

African American Literature and Queer Studies: The Conundrum of James Baldwin

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Consider the following short passage lifted from the African American writer James Baldwin's 1962 novel, *Another Country*: "He wondered who had been with her before him; how many, how often, how long; what he, or they before him, had meant to her; and he wondered if her lover, or lovers, had been white or black. What difference does it make? he asked himself. What difference does any of it make?" (172). What "difference" indeed. The passage records, in part, the troubled interior monologue of a 20-something-year-old white American male as he muses on the sexual history of his black female paramour, a woman with whom he has fallen in love. Not only are these questions interesting for what they reveal to readers about this particular young man's concerns, but the questions are also interesting for what they do *not* reveal as concerns necessarily. That is, while this young man appears to have a strong curiosity as to the racial identities of his girl's previous sexual partners (especially if they were black or white), he is curiously silent, or else indifferent, on the issue of gender – that is, as to whether any of those partners were male or female. This is a startling discovery. For it flies in the face of Michel Foucault's well known insight that, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, sexual definition in the West underwent a radical transformation. Foucault writes famously that at this time the "homosexual became a personage, [someone with] a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology," one distinct from the heterosexual (Foucault 43). From that moment on, according to some notable scholars, people in the West began to exhibit a near obsession with uncovering the truth of their own and their neighbor's sexuality, and that such "truth" was characterized chiefly in gendered terms only – in other words, everyone was believed to be either a heterosexual or a homosexual based on their affinity for either males or females. If so, why then does Baldwin's young white American refer to a second organization of desire upon pondering his twentieth-century future with his girl, one that subordinates gender to another category of difference, namely, "race"?

As evidenced by the coining by two Northern political foes of President Lincoln's in 1864 of the Civil War term "miscegenation," commonly known as "the sexual mingling of the races," throughout much of American history an intense, even obsessive, preoccupation with race has long distinguished both scientific and popular discourses on human sexuality (Hodes, *Sex, Love, Race; White Women, Black Men; Lemire*). However, starting around the end of World War Two, official national interest abruptly began to decline in this form of desire, to the extent that gender systematically displaced "race" from these discourses. The reason for this displacement is widely linked to the US government's efforts to distance the country from the heinous crimes inflicted on European Jews by the racist regime of Adolf Hitler and by the Nazi party in particular (Lubin; Romano). Underpinning this drive to relegate what had formerly been a highly valued taxonomical category to the cultural margins was the belief, and fear, on the part of many postwar white Americans in the apparent disturbing similarities between the debased status of the Jew throughout much of Europe and the debased status of the black within the US. Certainly one reason for this disturbance was the fact that the first comparison inferred a second – namely, that between white Americans and the Nazis. This implicit comparison between blacks and Jews, on the one hand, and between Nazi Germans and white Americans, on the other, prompted the US to adopt the practice of race-blindness as a corrective to centuries-long race-consciousness in order to distance its racially dominant citizens from such discomfiting associations (see Sollors). With race, both blackness and whiteness, effectively sidelined, gender would then emerge as the sole and exclusive analytical category in scientific and medical theories of human sexuality made popular by such thinkers in the US as Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, and Masters and Johnson, among others, from the 1960s to the early 1980s (Robinson). Since the mid-1980s, the interdisciplinary fields of lesbian and gay/queer scholarship have been the unlikely inheritors of this deracinated postwar discourse on human sexuality. And indeed, much of this work is deeply indebted to Foucault's periodization of homosexuality as an identity category. Due in part to how this institutionalization of sex research coincided so neatly with the rise of the modern lesbian and gay movement (symbolized for many by the Stonewall rebellion of June 1969), a heterosexual-homosexual binary model of desire, with its singular focus on gender of object-choice, would quickly supplant the earlier race-centered model (characterized by a "same-race"/"different-race" opposition) that had previously obsessed much of US popular and critical discourse up to this period.

While the black-Jewish, white American-Nazi German analogy will serve as an important backdrop to the subsequent analysis, the specific purpose of the present essay is to determine the impact this systematic suppression of "race" from US critical discourse on human sexuality has had in the academic field of Queer Studies. To assess this impact I selectively evaluate scholarly responses to a writer whose literary output has perhaps maintained the most vigilance in contesting our nation's sustained efforts to conceal the always already intersecting nature of "race" and sexuality: James Baldwin. As both an African American and sexually different (and, as I hope to show,

the identity labels “homosexual” and “gay” are simply too reductive to use when referring to this author and his writings), Baldwin has presented something of a conundrum to both mainstream and non-mainstream literary scholarship within the US. While the dominant (white) literary establishment prior to the 1970s had condescended to view Baldwin through the lens of his Civil Rights activism rather than his literary production, later scholars – most notably those within African American literary studies and Queer Studies – have tended to subdivide Baldwin (and, alternately, his novels) into component parts. For some scholars within African Americanist discourse, for instance, Baldwin (or his novels) is perceived as more African American-identified than queer – that is, homosexual; and here, the two terms function as synonyms for sexual deviance and are therefore interchangeable. In contrast, for some critics within lesbian and gay/queer discourse, Baldwin’s trenchant critiques of heteronormative gender and sexual norms, at least where men are concerned, allows these writers to perceive him as more queer-identified than African American. The unfortunate consequence of such critical practices is that “race” and sexuality are often placed in direct opposition to one another. As Kevin Ohi has observed, “rarely, though more often with [Queer Studies] than with [African American scholarship], do the poles of either of these oppositions come together” (Ohi 261). Even scholars who situate their critical practice at the intersection of these two fields often place “race” and sexuality in opposition to some extent. As we will see, many of these scholars within Queer Studies produce this opposition by limiting what they mean by the term “sexuality” to same-sex identities and desires almost exclusively, with little or no attention to other mediating factors, such as “race” or ethnicity, class, nationality, to name but a few. This is exactly the point linguist Don Kulick makes when he asks:

What does “queer” mean? What is special or unique about queer? And most importantly: if queer is *not* the same as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender – as all queer theorists insist that it is not – why, then, is the only language ever investigated to say anything about queer language the language of people who self-identify, or who researchers believe to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered? (Kulick 65–6)

Kulick’s insight becomes especially useful when applied to Baldwin. As evidenced by the earlier passage from *Another Country*, Baldwin rarely privileges racially neutral depictions of opposite-sex or same-sex identities and desires, the latter the ostensible proper object of much queer scholarship, even as he attempts to engage these concerns. Rather, the bulk of Baldwin’s writing always incorporates a complex matrix of desire that consistently takes into account the racialized dimensions of gendered desire. As reductive forms of intimacy, homosexuality and heterosexuality are simply not relevant categories of desire in the Baldwinian representational landscape. Indeed, Baldwin once stated famously, “Those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, are twentieth-century terms which, for me, have very little meaning. I’ve never, myself, in watching myself and other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were” (quoted in Mossman 54). With this single comment, Baldwin

expertly directs our attention back not to gender alone but to that *pre*-twentieth-century term for understanding human sexuality – indeed, “miscegenation” – which privileges *racial* distinctions. And while depictions of same-gender identities and desires recur throughout the author’s oeuvre, these depictions, I would argue, often serve a utilitarian function in that they assist Baldwin in making visible cross-racial group dynamics as a form of erotic practice that psychologically and politically influences their central characters. Moreover, these effects may often exceed their presumed racial meanings. Baldwin’s depictions of racialized sexual scenarios in his fiction and nonfiction, whether same-gender or opposite-gender, are not to be analyzed in terms of gender identity alone, but rather – to borrow Shane Vogel’s useful formulation – in terms that acknowledge “subjective possibilit[ies] that could include but always exceed[d] the closures of ‘sexual identity’ as such” (Vogel 403).

More recently, in an effort to stabilize and fix the meaning of “queer” to demarcate same-gender identities and forms of desire solely, much of contemporary gay and queer scholarship – especially the version practiced by many white gay male scholars – has failed to comprehend that Baldwin’s literary preoccupations are not narrowly focused on the relatively small group of sexual minorities known as gay men, a term and a community from which the author often felt himself personally estranged. I am well aware that my use of the appellation “white gay male” may strike some as essentializing the views of a relatively small group of critics based on their personal identities. After all, such men certainly have no control over their racial affiliation. Moreover, it is simply a truism that not all white gay male scholars exhibit in their work this same racial self-interestedness I am describing in these pages. But the fact of the matter is that, as I will address shortly, some of the most influential of these scholars do. In his important essay “The Responsibility of and to Differences: Theorizing Race and Ethnicity in Lesbian and Gay Studies,” queer theorist Earl Jackson, Jr., himself a white gay man, writes that because gay men like himself “have had a purchase on power and privilege unique to otherwise disenfranchised individuals,” they have “specific responsibilities” to contest traditional power relations within the academy and the culture at large. “These power relations are central to the historical configurations of white gay male identities and their modes of articulation, which cannot be assumed to be applicable to gay men of color or other marginalized groups.” Jackson goes on to explain that, consequently, “[a]ny consideration of gay male studies as a critical endeavor, and of the homosexual/gay male cultural practices that form some of its objects, entails confronting the ways in which both are inscribed in dominant traditions, reflecting the paradoxical relations between male homosexuality and racist, classist, and sexist hegemonies” (Jackson 136). To paraphrase Devon Carbado’s timely insight about the privileges accorded to black men in anti-racist discourse, “even when discussions about [homophobia] are focused on [white gay men], those discussions are not always understood to be gendered or [race-based] discussions; they are understood to be discussions about the plight of the crisis of [gay] America” (quoted in Carbado 9). It was perhaps out of his own innate sense of the way that blackness tends to “compete” with other forms of difference in minority discourses, such as gendered and

sexual, that Baldwin refrained from centering a black lesbian or gay male character in his fiction until his final novel, *Just above My Head* (1979). After all, “[a] black gay person,” Baldwin once offered, “who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he’s black or she’s black. The sexual question comes after the question of color; it’s simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live” (quoted in Goldstein 180). Indeed, a guiding assumption of the present inquiry is that white homosexuals have not been the original queers, in the sense that in its etymological root “queer” means different, unusual, abnormal. That mantle fell to Americans of African descent, whether heterosexually oriented or not, long before white lesbians and gay men took it up. For the latter, homosexuality serves as the sole marker of stigma, while their membership in the dominant racial group is downplayed. In contrast, “[t]he construction of African American sexuality as wild, unstable, and undomesticated,” as Roderick Ferguson usefully notes in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, “locates African American sexuality within the irrational, and therefore outside the bounds of the citizenship machinery. Though African American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolized a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heteronormativity. The racialized eroticization of black heterosexuals and homosexuals outside the rationalized (i.e. heteronormative) household symbolically aligned black straight and gay persons” (87). Because of the inextricability of white queers from the array of benefits and privileges accorded all whites in anti-black societies, and the inextricability of blacks *tout court* from having to endure the object-effects of embodying blackness in those very societies, the same claim could *not* be made about the relation between white straight and gay persons. This insight is an important one to keep in mind throughout what follows. As Robert Reid-Pharr points out, “discourses of blackness are overdetermined by discourses of queer sexuality” (*Once You Go Black* 63). In much of what follows, this essay will demonstrate that nowhere is this conflict over racial or sexual interpretation more on display than in scholarly engagements with Baldwin’s 1962 novel, *Another Country*.

(White) Queer Studies and *Another Country*

Set predominantly in New York City’s Greenwich Village in the period separating the early Civil Rights movement from the tumultuous events that would tear the nation apart in the 1960s, *Another Country* recounts the often stormy interpersonal relationships among a group of 20-to-30-something-year-old Americans that in many respects come to anticipate and even mirror these larger, more public events. At the center of these relationships is the black jazz musician, Rufus Scott. Each of the other characters in the novel shares a personal, and in some cases a sexual, history with Rufus that serves as the catalyst for the narrative events that proceed from his untimely suicide, a tragic moment which occurs quite early in the novel. Not all these other characters are women; some are men, and though most of these interpersonal

relationships are heterosexual in nature, some are homosexual, and many are in fact homoerotic in their psychosexual underpinnings. Moreover, at least one of these characters, Rufus's younger sister Ida, is black, while the rest are white, including Ida's white American beau, Vivaldo Moore, with whose interior musings I began this essay. The overtly racialized dimensions of these relationships transforms them from, on the one hand, the types of human entanglements that can be analyzed simply by relying upon terms and concepts that privilege gender as the most significant variable in making sexual desire legible to, on the other, those that require terms and concepts that consider both categories at once. The novel's inclusion of a range of sexual dissidents, including cross-racial heterosexual couplings, recontextualizes the exclusions that form the core of much of contemporary Queer Studies scholarship.

First, let us begin by sketching out the historical relation between Queer Studies and African American literature, and to do so via Baldwin. This tendency to approach Baldwin as a queer rather than a black writer – and to place the two categories in opposition – began with the emergence in the mid-1980s of critical research tools calibrated to challenge heterosexism and homophobia in contemporary literary scholarship. Emmanuel Nelson's "The Novels of James Baldwin: Struggles of Self Acceptance" (1985) is an early, but notable, example of this type of critical engagement. Yet, rather than impose on Baldwin's literary texts a recognizable political context that would anchor his primary investment in same-sex desire, Nelson appeals to the black writer's reputation as "one of the most important and influential *homosexual* writers of the twentieth century" (11; emphasis mine). As Nelson claims, "to grasp the full literary and cultural significance of Baldwin's works, one has to bear in mind that central to Baldwin's life and art is his confrontation with and acceptance of his sexuality" (11). With this statement, Nelson offers a reading of Baldwin's view on sexuality that nowhere acknowledges the author's keen awareness of the structuring influence of socially derived understandings of "race" on that process. "Baldwin," Nelson writes, perhaps too confidently, "views human sexuality in terms of a *homosexual-heterosexual continuum*: while some may be exclusively homosexual and some others exclusively heterosexual, many possess varying degrees of bisexual potential" (13–14; emphasis mine). On its face, such a statement overlooks Baldwin's many published statements on the subject of human sexuality – one of which I have already cited. In answer to a question as to what he thinks gay people will be like in the future, Baldwin offers what we now recognize as a characteristic response: "No one will have to call themselves gay," he says, when that time arrives. "Maybe that's at the bottom of my impatience with the term. It answers a false argument, a false accusation ... Which is that you have no right to be here, that you have to prove your right to be here. I'm saying that I have nothing to prove. The world also belongs to me" (quoted in Goldstein 184). To discount these statements by the author, as Nelson does, is to fail to confront a fundamental paradox anti-homophobic critics face when they write about African American literature and its preoccupations: How does such a critic engage the work of a black writer, whether that writer is straight, gay, or otherwise, with the sole purpose of excavating sexual content without also trying to

understand how that content is shaped, in profound ways, by the history of racial hierarchy?

I want to suggest that Nelson's steadfast refusal to acknowledge that human sexuality – for Baldwin in general, and for all Americans in particular – is not *merely* determined by gender identity alone, which a “homosexual–heterosexual continuum” unproblematically assumes, but also by “racial” identity, is typical of how many contemporary Queer Studies scholars writing throughout the 1980s and 1990s have taken up the author's work. However, similar critical engagements with Baldwin's most controversial novel by scholars affiliated with Queer Studies have continued up to the present day. While more sophisticated than Nelson's analysis, James Dievler's “Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*” (1999) replicates Nelson's tendency to overdetermine same-sex desire by narrowly linking it to the author's sexual autobiography. Dievler does this by turning to a well known essay Baldwin published two years before his death, in 1987, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” and later retitled “Here Be Dragons,” in which the author famously discusses his early sexual experiences. Although he does not completely overlook the racialized sexual dynamics of the novel, or of Baldwin's life, as Nelson does, Dievler fails to integrate this aspect fully into his analysis. One reason for this oversight is that Dievler only refers to those passages in “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” that support the homosexual–heterosexual binary framework in which his argument operates. Hence, Dievler does not mention those passages in the essay that might complicate this emphasis, such as Baldwin's numerous *heterosexual* relationships with *white* women, or, for that matter, the episodes in which the racist “speculations” of some white gay men concerning “the size of [Baldwin's sex] organ” proved menacing to him – a reference to which I will return later (*Collected Essays* 823–9).

To consider either of these passages in Baldwin's essay would, I suspect, radically undercut any effort to fix the author's own sexual orientation as a gay man. It would also reduce Baldwin's understanding of human sexuality to a homosexual–heterosexual framework, especially one unmediated by historically and culturally changing racialized distinctions. Dievler refers to this particular essay in order to contend that, in *Another Country*, Baldwin “portrays the devastation wrought in a country dominated by a categorically limited sexual culture and offers both a view of and the means of transport to ‘another country’, beyond the confines of the narrow identity categories that imprisoned Americans in the immediate postwar period and still do so today” (162–3). On the surface, such a project would need to be preoccupied as much with the racialized sexual dimensions of the postwar period as with its gendered sexual dimensions. After all, Americans during this period witnessed the formal dismantling of nearly four centuries of state-sponsored racial oppression, including the 1948 California Supreme Court ruling in *Perez v. Sharp* that struck down the state's laws against racial intermarriage. Nineteen years later, the US Supreme Court would follow this decision with its own landmark ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*. However, Dievler's narrow interpretation of Baldwin's essay, if not also his life, employs the phrase “sexual culture” as a synonym for gay subculture only. But as the racial and gender identities

of the plaintiffs in these court cases make clear, (white) gay men and lesbians were not the only “sexual culture” struggling for recognition in postwar America; black- and white-identified heterosexual couples were also constituted in these terms as well.

Any revisionist look back at the postwar, pre-Civil Rights era – the same period in which Baldwin’s novel is set – would need to include black- and white-identified men and women who dared to cross the color line for love and marriage in this category as well. This last point cannot be overstated, given postwar American culture’s intense preoccupation during this era with the hotly debated subjects of black–white intermarriage and racial equality, subjects that were frequently rhetorically linked in political and popular commentary at the time (see Pascoe; Romano). As the present essay contends, such couple relationships, to borrow Dievler’s terms, were “dominated [no less] by a categorically limited sexual culture” that “imprisoned” the desires of millions of black and white *heterosexual* Americans than by the “narrow identity categories” that had likewise oppressed millions of lesbians and gay men of the postwar era, whatever their racial or ethnic identities. The relatively recent experiences of the latter has simply tended to overshadow those of the former in terms of academic research – that is, until contemporary social scientists and historians, among others, began challenging this systematic erasure of interracial heterosexual-couple dynamics (see Childs; Dalmage; Hodes, *Sex, Love, Race*).

In contrast to Dievler’s analysis, William Cohen’s engaging essay, “Liberalism, Libido, Liberation: Baldwin’s *Another Country*” (2000), provides a detailed and rigorous analysis of the novel, while being careful to keep in the foreground the author’s emphasis on racial oppression. Although frequently persuasive, the force of Cohen’s insights is nonetheless marred by his surprising adherence to a narrowly conceived homosexual–heterosexual binary framework to structure his analysis as well. This framework makes it difficult for Cohen to recognize the limitations of this model and the need, therefore, for a more nuanced approach – one that acknowledges racialized desire *as desire* – for making legible the novel’s complex preoccupations. The following passage offers a telling example of the type of interpretive limitation I am describing: “It is now clear,” Cohen writes,

just how closeted the pre-Stonewall setting of Baldwin’s novel is: There is no coming out of the closet because there is nowhere to come out to. Sexuality was, therefore, “perfectly” private – it had not yet found a public voice – and it is for this reason that Baldwin’s fantasy of *racial* mixing and equality (which had, by this period, certainly gone public) was everywhere deflected onto sexual dynamics. (Cohen 218)

Cohen’s use here of metaphoric language linked to gay and lesbian/queer definition, i.e. “coming out” and “the closet,” reveal in stark terms the degree to which his interpretive framework relies heavily on same-sex desire and identities, rather than on racialized dynamics, to make sexuality legible as a category of analysis. His assertion, for instance, that the novel’s racial concerns are “deflected” onto concerns about sexuality – as if sexuality and “race” were completely separate phenomena – expose

how the two remain, in his analysis, mutually exclusive rather than mediating categories. *Racial* difference, then, between sexually intimate partners, can only register within Cohen's framework as a form of social conflict between differently opposed racial groups, and *never* as a historically changing form of desire that structures interpersonal relations that cross the color line. Unfortunately, textual depictions of heterosexually and homosexually intimate interracial bonds can become legible only as commentary on "racial" concerns, not as commentary on the "sexual" concerns that have *racialized* dimensions.

This critical tendency within Queer Studies scholarship to polarize "race" and sexuality in analyses of Baldwin's literary texts, especially *Another Country*, reached its apotheosis in the early 1990s, when the interdisciplinary field gained institutional legitimacy, however qualified, with the emergence of what has come to be known as "queer theory" (de Lauretis). In his close look at Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Bryan Washington's analysis recalls my earlier point as to the definitional conundrum that Baldwin presents to academic scholarship when he reaches this conclusion about the nature of some of the critical research produced early in the decade on the author's work: "As a black critic presented with the challenge of responding to recent readings of Baldwin," writes Washington, "I have been unable to avoid the unhappy conclusion that white gay theory is disturbingly self-interested, that it looks to Baldwin for absolution and disciplines him when he refuses to give it" (85). Washington is referring here to several prominent "contributions to gay theory," as he calls this sophisticated body of literary criticism, including Claude Summers's *Gay Fictions, Wilde to Stonewall* (1990), David Bergman's *Gaiety Transfigured* (1991), and Lee Edelman's *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994). For Washington, these critics exhibit an apparent "irritation and frustration" with Baldwin's portrayals of and remarks on homosexuality, even as they also celebrate him for daring to produce such representations at all. While Summers accepts *Giovanni's Room* (1956) as "'a central text ... in the American literature of homosexuality,'" he apparently finds *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), according to Washington, "questionable because race, rather than sexuality, is allegedly its primary preoccupation" – this is the case even though same-sex desire is integral to the novel's plot (Washington 78). On the other hand, Bergman is critical of the African American author's "refusal to accept the classification of 'gay writer,'" reading into Baldwin's reticence the possibility of a latent internalized homophobia. Thus, for Washington, these critics view "blackness and homosexuality [as] 'polarized'" (79). Such a critical stance leads Bergman to side at least partially with the famous homophobic critique in Eldridge Cleaver's *Souls on Ice* (1968), which likewise rebukes Baldwin for his fictional portrayals of homosexuality, but for reasons far different from Bergman's.

Moreover, Washington takes particular exception to Edelman's essay, which he calls "frequently disturbing" (79). Edelman sets out on a provocative project in his attempt to disentangle from the cultural category gay men the notion of African American writers who figure white-male-on-black-male sexual abuse as an instance of emasculating these men, therefore reducing black men to putative homosexuals.

For Edelman, given that our society's "dominant optic ... registers any act of male-male sex as 'homosexuality,'" black writers' textual critique of this violence can only "acquir[e] visibility through the demonization of male-male sexual relations" (quoted in Edelman 54-5). By the latter, Edelman no doubt means contemporary gay male identity formations. His primary contention is that such identities are, or should be anyway, viewed as conceptually distinct from the identity formation of the straight white male racist. If such a distinction is not somehow made evident in a black writer's text, then that representation, as well as that writer, risks the charge of homophobia. As Edelman himself puts it:

The complexities generated by these figures in which the racist persecution of African-American men is imaged through the violence of male-male sexual (which is always construed as male *homosexual*) aggression, prevent the passages [from black writers] from being dismissed as simple demonstrations of an authorial inclination to draw upon the homophobia that seems to be America's one endlessly renewable, though by no means "natural," resource. The figures themselves, after all, *as* figures produce a confusion of trope and referent that has everything to do with the confounding and dismantling of the active/passive distinction. While it is clear, in other words, that these textual moments put the fear and hatred of homosexuality strategically into play, only the particularity of a reading can determine if the passages are to be interpreted as homophobic themselves or, conversely, as subjecting homophobia to a much-needed analysis. (57-8)

While Edelman's comments here refer to Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train Has Been Gone* (1968) and *Just above My Head* (1979), and not to *Go Tell It* or to *Giovanni's Room*, his second and, for some critics, his much "gayer" novel, Washington considers Edelman's reading to be closely related to the readings by Summers and Bergman. Washington's basic point is that these scholars are unhappy with Baldwin's portrayal of homosexuality and homosexuals. The portrayals avoid unequivocally positive depictions of gay men who have triumphed over society's homophobic condemnation of them, and offer instead a vision of homosexuality that is, to these gay male critics, narrowly specific to African American experience. The fact that Baldwin, as a black writer who was primarily, though not exclusively, attracted to other men, may have had different experiences of homosexuals – and particularly *white American* homosexuals, who, after all, as white Americans living in the postwar era, were liable to hold anti-black beliefs the same as their heterosexual counterparts – does not seem to be of interest to these critics. Simply, these writers chastise Baldwin for not privileging his allegiance to white queers like themselves over his apparent, to them, "marginal" allegiance to blacks in general, whom these writers curiously appear to assume to be exclusively heterosexual.

In this vein, Edelman criticizes Baldwin for conflating (white) homosexuals with white racism rather than viewing, as he apparently should, as a gay man himself (albeit a black one), (white) homosexuals as similarly oppressed victims caught within the same ideological structures of domination as people of color. As Washington puts it:

To chide Baldwin and other black writers [as Edelman does] ... for the moments in their work when homosexuality is associated with white racism is to suggest that whites have been misrepresented, that they are not the oppressors. If whiteness in American culture is not the emblem of power and aggression, what is it? Why, in short, would black writers conceive whites differently? (79)

Washington goes on to rebuke Edelman in turn for the latter's claim that Baldwin's representation of white homosexuals in a passage in "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" evinces homophobia. As Washington argues, "it is important to read [Baldwin's remarks] with its context in mind." In other words,

Baldwin refers to his early experience with the New York "gay world," a world he describes as alienating because of the racial and sexual stereotypes operating within it. "The very last thing this black boy needed," [Baldwin] writes, "were clouds of imitation white women and speculations concerning the size of his organ." Arguing that he was exploited "by people who truly meant ... [him] no harm," [Baldwin] quickly points out that "they could *not* have meant him any harm because they did not see ... [him]." (83)

For Washington, Baldwin's supposed discomfort with homosexuality in general and with homosexuals in particular is best understood by considering how the author's various references were conditioned by the collision between stereotypes about black embodiment with the social hierarchy characteristic of the largely white gay male community. The latter is a point that many contemporary scholars of Queer Studies often fail to consider in their assessments of Baldwin, perhaps because of what I have referred to as their overinvestment in recuperating affirming portraits of (white) homosexual identity and desire to offset those that are demeaning and pathologized.

My goal has been to use Washington's commentary as a valuable lens through which to understand how some white-identified scholars operating within a Queer Studies hermeneutic have tended to approach *Another Country*, a novel that does not privilege same-sex desire but in fact privileges *black-white* desire, both heterosexual and homosexual. Washington's point is that Summers, Bergman, Edelman, and other "gay theorists" who minimize or disregard racialized concerns altogether have not analyzed Baldwin's novels on their own terms. Rather, such theorists have used these texts opportunistically to center almost exclusively their depictions of same-sex desiring scenarios and identities at the expense of a particular text's overall narrative design. Washington would argue that the design may center not those particular scenarios and identities, but those filtered through concerns germane to African American experiences as an historically subjugated racial minority group. Moreover, these critics fault Baldwin for failing to provide them with representations that satisfy late twentieth-century politicized expectations, organized chiefly around promoting depictions of (white) queer psychological wholeness and self-empowerment. However, Baldwin himself, in 1984, may just have anticipated this criticism from select white gay male scholars:

I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. The anomaly of their sexuality puts them in danger, unexpectedly. Their reaction seems to me in direct proportion to the sense of feeling cheated of the advantages which accrue to white people in a white society. There's an element, it has always seemed to me, of bewilderment and complaint. Now that may sound harsh, but the gay world as such is no more prepared to accept black people than anywhere else in society. It's a very hermetically sealed world with very unattractive features, including racism. (quoted in Goldstein 180)

In recent years, several critics have noted this seemingly resurgent white gay male identity politics that has come to characterize Queer Studies overall, and view it as a significant limitation of the field, as Baldwin no doubt would have. In their jointly authored essay, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now," David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Estéban Muñoz (an Asian gay man, a white Jewish transgender woman, and a Latino gay man) warn that "Much of queer theory nowadays sounds like a metanarrative about the domestic affairs of white homosexuals" (12). Indeed, in her own essay, "Shame and White Gay Masculinity" (2005), Halberstam predicts an apocalyptic end to the field if such narrow concerns are not ultimately displaced: "The future of queer studies ... depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies" (220).

Queer Studies (of the Future) and *Another Country*

I would like to conclude by taking a moment to gesture towards some of the work produced by those scholars whom Halberstam suggests can help ensure that the "future" of Queer Studies as an academic field of research is not so narrowly focused on a small minority who are both gay men and white. Without exception, the critical preoccupations of these scholars operate self-consciously at the crossroads of racial *and* sexual discourses. In contrast to the critics I have discussed throughout much of this essay, most of these critics combine a focus on African American and queer discourse to explore Baldwin's depictions of same-gender desire in his fiction and late essays. Because of how these critics are situated methodologically, their work takes aim at both forms of scholarship that have tended to marginalize their own doubled concerns. Hence, not only does much of this research challenge the normative racial assumptions of (white) mainstream Queer Studies scholarship, but much of it also challenges the normative sexual assumptions of mainstream African American literary critical discourse as well, which is overwhelmingly heterosexist. If Bryan Washington's critique of Edelman, Bergman, and Summers can be said to be focused on contesting the racial assumptions of what he calls "white gay theory," then many of these other writers take critical aim at what one scholar has dubbed "black straight studies" (McBride 35).

Moreover, many of the current scholars who work at these intersections often do so with the express aim of challenging heterosexist and homophobic biases that pervade the African American literary tradition. Thus, in “‘Ain’t Nothin’ like the Real Thing’: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity” (1996), Kendall Thomas challenges the routine homophobia that critics of color have perhaps inadvertently exhibited with respect to Baldwin’s work. In addressing one of these writers, in particular, Thomas states:

{This critic’s} awkward answer to those who would “deracinate” Baldwin and reduce the writer to his sexuality is to “desexualize” Baldwin and reduce him to his race. To be sure, these two equally misguided moves are impelled by very different purposes: where Baldwin’s detractors magnify his sexuality in order to renounce him, [this critic] minimizes Baldwin’s sexuality in order to redeem him. (59)

Likewise, in “White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality” (1999), Marlon Ross continues Thomas’s critique by indicting black intellectuals such as Houston Baker for their unwillingness to integrate Baldwin’s focus on sexual concerns with his focus on racial matters. In addition, Ross discusses at least two of Baldwin’s early literary works, including *Another Country*, in relation to the critical commentary that has been generated on the novel. Ross’s main point (which intersects with Bryan Washington’s critique of white gay scholars) concerns the fact that because Baldwin often chose “the apparently curious option of treating male homosexuality through the fictional experiences of white characters, if not from a white point of view,” critics of his early novels often tended to place race and sexuality in opposition to one another (19–20).

However, Robert Reid-Pharr, who is also dually invested in African American and queer critical discourses, offers a reading of *Another Country* that both implicitly critiques his other like-minded counterparts working within what has recently become known as “black queer studies” (see Henderson and Johnson 2005), as well as explicitly takes to task scholarly work within (white) Queer Studies that persists in downplaying questions of race. In his iconoclastic collection of essays entitled *Black Gay Man* (2001), Reid-Pharr argues that scholars whose work has been organized chiefly around producing sophisticated theoretical concepts and insights about non-normative sexual identities and practices have steadfastly avoided interrogating some of the most basic questions about subjectivity in the act of enacting our sexual selves. Reid-Pharr is especially concerned with highlighting the sexual formation of cross-racial desire as a crucial site for anchoring such explorations, a form of desire that only a handful of other black queer studies scholars have taken on (see Scott; Williams). He contends that “nearly two decades of writing and film by people of color, and in particular that by Black gay men, has spoken to the experience of sex with whites, painting it at once as liberatory and repressive” (Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man* 86). The same, however, has not been the case with white writers. Reid-Pharr poses the question: “Why is it that we often find such sustained discussions of cross-racial desire among people of color while whites remain largely silent?” (88).

To answer this question, Reid-Pharr turns to the emerging work by scholars whose research focuses on whiteness as an ideological construct. He concludes with a provocative insight: "that, in fact, the tendency to insist upon the innocence of our sex, the transparency of desire at the moment of penetration, is itself a part of the complex ideological process by which whiteness is rendered invisible, unremarkable except in the presence of a spectacularized Blackness" (*Black Gay Man* 77–8). In other words, Reid-Pharr discovers that the injunction not to speak (or think) about race when we engage in sexual acts with others – on the part of blacks as well as on the part of whites – is to collude in the ideological process of rendering whiteness invisible and blackness overdetermined. The potential antidote to such collusion, Reid-Pharr suggests, is for Americans to not only speak race when we "fuck," but also to think it, even in the face of powerful institutional and cultural powers that insist otherwise (76). In his own tour de force rereading of *Another Country*, Reid-Pharr uses these critical insights into whiteness to argue that Baldwin recognized this tendency of liberal white Americans especially to avoid the topic of race as it pertained to their sexualities. For Baldwin, this silence was one that had the unfortunate effect of reinscribing, even as it actively repudiated, the workings of a white supremacist culture by insisting on the invisibility of one racial category (whiteness) while insisting on the hypervisibility of another (blackness). The entire process was organized through an elaborately produced denial on the part of liberal whites of what was in fact seen, i.e. "black" and "white" bodies. "[T]he tragedy, the horror that both the white and the Black subject must confront in Baldwin's universe," Reid-Pharr contends, "is the racial fantasy that denies access to the body, that denies access to the beloved, and instead seals each partner into a bizarre competition in which mutual invisibility is the inevitable outcome. Indeed, the 'lovemaking' in *Another Country* is as much an act of rage as of adoration and devotion" (81). For Reid-Pharr, as perhaps too for Baldwin, the solution to such a dilemma is simply to speak the unspeakable, or at least to dare thinking it as a prelude to speaking out eventually.

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that some critics have performed opportunistic readings of Baldwin's controversial third novel, *Another Country*. In so doing, these critics have exhibited an unwillingness to engage the novel's own preoccupations with interracial figurations by imposing onto their readings political contexts and arguments that recenter the struggles of gay men. As such, these critics conveniently displace the novel's ongoing preoccupation with the theme of post-World War Two racial struggle and the central role that sexual relationships across the color line played historically during that period. This sociopolitical context has been systematically overlooked in much of contemporary Queer Studies in favor of the privileging of (white) same-sex identities and desires. And while the emergence of black queer studies has recently sought to remedy this oversight, sadly much of this work, with some

notable exceptions, too often operates within its own homosexual–heterosexual binary framework, albeit one configured differently from its mainstream counterpart. In short, the former merely reproduces a new binary opposition within the old model – namely, *black* heterosexuality / *black* homosexuality that is then placed alongside, or *within*, the (white) heterosexuality / (white) homosexuality framework that is common to (white) queer theoretical and political activist discourse. However, as Cathy Cohen has pointed out, such a binary “narrowly posits a dichotomy of heterosexual privilege and queer oppression,” one that I suggest is merely doubled by race. Not only does this *re*-racialized opposition produce “monolithic understandings” of these two categories, heterosexuality and homosexuality, but it also fails to recognize the varying relations to power that exist among members of both groups, “in which identities of race, class, and/or gender either enhance or mute the marginalization of queers, on the one hand, and the power of heterosexuals, on the other” (210, 215).

My point here has been to argue that *Another Country*, but also many other texts within the African American literary tradition, offers these and other scholars potentially rich literary narratives for analyzing racial and sexual content that resist overly conventional analyses. In other words, if we are to take seriously what the authors of “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” claim when they write that “the ‘subjectless’ critique of queer studies [ideally] disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 3), then I would say that, in the twenty-first century, the literature by people of color, whether homosexual or otherwise, and the intersectional nature of our concerns, ought to serve as a more elucidating object of study for such critical practices than would texts that cater primarily to the monolithic identity concerns of white lesbians and gay men. Earl Jackson, Jr. reminds us that “[a] marginal sexual identity does not warrant reductive identifications across other differences” (Jackson 151). And as my brief look at the critical literature within Queer Studies of Baldwin’s *Another Country* has tried to demonstrate (a work, after all, in which “different-race” sexuality is privileged over “same-gender”), this marginality should extend to the difference, and even in some cases to the sameness, of race as well.

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