
**Of Cost and Consequence:
Examining the Price of White Liberalism
in James Baldwin's *Another Country***

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America's the most wonderful country in the world, it is the most extraordinary collection of ill-assessed motives and undigested history, the most peculiar system of moral evasions and tremendous innocence. There's something very winning and very moving and very beautiful about those people who don't yet know that the world is big and complex and dark and that you have to grow up and become yourself big and complex and dark in order to deal with it. Americans still believe they can somehow get through life without ever being corrupted. It is an insane endeavor and, of course, this is where the Negro comes in. The Negro, by his presence, being on the bottom, affords society almost the only coherence that it has. (Mossman 57)

Introduction

As one of the most prolific African-American writers of the twentieth century, James Baldwin's work is characterized by his "radical humanism" (Kaplan and Schwarz 1) and deep insight into the nature of both the individual and the collective American psyche. At the time of the publication of his third novel, *Another Country* (1962), James Baldwin had already

asserted himself as an outspoken advocate for social justice. Following in the tradition of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Baldwin's *Another Country* quintessentially fits the genre of the African-American social protest novel. Although Wright and Ellison were Baldwin's contemporaries, and all three men were prominent African-American writers who boldly addressed the insidious presence of racism in America's urban North, the social and political landscape from the time Wright released *Native Son* to the time Baldwin published *Another Country* changed dramatically:

Events that transpired between the 1940s and 1960s (e.g., the urbanization of racial minorities, the gradual incorporation of minorities in the industrial sector, the protests by civil rights organizations as well as the over 200 race riots in the 1960s, and the contradiction between the democratic rhetoric of the U.S. government at the height of the Cold War and its treatment of the minorities at home) led to a change in the racial structure of the United States. (Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy* 138)

For this reason, although there are similarities between Baldwin's social protest novel and those of his contemporaries, *Another Country* must be analyzed as a product of its historic moment. More specifically, *Another Country* deserves to be recognized for its attempt to boldly disrupt the cultural narrative of the Civil Rights Era through its relentless examination of the role of white liberalism as a universal and uncomplicated approach to racial reconciliation.

Released at the height of the Civil Rights Era, *Another Country* intimately portrays the relationships of a racially mixed group of friends and lovers living in New York in the middle 1950s. Published on the heels of desegregation, the novel details the struggles and nuances of racial reconciliation at a critical time in American history when blacks and whites alike were tasked with imagining what integrated life might look like. Ad-

ditionally, its release coincided with the rise of Black Nationalism and only marginally preceded the Gay Liberation Movement. As a novel that showcased a queer, black man as its protagonist in that specific historical moment, the work was fiercely criticized as a racial abomination by Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver lambasted the novel's depiction of its protagonist, Rufus Scott, as "a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white homosexual fuck him in the ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman" (Cleaver 107). Hyper-masculine criticism from the black left was echoed by white social conservatives who were outraged by the novel's controversial exploration of interraciality, homosexual desire, promiscuity, and domestic violence.

In the decades since the novel's publication, much scholarship has been dedicated to deciphering Baldwin's motivation for creating—and then prematurely sacrificing—Rufus Scott, a character who uncannily resembles his creator. Interpretations of Rufus's suicide range from the belief that it signifies Baldwin's ambivalence toward his own racialized sexuality to William A. Cohen's assertion that "the critique Baldwin wanted to make about race he could only express fully in terms of sexuality" (15). Cohen's analysis suggests that Baldwin portrays sexual and racial politics as interdependent, an argument that Susan Feldman concedes in "Another Look at *Another Country*: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," despite her critique of Cohen's conclusion that *Another Country* "appears more interested in the salvation of individual characters than radical social change" (89). While Baldwin carefully cultivates the interiority of his characters, *Another Country*—while being a work of character-driven fiction—also does significant theoretic work.

The novel presents an array of characters who occupy various social locations, and while many of those identities overlap, no two characters

mirror each other's experience holistically. For example, Baldwin only grants the reader access to the interiority of two African-American characters throughout the novel and, although Rufus and Ida are siblings, their genders and sexualities are foreign experiences to each other. It is clear that even their shared experience of being African-American cannot be simply universalized because American racial, gender and sexual hierarchies co-create one another. In her piece, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberle Crenshaw addresses the limitations of attempting to analyze intersecting identities independently:

Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent that they can forward the interest of "people of color" and "women," respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other. The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color. (13)

The dilemma Crenshaw refers to is one commonly faced by those doing intersectional social work. Because identity categories are often treated as distinct entities that are frequently set against one another, the points at which multiple identities intersect and the complex epistemologies that those intersections produce are regularly erased, ignored, or problematically oversimplified in the political sphere. Alternately, fiction makes its most explicit claim for theoretical and political efficacy by intimately and accurately representing identities that are not easily classifiable within a text. In his book, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligi-*

bility, Ernesto Javier Martínez supports this stance by claiming that “for Baldwin, the novel has the opportunity to exceed the didactic limits of political pamphleteering as well as the presumed (detached) objectivity of the social sciences, and to tell a different story altogether” (3).

To best understand Baldwin’s efforts to “tell a different story” about American race relations, one should refrain from analyzing the identities of the characters in *Another Country* as fixed, for Baldwin deliberately presents them as “fluid, labile, and multiple” (Hsu 13). Additionally, readers should actively resist seeking to understand those identities as autonomous and instead focus on exploring the ways in which Baldwin allows his characters to examine and, in effect, create one another. Finally, rather than speculating about Baldwin’s motivation for disposing of his queer, black protagonist so early on in a novel primarily concerned with race and sexuality politics by fixating on Rufus’s identity alone, it is my goal to investigate the forces that drive Rufus to his demise by looking critically at the framework through which the characters in the novel understand and approach race.

Avoidance vs. Acknowledgment

Because *Another Country* situates itself in New York during the 1950s and boasts a cast of mostly white, progressively-minded, working-to-middle class artists, it should come as no surprise that the dominant ideology that the characters in the novel use to engage with race is through the framework of white liberalism. During the civil rights era, white liberalism “represented the [political] site for white people opposed to the racial ordering of the United States” (Aanerud 58). However, white liberalism, as Rebecca Aanerud describes it in “Now More Than Ever: James Baldwin and the Critique of White Liberalism,” is a contradictory “antiracist social category” (56) with a “complicated and uneven history” (58).

Although white liberalism can be—and often has been—used interchangeably in modern discourse with terms such as “abstract liberalism” and “colorblind racism,” the term white liberalism in the context of *Another Country* is used to signify the specific and prevailing liberal ideology that characterized the politics of many white advocates for racial justice in mid-century America. Additionally, Baldwin was a fierce critic of white liberalism and seemed never to refer to it by any other name.

According to Aanerud, this “social and political category of wide-ranging perspectives, beliefs, and agendas” (58) can be identified by a person’s application of at least one of the following defining ideological characteristics: racial paternalism, white guilt, or hyper-individualism. The characteristic of white liberalism that Baldwin appears most to despise is racial paternalism, or what Aanerud refers to as the “missionary complex” (61). Racial paternalism is rooted in colonialist discourse (61) and situates whiteness as both normative and superior, thus charging whites interested in racial equality with the responsibility of saving blacks from their naturalized inferiority. Conversely, white guilt situates white people who are sympathetic to racial justice as victims of the shame and anguish that accompany acknowledgment of a racialized history of domination in which people with similar phenotypes acted as oppressors. Aanerud contends that white guilt becomes manifest as a construction of “a paralyzed and impotent self” (65), a self-perceived victim, incapable of enacting social change, suspended helplessly in apology. Finally, hyper-individualism is the conception of oneself as purely individual, ultimately untethered to—and unconstrained by—greater social forces. While individualism is the undergirding principle of liberal theory, in the context of white liberalism, staunch adherence to individualism allows the positioning of oneself “outside of racism” by denying “the ways in which racism is embedded in the very structure of our society” (60). Ultimately, the objective of white

liberalism, above all else, is to distance whites (who wish to designate themselves as antiracist) from white supremacy (60).

In a 1965 interview with James Mossman and Colin MacInnes, Baldwin bluntly stated his opinion of white liberalism by saying "I can't stand White Liberals. Obviously, I can't stand White Liberals ... What I resent is the assumption I must be raised to their level. It seems to me that the only way we can deal with each other as human beings or as social units is to understand that we have something to give to each other" (Mossman 51). Given Baldwin's disapproval of the paternalistic way in which white liberalism demands that people of color "must be raised" to the "level" of whiteness, it is curious that *Another Country*—Baldwin's social novel—is dominated by characters whose thoughts and actions reflect white liberal ideology.

If Rufus's death is the central action of the novel, and white liberalism is the dominant ideological framework that the novel employs, it is worth investigating the ways in which these two things may be related. In many ways, Rufus's sudden disappearance is the cataclysmic event that forces the remaining characters to finally confront white supremacy. The demands of that confrontation are great, especially for those who, by adhering to a white liberal ideology, have managed to psychologically distance themselves from white supremacy. By allowing his cast of mostly self-proclaimed white liberals to grapple with the traumatic death of a beloved black friend, Baldwin exposes the paradoxical nature of white liberalism. In that way, *Another Country* explores how white liberalism is not the antithesis of racism, but rather a less explicit manifestation of it. White liberalism renders people of color dually marginalized by white supremacy. Whereas people of color are disproportionately affected by explicit racism as a systemic form of oppression, white liberalism, because of its distancing, avoidance, and denial of racism, offers "those who

have enjoyed little power in our society no mechanisms for understanding and challenging the systemic nature of their oppression” (Guinier, Torres 144). This is the position that Rufus finds himself in at the end of his life, a predicament characterized by desperate alienation, a propensity toward violence, and eventually, an acceptance of death as a more desirable alternative to living in such profound incoherence.

Rufus, however, is not the only character in *Another Country* to experience the irreconcilability of extreme incoherence. In *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, Martínez contends that the novel is characterized by “states of profound confusion and unacknowledged incoherence” and adds that these states are “previously undocumented in the racial and sexual discourse of the American mid-twentieth century” (3). Martínez argues that the incoherence displayed by Baldwin’s characters results from their inability to grapple with the incommensurability of multiple and intersecting identities. Further, Martínez claims that the stakes of experiencing incoherence are not equal for all of the novel’s characters. Therefore, white liberalism is an ideological force that further stratifies the novel’s characters despite the antiracist efforts of those who employ it. Although all of the primary characters in *Another Country* are touched by the effects of white supremacy, those whose identities allow them to psychologically distance themselves from the effects of racial inequality employ the framework of white liberalism to do so, leaving those who cannot use that framework to bear the burden of structural oppression alone.

Distance vs. Closeness

The most consistent model of white liberalism in the novel is Rufus’s Irish/Italian best friend, Daniel “Vivaldo” Moore. Despite his closeness with Rufus and his relationship with Rufus’s sister Ida shortly following Rufus’s death, Vivaldo is the character that is most unaware of and disil-

lusioned by his complicity with racism. In a scene in which Vivaldo is travelling with Cass by cab, he recounts his experience visiting Ida's home immediately after Rufus's death:

"When I went up there, the day she called me to say that Rufus was dead—I don't know—I walked through that block and I walked in that house and it all seemed—I don't know—*familiar*." He turned his pale, troubled face toward her but she felt that he was staring at the high, hard wall, which stood between himself and his past. "I don't just mean that I used to spend a lot of time in Harlem," and he looked away nervously, "I was hardly ever there in the daytime anyway. I mean, there were the same kids on the block that used to be on my block—they were colored but they were the same, really the same—and, hell, the hallways have the same stink, and everybody's, well, trying to make it but know they haven't got much of a chance. The same old women, the same old men—maybe they're a little more *alive*—and I walked into that house and they were just sitting there, Ida and her mother and her father, and there were some other people there, relatives, maybe, and friends. I don't know, no one really spoke to me except Ida and she didn't say much. And they all looked at me as though—well, as though I had *done* it—and, oh, I wanted so bad to take that girl in my arms and kiss that look off her face and make her know that I didn't do it, *I* wouldn't do it, whoever was doing it was doing it to me, too." He was crying, silently, and he bent forward, hiding his face with one long hand. "I know I failed him, but I loved him, too, and nobody there wanted to know that. I kept thinking, They're colored and I'm white but the same things have happened, really, the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?" (113)

This passage is characteristic of white liberal ideology in that Vivaldo exhibits all three of the behaviors that Rebecca Aanerud outlines. First, he wills ignorance in his insistence upon not only familiarity, but sameness between himself and Ida and her family. Vivaldo's "willful not-seeing" is

what George Shulman identifies as a “disclaiming of responsibility, which fundamentally corrupts American life” (107). It is an ignorance that is not altogether innocent. Instead, Vivaldo’s compulsive inclination to identify with Ida is an unconscious attempt to situate himself on the side of the color line that protects him from having to confront the fact that Rufus’s suicide was motivated by the effects of racial domination. Second, his guilt is palpable. In his essay, “White Man’s Guilt,” James Baldwin explains that “no curtain under heaven is heavier than that curtain of guilt and lies behind which white Americans hide” (412). The weight of Vivaldo’s guilt is notable in the line, “And they all looked at me as though—well, as though I had done it.” He continues, “I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t do it, whoever was doing it was doing it to me too.” Vivaldo’s defensive declaration of innocence emphasizes his individualism, and thus minimizes the impact of systemic forces. He fails to acknowledge that “the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do” (“Guilt” 410). Even Vivaldo’s insistence on being viewed strictly as an individual exposes his complicity with white supremacy, making him, in effect, Ida’s least productive ally, despite his affirmation that the pair is tasked with facing similar realities. Additionally, he embodies the missionary complex in his desire to swoop in and “kiss that look off of [Ida’s] face.” Here, he distances himself further from Ida by privileging the restorative power of heterosexual masculinity over the anguish of racial trauma. Finally, Vivaldo romanticizes the condition of Ida’s family, stating that they are “the same old men, the same old women—maybe they’re a little more *alive*,” as if black poverty is somehow more romantic than the poverty he experientially knows. Lastly, the “high, hard wall” that Cass perceives as standing between Vivaldo and his past is a direct allusion to the distance Vivaldo maintains between himself and white supremacy.

When Vivaldo finishes his account, Cass bluntly counters it with “but they didn’t ... happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened” (113). Although this statement shows tremendous insight into the stratifying nature of white supremacy, Cass and Vivaldo are both suspended in the same ideological web. In an earlier scene in the novel, Cass and Vivaldo venture from Cass’s comfortable home in Greenwich Village to Harlem to attend Rufus’ funeral. When the two arrive at the church, Cass realizes that she has forgotten to bring a garment to cover her head during the service, and she races to a nearby shop to right her faux pas. The scene that unfolds exposes her discomfort with confronting blackness as an anonymous entity, despite her affection for Rufus and Ida individually. As Cass walks through the unfamiliar streets of Harlem alone, seeking an open clothing store at high noon on a Saturday, a paralyzing realization strikes her:

For a moment she thought to stop one of the women—one of the women whose faces she watched as though they contained something it was necessary for her to learn—to ask directions. Then she realized that she was mysteriously afraid: afraid of these people, these streets, the chapel to which she must return. She forced herself to walk more slowly. She saw a store and entered it. (117)

In this moment of pause and panic, Cass’s fear is clearly racialized. Although Harlem is periodically described throughout as the novel as “violent” and “oppressive,” those descriptions are usually paired with darkness and the dangers that lurk within it. This outing takes place during the middle of the day, and there is no evidence of anything that threatens Cass. She is notably afraid not only of the streets, but also of the people who are both unknown to her and of color. When she stumbles into the shop, she becomes increasingly more uncomfortable. At this point, Baldwin strategically shifts the third person omniscient narration and vocalizes

it through Cass as she describes the shop girl in a disconcerting way: "The girl, whose smile had clearly been taught her by *masters*, looked as though she sold at least one hat every Saturday morning, to a strange, breathless white woman" (emphasis added, 118). In that way, Cass unnecessarily emphasizes her whiteness ("strange, breathless white woman") while noting that the black service girl wore a smile "masters" must have taught her. The black girl's service to Cass paired with Cass's unusual use of the word "master" conjures up an uncomfortable image of black servitude. Furthermore, when Cass asks for a "black" scarf, she is surprised by "how the word seemed to roll through the shop!" (118). Cass's exaggerated discomfort throughout this scene is exemplary of the kind of *distance* the white characters in the novel consistently maintain from confronting evidence of white supremacy, despite their close relationships with black individuals.

Clarity vs. Obscurity

With the critical importance white liberalism places on the need to situate oneself outside of white supremacy, it seems reasonable to question the degree to which things defined by white supremacy become obscured. As distance affects the visibility of a thing, white liberalism leads white advocates to distance themselves from white supremacy and the realities of people of color in the United States who are defined by white supremacy. White liberalism, therefore, makes the lived experiences of people of color incomprehensible to white liberals. Essentially, if white liberals are unwilling to look directly at white supremacy, they render themselves incapable of seeing people of color clearly and holistically. Therefore, a refusal to acknowledge the forces that define the lives of people of color in this country renders them, to varying degrees, invisible to white liberals.

Ten years before the publication of *Another Country*, Ralph Ellison explored this phenomenon of invisibility in his novel *Invisible Man*. In the

prologue of his text, Ellison boldly suggests that, "it's when you feel like this [invisible] that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you" (4). Violence reoccurs throughout the novel. Notably, it is a motif that Baldwin allows his black characters to utilize as a response to being rendered invisible.

As the only two African-American characters among their white liberal peers, both Rufus and Ida use violence to assert agency. While Rufus's propensity toward physical violence in his relationship with Leona is widely recognized and critiqued by other characters in the novel, Ida also engages in a kind of psychological violence in her relationship with Vivaldo. In a 1984 conversation with Audre Lorde about brutality committed against the black female body and the disempowerment of black men, Baldwin plainly asserts, "if you drive a man mad, you'll turn him into a beast," to which Lorde counters, "if you drive a woman insane, she will react like a beast too. There is a larger structure, a society with which we are in total and absolute war. We live in the mouth of a dragon" ("Revolutionary" 130). The sentiment that Baldwin and Lorde share in this dialogue is not that either of them advocate violence, but rather recognize it as a reasonable psychological response to a system that threatens to extinguish one's humanity. What both Baldwin and Lorde are primarily concerned with is causality. Later in the conversation, Baldwin states:

Something happens to the man who beats up a lady. Something happens to the man who beats up his grandmother. Something happens to the junkie. I know that very well. I walked the streets of Harlem; I grew up there, right? Now you know it is not the Black cat's fault who sees me and tries to mug me. I got to know that. It's his *responsibility* but it's not his *fault*. That's a nuance. ("Revolutionary" 130)

Baldwin's distinction between fault and responsibility is imperative to understanding violence as a response to oppression. By contending that fault lies elsewhere, but that a "Black cat" is still responsible for his actions, Baldwin neither sanctions violence nor ignores the social and structural forces that make it a viable locus of agency.

While Rufus and Leona "[fight] each other with their hands and their voices and then with their bodies" (53), Ida's brand of violence involves infidelity and subverting the fragile masculinity that Vivaldo desperately clings to as a symbol of his heterosexual identity and a repression of his queer desire. The ways in which Rufus and Ida empower themselves by assaulting their partners are both gendered and sexualized. Physical violence for Rufus works to the end of affirming his masculinity while Ida manipulates Vivaldo with her sexuality, emphasizing the way in which race, gender and sexuality are historically bound together.

While Vivaldo's political identity as a white liberal allows his complicity with white supremacy to remain unseen and unchecked throughout the novel, Baldwin uses the perspectives of other white characters (particularly white men) to exaggerate the failings of Vivaldo's "progressive" ideology. When Ellis, a powerful white colleague of Richard's, combatively asserts to Vivaldo that "art doesn't exist in a vacuum; it isn't just for you and your handful of friends," he is condemning Vivaldo's naiveté as a writer, but Baldwin allows the line to be imbued with a bitter sense of irony in which the reader could easily replace the word "art" with "blackness" and the line would expose more about Vivaldo than either he or Ellis is aware. Ellis's tongue-in-cheek allusion to Vivaldo's racial tokenism almost immediately follows a telling exchange between Richard and Vivaldo in which Richard questions Vivaldo's motivations for courting Ida, the only African-American present at his book release party: "You've always had a thing about colored girls, haven't you," and Vivaldo replies

that he's never been in a relationship with an African-American woman before Ida. Richard stingingly counters, "No. But you used to do a lot of tomcatting up in Harlem. And it's so logical, somehow, that you should be trying to make it with a colored girl now—you certainly scraped the bottom of the white barrel" (156). In addition to revealing Vivaldo's inability to acknowledge that Ida's race is something that he cannot simply will other people not to see, these passages also expose the way in which Ida's gender is racialized—even among her white liberal peers—and hence, socially positions her in a status lower than "the bottom of the white barrel." This perspective is one that Ida is aware of and uses retributively to her advantage by engaging in an affair with Ellis in order to dominate Vivaldo and subvert his masculinity. After failing to communicate the way that racial inequality disproportionately affects her in their relationship, Ida learns to turn sex into a currency of power that, unlike race, Vivaldo is capable of understanding. She abuses the power of sex to disempower Vivaldo.

Ida's act of translating race into something that Vivaldo can comprehend extends beyond sex. Throughout the novel, Ida cryptically insists that all Vivaldo has to do is "pay [his] dues" (277). Her preoccupation with repayment is a way in which she linguistically converts her experience of racial domination into a vernacular of currency. Her demand for retribution is not monetary, however, but rather a plea to be seen by Vivaldo, who genuinely believes that his avoidance of racism will safeguard him against contributing to it. The use of transactional language as a metaphor for racial reconciliation is one that Baldwin uses in *The Fire Next Time* by stating that "a bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay" (378); however, Ida's forceful insistence that Vivaldo make reparations manifests itself as an act of verbal coercion. Although Ida's discourse of indebtedness springs from her desperation to communicate her experience

to her partner, Vivaldo internalizes her demands as an incomprehensible litany of unearned abuse. This is evident in an exchange he shares with Eric toward the end of the novel in which Vivaldo asks if Eric, in his relationship with Rufus, experienced the same kind of pressure for repayment that he regularly confronts with Ida. Vivaldo asks, “Didn’t he try to make you pay?” To which Eric casually responds, “Ah. He didn’t *try*. I paid” (340). In this moment, Eric conveys an understanding that for both Rufus and Ida payment is not atonement for a personal wrongdoing, but rather a metaphor for an acknowledgement of the unjust experience of African-Americans who live under the inescapability of white supremacy. However, this paradigm shift cannot occur in Vivaldo, so long as he is locked within the ideological structure of white liberalism; and thus, Ida’s motivation for both infidelity and her insistence upon repayment remain obscured to him by his experience of these things as victimization.

Risk vs. Responsibility

While Vivaldo is the quintessential embodiment of white liberalism, his character serves another purpose. In her essay, “Another Look At Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin’s Racial and Sexual Politics,” Susan Feldman argues that “in cultures based on patriarchal heterosexuality[,] the surplus repression of same-sex desire clearly serves—as Baldwin shows in *Another Country*—as a foundational support for class, racial, and sexual hierarchies” (96). Although Vivaldo publically presents himself in the novel as uncomplicatedly heterosexual, he serves, in addition to his adherence to white liberalism, as an example of repressed queer desire in the text.

Feldman’s statement about the interdependence of racial and sexual hierarchies is most evident in a scene that takes place toward the end of the novel between Vivaldo and Eric. Shortly after Eric, a white, bisexual,

American expatriate, returns to New York, he and Vivaldo become briefly, but intimately, involved with one another. This is the first time in the novel that Vivaldo's queer desire becomes physically actualized. Abruptly, just before the two men become intimate, Vivaldo brings Rufus up in conversation. As he recounts the details of the last moments he and Rufus spent alone together, he tells Eric that he "had the weirdest feeling that [Rufus] wanted me to take him into my arms" (342), but Vivaldo is unable to bridge the distance between them. Moments later, he expresses remorse for refusing to physically comfort Rufus on the night of his death: "But, oh, Lord, when he died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed, and held him" (343). Vivaldo's compulsion to confess his guilt over Rufus's death just before he and Eric become physically intimate brings the unconscious connection Vivaldo makes between race and sexuality to light. Furthermore, the reference that Vivaldo makes to the "quarter of an inch" that separated him from Rufus on the night of his death mirrors the description of his proximity to Eric in the present: "Here Vivaldo sat, on Eric's bed. Not a quarter of an inch divided them" (344). That "quarter of an inch" signifies both a physical and a psychological space, a terrifying void that requires Vivaldo to take a tremendous psychological risk in order to transcend. For Vivaldo, the replication of a quarter inch chasm between himself and a thing he refuses to face represents simultaneously both his doctrine of racial avoidance and his repressed queer desire. Ultimately, Vivaldo is only able to take that psychological risk with Eric.

In his essay, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," George Kent asserts that "sex, for Baldwin, is obviously a metaphor for the act of breaking one's isolation and, properly experienced, responsibly entering into the complexity of another human being" (22). Contrary to Feldman's assertion that sexual desire and identity categories are historically linked,

Kent paints desire as less social and more individualistic. In this regard, Vivaldo's decision to indulge his repressed (and socially concealed) sexual desire with Eric rather than directly confront the effects of white supremacy with Rufus is a more ideal option because it poses less of a social risk. Because Vivaldo's rendezvous with Eric takes place exclusively in the private sphere, the prospect of being physically intimate with Eric and transcending the distance between them does not threaten the framework with which he orders the world as a white liberal.

In addition to the great psychological risk necessary to transcend the chasm between what is safe and what is desired, perhaps the greatest threat to one's identity arises from the personal responsibility necessary to take that risk. Choice makes responsibility unavoidable. In an intimate conversation towards the end of the novel between Eric and Vivaldo about each man's respective sexual fluidity, Eric claims his uncertainty and utilizes it as a critical point of self-reflection. Conversely, Vivaldo refuses to acknowledge his desire for men as an extension of his identity. Instead, he insists that he "can have sexual relations with men as a favor to them, as an acknowledgement of their need for him, but not with any sense of being changed by the encounter" (Martínez, "Dying to Know" 68). Eric resists Vivaldo's objective approach to consummating his desires and sharply replies, "but if you went to bed with a guy just because he wanted you to, *you* wouldn't have to take any responsibility for it" (*Another Country* 337). Eric's insistence that Vivaldo take responsibility for both his desires and his actions reveals what Martínez refers to as "an embedded epistemological thesis" within the text:

In order to know even complicated things like desire, one needs to make decisions that, in one form or another, amount to sustained personal and social commitments—sustained lines of inquiry—that have a stronger purchase on one's life than one intends. ("Dying to Know" 68)

Vivaldo's willingness to indulge his queer desire while refusing to claim it as an identity is a replication of his eagerness to create and sustain intimate relationships with both Rufus and Ida, despite his aversion to confronting the ways in which his complicity with white supremacy negatively impact their lives. While Vivaldo's white liberal ideology allows him to distance himself from white supremacy while entertaining relationships with people of color, it also allows him to have sexual relations with men without viewing himself as queer. This cognitive dissonance enables him to separate his individual actions from social structures of power and exposes the fact that what he "comprehend[s] as being good for [himself] may in fact be good for the perpetuation of oppression" (68). Although Vivaldo views himself as a benevolent, progressively minded advocate for social equality, his liberal ideology ensures his complicity with systemic oppression by allowing him to recognize himself solely as an individual whose actions have no social or political significance. Therefore, in the midst of profound incoherence, he is capable of taking solace in the safety of passivity. However, in his allegiance to safety, Vivaldo's inaction has irrevocable consequences, which include his strained relationship with Ida and, ultimately, Rufus's death.

Conclusion

Although *Another Country* was published more than fifty years ago, the novel's preoccupation with how best to approach racial reconciliation amidst the profound incoherence produced by the systemic stratification of identity categories produces is still a legitimate concern for many Americans. As the rhetoric of having achieved a post-racial society becomes increasingly more common—both in popular culture and in politics—Baldwin's work remains as relevant as ever. In our current historical moment, when the universalization of difference is characteristic of a lib-

eral approach to social equality, it has become polite to claim colorblindness. Consequently, many Americans refuse to critically examine the ways in which structures of systemic oppression continue to disproportionately affect people of color. In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin warns of the dangers present in being complicit in this kind of casual racism: "In a way, the American Negro is *the* key figure in this country; and if you don't face him, you will never face anything" (16). Although the highest stake of Vivaldo's unwillingness to emerge from the safety of his white liberal ideology in order to intimately engage with the way white supremacy affects people of color is Rufus's death, the lasting significance of *Another Country* lies in Baldwin's keen ability to depict the problematic ideologies that keep us "locked together in a kind of misunderstanding of each other" (Mossman 51)—ideologies that will continue to persist and perpetuate social inequality until we are finally bold enough to face one another.

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