

African American Literature

of James Baldwin

Guy Mark Foster

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;

questions interesting for what they reveal to us about the... concerns, but the questions are also interesting for what they do not reveal...

white) he is curiously silent on... to whether any of these partners were... friends. Their...

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. From that moment on, according to some notable scholars, people in the West began to exhibit a new obsession with...

being a run of life, life for... (Foucault 43). From that moment on, according to some notable scholars, people in the West began to exhibit a new obsession with...

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, *The American Woman, 1820-1860*; 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 reasons for this displacement are 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 Nazis party in particular (Lipp, *Komodo*). Unperturbed, 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 arduous dichotomizing of Germans between the degraded status of the Jew throughout much of Europe and the degraded status of the black within the US. Certainly one reason for this disturbance was the fact that the Holocaust was a second "nativity" that between white Americans and the Nazis. This motif of 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 racialized citizens from such disturbing associations (see Sollors). With race being displaced from whiteness, effectively sidelined, gender would then emerge as the sole and exclusive analytical category in scientific and critical theories of human sexuality and 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 decentered Jewish and discourse on human sexuality, and indeed, much of this work is deeply indebted to Foucault's epistemological discourse on sexuality as an identity category. In part, 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 directly supplant the earlier race-centered model (characterized by a "same-race"/"different-race" opposition) that had previously obsessed much of US popular and critical discourses on this period.

While the black, Jewish, and 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 discourses 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 Robinson. As often an African Americanist, sexuality theorist, and, as I hope to show,

President Lincoln's

... as the sexual

... even as

... and popular

... *Black Man*

... of national

... of the

... from the heinous

... and for the

... to relegate what

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

referring to this author and his writings), Baldwin has presented something of a counterpoint to both mainstream and non-mainstream

US. While the dominant (white) literary tradition has

his literary production, later scholars – most notably those within African American

literary and for the

tion as synonyms for sexual, that is, homosexual, and here, the two terms func-

tion as synonyms for sexual

tion as synonyms for sexual

tion as synonyms for sexual

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

poles of either of these oppositions come together" (Ohi 261). Even scholars who

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

... of

depictions of opposite-sex or same-sex identities and behaviors as the

proper object of much queer scholarship, even as he attempts to

Kather, the bulk of Baldwin's writing always in

Kather, the bulk of Baldwin's writing always in

Kather, the bulk of Baldwin's writing always in

Kather, the bulk of Baldwin's writing always in

... of

... of

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 possibilities that could include, but always exceed, the closures of sexual identity as such” (Vogel 403).

More recently, in an effort to redress a similar meaning gap, some scholars have demarcated 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 individuals 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 men’s past and contemporary localities. After all, such men certainly have no control over their racial affiliation. Moreover, it is simply a fact that some 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 Clark 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.<sup>91</sup> These power relations are central to the historical configurations of white gay male identities and the 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 historicality of its inquiries practices that in 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 91). It was, perhaps, out of his own mindless sense of duty that blackness seems 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, *Jock Macpherson* (1977).<sup>1</sup> In *Another Country*, Baldwin does not afford "white" characters a "center" in the novel, but he does center a black lesbian character in the novel, and he does center a black gay male character in the novel. The sexual questions raised in the novel are not only a more aspect of the danger in which all black people live ("Godem' t'ou").<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a guiding assumption of the present inquiry is that white homosexuals have

whether heterosexually oriented or not, long before white lesbians and gay men took up the issue, nonheterosexuality was not a central concern of white Americans. In contrast, "the construction of a racialized American identity was a central concern of black Americans," as Erick Ferguson usefully notes in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, "black American homosexuals, like their heterosexual counterparts, were excluded from the bounds of the citizenship machinery." Though African American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolized a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heterosexuality. The racialized eroticization of black heterosexuals and homosexuals outside the racialized (i.e., heteronormative) household, symbolically 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 on display in the following passage from *Another Country*: "discourses of blackness are overdetermined by discourses of queer sexuality" (*Over 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* records the often stormy interpersonal relationships among a group of 20-to-30-something-year-old Americans that in many respects come to mirror the racial and sexual tensions of the time. At the center of these relationships is the black jazz musician Rufus, whose character 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 central characters are women; some are men, and though most of these interpersonal

relationships are heterosexual in nature, some are homosexual, and some are both heterosexual and homosexual in their psychosexual configurations. However, at least one of these characters, Rufus's younger sister Ida, is black, while the rest are white, including Ida's white American boyfriend, Vivian's white, white-winner 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 race and gender 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 writer, that 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" (1987) is an early but notable example of this type of critical engagement. Yet rather than impose on Baldwin's literary texts a cognizable 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 best awareness of the structuring influence of socially desired and undesired sexualities on his creative 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 about whether 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, "which that time arrives." "Maybe that's at the bottom of my impatience with the term. It answers false argument, 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 false does us 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

I want to suggest that Nelson's steadfast refusal to acknowledge that human sexual-  
ity for Baldwin is general and for all Americans is determined by gender identity alone, which a "homosexual-heterosexual continuum"  
unproblematically assumes, but also by racial identity is typical of how many con-  
temporaneous critical studies of race and gender in the United States have taken  
on the author's work. It is, however, similar critical engagements with Baldwin's most  
controversial novel by scholars unaffiliated with queer studies that have informed the  
analysis of Baldwin's race and sexuality in "Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*," (1999), replicates Nelson's tendency to

ography. Dievler does this by ignoring a well known 1961 Baldwin published essay  
later retitled "Here Be Dragons," in which the author famously discusses his early  
sexual experiences. Although he does not completely overlook the racialized sexual  
nuances 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.  
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 refer-  
ence to which I will return later (*Collected Essays*, 873-9).

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-heterosexu-  
al framework, especially one unmediated by historically and culturally changing  
sexual constructions. 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 impinged Americans in the immediate postwar period and still do so today  
(1954). As the author writes, 'I might wonder if and on the occasion of my visit to  
the rainbow sexed dimensions of the postwar period as with its gendered sexual  
dimensions, in Africa, Indians and Negroes had witnessed the total dismantling  
of nearly four centuries of state-sponsored racial oppression, including the 1948 Cali-  
fornia 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

narrow heterosexual model of Dievler's essay, it will only be the coming of the  
coming, as a symbol of the author's own fear of the racial and gender identities



of the plaintiffs in these court cases make clear, white gay men and women were not the only "sexual culture" struggling for recognition in postwar America; black and white identified heterosexual couples were also recognized 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 preoccupations 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, Liberty, and the Erotic: 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 fitting example of the type of interpretive limitation and essentialism Cohen writes, "It is now clear,"

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 home — and is in fact as much Baldwin's fantasy of social mixing and equality (which had, by this period, virtually 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





For Edelman, given that our society's "dominant optic ... registers any act of male-male sex as homosexual," black writers' sexual critique of this violence can only "acquire 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 white male racism of the homophobic 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 culpability generated by the homophobic violence of the 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 "you are different and has everything to do with the commodity and instability 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 more 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 to Giovanni's Room*, his second and, for some critics, his much "gayest" novel, Washington considers Edelman's reading to be overly radical in its challenge to *Just above My Head*. Washington's basic point is that these scholars are unhappy with Baldwin's portrayal of homosexuals and lesbians: "I don't portray any of the queers as positive representations of gay men who have triumphed over society's homophobic condemnation of them, and don't instead a vision of homosexuality that is to these gay male critics narrowly specific to African American experience. I don't read 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, as white Americans living in the 1950s era, were able to hold a double life that is not as strictly heterosexual as interpreted — was not seen as of or interest to these critics. Simply, these writers analyse 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 consistently 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:



I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born in 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 always seems to me, of smallness and incompleteness. Not always 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 Esteban 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 their own essay, "Some Use White Gay Masculinity" (2007), 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 tactical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw more liberally and suspiciously 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 turning 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 race gendered desire in his fiction and literary 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 Edem M. Ukpemba's not-able summaries can be said to be one of our contemporary critical 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" (Ovbridge 55).

so with the express aim of challenging heterosexist and homophobic biases that pervade the African American literary tradition. In "The Real Thing: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity" (1996), Kendall Thomas challenges the routine homophobia that critics of color have

these writers, in particular, Thomas states:

[This critic's] awkward answer to those who would "deracinate" Baldwin and reduce

Like wise, in "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality" (1999), Marion Ross continues Thomas's critique by indicting black intellectuals'

Baldwin's early literary work, including *Another Country*, in relation to the critical

through the fictional "experiences" of white characters, not from a white point of

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

*Man* (2001), Reid-Pharr argues that scholars whose work has been organized chiefly

five sexual identities and practices have creditably avoided interrogating some of the most basic questions about subjectivity in the act of enacting our sexual selves.

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?" (2007, p. 112)

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 course of research on *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 copulation 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  
 - subject, the former merely reproduces a new binary opposition within the old model  
 - namely, *black* heterosexuality / *black* homosexuality, whereas when placed alongside

common to (white) queer theoretical and political activist discourse. However, as  
 - that often happens, the very definition of these categories is often

these two categories, heterosexuality and homosexuality, but it also fails to recognize  
 - the ways in which these categories are often used to relate to each other  
 - more on the one hand, and the ways in which these categories are often used to relate to each other" (110, 115)

My point here has been to argue that *Another Country*, but also many other texts  
 - within the critical period are not only rich in their own right but also offer a particularly  
 - 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 'subject'  
 - less' critique of queer studies is idealistic rather than realistic, for a number of  
 - object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent" (King, Hal-  
 - berstam and Muñoz 3), then I would say that, in the twenty-first century, the

our concerns ought to serve as a more elucidating object of study for each critical  
 - practice that would serve that later primarily to the monochrome identity concerns of  
 - white lesbians and gay men. Karl Jackson Jr. reminds us that "[a] marginal sexual

identity, however, has also to do with the way in which the dominant group of people

Library of America, 1999. Princeton, Princeton University Press,  
 Carabado, Devon. W., ed. *Black Men on Race*. 2001. 200-27  
 Children, Erica Chito. *Navigating Interracial Borders*. Ed. Patricia Juliana Smith. New York:



- Divided World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities – an Introduction." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): iii–xviii.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am." In *James Baldwin: A Life*. Ed. Dwight A. McBride. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 101–80.
- Edelman, Lee. *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Eng, David, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Essays on Literature* 32.4 (2005): 6–12.
- Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*, Volume I: An Introduction. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Goldsrein, Richard. "Go the Way Your Blood Beats": An Interview with James Baldwin." In *James Baldwin: 1924–1988*. Ed. Quincy Troupe. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. 173–85.
- Halberstam, Judith. "Shame and White Gay Masculinity." *Social Text* 23.3, 4 (2005): 219–55.
- Henderson, Mae (r.) and E. Patrick Johnson, ed. *Black Futures: A Critical Anthology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Hodes, Martha. *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Hodes, Martha. *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Jackson, Earl, Jr. "The Responsibility of and to Differences: Theorizing Race and Ethnicity in Lesbian and Gay Studies." In *Defina d'Avila: Deferred: Multicultural Education and the Politics of Possibility*. Ed. David J. Thompson and George Tyagi. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993. 131–61.
- Kulick, Don. "Queer Linguistics?" In *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*. Ed. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Robert J. Pedersen, Scott L. Roberts, and Andrew Ware. Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2002. 65–8.
- Lemire, Elise. "Miscegenation": Making Race in America. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.
- Lubin, Alex. *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945–1954*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- McBride, Dwight. *The Way I Was Born and the Way I Live: James Baldwin and Sexuality*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Prosser, James. "Race, Race, Sex, and Color: A Conversation with James Baldwin." In *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt. Jackson & London: University of Mississippi Press, 1989. 46–58.
- Nelson, Bramanash. "The Novels of James Baldwin: Struggles of Self-Acceptance." *Journal of American Culture* 8.4 (1985): 11–16.
- Offit, Kevin. "I'm not the boy you want": Sexuality, 'Race', and Thwarted Revelation in Baldwin's *Another Country*." *African American Review* 33.2 (1999): 261–81.
- Pascoe, Peggy. *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Reid-Pharris, Robert. *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Reid-Pharris, Robert. *Queer You Go: Black Choice, Desire, and the Politics of Intimacy*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.
- Robinson, Alfred. *The Moral Degeneration of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Romano, Bruce. *Race-mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Ross, Marlon. "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality." In *James Baldwin Now*. Ed. Dwight A. McBride. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 115–55.
- , ed. *Black Man in Search of Soul and Justice: Politics, White Dick, and the Utopian Bedroom*. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.3 (1994): 299–321.
- Sollors, Werner, ed. *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Thomas, Kendall. "'Ain't Nothin' like the Real Thing': Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and

University of Pennsylvania. *Black Men*. Ed. M. Blount and G. Cunningham. *the Mountain*. Ed. T. Harris. Cambridge

and the Queer Project. *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*. *Black Americans, US Terrain*. Ed. Wahneema

Hate. *Abercrombie &* 48.3 (2006): 397-425. *Black Americans, US Terrain*. Ed. Wahneema

, 2005. that Dare Not Speak Its Name. John, Elisha. 136-56.

, Sex, and Colour: A udwin." In *Conversa-* d. Fred L. Standley

London: Universi- 189. 46-58.

Novels of James Acceptance." *Journal* 35): 11-16.

you want's Sexual Revelation in Bald- *can American Review*

in America. Oxford:

y Man: Essays. New Press. 2001.

L. C. P. Blake, C. Boire *an Interview*. New Press, 2007.

tion of sex: *Madame Masters and Virginia*

*Black-White Mar-* Cambridge, MA: 003.

s of Desire: Baldwin Sexuality." In *James*

A. McBride. New sity Press, 1999.

Black Gay identity and the Usonian

*Black-White*

ary, *Excitement, and* versity Press, 2000.

thin' like the Real Gay Sexuality, and