Intersections of Masculinity, Sexuality, Nationality, and Racial Identity in James Baldwin

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Abstract
James Baldwin stands as an enigma: the fiery, race-conscious sculptor of Go Tell It, The Fire Next Time, and the homosexual creator of Giovanni’s Room, Another Country, and Just Above My Head. His essays on racial, and national identities are archived in Nobody Knows My Name and Notes on a Native Son. In life and death, Baldwin’s quest for an inclusive humanism has been received both negatively and positively by black and white audiences. Baldwin has also become the subject of a revisionist impeachment for his unending provocativeness. This ambivalence in reading Baldwin defies an epistemological and ontological center on intersectionality and questions of gay and queer literature, migrants, civil rights, politics, and the role of the artist in the African American archive. This article contributes to critical conversations on periodizing Baldwin and racial identities at a time when America in 2021 glowers under telling dramaturgy embedded in #BlackLivesMatter and #ICan’tBreathe.

Keywords
James Baldwin, intersectionality, African American Studies, ethnicity and race, carceral state, hypervisibility

Mapping Baldwin Against Black Nationalist Politics

In both modes of writing—fiction and essays—Baldwin grapples with issues of identity, authenticity, and sexuality in the historical, social, and political African American experiences, painfully arriving at his realization that disruption and displacement of the black diaspora have shattered and disoriented the African American’s sense of integrity, wholeness, and belonging. If recovering a heritage, language, and culture is an act of recuperative politics as Edward Said (1979, p. 76) contends in Orientalism, then Baldwin’s writings (as recuperative inscriptions) privilege recovery of difference (from white America) and identity (first as black and then as American). This penning animates an alternative position, acutely aware that authenticity is a fetishised cultural commodity. Baldwin (1963b, p. 65) therefore concludes:

It comes as a great shock around the age of five or six to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiances, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. . . . It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime.

Whereas Baldwin here lucidly elaborates his “thingification” by white America, he would rather embrace this nation and its multi-colored people than reject its bestiality and embrace a violent resolution. What we witness in Baldwin’s narratives and essays in an acute sensitivity over the “flag to which he and the rest of the black Americans have pledged allegiance.” He scripts about the punitive carceral conditions in America that he projects as the hyper-reaction of a penal state where the social state retreats, detrimentally impacting vast sectors of the colored population, particularly the poor and working classes. White America’s obsessive re-affirmation of “security” occurs as access to work diminishes and the precarity of unemployment expulses the most disadvantaged populations to both the informal and illicit economies as they seek to survive. Charles Blow (2021, p. 4), reminiscing on the possibilities of a mass black exodus to the South, explicitly warns in the following terms:

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... however protest is performed, for what motivations, it [eventually wanes]. Outrage is an expensive emotion. It consumes energy like a blaze . . . Performative activism . . . assuages white guilt and attempts to coax black people into a passivity that allows endless oppression.

Again, Blow makes significant annotations on the endless oppression and precarity of blacks in America. Closer to the time of Baldwin’s reticent declaration, Eldridge Cleaver (1968/1992, p. 55) embodies the black militant, the masculinist and minces no words in declaring that “my own reaction is to have as little as possible to do with whites.” He further asserts that “what the Negro needs and consciously seeks is political and economic power” (Cleaver, 1968/1992, p. 112), a trope that animates Charles Blow’s The Devil You Know (2021), #BlackLivesMatter and #ICan’tBreathe. For Cleaver, the white race is the unchanging and intimate enemy of the black man, yet for the accommodating Baldwin, whites cannot be taken as models for how to live:

Rather, the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being. (The Fire Next Time, 1967, p. 83)

For Baldwin, the price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the Blacks as he ruthlessly articulates in Sonny’s Blues (1948). If as Du Bois (1929) observed, the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, then for Richard Wright, as for Amiri Baraka, “the machine gun on the corner is the symbol of the twentieth century . . . the embryonic dream of Nat Turner’s legacy . . . a shit storm coming” (Soul on Ice, 1969, p. 107). In contrast to writers and thinkers such as Du Bois, Wright, Baraka and Blow, Baldwin’s vision is remarkably indecisive preferring.

The moment when we, Americans, are able to accept that my ancestors are both black and white, that on the continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other, that I am not a ward of America . . . not an object of charity . . . Until this moment comes, there is scarcely any hope for the American dream.

If this confession of ambivalence by Baldwin is not a vision of his “inclusive humanism,” then at best it is a “transcendent idealism” that generated his lasting quarrel with black power and black protest writers such as Richard Wright (Native Son), Eldridge Cleaver (Soul on Ice), and Chester Himes (If He Hollers, Let Him Go). Baldwin castigated protest writing for “accepting the harsh, grating reality, meaningless language that society metes out on its discussions of ethnic minorities and is thus unable to move out of the social arena” (Houston Baker, 1984, p. 60). Baldwin’s alternative is himself as the “honest writer who takes as subject the private self, the void from which the tides of history flow, where language is poetic, analytic, asocial” (Baldwin, 1964b, p. 23). Baker Jr. (1984, p. 61) argues that Baldwin is “dedicated to a truth that lies within the self—making his Western-ness no simple matter—not easily integrationist, nor assimilationist.”

Methodologically, this article examines Baldwin’s writings through the prisms of critical race theory, cultural studies, and the problematic contributions of queer theory. These matrices help to integrate both grounded anthropological and sociological perspectives into the cultural practices of everyday life, placing specific emphasis on the ways in which black American subjects experience their day-to-day reality. This perspective analyses the condition of citizenship and the collective subject construction, and individuals in relation to other actors, with one privileged actor, in particular: the white American state (Gupta, 2012). The paper interrogates the contradictions, accounts for the absences, sheds light on the controversies, and takes stock of the trends in scholarship and appreciating the oeuvre of Baldwin’s troubling aesthetics. Processes of racialization are melded into the dramaturgy for social and economic justice, moving, as it were, from the particular to the distributational power of the American Constitution. In re-reading the positionality of black and white bodies in James Baldwin, we encounter the social, spatial, and political spaces as complex and complicated sites consecrated to the reproduction of racialized identities, where black hypervisibility rather than invisibility generates white hostility and treachery, institutional suppression, and repression (Martin, 2011). Critical race theory does not assert that Black people are superior to other races; rather it posits that Black people are equal to other racial groups, but the black race has been systemically oppressed to experience taut precarity because of a racial caste system.

Second, critical race theory asserts that racism is systemic, not aberrational. While white people view instances like George Floyd’s death in 2020 as an anomaly, critical race theory postulates that racism is something people of color endure consistently in America.

The third tenet asserts that Black people’s legal setbacks benefit white people. The fourth tenet of CRT asserts that Black people endure “different radicalisation,” resting on racial stereotypes. Othering Black people dehumanizes them, greenlighting acts of covert and overt racism (Smith, Byrne & Garratt, 2021:96). Suddenly, it becomes normative to stop the black man rather than the white one on the systemic racist premise that Black people are inherently dangerous.

The fifth tenet of critical race theory is “intersectionality.” This theory contends that individuals cannot be placed into a single, identitarian box. A Black woman is both Black and female, for instance. By viewing a woman as only Black, society fails to understand the way her womanhood exerts an impact on her lived experiences. CRT posits that people are dynamic and multidimensional.
Finally, the sixth tenet asserts the need for a “voice of colour.” Critical race theorists understand that someone from the same group best speaks for them. In the domains of CRT, representation matters because a Black man is ontologically and experientially more in tune with other Black men’s specific needs and experiences. Emmanuel Nelson (2005: 2) is on point in recognizing the challenges related to the reception and consumption of Baldwin in the 21st century: The problem he sees in Baldwin scholarship has been an inability on the part of critics to deal adequately with the complexity of Baldwin’s identity. “Many white critics are uncomfortable responding to a writer who is doubly different; many Black critics, though often enthusiastic about Baldwin’s handling of racial themes, seem embarrassed and angered by his explicit treatment of homosexuality” (p. 2). Doubly different as black first, and gay second for the white critics; doubly different for the black critics as first a black spokesperson and second a conduit for an incandescent homosexuality that would rather be stymied. Mining James Baldwin’s complex body of work through CRT therefore generates ever-new provocations.

**Difference, Division, and Prescience: Calibrating the Polemics of Identity in Baldwin**

Perhaps no other novel of Baldwin’s exemplifies difference, division, and the polemics of identity more than the quasi-autobiographical *Go tell it on the mountain*. Structurally divided into three parts (The seventh day; The prayers of the saints; and The threshing floor), the novel historicizes and dramatizes the germination and flowering of a son’s hatred for his preacher-father. The twin foci of the novel are the home and the church, critical sites in the ontological becoming of African-Americans. The church is called The Temple of the Fire Baptized; it is a marooned and stifling location where “the Grimes arrived in a body” (*Go tell it*, 13). Their arrival and departure at this site make their congregation a ritualized performance of their seventh day of the week bereft of faith, hope, and tenacity. In an inversion of foregrounding where the church is commonly associated with purity and chastity, Baldwin sets the temple in a locale where the innocent John and his brother Roy are witnesses to prostitution, violence, and the macabre: “They did it standing. The woman had wanted fifty cents and the man flashed a razor” . The very radical wording here implicates the perceptual construction and contestation of space and locality as racialized. Baldwin inscribes in this episode the politics of space, generating occluded and disavowed historical cartographies of the territoriality of disenchantment, precarity, and disempowerment (Gilmore, 2002; Lipsitz, 2007).

This scene, indelibly imprinted onto John’s psyche in his formative years, is repeatedly echoed in the atrophied home they live in: privacy and dignity are literally ostracized as the children listen in to their parents’ orgies of procreation—over the sound of rats’ feet and the cursing from the harlot’s house downstairs. In fact, even in the spatio-temporal location of the tenements, there is an appositional catalog of chaos and order, purity and sinfulness, fanaticism and reflexivity, bigotry and open-mindedness, and spirituality and worldliness.

Grimes (the name curiously and easily inverts into graves) towers in the novel as an atavistic and sadistic father, quick to physically abusing his children, sister, and wife. His parochial insistence on prayer for salvation is superbly underplayed by his dark, shadowy self that drives him inexorably toward infidelity, thereby breaching the sixth commandment against adultery. He steals the money that Deborah had saved all her life to send Esther away (p. 155) since he has made her pregnant in the white folks’ kitchen. And Esther is no purist, determined as she is “to live all I can while I can” (p. 143). The product of Grimes’ infidelity with Esther, atypically named Royal, is acknowledged posthumously when Deborah quizzes him.

If all history is a form of selective fiction, so too, all literary works are a form of history and constitute indispensable historical evidence. Thus, the end product in Baldwin’s *Go tell it on the mountain* is a personal history of his time, place, and race. What binds “true history” and “fictive history” in *Go tell it* is the unutterably painful historicity of precarious Black American experiences. We witness, therefore, Deborah’s mass raping by white Southerners, ultimately leading to her sterility (p. 83). Royal, that evangelical bastard, is recruited into the army and fights in the American Civil war. Elizabeth undertakes the grand South to North Journey—the American Dream of Emancipation—only to discover that

There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled: there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: *what it promised it did not give; and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other*. (Baldwin, 1954, p. 189; my italics)

Again, it is Elizabeth who aptly sums up the wretched course and curse of all black people in white America: a life of “poverty, hunger, wandering, cruelty, fear and trembling, to death” (p. 207). If the North refuses to give what it promised, then we read Elizabeth’s entry into it as a daring dream that disrupts white homeowners’ locus of economic power, a disruption that is later theatricalized in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Dream Deferred* (1969) when Karl Lindner proposes to buy the Youngers out of 406 Clybourne Park for the reason that they would contaminate the white racial
configuration of this space in Chicago. Her ruminations on
the Great North Migration and settling-in draws immediate
attention to material, ideological, and racialized segregation.
In the penultimate, the shreds and shreds of both per-
sonal and social history that furnish the oeuvre of Go tell it
on the mountain vindicate Baker Jr.’s observation that “like
the Civil Rights worker in the deep South, the black writer
is paradoxically compelled to see himself against the back-
drop of ideas and ideals more honoured in breach than in
observance” (1984, p. 59). Place alerts us to the context and
contingencies of power, identity, and the phenomenology of
belonging, insisting that we question the role of race in
American practices at the intersection of displacement and
emplacement (Delaney, 2002).

The “forty acres and a mule” which were underwritten by
Abraham Lincholn’s Emancipation Proclamation have become “a dream deferred,” a la Langston Hughes apropos Lorraine Hansberry. It is important to pinpoint that this
dream in Baldwin does not explode, but “festers like a
wound,” with myriad ramifications for black-white rela-
tionships and homosexuality, especially in Another Country,
Giovanni’s Room, and Just above my head. These novels
textualize homosexual relations as potentially redemptive
as well as vicariously tragic.

In Another Country, as well as in Just Above My Head,
Baldwin anchors his same-sex relations not only on black-
white difference but ensures that they transcend class, eth-
nicity, and national binaries. Be this as it may, it is important
to note that in a world predicated upon race and the supe-
rior-inferior continuum, Baldwin pivots rather than subverts
this dialectic by making his white homoerotics male while
the blacks are feminized. Cora Kaplan (1996, p. 35)
observes that “in a racially coded Eden, it is African
American men and women who take up the structural posi-
tion of Eve . . . the Adamic figure is white.” This insightful
observation on subject-object position intersects with the
derivation, hatred, and subordination of women (including
black male homosexuals), linking this positionality directly
with the power dynamics embedded in racism that ascribes
an inferior status to the entire black diaspora. An under-
standing of race as an indeloseful privilege in the white
psyche apparently snare Baldwin into staging homosexual-
ity as an experience of both degradation and fulfillment. In
his 1973 interview with Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin concedes
that “white people invented black people to give white iden-
tity . . . the sexual question and the racial question have
always been entwined . . . the sexual question comes after
the question of color” (James Baldwin, The Legacy, 1973,
p. 178). Baldwin’s inscription of the grotesque as the inel-
uctable condition of the normal by way of the intimate homo-
sexual, queer, gay, and lesbian relationships is his unique
assertion of the dictum that “each of us, helplessly and for-
ever, contains the Other—male in female, female in male,
white in black, and black in white. We are a part of each
other” (The Price of the Ticket, 689).

After the semi-autobiographical, semi-confessional Go
Tell It, the public’s reaction to Another Country was shock,
aptly captured in Henry James’ telling critique in 1979 that
the characters in the novel “strike one, above all, as giving
no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated
by human use. To this inarticulate state they probably form,
collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; absys-
mal the mystery of what they think, what they want, what
they suppose themselves to be saying.”

When the novel opens, its hero (or anti-hero), Rufus
Scott, is already dead, yet the propellant to this massive nar-
native is his deprived and deprived life on the interstitial
margins. We gather, interminably throughout the novel, that
towards the end of his life Rufus was “broke and had
nowhere to go” (1963, p. 13); he was “one of the fallen”
(1963, p. 14); “entirely alone . . . part of an unprecedented
multitude.” He is characteristically one of “the wretched of
the earth,” Harlem’s black army living “in an acrid room . . .
the sperm-filled blankets, behind marijuana or the needle,
under the smell of piss in the precinct basement” (Baldwin,
1963, p. 17).

This background inaugurates our identification with
Rufus as one dazed into dementia by poverty in a white
world that is projected as filthy rich. His erotic relationship
with Leona is violent: “Rufus is just full of prejudice against
everybody (Another Country, 1963, p. 33). This swirling
rage in Rufus, particularly his realisation ‘that everyone in
the place knew what was going on, knew that Rufus was
pedalling his arse” (p. 50) is metonymic of Bigger Thomas
in Native Son as he also realizes the futility of his flight
from the police and the baying hounds. In a fit of fury and
rage, he retorts, ‘you got to fight the landlord because the
landlord is white. You got to fight the elevator boy because
he’s white’ (1963, p. 75). Even the walls in Benno’s bar are
graphic testimony to the history of racial tension, marginal-
ity and squalor that have scarred Rufus:

The bar smelled of thousands of travellers, oceans of piss, tons
of bile and vomit. He added his stream to the ocean . . . he
looked at the horrible history splashed furiously on the walls—
telephone numbers, cocks, breasts, balls, cunts, etched into the
walls with hatred . . . down with the Jews. Kill the niggers.
(1963, p. 89).

The putrid odour of this rundown bar echoes the horrors of
racial tension, tenuous black-white relationships and the
overt exploitation of black men and women. The graffiti
insist on a total erasure of blacks. Whereas the “piss and
bile. . .and vomit” foment the putrid and fetid odour in the
bar, it is the “horrible history of four generations of slaves
and sharecroppers” inscribed in the injunction “kill the
niggers” that re-inscribes the ubiquitous racial hierarchy in Baldwin’s text. When Rufus bashes Leona, Vivaldo becomes the paternal white figure threatening Rufus: ‘you could be killed for this. All she’s got to do is yell. All I have to do is walk down the corner and get a cop’ (1963, p. 62). Vivaldo dashes all hopes of escape for Rufus: the detachment of land and lineage make Rufus share no more than a transient connection to the volatile energy circulated in this racialized encounter.

There is no escape for Rufus from this inchoate prison: he is the stereotype of the black man as rapist and murderer, and the police arm of this state would not hesitate to incarcerate him for “violating a white woman; neither would the police refute the ‘evidence’ from a white Vivaldo. If Vivaldo walks down the corner and gets a cop, he garners the efficient extermination machinery of the white American state. This ever-present possibility becomes a prescient recognition that it is not the state’s reproductive capacity, or its ability to “let live,” that is the basis of governance (Hanson & Zubillaga, 2021, p. 7). For Vivaldo and like-minded white Americans, the practice of killing “disposable populations” is an essential resource for the white American state to maintain its socio-economic and political power and guarantee sovereignty. Agamben (2005) reflects on the current authority of modern and democratic states to suspend rights when they identify a “threat,” and install, as a consequence, a state of exception. In contexts of the withdrawal of constitutional guarantees and liberties, of citizenship itself, the American state can kill with impunity (Agamben, 2005). The state of exception does not remain “exceptional;” however, but becomes routine as witnessed in the current millennium in the lynching, shooting, and asphyxiation of Eric Garner (July 17, 2014), Freddie Gray (April 12, 2015), Sam DuBose (July 19, 2015), Philando Castille (July 6, 2016), Michael Brown, August 9, 2014), Stephon Clark (March 18, 2018 and George Floyd (May 25, 2020). This trend marks the American state as ostensibly tending to convert itself into the mode of rule. In this way, Agamben points to the intimate solidarity of modern states with surveillance, the invention of a police state, and totalitarianism.

Evidently, we are left with more questions than we have answers as to who Rufus is: “a black destitute or just Ida’s brother who commits suicide, a man who, out of a racial death wish, mates in a flirtatious relationship with Leona or an avowed drug addict who turns to homosexuality to feed himself . . . a folksy musician who fails or a caricature of black consciousness.” Baldwin is apparently reworking the terms of self-definition and identity through the corporeal body, the life and death of Rufus rather than questions of ideology and reflexivity. It is Rufus’ black body which is the target of Vivaldo’s and Eric’s libidinal desires: the two whites acknowledge his existence through anal sex, subjectivizing him as a woman. It is in all respects an adversarial relationship with white America. In the end, he bitterly observes that he has been objectified:

They tear you limb from limb in the name of love. Then when you’re dead, when they’ve killed you by what they made you go through, they say you don’t have any character. They weep big, bitter tears . . . not for you. For themselves, because they’ve lost their toy. (Another Country, 1963, p. 261)

In this new Bohemia where relations are fluid and impermanent, built on quicksand, Eric betrays Richard in mating with Clarissa/Cass (1963, p. 284) and in the process betrays the dead Rufus, notwithstanding the yet-to-arrive Yves. Equally, Vivaldo who professes undying love for Ida Scott has mated with the late Rufus and Erica. The symbolism in this final segment of the novel, engraved in “Towards Bethlehem,” shatters the very foundations of black patriarchal identities. Yves, the French counterpart to Eric, is about to arrive in New York: a new beast is about to be born, a new chapter in Romeo-Romeo relationships that will, nevertheless, be cognizant of the free Juliet. This interpretation is validated by Ida Scott who vindictively hurls into Vivaldo’s face her innermost feelings towards their pairing: “You think I’m nothing but a whore. That’s the only reason you want to see me. . .All you white bastards are the same” (1963, p. 170). Spurlin (1999, p. 3) offers an insider’s defense in observing that the “Black Power movement in the 1960s saw homo-sexuality among blacks as a form of ideological penetration by whites, that is, as introduced into black culture from without and inherently foreign to it. Looked at in this light, homosexuality, a white man’s decadence and disease, according to Eldridge Cleaver, has ‘deprived [the black homosexual] of his masculinity, castrated him in the centre of his burning skull’” (p. 103).

The rest of the male whites, according to Ida, think she is just another colored-girl receptacle for their sperm. She is, in this instance, summing up one of generational racism’s salient historical fact: ‘the assumption that white men—especially those who wield economic power—possess an incontestable right of access to black women’s bodies’ (Angela Davis, 1981, p. 175). The myth of the black male rapist intersects with the myth of the black female whore and Ida rejects these myopic and mythic demarcations in asserting her identity. Defendants of the Ida-Vivaldo relationship would contend that in choosing Ida, “he wanted her to know that the world was not as black as she thinks” (1963, p. 128). Nevertheless, Vivaldo is the quintessence of an outsider who “knew that Harlem was a battlefield, and that a war was being waged there day and night—but of the war she knew nothing” (Another Country, 136).

Like its predecessor, Just above my head opens with Arthur Montana dead at 39 in a London pub. Arthur Montana is described as a “moaner and groaner” by the
British press, as “an emotion-filled gospel singer” by the American press. Again, Arthur is inexorably tied to Crunch and Jimmy in scintillating and unabashedly carnal homosexual relationships. The novel can be read as a history of Arthur’s life—a public acknowledgment of his bohemian life, a confession by Hall on behalf of the singer: “I have been so busy, covering up for Arthur, strong-arming the press” (Just above my head, 15). This is when the investigative press attempts to disseminate this queer identity, holding Arthur’s life to the glee of the world as a “loverboy.” Hall, the 48-year old brother and central narrator, thinks that in marrying Ruth he has “come out of the wilderness of orgiastic homosexuality, unlike Arthur who died steeped in it.” The music playing in Julia’s room, Esther Williams’ “From a Whisper to a Scream”—carries Hall Montana’s confessional montage on Arthur’s vicarious if precarious life, a life so battered that even after his death, the school children at Tommy’s school still mock Tommy by associating him with an uncle they call “faggot.” Eldridge Cleaver is together with Tommy’s classmates in condemning Arthur’s (and Rufus’) homosexuality:

...there is a decisive quirk in Baldwin’s vision which corresponds to his relationship to black people and masculinity ... [a quirk that makes Arthur and Rufus] the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man ... It is regrettable that many homosexuals go to the direction of assuming that there is something intrinsically superior in homosexuality ... I, for one, do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as ... baby rape. (Soul on Ice, 106)

As in his other novels, Baldwin crafts a variety of offshoot narratives that build up on this main storyline of marginality and precarity. The use of such a kaleidoscopic technique allows Baldwin to incorporate social history’s milestones into his narratives to lend historical credence (Blount & Cunningham, 1994, p. 12). When Crunch, one of the singers in the “Quartet of Zion” loses his two front teeth “through a black cop who attempted to destroy him” (1963, p. 39), he never replaces them to parade what automated, conditioned and disenfranchised black people can do to their own. The relocation of blacks from tumble-down tenements along Lennox Avenue in a sprawling Harlem is captured in the novel’s condemnation of the ‘disastrous housing projects’ into which blacks are herded, having been financially ripped’ (1963, p. 54).

The flow and influx of migrants of all castes into America is dramatized and built into the character of Martha, the West Indian girlfriend to Hall who remarks that her father tried to warn her off migration to New York (and she refuses). Having been lured by the dream of more life chances in New York, Martha is battered by poverty and insecurity, leading her to conclude, “this white man ain’t never going do right. Ain’t in him” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 134). America’s image of the policeman of the world and the slave driver is also incorporated in a veiled critique of transnational politics where Hall’s Korean “tour of duty” makes him conclude:

I didn’t see what right I would have to go there, what right anybody had to send my black ass there. I don’t think anybody can really hate his country ... but you certainly despise the road your country travels ... If I had been a white man, I would have been ashamed, really, to send a black man anywhere to fight for me. (p. 140)

A more incisive critique of the Korean intervention is given in Nobody Knows My Name where the connection between America’s veiled support for colonialism abroad and the segregation, enslavement, and deprivation of blacks at home is traced.

Ultimately, Peanut becomes keenly aware of the emptiness of the proclamations on desegregation and integration:

...how many niggers in Washington got enough money to go downtown and be desegregated. ...these people got the gal to claim to be giving something they didn’t never have the right to take away. ... (p. 307).

Routine, practical experience in “integrated” America gives both Peanut and Florence the wisdom to discern that desegregation is a farce. Black Americans remain the wretched of the earth. Their experiences in American social and economic life stubbornly retain the signature of the black person as Sambo, the tar baby.

Religion has always had an ambivalent and paradoxical role in Baldwin and Just above my head takes this ontological challenge to new horizons. In examining this trope, Julia begins as a girl-preacher, the nemesis of Johny Grimes in Go tell it. She recants her religious vocation because her father, Brother Joel, has become improvident—“he could never make up his mind about anything ... just the way black men are—they don’t know how to make up their minds” (Just above my head, p. 159). In a stroke of witty invective, Julia describes her father as “one who used to come and raise hell in the house because he didn’t raise the hell outside” (p. 160). It is this same apostate Joel who ravishes his own daughter after the death of his wife following a Freudian crisis which claims that every man has a wish to turn his daughter into a woman (p. 89). Filled with an inexplicable fear, a fear of what the white law would do to Joel, what the black society would say of him, what the world would see in her, Julia acquiesces to her deflowering (p. 177). It is only her belated, crafted intimacy with Crunch that becomes therapeutic to this woundedness from the past. She moans and pleads that Crunch make her well after
the psychic and damaging incest (p. 252). From a puritan adolescent adorned for the pulpit, Julia passes through overt prostitution where “she looks at ceilings while the men pounded themselves into her, less brutally than her father had” (p. 380), rising to stardom as an independent actor-artist.

Between 1963 and 1964, Baldwin produces his most articulate writings on national identity issues in Notes on a Native Son and Nobody Knows My Name. The question that Arthur Montana grapples with in Just Above My Head, the question of being black in America, comes to the fore in these essays. Arthur “does not like being a black American,” being black, or being American, or being Arthur . . . his existence was the proof of the unspeakable perversity of history, a flaw in the nature of God” (p. 564). Baldwin dramatizes these intersections in arguing that “the nation, the entire nation, has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it” (Nobody Knows My Name, p. 99).

Writing in 1969, Amiri Baraka contends that “the Negro artist who is not a nationalist . . . is a white artist, even without knowing it (Raise Race Rays Raze, p. 98).” The difference between Baldwin and Baraka is that Baldwin equates nationalism with integration, almost on the terms of Booker T. Washington’s “separate but equal” stance, the maintenance of a black quietude in urban areas while Barak’s hyper-politicized viewpoint perceives the Negro as a perpetual victim occupying an inferior and subjugated position. Baraka insists that this must be changed, “by all means necessary.” In contrast, Baldwin is consistent on a de-stigmatization of blackness—an appeal to whites’ sense of moral rectitude. This cul-de-sac in Baldwin contradicts the paths to nationhood envisaged by Malcolm X and WEB Du Bois. Baldwin’s vision is integrationist; he is not anti-white; he charts a course similar to that of Martin Luther King’s quest for non-violence. For both Baldwin and Martin Luther King, “black Americans were culturally part white and white Americans were culturally part black” (Gafio Watts, 1994, p. 13). Their victim status hinges on the desire of the victimized to obtain from the victimiser recognition of their historical victimization and the willingness of both to accept the victimized as their creation. The victimiser must grant the desired recognition. But, crudely, this paternalism can only perpetuate that status quo: it cannot guarantee emancipation, dignity, and the victimized cannot participate in self-determination.

We could conclude that the ideological position evident in Luther King Jr. and Baldwin ensures their acceptability within the mainstream white liberal society. Their acceptance guarantees their function as agents of a black middle class power structure: they act as buffers against mass black action. Luther King Jr. interceded for non-violence in Montgomery and Birmingham; Baldwin, King, and Frank Sinatra were lined up as violence-stoppers and spokespersons for the black and disenfranchised mass during the Harlem riots proposing immersion into mainstream American culture (Baraka, 1966, p. 149).

At the beginning of this paper, we argued that Baldwin is the imprimatur of a Janus-faced African American and we are convinced that this paper should anchor its terminus on that note. Baldwin self-exiled himself to France, occasionally hating both himself and his black folk, especially their violent struggle for self-definition. In his intermittent portraits as exile and native son, he insists, “by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognise him as a human being” (Notes on a Native Son, 157). He repeats in his writings the motif of black lives as ugly, painting the black man as a social and not a personal or human problem [where] to think of him is to think of statistics, rapes and injustices’ (Notes on a Native Son, p. 30). In The Devil Finds Work, he also deals with the problem of the mulatto, arguing that all mulattoes were produced by the white men out of coercion rather than reciprocal love. He even goes to pains to locate the etymology of mulatto in the Spanish “mulo,” a mule that is forever sterile. Baldwin professes the contention that white men fathered the colored on the guarantee that they would never reproduce (The Devil Finds Work, 49).

On the Negro-African Writers’ Conference of 1956, Baldwin concludes that “nothing of significance” transpired at the workshop, stating that the American Negro is “possibly the only man of colour who can speak of the West with real authority.” He disagrees with Aime Cesaire’s sentiments on the black person’s culture as foisted upon him rather than chosen, but goes on to offer an apologia for whites: “it is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own” (p. 67). This explains the entanglements between power, rage and politics that pulses through the majority of Baldwin’s writings as Eddie Glaude Jr (2020) assesses.

Here is the acme of Baldwin’s shifting, liberal, and integrationist views: in one breath refuting Cesaire’s poignant analysis and in the next pleading to the whites not to diminish their humanity. He is the same writer who asserts that “to be an American Negro male is to be a kind of walking phallic symbol” in Nobody Knows My Name, but will go on envision “true identity,” understanding and a human community in the Eric-Yves “faggot” relationship in Another Country. At his most powerful, Baldwin’s writing pulses in its expression of the anger and helplessness felt by many black people in America—Sony’s Blues, The Rockpile, and Going to meet the man—but alas, Poor Baldwin, his repudiation of violence in a violent police state, his battles with “protest writings” and his glorious vision of homosexual racialized identities as superior all constitute an archive that primes and argues the ideology of white supremacy rather than interrogate black consciousness, black masculinities, and black empowerment through a radical redistribution of American resources.
In Closing
Perhaps the greatest contribution by Baldwin is his unrelenting questioning of race, sexualities, and identity issues. There is a certain unflinching honesty in his writings, most notably his belief in the primacy of conscience toward redressing inequity and inequality.

This article showed through a critical discourse analysis that Baldwin’s writings evince skewed distributions of power that are definitively inequitable. In the home, the social space as well as the political institutions, the texts exhibit the realization that the power to make decisions of the most palpable consequence is wielded by those with the greatest economic resources and the political umbrage to do so. This urgent redistribution of political and economic leverage generates, ipso facto, the agenda for social justice that cannot be narrowly focused on the systemic control mechanisms currently in vogue in America. If the texts we have read here are as illustrative as they should be of the inequities in the American polity, then we should acknowledge that the needs and interests of black and white agents are in tension at multiple levels; unity and diversity are each systemic realities that call for a novel disruption.

Baldwin could thus be assessed as theologically pacifist compared to other black writers such as Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry who wrestle with the day-to-day vulnerabilities and disempowerment of blacks. His insistence on “our need for each other” apparently is a weak projectile when aimed at a Constitution that has historically and essentially proved both a veritable hoax and a fraudulent document.

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