

Delegitimizing the Racial Stereotypes in James Baldwin's *Another Country*

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Abstract

Regardless of the reasons behind this identity crisis, the modern self seems bound to reinvent itself, to adapt to the requirements of a new social reality. An important part of this paper focuses around to the concept of dignity and social acceptance, the evolution of the intellectual being analyzed here in close connection with the evolution of morality, religion, and the triumphal march of the principles of equality and liberty with reference to James Baldwin's novel *Another country*. Openness or cultural relativism is the new social policy of the United States. Synonymous with literature of protest, Black literature protest against exploitation, limitations, restrictions, discrimination, intolerance, injustice etc, to which they are being subjected by the Whites in the United States.

Keywords: Racial stereotypes, fragmentation, protest, violence exploitation, Afro-American.

Introduction

In the literary events of black Afro- American and gay literature, Baldwin has configured a respectable place and is being counted an imminent writer whose writing speaks volumes about the black aesthetics and the arrows of affliction affiliated to black aesthetics.

Baldwin's writing created a potential roadmap for grappling in and theorizing about black essence as well as existence at the intersections of race, gender, class from the thresholds of literature.

Synonymous with literature of protest, Black literature protest against exploitation, limitations, restrictions, discrimination, intolerance, injustice etc, to which they are being subjected by the Whites in the United States. It can't be ruled out that black literature has given new identity to the African- American black writers in a sense they fought for, now the truth is what they have created or nourished for themselves but not that with which whites burden ruled and tried them, now they their own personhood and identity their future generations could be proud to follow. The quality of personhood they groomed around their literature is very much inherently specific to the black narratives that previous were being marginalized are now being fantasized and danced about, now their narratives that delegitimize racial stereotypes are all about being human and all other discourses that legitimate human worth.

According to rhetorician and linguist Barbara Johnston in critical book of essays 'Discourse Analysis and Narrative', that: "The essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative" (Johnston 635).

To Baldwin texts seem to be a battle grounds wherein the characters fight all along the racial lines long back drawn by white masters. Making storytelling the trope of narration the white pretended and false accounts are being demystified that risked the innocence of deliberately held marginalized. Now Baldwin as a prophetic voice speaks for them and makes whites society realizes who they actually are.

A decent starting point in the analysis of black aesthetics seems to be the feeling of identity crisis, of depersonalization following social alienation of the individual. There is, in the contemporary period, an acute spiritual tension whose roots go back, on the one hand, in the profound economic and political changes of the twentieth century and, on the other hand, in the accumulation of cultural information that subliminally presses on the psychic of the modern writer. Regardless of the reasons behind this identity crisis, the modern self seems bound to reinvent itself, to adapt to the requirements of a new social reality. An important part of this paper focuses around to the concept of dignity and social acceptance, the evolution of the

intellectual being analyzed here in close connection with the evolution of morality, religion, and the triumphal march of the principles of equality and liberty. Openness or cultural relativism is the new social policy of the United States. It is obvious that every political regime tries to educate its citizens in the light of its guiding principles (in the case of democracy, the principle of equality and acceptance of the other, each with his own standards and own perspective) and the public enemy of the contemporary society becomes the discriminator, who cannot accept diversity and the multitude of points of view.

However, when there is no more shared vision on the public good and there are no more common goals, the question rises whether the social contract is still possible. What this chapter tried to prove is that contemporary society has dissolved into a mass of separate individuals, each pursuing his own selfish goals and subjective interests, destroying that common vision and that social and moral order necessary for the construction of a healthy image of the self. Because the formation of the individual or, in a narrower sense, of the modern intellectual, cannot be understood other than in close relation with society, the redefinition of the modern self becomes synonymous with the redefinition of the moral standards of society, seen, most of the times, as an impossible mission, hence the nihilism or pessimism of many analysts. What is relevant for this chapter is the fact that the writer under scrutiny here do not perceive this transition as a moral or philosophical failure, but as a fresh start, where the modern self is not only freed from the old limitations, but assumes new identities, better adapted to the challenges of the white color dominated society. As indicated in this theoretical chapter consciously James Baldwin being aware that America needs a profound transformation and that the key to this transformation is a correct balancing of individual rights and obligations. The true identity cannot be forged other than in relation with the others, assertive or conflictual but necessarily infused with respect for the other, thus ensuring the climate of social dignity required for a correct functioning of society.

As Ron Karenga said:

Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution. It must become and remain part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively.... Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution. . . . It must be functional like the poem of another

revolutionary poet ... it must be collective. In a word, it must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life. (Ron Karenga 141)

Language is an instrument which writers use to portray their thematic preoccupation. Narratologists value the essence of language because it enables them to visualize various interpretations in the narrative.

A writer deeply invested in blues culture, James Baldwin looked to model his writing style after the vernacular traditions of figures such as Bessie Smith, a performer who mastered the art of understatement, acceptance, and going beyond. "In her "Back Water Blues," Bessie Smith sings about the devastation of a Mississippi flood and the loss of her home. In other words color disparity made her lose the confidence and authentication she was to live along and the pinch makes her quite dislocated and alienated, the reality of white dominated society is a thing she grapples with and What is fantastic for Baldwin is Smith's ability to transcend the depression of her material loss into a realization that she must move forward. Since it was quite tough to come to terms with the racist, political and economic ideas the so called American dream was living along but still literary writers of Harlem renaissance managed to make their expression quite laudable.

In *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture (2010)* Steven Watson asserts African-American writing existed before these years, of course, and many authors who first found their voices during the 1920s produced significant work in the years following but the New Negro's organized, self-conscious phase lasted less than a decade.

James Baldwin's *Another Country* can be read as a blues text that is musically coded and sonically written. Every character encountered is harmonized along with their personal struggle(s), experience(s), and feelings. If the blues operate literarily as code, Baldwin fills the reader in on their conundrums by giving it a different twist. Baldwin assumes the role of blues deconstructionist, creating a vernacular space where the blues haunt and even inform his writing as his characters perform Baldwin's literary excoriating experiences, it was about the wedding of black and white, it was Negro who brought the cultural dowry.

We are ushered through the psyches of Rufus, Vivaldo, Cass, Ida, and Eric by Baldwin as he decodes their disasters and their attempts to go beyond it “to transcend as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal” (James Baldwin 27). Baldwin queers time in *Another Country*: his written blues destabilize the imaginary lines between the internal and the external, the past and the present, as well as fantasy and reality. From the onset of the novel, we encounter Rufus homeless and hungry, but also preoccupied with his past, his family, friends and the meals he had eaten.

After urinating on the streets as a physical release, he immediately delves back into his internal thoughts and thinks of Leona “[o]r a sudden, cold, familiar sickness filled him and he knew he was remembering Leona” (28). Through the physical release of urination and the thought of Leona, Rufus’ mind flows backward in time to the night that they met, and leads us to their first sexual encounter—a rape—where the roles of victim and perpetrator are quite hazy. There are, indeed, clear indicators of Rufus’ sexual aggression—pulling her roughly, knocking the glass down out of her hand, as well as Leona’s repulsion: “pulling her body away from his touch,” (29) crying, and struggling.

As Rufus rapes Leona, however, his thoughts elucidate physical and mental torments that are at once contradictory and, at the same time, seamless. Rufus’ suffering mental state forces him to be physically aggressive which ultimately exacerbates his psychological suffering. Although he “forced her beneath him and...entered her,” (30) “it was Leona who “carried him, as the sea will carry a boat,” (31) and Rufus who was riding this sea with his “weapon” (32). This double characterization of Rufus as both rider and possessor of a weapon creates an image of a terrorized rapist who rationalizes rape as acceptable because he is engaged in a sexual battle. Rufus *forced* himself to look at her face and saw a cheerful smile and Whether or not the smile was, indeed, cheerful is unknown, as we are limited to Rufus’ interpretation. The post-rape dialogue, however, sheds light upon the ambivalent nature of the rape scene. Leona speaks the first words; it was so wonderful Baldwin portrays the rape scene between Rufus and Leona in physical and mental imagery, carefully moving between exploring the motivations and dissonance of the rapist, Rufus, and blaming the victim, Leona, who hardly considered by Baldwin’s descriptions, to be totally powerless, nor the only one suffering. The first sexual encounter is not only violent, but also temporally queer—the internal thoughts of both Rufus and

Leona are suggestive of broader historical and stereotypical mythological figures in the American drama: the violent hyper sexualized black male and the innocent white female. In his critique of protest literature and their shallow depictions of characters Baldwin writes in April 1972 that:

[a]nd, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together. (James Baldwin, *Everybody's Protest Novel* 33)

Rufus and Leona, the racialized and gendered mythical figures torturously thrust and counter-thrust until they ultimately die. It is clear that Baldwin, as a black American writer, is haunted by the oversimplification of characters such as Rufus and Leona. Instead of ignoring the race-gender stereotypes, Baldwin allows Rufus and Leona to dominate the beginning of the novel; however, by having them die early on, he asserts his critique that these one-dimensional portrayals will not dictate his story. Rufus and Leona's relationship and the mythical figures they represent haunt as striking specters over the characters' personal relationships as they are drawn and repulsed to other people, replaying the early pushing and pulling of the rape in various forms. Baldwin immediately and deliberately kills these dominant mythical figures to stylistically shed the space of the mythical Negro writer from which *he* is presumed to write within and, thus, creates a new, freer vernacular space to articulate his blues.

The relationship between Rufus and Leona, which could be more accurately be described as an extended and repetitious thrust and counter-thrusting of fantastical Mythology, sets the ambivalent tone for how the novel's characters conceptualize sex and love and foreshadows the various internal and external dilemmas with which they will struggle. Rufus and Leona's relationship and the mythical figures they represent haunt as striking specters over the characters' personal relationships as they are drawn and repulsed to other people, replaying the early pushing and pulling of the rape in various forms. Baldwin uses that moment as a touchstone or the standard twelve-bar of his Another Country blues and attempts to illustrate how one move beyond the bitter realities of life toward what comes next through his characters and his writing.

In what may be called the ‘the big world’, Rufus was acutely aware of the eyes upon him and Leona from the landlord, neighbors, children in the Village, and passersby in general who “looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm.”(James Baldwin, *Challenging Authors* 29-30). He could feel himself outside of himself, being watched and understood very clearly people’s disdain for his relationship with Leona, a racialized discomforting scene. While struggling with the consciousness of himself as spectacle, Leona naively comments that he does not know himself. Rufus, however, explains: “I know who I am; all right ... I’m your boy” (4). His double-vision allows him to imagine the auction block and himself as Leona’s “boy” on that auction block.

The performative nature of blackness is evident throughout the text. Rufus performed the mythical role of the violent black man who both desires and hates white women. Vivaldo’s obsession with blackness is interesting, as well. He uses configured racialized spaces to wear blackness. When looking for prostitutes Vivaldo enjoyed the eyes watching him in judgment and yearned for the experience of double psyche: “He enjoyed this, his right to be being everywhere contested; uptown, his alienation had been made visible ... He had felt more alive in Harlem” (132). Vivaldo’s preoccupation with the other aligns with his issues with normalcy. Although he is white, male, and seemingly heterosexual, Vivaldo queers blackness so that he can live queerly in black spaces. By queering Harlem as a black space where whites should not be, he attempts to shed his normalcy by imposing himself there. Similarly, he seems to have sexual relationships with black women in an attempt to take up the role of the queer white man who would rather have sex with black women than white women. The issue here, of course, is that white men having sex with black women, especially with economic complications—is not new, abnormal, or queer. Vivaldo does not think that deeply about the historical treatment of black women by white men in the United States. He is more concerned with the black eyes that judge him when he walks the streets of Harlem looking for black women to have sex with or jazz clubs to drink in, and is less concerned with how black people really feel about him.

Vivaldo pleads to Rufus and Ida that he wants to understand, but is unwilling, until the very end of the novel, to sacrifice his innocence for that understanding. He engages intimately *and* artificially with blackness, as a space of sexual deviancy, but seems stunned that he is not treated exceptionally and trustingly by black people. Vivaldo is representative of a type of white

liberalism that immerses itself in black life and culture. Rufus calls Vivaldo's liberalism unique because of its treacherous nature. Vivaldo seems to be willing to sacrifice his whiteness—however inconceivable that may be—despite the actual social realities of race. His treachery is made possible by his innocence. For instance, after being attacked at an Irish bar in New York City, Vivaldo is blinded by his innocent view of America's race relations, and the societal limitations Rufus faces as a black man who wants to help a white friend. Rufus senses his innocence and was afraid 'for Vivaldo, who knew so little about his countrymen', Rufus knew that he could not take Vivaldo to the hospital, and that his white girlfriend, Jane, could. For Vivaldo, racism stops once the racial lines are crossed by friendships and love. He does not understand that racism could still haunt a relationship despite the intentions of the parties involved.

Throughout the novel, Vivaldo struggles to understand that personal relationships are not isolated from larger structural forces. When Ida tries to explain to him how black boys' and girls' bodies can be used by white people, his immediate response is to use his relationship with blackness and black people as evidence that there is no structural manipulation of black bodies. He naively ponders, "After all this time we've been together...you still think that?" (44) Keen to Vivaldo's innocence by way of second-sight, Ida responds that our being together doesn't change the world, Vivaldo. Vivaldo holds on to his innocence: "It does ... for me", but Ida explains "That...is because you're white" (53). Despite Ida's views to the contrary, Vivaldo remains obstinately grounded in his ignorance until it is involuntarily snatched out of him by the shattering of his image of Ida. When she reveals her incriminating past sexual experiences with other white men, including Ellis, Vivaldo is finally able to purge himself of his innocence and understand his queer escapes from the normal identities that haunt him, his race and sexuality.

Conclusion

Another Country as a blues text aiming to situate Baldwin as a vernacular intellectual located in the traditional discipline of literature. His acute attention to the more popular forms of art, most clearly the blues seem to influence his writing style and content. Baldwin necessarily uses the space of the vernacular to expose the intimate links of sexuality, love, race, friendship, politics, gender, and nation, various 'countries.' These countries are given shape and meaning, by the characters existence within in those varied spaces. *Another Country* is Baldwin's attempt to

fantastically write a blues novel as Bessie Smith recognized in the recorded song “Back Water Blues” (February 17, 1927) that she can’t live there no more to transcend the haunting of the past and go beyond.

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