II

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Baldwin and the Occasion of Love

To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world.

Love’s Currency

When reading James Baldwin’s seminal prose, readers cannot escape the concept of love. Not only is love central to Baldwin’s writing; it is central to his thinking about social change. Notably, in the proliferation of criticism on sexuality and gender, love plays little if any role in the evaluation of Baldwin’s prose. This is not to say that critics never mention love. Critics casually refer to love, since it is undeniable in Baldwin’s corpus, yet the silence around love’s central connection to Baldwin’s racial and sexual politics is both conspicuous and surprising. Baldwin is everywhere talking about love, yet critics set the topic aside. In prose masterpieces like The Fire Next Time (1968), short fiction such as Going to Meet the Man (1965), and novels like Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), Another Country (1962), and If Beale Street Could Talk (1974), love remains central. Baldwin invokes love or its explicit absence in many varieties. Baldwin repeatedly comes back to a singular emphasis: if one faces up to the most challenging truths that shape their lives, instead of keeping up a façade, one can maintain deep personal and political connections that define the basis for love. Love surfaces in a variety of guises throughout Baldwin’s rich discussion of racial and sexual conflict in the United States.

Baldwin writes in Another Country (1962), “How do you live if you can’t love? And how can you live if you do?” Baldwin answers this question throughout his work by cultivating different sites for love – such as the family, the sexual life of married couples, or the bond between two male friends. These sites enhance Baldwin’s critiques of homophobia, racial
myopia, Northern white liberals, and Southern racism. In this vein, love allows Baldwin to deepen his readers’ sense of the personal, political, and historical aspects of characters’ lives. Critics can read Baldwin without noting the symbolic force of love, yet by keeping love in focus, critics can continue to enrich ongoing discussions of race and sexuality.

One reason that critics tend to avoid the subject of love is that so often, its representation reinforces the idea that professing love for an individual is good enough as a commitment to social change and that declaration is equivalent to the hard work of telling the truth about oneself – which, as Baldwin demonstrates in the texts this essay studies, can be terror-inducing and chaotic. Baldwin’s writing shows how popular art can enable American audiences to wrap themselves in a “protective sentimentality” that represses feelings of instability and inner “chaos.” He makes a distinction between deep love and sentimental love by suggesting that the sentimentality found in popular novels and films like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) discourages audiences from facing the most challenging aspects of American racism. Facing these dilemmas like racism courageously, he suggests, may upend the way people think about the world, thereby exposing them to feelings of inner “chaos.” From this perspective, when characters find and profess love, it becomes an escape from difficult social conflicts and reinforces fantastical abstractions, normative social categories, and social inequality. Baldwin’s interest in love, and his battle to wrench it from the popular films and novels Americans consume, is based on the question of whether people can define their own terms, face who they are or have become, and consider how they treat others. Thus Baldwin deploys situations that involve love to disclose the difficulties that prevent individuals and groups from creating new social relationships without – or at least with less – racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Love’s currency in Baldwin’s prose hinges on its ability to signify interpersonal instability, moments in life when subjects are rocked by emotion, physical intimacy, and vulnerability – moments that, in his work, are crucial to identity-making. This essay confronts love in Baldwin’s work by addressing how both his disdain for sentimentality and his critiques of U.S. racism are defined by his portrayals of moral and spiritual courage. The role of love also indicates Baldwin’s unassailable belief in the importance of one’s ability to deepen and transform oneself, both morally and spiritually, to effect necessary social change. By analyzing selections from Baldwin’s fiction, as well as from his essays, interviews, and speeches, this essay probes Baldwin’s critiques of racist and sexist conditions in order to suggest how Baldwin showcases the radical dimensions of love.
Feeling the Cost

Despite being a fierce critic of sentimental fictions, Baldwin was labeled sentimental himself by an icon of the intellectual left, Irving Howe. Referring to *Giovanni’s Room* (1954) and *Another Country* (1962), Howe discerns a “disconcerting kind of sentimentalism, a quavering and sophisticated submission to the ideology of love.”4 Beyond this statement, Howe does not elaborate on love’s “ideology.” What Howe misses about Baldwin is fundamental. Across most of his writings, love presents opportunities for characters to grapple with issues that prevent them from addressing personal and social problems. In my view, because love is so mired in the mass-market sentimentality that Baldwin rails against, critics like Howe miss opportunities to see the transformative possibilities and social change in Baldwin’s vision of love.

Howe’s misdiagnosis of love in Baldwin calls attention to recent criticism’s tendency to treat this theme with insufficient seriousness. Critics have yet to reconcile Baldwin’s forceful commitment to social and political change with his commitment to concepts such as love. Baldwin unapologetically invokes the importance, even the necessity, of love in everyone’s life. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin proclaims:

> Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.5

Love is crucial for growth and capturing the “universal sense of quest,” which Baldwin identifies, requires us to “dare everything.”6 This is a tall order for serious self-transformation, requiring one to sacrifice things one may cling to in order to insulate oneself from troubling social, psychological, and political disruptions.

Baldwin often critiqued popular U.S. films and novels that centered around love, yet the texts he targeted display the opposite of what Baldwin considered love to require. In addition to criticizing films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* and novels like *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Baldwin was not shy about criticizing the much-hyped black film, *Carmen Jones* (1954). *Carmen Jones* is an all-black operatic film remake of Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen* (1875). Donald Bogle characterizes the film release as a major event: “*Carmen Jones*, released in 1954, was the 1950s’ most lavish, most publicized, and most successful all-black spectacle.” Bogle also depicts “pop creations” and “stock situations” which Baldwin no doubt found problematic.8 *Carmen Jones* – in which eroticism, violence, and a melodramatic finale
are central – can be viewed in a similar vein as other films Baldwin labeled superficial and lifeless. Discussing *Carmen Jones*, Baldwin submits: “One is not watching either tenderness or love and one is certainly not watching the complex and consuming passion which leads to life or death – one is watching a timorous and vulgar representation of these things.”

Americans celebrate the films that Baldwin criticizes. Baldwin, by exploring what Americans like so much about them, can get closer to what he imagines as the “interior life of Americans.” Baldwin’s broader sense is that the very fact that *Carmen Jones* was created shows the disturbed state of America. Baldwin writes that the film assumes stereotypical ideas about what the American public thinks about blacks and sex – he explains that what is most distressing is “the conjecture this movies leaves one with as to what Americans take sex to be.” Yet Baldwin, in writing his critique of the film, sees his writing as enhancing America’s readiness to think seriously about the mass media’s representations of blacks. For Baldwin, bad films encourage hiding and avoidance in ways that are dangerous and threaten an individual’s beliefs and way of life. Americans need to turn inward, as Baldwin imagines, in order to confront the only way to deal with the racist conditions and social exclusions that led to the creation of a movie like *Carmen Jones*.

In “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin explains that racist lynch laws, segregation, and other racist practices reveal the way whites found a “way to live with the Negro in order to live with himself.” According to Baldwin, for whites to accept blacks as “one of themselves” means jeopardizing their own superior status as whites. Thus, segregation, racial violence against blacks, and other racist practices point to whites’ efforts to feel disconnected from blacks even when they may share local, familial, religious, or other connections. Baldwin takes this idea further in the culminating moment of his speech to the West Indian Student Centre in London. In the speech, he argued that whites must be ready to face their own truths about their relationships and connectedness to blacks. Many whites need to admit that:

brother has murdered brother knowing it was his brother; white men have lynched negroes knowing them to be their sons; white women have had negroes burned knowing them to be their lovers. It is not a racial problem of whether or not you are willing to look at your life and be responsible for it and be willing to change it…. American people are unable to face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh…they cannot face that…and that is why the city of Detroit went up in flames.

Baldwin emphasizes that people who get lynched or burned may be actually related to or in love with one of the whites in the lynch mob. Whites, he suggests, especially in moments of crisis, neither acknowledge nor defend
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their brothers. Although he does not mention love specifically, the father/son, brother/brother, and lover/lover relations that he mentions connote an ideal of closeness, affection, and loyalty. For Baldwin, whites’ denial of their connection to blacks and family members or lovers is not simply a racial problem. Baldwin exclaims, “It is not a racial problem of whether or not you are willing to look at your life and be responsible for it and be willing to change it.” In the midst of talking about racial disavowal, Baldwin says that, at its core, the “problem is not racial.” By this remark, he does not mean that it does not involve race (it obviously does), but rather he indicates that whites’ unwillingness to tell the truth about who they are connected to animates racial conflict. Baldwin asks the question: Are you willing to look at your life, be truthful about what you see and take “responsibility for it”? Baldwin presents the absence of love, truth, and responsibility between family members, or broader still, between the citizenry of the United States, as moral violation, as something his audience should be outraged against enough to prompt a moral and political reform that would lead to social acceptance between the races.

Baldwin’s truth-telling about the blood ties between the races recognizes that this can be a world-shattering event. One must risk “falling to pieces,” with no guarantee of the potential to be put back together again. Baldwin claims, “This may take away one’s dreams, but it delivers one to one’s self.” To bring one to one’s self is a personal inward journey, the specifics of which Baldwin brings to life in his fiction. For Baldwin, the bonds of love reflect social mores and political realities of racial difference. While Baldwin understandably had his own doubts in desperate times, throughout his career he remained committed to the notion that if one cannot risk the destruction of his or her ideas and way of life, then “longed-for love” will not be possible.

Violent Longing

In his fiction, Baldwin turns to the marriage bed to draw out how whites’ avoidance of the history of racial violence actually prevents them from keeping separate any part of their lives. The title story in the short story collection Going to Meet the Man (1965) concerns a local town sheriff named Jesse as he deals with blacks in the South at a historical moment of racial unrest. Baldwin begins the story with Jesse’s inability to perform sexually with his wife. In an attempt to overcome his impotence, Jesse thinks about an “image of a black girl” to excite him, but the thought actually makes it impossible for him to have sex with his wife. Baldwin invites the reader to closely observe the physicality of the sex act. The closeness is not simply about aesthetic detail but rather involves the disclosure of a scene in which
the naive reader may not expect racial difference to make such an impact. Jesse’s ability to perform sexually is linked to race. His predilection for “a black girl” is not merely about racial exoticism but is also linked to family history and racial violence in his community and in the South generally. At the end of the story, Jesse is sexually aroused after recalling how his parents took him to see a lynching; only through that memory can he be sexually aroused. The narrator describes how “[h]e grabbed himself and stroked himself” after thinking of the lynching (950). Jesse could experience neither the fullness of love with his wife Grace during sex nor the feeling of grace while the image of “a nigger” possessed him. In Baldwin’s world of love, Jesse cannot even enjoy socially and legally consecrated intimacy with his spouse because he cannot confront his own role in the history of racial violence, and injustice haunts his community’s daily life.

In “Going to Meet the Man,” then, racial unrest, social relations, and intimacy are intertwined. Hence, the lynching is also significant because Jesse’s memory of whites’ destruction of the black man quiets Jesse’s anxiety over current black protests – social unrest that, in the time of the story, he cannot control. Yet what he believes insulates him from danger in fact represents the loss of his identity. While it appears that the lynching made him capable of sex, the sex act harnesses Jesse with feelings of further constraint. He says to Grace, “Love me like you’d love a nigger,” and only by using the word “nigger” is he able to make love to his wife (950). The body of the “nigger,” not of his wife, energizes his titillation. Jesse cannot reciprocate such intensity with the woman he loves while the “nigger” is there, and he can neither live nor love while he refuses to confront the reason behind this. Furthermore, the lynch mob, whose consciousness Jesse inherits, “never dreamed that their privacy could contain any element of terror . . . that their past so stubbornly refused to be remembered” (941). It is significant that Jesse never confronts or tries to answer the questions he asked when he was child on the way to lynchings – questions about Otis, the black servant of his childhood, or other blacks he was friendly with.

**Love Acts**

While “Going to Meet the Man” exemplifies an environment in which love cannot thrive, Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962) wrestles with the relationship between one’s sexual acts, the love one professes, and truths one is willing to face with courage. In *Another Country*, the death of Rufus, a jazz performer, sets in motion new opportunities for his peers and friends to think about their connections to him, to one another, and to themselves. As in “Going to Meet the Man,” the role of sex in *Another Country* is crucial.
But sex in the bohemian Greenwich Village is not inherently good, pleasurable, or devoid of consequences. As Baldwin writes, the people in his neighborhood had plenty of great sex “and still chopped each other up with razors on Saturday nights.” In the novel, Rufus and his friend Vivaldo use sex as a weapon to destroy, humiliate, and use people, as well as to hide their own anxieties, pain around their past, and uncertainty about the future – things they are unwilling to face or accept. Rufus’s sexual encounters are not “acts of love” (53); Rufus beat and humiliated his white girlfriend Leona; he destroyed her. He used Leona in whatever “way would humiliate her the most” (53). Cass, one of Rufus’s friends, describes Vivaldo similarly. She says, “you get involved with impossible women – whores, nymphomaniacs, drunks – and I think you do it in order to protect yourself from anything serious” (96). Sex is the sine qua non of identity, but the novel shows how in facing one’s dark inner fears and pain, sex can be transformed from a scene of objectification to one of meaningful intimacy and love. One can say that the discourse of sexuality and power in the novel is mediated by the central question that nags Vivaldo after Rufus’s death: “How does one live without love? And how can you live if you do?” (340).

Rufus faces similar questions during his own life. “‘Do you love me?’…this was the question Rufus heard” as he listens to the performances by musicians he watches with Vivaldo (8). What Rufus hears in the music foreshadows Vivaldo’s failure to comfort Rufus on a night when the latter needs to be held and loved. This moment also marks the culmination of an ongoing silence between Vivaldo and Rufus, one that continues despite their friendship. They both justify their individual sexual exploits and exploitations of others, even as they look beyond their own limitations and see the abuses perpetrated by each other. They do not address why they use and abuse others, and they fail to discuss the problem of racial tensions with other friends. These discussions are “minefields they dare not cross” (320). Baldwin makes affective personal bonds appear to be a cold and impersonal space. On the night Rufus desires comfort, Vivaldo confesses, “I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms…I had the feeling he wanted someone to hold him” (342). But Vivaldo is afraid – afraid that Rufus would not understand that it was only love. “Only love.” Fear arrests Vivaldo, and, perhaps more importantly, a scared Vivaldo does not face what frightens him enough to forego his instinct to try to embrace Rufus.

Perhaps most important of all, Vivaldo’s act of love with Rufus’s former lover Eric has transformed Vivaldo. Eric’s warmth and openness inspire Vivaldo to break the silence that has constrained his relationship with Rufus. Vivaldo’s revelation of his truth leads to a closer connection with Eric, which leads them to express their love and have sex. Vivaldo caresses and makes
love to Eric. Eric loves him as well. The physical intimacy unlocks Vivaldo further (386–7). Baldwin uses the connection between facing fear, telling the truth, and experiencing bodily sensations to produce the discourse of love. For Vivaldo, loving Eric “[i]s a great revelation” making “for an unprecedented steadiness and freedom” (387). In these scenes, Baldwin emphasizes the power of love and the present-ness of the characters’ actions.

After Vivaldo’s act of love with Eric, he faces his lover Ida – also Rufus’s sister – with renewed honesty and courage, despite the fact they have both had sex with other people. Baldwin presents their secret sex acts as transformational for them individually, because both were prompted by sincere moments of expression. That is, both Ida and Vivaldo expose themselves to what they were most afraid of: the process of connecting with people they care about. Their willingness to discover and accept themselves in new ways allows Ida and Vivaldo to confront the variety of tensions between them – racial and otherwise – on new grounds of understanding, instead of based on the antagonism that characterizes their earlier interactions. Baldwin does not show Ida and Vivaldo discussing their racial difference but does depict how they both admit to having had sexual affairs with others for different reasons. In their last interaction with one another, Ida asks Vivaldo not to be kind or to understand. Vivaldo promises he won’t, and then says, “You seem to forget that I love you” (431). The novel moves through Ida and Vivaldo’s intense and honest dialogues, but the novel’s central point is their acceptance of another person’s shortcomings, even without understanding, in a way that shows compassion and demonstrates love.

In other words, Another Country comments on love by displaying what must be sacrificed to experience it, while “Going to Meet the Man” shows how racism suppresses love’s possibilities. In “Going,” the castrated black man shapes Jesse’s own mode of expression, and a strangling sense of oppression remains for everyone involved in the lynching; in Another Country, sex is liberating only when it accompanies a character’s ability to face horrific experiences of truth. Jesse and Grace, as well as Vivaldo and his lovers, then, point to a link between sexuality and racialized identity. More importantly, Another Country and “Going” point to deeper divisions Baldwin expresses through various social relations. The physicality of sex, as used in Baldwin’s prose, constitutes how his characters relate to themselves, others, and the institutions around them. More specifically, in “Going,” the marriage bed demonstrates the larger traps related to white supremacy.

Generally, whites who deny their connection to blacks lose the truth of their own identity; legal and social structures within the United States, according to Baldwin, reflect the white desire to maintain a fantasy of distance from blacks even though blacks and whites are actually connected. In
“Stranger in a Village,” Baldwin says this in another way: “lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession – is the way whites found a way to live with the negro in order to live with himself.” Similarly, one telling image in *Another Country* emphasizes a collective future that requires social cooperation in the present: “Many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other” (86). In contrast, acts of love are transformative events for individuals, as they expose the motives that shape individual moral choices and beliefs. Baldwin sees such acts as key to imagining social transformation. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin insists that “[t]he price of liberation of whites is the liberation of blacks” (375). Love, Baldwin writes, is a vehicle and state of being through which this “daring growth” can be made manifest (375); that is, one cannot get liberation for whites or blacks without the “universal sense of quest” love captures (375). Thus, to reimagine the promise of love, as Baldwin does, is not an evasion of history, but instead a crucial method for confronting it – its history and ideologies, as well as the reasons that individuals cling to structures they have created, as if they believe that if these structures fail, they will be lost in chaos and darkness. Love constitutes Baldwin’s site of critiquing the American fantasy of “the good life,” a fantasy sustained by the denial of a world of violence and reinforced by the social hierarchy that it creates.

**Intimacy and Truth**

By presenting personal encounters between loved ones, Baldwin asks readers to face their vulnerability to other people, events, and forces that shape social life. Baldwin encourages his readers to think beyond the limits of history, into a spiritual affirmation of individual existence and an acceptance of whatever consequences reality may bring. In other words, the dream vision and spiritual threshold that Baldwin depicts in *Another Country* – or *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), for that matter – can be seen as stripping away the knowable conventions of history. When Vivaldo dreams of Rufus after the latter’s death – a dream that precipitates the confessions of love and intimacy between Rufus and Eric – the moment is violent and unruly. Enduring his emotions, Vivaldo dreams of Rufus as he holds Eric. The fury and chaos within the dream are linked by Vivaldo’s attention to the flesh and his expressions in facing that which he formerly avoided based on his sense of shame.

But what must be emphasized here is that the physical and the psychological push against all discernible boundaries. Time becomes long and
imprecise instead of immediate: “How old was this rite, this act of love, how deep?” (386). As demonstrated with these words, Vivaldo feels that he has stepped off a precipice into thin air – and that from here, he can see down, “into the bottom of his heart” (386). That physical threshold saturates every level of Vivaldo’s consciousness. At this moment, Eric is sobbing and praying, and it takes everything – in body, mind, and spirit – to sustain Vivaldo. He feels that he has risked everything. Here, Baldwin’s apocalyptic imagery portrays the intensity of pain, as complemented by loud drums, trumpets, and the blues, that fill the earth with a sound so “dreadful [Vivaldo] could not bear it” (382). What Baldwin means is that Vivaldo cannot bear these feelings alone. At the threshold of pain and terror, Vivaldo realizes that it is “Eric to whom he clung” (383). Vivaldo needs to be able to love, having been shaken to the foundations of his life, even to every recognizable object around him. Vivaldo feels that Eric loves him, and “with a groan and sigh” Vivaldo comes fully awake and pulls Eric even closer (383).

While thus far I have discussed Baldwin’s use of physical intimacy, sex, and sexuality as acts of love, in Go Tell It on the Mountain Baldwin unites love, sensuality, and tenderness without explicitly depicting the protagonist involved in the sex act. Go Tell It is one of the novels in which Baldwin writes directly about how love and sexual desire reveal how characters define their religious experience and identity. This novel is the story of the family of John Grimes, who struggles throughout the book for spiritual self-definition. Familial love plays a central role in this struggle. John’s father Gabriel, a leader in the church, makes his son John feel profoundly alienated because of his abuses. John, who comes to be “saved by the church,” ultimately rediscovers his relationship with himself, the community, and God – but on his own terms, not his father’s. It is key that he undergoes this change by means of self-affirmation, as aided by the encouragement of the church community, the voices of ancestors, and his dear friend Elisha.

John’s spiritual experience is one of the most significant in African-American letters, yet it is a spiritual flight that is defined by sexuality, intimacy, and touch. When the novel begins, John wonders if he is a sinner or a saint after touching himself until he reaches orgasm.^{23} He is also thrilled during a heated wrestling match with his friend Elisha, which takes place while they are cleaning at the church. Initially, John’s only view of himself is through his condemnation of his father, who had constituted John’s understanding of himself, family, and God. The major problem with this configuration is that Gabriel’s authority and self-righteousness had been based on his keeping the truth of his own past a secret. John’s father’s hypocritical religious life lead him to damn his own sexual impulses, even when he previously acted on them.
The church service creates space for John to reclaim himself by realizing that his father’s God, as well as his overall worldview, do not have to be his; in this process, time and space converge through the elation and prayer that characterize the spirited church service. The singing, praying, and testifying create John’s moment of ultimate undoing, when he must face his own despair, intense loneliness, and even the prospect of death. Led by prayers of the saints, he ultimately proclaims to himself, “I am saved…and I know I’m saved” (210). The service is rich with sound and indescribable bouts of anguish, which together push John to his limits. Yet in this case, John is able to say yes to life differently. Throughout the novel, John has developed a friendship with and attraction to a young man, though slightly older than himself, named Elisha. Elisha, who at one point had been publically chastised by the church, accepts John unconditionally and becomes a pivotal part of John’s voyage to define himself. If it were not for his friendship with Elisha, none of the changes he undergoes would have been possible. Elisha’s unconditional love and acceptance of John spiritualizes the social bond between the two, and this sensation fortifies John’s final statement: “I’m ready…I’m on my way” (226).

Interestingly enough, Vivaldo’s dream and John’s threshing-floor experience, which is key to his religious transformation, share apocalyptic imagery. Both scenes are intensely physical and related to Baldwin’s antiracist perspective, yet the scenes are centrally spiritual. Baldwin opens up the concept of history in time and space, heaven and hell, but only as it is realized in the body. He suggests a high bar for what a person must be willing to risk to effect change in his or her own life: “If it cost me my life” are John’s words as he chooses to pursue new relationships with his family, community, and the broader social world (222).

A similar story of risk and self-discovery, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) is a novel about a black man falsely accused of rape by a Puerto Rican woman and a police conspiracy aiming to convict him. Baldwin highlights how the family of the accused endures these traumatic circumstances. Although it is the character Fonny who is falsely accused of rape, Baldwin chooses to tell the story from the perspective of Tish, Fonny’s fiancée. Baldwin portrays Tish as spiritually resilient. Overall, *Beale Street* is another novel about family love; lovemaking between Fonny and Tish is also central. What is also clear is that family members do everything possible (including traveling to Puerto Rico) to help vindicate their beloved son. There is no giving up. At the same time, the characters demonstrate an acceptance of what they cannot control, especially on behalf of Tish and Fonny. This acceptance is key, as the district attorney’s coercion of witnesses and other orchestrations and intimidations are used to keep Fonny in jail.
In one of the novel’s significant final moments, Fonny feels especially defeated by the resources the state has brought against him. He worries; he panics – but Tish both pleads and advises, saying about his fears, “there’s no point in thinking about it like that.” Tish directs Fonny’s attention to her and to them as a couple: she says with a soothing voice, “Did you miss me?” Fonny, despite the odds, affirms his attitude about the future: “I’ll be better when I come out, than when I came in” (184). He believes that he will be vindicated eventually, however unlikely that may be. When it is Fonny’s time to go back to his cell, Tish’s words are: “A silence falls and we look at each other…. Something travels from him to me, it is love and courage. Yes. Yes. We are going to make it, somehow. Somehow. I stand, and smile, and raise my fist. He turns into the inferno. I walk toward the Sahara” (184). The paired images of the Sahara and the inferno harbor the concepts of loneliness, suffering, and death. What is key is that the lovemaking between Fonny and Tish, as well as the actions and presence of the family around them, helps them face the sensations of hell and loneliness that they cannot control. Love is what they create and renew by facing their own shifting levels of power and powerlessness.

Love after History

Crucial in Baldwin’s works is that love is seen as an infinite category of human possibility. In other words, while Baldwin’s numerous lectures, speeches, and essays demonstrate his desire to solve immediate social problems and promote new ways of thinking about political and economic reform, he does not promise that people will cease to be plagued by the need to lie to themselves or objectify others to sustain their own realities. Hence, it is not only because of various forms of oppression that people continue to lie. Baldwin’s beliefs about people are fundamentally moral and existential. Love represents one way of exploring Baldwin’s engagement with humanity’s ongoing spiritual conflict and encompasses how this is expressed historically as well as personally.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard shares much with Baldwin with respect to his views on love and spirituality. He writes, “Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence.” Baldwin fashions a similar vision through a relentless commitment to the individual’s materiality – through nakedness, sex, and a mysterious vulnerability. Baldwin’s version of “all existence” is materialized as the texture of history, but Baldwin wants readers to think of existence as exceeding history – transcending material life – which encourages people to want mastery over their lives precisely in moments...
when they may have little or no control. Baldwin’s characters Vivaldo and John Grimes surrender and accept their limitations, and, in Baldwin’s world, this acceptance means that they are free to thrive in love in new ways – ways that may not be perfect but are certainly new. One cannot accept that mode of freedom without paying the price, without taking risks, or at least without seriously contemplating the horrifying costs of such a freedom.

Another key problem that makes the subject of love as treated by Baldwin less prescriptive and more challenging is the elusiveness of that very subject. In all of Baldwin’s novels, the protagonists who do change for the better do not actively seek their problem. Rather, events pounce on them: the circumstances of their own history find and strip them, accost them, troubling all their pursuits – especially those of love and substantive social connections.

Significantly, Baldwin places his characters in situations wherein they have the opportunity to unveil truths they badly want to keep hidden. He places them at a crossroads, allowing them to choose between freedom and innocence, love and hate, life and death. These distinctions are the universal terms of Baldwin’s writings. Those critics seeking to see love or sex as enigmas solely defined by political solutions – or even something more robust, such as a politics of everyday life – are left wondering from the start. Baldwin’s work calls for social and communal engagement, which may be ultimately beneficial politically – yet he does require that the moral dilemmas he presents include direct answers to pressing civic problems. The varied means by which Baldwin reveals the desire for, absence of, or manifestation of love are transformed into artifacts of history; they are produced by an individual self and within a social community. Baldwin’s depictions of social relationships query how the fabric of love is woven.

NOTES


4 Irving Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons,” *Dissent* (Autumn 1963), 353–68. While he does not mention “love” specifically, Henry Louis Gates Jr. also criticizes...
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6 Ibid., p. 379.


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid., p. 112.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


14 Ibid.

15 Horace Ové (dir.), Baldwin’s Nigger (London, United Kingdom, 1969). Film.

16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.


