James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination

Brim, Matt

Published by University of Michigan Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36853
CHAPTER 3

What Straight Men Need
Gay Love in Another Country

If you believe the propaganda, it would seem that every time a fag or a dyke
gathers a vagina or asshole is a demonstration of queer love and community.
—ROBERT REID-PHARR, BLACK GAY MAN: ESSAYS

Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not
others in our reach.
—SARA AHMED, QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY: ORIENTATIONS,
OBJECTS, AND OTHERS

Why do straight people have sex with gay people? The question is a queer
one, strange in that its rhetorical power to surprise and even unsettle comes
from the mundane facticity with which it asserts its underlying claim:
straight people have sex with gay people. The question does not simply
ask to be answered. Rather, it produces the need for an explanatory nar-
rative, a substitute logic by which such straight-gay sex can make sense. In
a culture in which the homophobia-producing straight-gay binary holds
sway, straight people cannot simply have sex with gay people. There must be
something more to the story. Ironically, the reverse assertion, that of course
gay people have sex with straight people, seems naturally to contain its own
explanations. Straight people are “logically” understood to be the objects
of gay desire, idealization, recruitment, and predation. Indeed, narratives
of why gay people (want to) have sex with straight people abound. But in
the reverse case, excuse narratives (drunkenness, adolescent curiosity) and
closet narratives (the straight person is not so straight after all) provide eva-
sions rather than explanations. One model of bisexuality could account for
shifting sexual identifications, while another would suggest that everyone is
bisexual, but both models avoid the seemingly paradoxical question of why
straight and gay people have sex with each other as straight and gay people.¹ In a different way, the overarching narrative of postmodern queer theory makes sense of the question of straight-gay sex by deconstructing sexual identity and rendering the binary distinction incoherent. In the queer act of sex, “straights” are not having sex with “gays” at all. What narratives, though, might respond to the question of straight-gay sex in ways that are more nuanced, not purely deconstructive, and yet still believable—ways that even create new possibilities for belief?

James Baldwin’s third novel, Another Country (1962), attempts to create just such a narrative. Baldwin offers a strange, imaginative, and perhaps fantastic answer to the question of why straight people have sex with gay people: because they need to. Because it is good for them. Because “gay sex”—a deeply problematic phrase that nevertheless proliferates in critical assessments of Another Country—offers straight people a revelatory, authenticating experience. While both straight men and women have sex with the novel’s central gay male figure, Baldwin clearly posits the straight male situation as the more pressing concern. “Gay sex” and the love it expresses, Baldwin paradoxically dares to imagine, is what straight men need.

In Baldwin’s expression of what straight men need, we have a sexualized version of his more recognizable artistic and cultural inquiry that asks what white people need to be told, need to hear, need to face up to in America, that is, what they need to know about themselves so that they may know their “other.” The liberal white audience to whom Another Country appealed may have looked to Baldwin with precisely these race questions in mind, but the novel shocked—and therefore appealed all the more thoroughly—because it taught its race lesson as inextricable from its sexual lesson: what straight white men need. The precise nature of what David Gerstner calls Baldwin’s “white seduction”—the complicated dynamic by which Baldwin “simultaneously eroticized while excoriating the seductive powers of whiteness”²—will be an active and open question for this chapter. But generally, such knotted relationships between sex and race were informed by Baldwin’s long-held claim, reiterated in a late interview, that “the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined.”³ A striking exploration of this connection between sex and race, “gay sex” in Another Country initiates in the straight white man (for he becomes Baldwin’s primary, though not exclusive, test case) a kind of loving transformation that not only attempts to redraw conventional sexual boundaries but also prepares him to confront what is represented as the related yet more impenetrable border of interracial desire.
Rather than homosexuality functioning as some kind of solution to racial discord, *Another Country* implies that one crossing of lines of identity can motivate and enable another.\(^4\) This chapter argues that although the novel offers a wide-ranging critique of American identity, it stakes its forward progress—that is, its narrative logic—on the claim that straight white maleness represents an impoverished and impoverishing cultural location, one that can be enriched by the love of a good gay man. The ambiguously queer “asshole” in Robert Reid-Pharr’s epigraph to this chapter, lovingly touched as a “demonstration of queer love and community,” is relocated onto the straight white man as a symbol of his unfulfilled racialized need.

If Baldwin was seduced by the needs of white straight men, his work also suggests that at the center of the national erotic landscape is a disavowed blackness. Reid-Pharr, in a chapter titled “Dinge,” suggests that “even and especially in those most sacred moments of sexual normativity (white dominant male on white submissive female), the specter of the black beast is omnipresent.”\(^5\) Citing the work of critics who theorize blackness within whiteness,\(^6\) Reid-Pharr participates in the project of analyzing “how blackness is indeed the always already lurking in the netherworld of white consciousness.”\(^7\) Thus he notes that Rufus, the central black male character in *Another Country*, exists as the “specter of the black beast,” “the ghost who haunts even [his white friend] Vivaldo’s most intimate interactions.”\(^8\) I am deeply indebted to Reid-Pharr, who demonstrates that only by keeping Rufus’s race status and his raced experience in full view can we encounter whiteness as other than a transparency. Yet I diverge from Reid-Pharr’s interpretation of *Another Country* in several meaningful ways, especially from his willingness to identify as “queer” the white (and, I argue, straight) man who relies on an omnipresent black male presence to (invisibly) mediate and thereby relieve him of his own racial knowledge. This can be done, I believe, only if the black specter is necessarily not recognized as the black gay specter in the novel. Behind the inscrutable Rufus, who sleeps with men and women, stands a more resolutely black gay character in the fleeting presence of the young southerner LeRoy, on whom (even Baldwin seems not to recognize) the novel’s vision depends. I will argue that two problematic shifts occur to the extent that LeRoy recedes from view. First, “gay” identity in the novel comes to mean white gay male identity. Second, in the sexual liaisons between gay and straight made possible precisely thanks to shared whiteness, straight whiteness comes to mean “queer.” “Queerness” is but another form of
straight white masculinity. Stepping back for a moment, one can hardly overstate the radical nature of Baldwin’s vision of a “different way to live and love.” In mapping anew the terrain of straight-gay sex, Baldwin makes good on what would become one of the promises of queer theory: to enumerate and problematize narratives of desire. However, even as queer theory looks forward into an unknown, necessarily unknowable, knowledge-producing future, it always does so from what we might call an identifiable present in which identity categories function for better as well as for worse. So, for example, while the late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick advocates, in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, for a version of future-looking queer theory, she nevertheless also necessarily invokes the presence of gay men. This move typifies her inquiry in her other seminal queer theory texts, *Between Men*, *Epistemology of the Closet*, and *Tendencies*, as well. On the one hand, Sedgwick keeps a vigilant eye on the homophobic pressures that continue to produce a demonized gay minority and that undermine the universalizing queer logic toward which her work surely tends. On the other hand, Sedgwick writes precisely for a positively imagined—and thus restabilized—gay community. In her retrospective preface to the 1992 republication of *Between Men*, Sedgwick reflects a version of this queer interplay between gay male presence and absence: “There’s a way in which the author of this book seems not quite to have been able to believe in the reality of the gay male communities toward whose readership the book so palpably yearns. The yearning makes the incredulity.” Sedgwick’s essay from *Tendencies*, “Queer and Now” (reprinted as the opening chapter of the latest state-of-the-field anthology, *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, from which I quote), deepens the integrity of the author’s relationships with gay men in light of her breast cancer diagnosis:

Probably my own most formative influence from a quite early age has been a viscerally intense, highly speculative (not to say inventive) cross-identification with gay men and gay male cultures as I inferred, imagined, and later came to know them. It wouldn’t have required quite so overdetermined a trajectory, though, for almost any forty-year-old facing a protracted, life-threatening illness in 1991 to realize that the people with whom she had perhaps most in common, and from whom she might well have most to learn, are people living with AIDS, AIDS activists,
and others whose lives had been profoundly reorganized by AIDS in the course of the 1980s.”

If Sedgwick can be taken as representative, queer theory simultaneously—often unintentionally, and perhaps characteristically—deconstructs but also relies on and reconstructs gay identity as part and parcel of its critical project. Queer theory needs and even affectively yearns for a gay referent.

This long-standing and still-productive tension frames my reading of Another Country, the queerness of which relies on entwined problematic representations of gay identity. An antihomophobic reading of Another Country must attend carefully to the narrative function of the gay man in facilitating straight-gay sex. More specifically, it must critically examine the use of the gay man and “gay sex” as mechanisms by which straight people transcend sexual and racial differences, for as the gay man bears the weight of others’ personal insights and revelations, he does so with his body and at his own expense. Although it may appear to hold a privileged place in the novel, given that “the homosexual connection magically produces ‘a healing transformation’ in racial terms as well [as sexual terms],” homosexuality is, in effect, unevenly exchanged or traded on in the interest of straight sexual liberation and racial reconciliation. The nature of this exchange becomes most disturbing when the social gains that result from the “liberatory” powers of homosexuality—powers embodied in the character of gay white southerner Eric Jones and ghosted in the figure of gay black LeRoy—are shown, paradoxically, to reinscribe heteronormative sexuality. In that gay trade-off, homosexuality is both used and also figuratively “used up,” changed into a concept evacuated of positive content, made a self-defeating means to an ostensibly queer end. In fact, “redemptive” homosexuality represents the foremost of the novel’s many forms of prostitution, not primarily because it is offered up in service of racial integration, but because it concomitantly stabilizes and privileges straight identity. Moreover and bizarrely, that straightening out is accomplished through straight-gay sexual couplings that would appear to unsettle straight (and, to a lesser extent, gay) identities. From this critical perspective, the novel is deceptively “queer.”

In a famously homophobic attack that nonetheless provides an unexpected touchstone for this chapter, Eldridge Cleaver also identified a connection between sexual exploration and racial identity in Baldwin. Characterizing the central black male figure in Another Country as a “pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man’s pastime of committing suicide, who
let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in the ass," Cleaver fell in line with one black nationalist discourse that pitted African American masculinity against queer sexuality. Signifying off of and diffusing Cleaver’s accusation, I want to suggest that Baldwin is not so much a “race traitor” as a “gay trader” in Another Country, constructing a fantasy not of black destruction but of homosexual sacrifice disguised as revolutionary love. The gay trade of the novel occurs when heteronormalizing questions of gender and race are worked out on the “loving” body of the gay man. Not surprisingly, then, I characterize the gay trade of Another Country as an essentially bad deal for the homosexual man, who, circulated as the instrument of racial and sexual exploration for straight people, gives much more than he receives, both physically and emotionally. The price of enlightenment in the novel, I argue, is paid in a special way by the gay man, whose revelatory sexuality is predicated on an unproblematized sexual accessibility that evokes not only gay prostitution but a larger sellout of homosexuality itself.

My argument, I am acutely aware, runs counter to Baldwin’s intentions, which were to expose the uselessness and, indeed, danger of suffocating sexual identity categories, rather than to reuse them in even more dangerous ways. Another Country remains perhaps the best example of Baldwin’s universalizing poetic, his attempt to act as witness to our flawed but common humanity and to articulate the fundamental but not reciprocal interdependence that exists within difference. Nevertheless, while Baldwin’s artistic impulse was queer, the narrative strategy that I am calling the “gay trade” disrupts that queer vision. In contrast to most recent critical work on Another Country, I contend that sexual identity categories function quite normatively in the novel, even, in a perversely ironic echoing of Cleaver, to the point of whitewashing homosexuality by creating of the black gay man an ontological impossibility. My own intention is not to criticize Baldwin bluntly but, rather, to suggest the nearly insurmountable difficulty of the narrative dilemma he faced: how to craft his universalizing message about the sexual and racial identities into a believable narrative without, as Reid-Pharr has noted is also true at times of the black man in Baldwin’s work, relying on a gay scapegoat.

As I trace what I will gently call Baldwin’s narrative “failure,” I also want to draw attention to the difficulty that queer theory has had in grappling with a text like Another Country, a problem that crystallizes in the way that critically queer interpretations of the novel, reluctant to read straight-gay sex through the eyes of a resolutely gay male character, privilege the novel’s
“queerness,” as though queerness harbored some kind of inherently positive content. Reid-Pharr pointedly attests that the naive transparency associated with white privilege—white people’s ability to exist outside their white bodies in the act of sex so as not to acknowledge what they think as they fuck—extends to (white) queer privilege as well. If, argues Reid-Pharr, we recognize that “[w]e do not escape race and racism when we fuck” and that “[o]n the contrary, this fantasy of escape is precisely that which marks the sexual act as deeply implicated in the ideological processes by which difference is constructed and maintained,”17 we must also confront an idea that is “more difficult to accept”: that “the sexual act, at least as it is performed between queers—and yes, I am nominating Vivaldo [the novel’s central white male character] as queer—is not necessarily a good, expansive, and liberatory thing, a place in which individuals exist for a moment outside themselves such that new possibilities are at once imagined and actualized.”18 While I will disagree about naming Vivaldo as “queer”—arguing, instead, that his straight privilege mirrors and buttresses his white privilege—I join Reid-Pharr in his underlying queer critique, a critique that is not oppositional to but, rather, deeply invested in queer theoretical reworkings of difference. Ultimately, I ask whether certain queer theories reinscribe Baldwin’s “failed” narrative, encouraging a critical/analytical gay trade by subverting gay interpretative positions in favor of impossibly positive queer ones.

A FAILED LOVE SCENE

The pressing question of straight white male need in Another Country surfaces after the suicide of Rufus Scott, a talented African American musician. Rufus’s experience of being an expendable commodity in the white man’s world references the African American slave trade and also echoes with the threat of a modern-day lynching: “How I hate them—all those white sons of bitches out there. They’re trying to kill me. . . . They got the world on a string, man, the miserable white cock suckers, and they tying that string around my neck, they killing me.”19 Tortured by the knowledge that the black man’s extinction is the price white America willingly pays for its survival, Rufus jumps from the George Washington Bridge.20 Rufus’s suicide forces Vivaldo Moore, Rufus’s best friend, to face his own racial guilt, as he wonders how, given the historical inertia of racist violence, he (and, by extension, other white men) can recuperate and recover—indeed, love—the
black man in America. Vivaldo’s belated need to love Rufus will govern the remainder of the novel.

In a remarkable scene of what I want to describe as hetero-raced paralysis, the Irish-Italian Vivaldo recalls having been unable to reach out to and potentially save his best friend. 

[T]he last time I saw Rufus, before he disappeared, . . . I looked at him, he was lying on his side. . . . Well, when he looked at me, just before he closed his eyes and turned on his side away from me, all curled up, I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened. I had the feeling that he wanted someone to hold him, to hold him, and that, that night, it had to be a man. . . . I lay on my back and I didn’t touch him and I didn’t sleep. . . . I still wonder, what would have happened if I’d taken him in my arms, if I’d held him, if I hadn’t been—afraid. I was afraid that he wouldn’t understand that it was—only love. Only love. But, oh, Lord, when he died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I’d just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed, and held him. (342–43)

I want to make several related points about how Baldwin constructs the impasse described in this scene. The passage reflects, foremost, a deeply racialized encounter marked by a debt, to use one of Baldwin’s chief metaphors, that can never be fully paid. Tuhkanen notes that “the question of economy is never a simple one for Baldwin. Paying the ‘price of the ticket’ never rids us of all our debts; in a sense the notion that debt is fully cancelable is characteristic of the economy of protest novels, which seek to redeem us . . . by binding . . . history into neat, consumable units of fiction.”21 Indeed, Baldwin had already famously derided such fiction in his early essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949). For Baldwin, “the price of the ticket” for living in America is that we must live with our race debts even as we seek to redress them. Vivaldo, however, cannot negotiate that exchange, for he surely fears that Rufus will interpret his touch as a sign of a white man’s pity for his black friend. He knows, for instance, that Rufus has been living on the streets “peddl[ing] his ass” (42) to white men in order to eat. Vivaldo’s touch, then, would be charged by the same sexualized energy that has come to mean precisely racial disempowerment, not “only love,” for Rufus. The scene thus functions as a microcosm for a larger social dynamic by which
racial inequality, whether through white pity or white sexual appropriation, circulates in the novel.

If Vivaldo cannot bring himself to reach across the gulf of racial difference, neither can he negotiate the overlapping terrain of gendered intimacy. He intuits that only a man can hold Rufus and that, in fact, Rufus wants to be held by a man, yet he fears that an act of male-male union will be misinterpreted as something other than “only love.” It would seem at first glance that Vivaldo is worried that his making a move toward Rufus will be misunderstood as his making a move on Rufus. While Vivaldo seems oddly unfazed by the potential for sex to occur—“maybe sex would have happened”—he cannot imagine how to engage his black friend in a loving, physical, potentially sexual embrace that might be defined against homosexuality, against the “gay love” that such an embrace would most immediately, even definitionally, call to mind. But if Baldwin is careful not to represent Vivaldo’s desire to take Rufus in his arms and “only love” him as homosexual, it strikes this reader as somewhat odd that Vivaldo would later turn to a homosexual, Eric, to learn exactly that lesson of how to reach out to and love a man. Gay love is thus both problem and solution, ostensibly confusing the issue of male-male intimacy by threatening to define Vivaldo’s intentions as homosexual and therefore needing to be undercut by the caveat “only love,” but also offering to guide Vivaldo toward a greater understanding of the love between raced men that he has such difficulty articulating and enacting. Vivaldo avoids homosexual identification as he struggles for some kind of racial reconciliation with Rufus, but, as I will demonstrate further on, only the gay man and the love he alone seems capable of embodying can prepare the straight white man to face, at last, the challenges of loving across lines of race.

A second reading of Vivaldo’s apparent indifference to the possibility of sex with Rufus suggests a different kind of familiarity that, rather than signifying homosexuality or bisexuality, seems to effect a designification of the male-male sex act. In fact, a “queer” current of sexual liberalism runs through Vivaldo’s relationship with Rufus. Discussing their troubles with women, Rufus asks Vivaldo, “Have you ever wished you were queer?”—as though homosexuality, a synonym for “queer” in this context, would provide a tidy escape when a woman “was eating you up” (51). Vivaldo helplessly replies, “I used to think maybe I was [queer]. Hell, I think I even wished I was. But I’m not. So I’m stuck.” Rufus then picks up the exchange:
“So you been all up and down that street, too.”
“We’ve all been up the same streets. There aren’t a hell of a lot of streets. Only, we’ve been taught to lie so much, about so many things, that we hardly ever know where we are.” (52)

Here, Vivaldo in particular reveals an ostensibly queer-friendly brand of heterosexuality heavily coated with liberal intent. But only from the position of straight white male privilege in which he is “stuck” can Vivaldo assert his open-mindedness: he would not mind being “queer.” His position proves not only sexist, with the man-eating woman representing the problem, but heterosexist, with gay male life supposedly affording an escape from straight troubles. Paradoxically, Vivaldo’s “wish” to be “queer,” buttressed by his later claim that he is “condemned to women,” positions him as “stuck” indeed, immobilized by what should be understood as a false relation to sexual identity. Using a metaphor of urban geography, Vivaldo depicts the streets for expressing sexuality as few and the sexual landscape as fairly small and undifferentiated. But rather than persuasively depicting a socio-sexual common ground, this metaphor actually reveals that for Vivaldo—and for Vivaldo alone—the stakes of exploring new sexual avenues are remarkably low. Only because he operates from a place of straight white male privilege can the streets function as queer contact zones. While Vivaldo at one point refers to his “time with boys” (315) and recalls a fantasy of touching a boy named Stevie, the more telling episode of Vivaldo’s “boy time” unfolds when he remembers how he and his buddies from Brooklyn once used, beat, and left for dead a gay boy they had picked up on one of these supposedly queer streets.

I am arguing that Vivaldo’s failure to “only love” Rufus reflects his naive relation to white privilege and his disingenuous relation to straight privilege. One has the impulse, perhaps, to attempt the impossible and parse out the degree to which Vivaldo’s hetero-raced paralysis is straight and the degree to which it is white. Resisting that impulse, a postmodern strain of queer theory and queer cultural studies has recently been productively deployed to read Baldwin’s third novel as a commentary on the means by which myths of racial difference and sexual difference might be reciprocally deconstructed, thereby reinforcing the destabilizing, queer-making potential of Baldwin’s social vision. Just as important, critics have argued that while readers cannot possibly disarticulate race and sexuality, they must nevertheless attend
to the particulars of different but overlapping oppressions, lest one becomes an interpretive shortcut for the other.24 According to William Cohen, “[t]he universalizing maneuver whereby [the homosexual man’s] consciousness of gay oppression comes to stand in for all other modes of subjugation not only obscures the specificity of power relations structured by sexuality but elides the different and often contradictory concerns of people who feel themselves, as Baldwin might say, to be outsiders.”25 While *Another Country* attempts to initiate a healing between black and white and ostensibly does the same for gay and straight, and while its larger crossing over is between race and sexuality themselves, the social fabric created by various threads of oppression in *Another Country* does not unravel evenly. A central refrain of this chapter is that the black gay man, situated at the narrative crux where identities ostensibly break down and “healing” begins, represents a particular crisis of representation within the novel.

If the power of Baldwin’s message about the absolute necessity and supreme difficulty of racial reconciliation diverts attention away from the questionable uses to which both white and black gay men’s body are put in the novel, it very effectively exposes, by contrast, the misuses of black women’s bodies as they are prostituted to white men, especially to the “liberal” Vivaldo. The most critical task for Vivaldo, if he is to “save” Rufus, is to trade in his liberal white fantasy that “suffering doesn’t have a color” and that one can simply “step out of this nightmare” of American race relations (417). Yet Vivaldo’s “liberal, even revolutionary sentiments” (133) butt up against his sense of imperiled white masculinity. Sex with black female prostitutes in Harlem, where “he had merely dropped his load and marked the spot with silver” (132), represents Vivaldo’s attempt to forge his masculinity in a place where the danger “was more real, more open, than danger was downtown.” Consequently, Vivaldo feels that “having chosen to run these dangers, [he] was snatching his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire” (132). When, in an attempt to get closer to the absent Rufus, Vivaldo enters into a relationship with Rufus’s sister Ida, he positions her not only as racial proxy, a stand-in for her brother, but as sexual proxy, another one of the uptown prostitutes the white man has made a habit of visiting.

Ida, who prides herself on “knowing the score,” understands the tricky and, indeed, deadly race and gender dynamics at play in her relationship with Vivaldo. She therefore rejects the liberalism of the white man’s claim that he loves her and her dead brother: “[H]ow can you talk about love when
you don’t want to know what’s happening. . . . How can you say you loved Rufus when there is so much about him you didn’t want to know? How can I believe you love me?” (324–25). In Ida’s experience, people, both black and white, make the cheap trade. They pay with their money or with their bodies rather than entering into the more difficult and perhaps impossible exchange by which blacks and whites might actually attempt to know each other. She tells Vivaldo, who insists that he wants to spend the rest of his life finding out about her, that he is not truly willing to do so. “And, listen,” Ida concedes, “I don’t blame you for not being willing. I’m not willing, nobody’s willing. Nobody’s willing to pay their dues” (325). The price, she knows, would be too high. Throughout the novel, Vivaldo listens to the blues, but in his liberal innocence, he does not truly hear; Ida, however, sings the blues as the song of experience. She therefore sees Vivaldo’s attempt to recover Rufus (and redeem himself) as a white liberal fantasy that blacks, who know the score, cannot afford to share.

Yet in their last scene, Ida and Vivaldo do share a breakthrough, perhaps beginning to pay off their race debts. Confessing her opportunistic affair with an influential white music producer, Ida begins to tell Vivaldo something of her connection to her brother, of their mutual lost innocence, of their experience as African Americans living in a white world. Vivaldo, shedding his liberal skin, feels, in turn, that Ida “was not locking him out now; he felt, rather, that he was being locked in. He listened, seeing, or trying to see, what she saw, and feeling something of what she felt” (415). When Ida breaks down sobbing on the floor, Vivaldo’s “heart [begins] to beat with a newer, stonier anguish, which destroyed the distance called pity and placed him, very nearly, in her body, beside that table, on the dirty floor . . . , her sobs seeming to make his belly sore” (426). The scene ends with Ida “stroking his innocence out of him” (431). At the novel’s close, then, Vivaldo seems willing to trade his white innocence as he attempts to participate more genuinely in Ida’s African American experience, and Ida, in turn, appears willing to accept the legitimacy of that cross-racial exploration, as, in sharp relief to Vivaldo’s paralysis with Rufus, their black and white body barriers seem almost literally to dissolve.

In stark contrast to Vivaldo’s final scene with Ida, in which Baldwin portrays racial intersubjectivity as a long and painful endeavor, the sexual encounter between Vivaldo and the gay man Eric makes straight/gay difference into a hurdle quickly leapt. Whereas Ida “stroked[es] the innocence out of” Vivaldo, Eric returns Vivaldo “back to his innocence” (386), suggesting
utopic closure as opposed to an agonizing beginning. Unlike sex with Ida, sex with Eric catalyzes in Vivaldo not the type of mystification seen above but a revelation, one that translates not as sexual redefinition but as a precursor to a hoped-for racial integration. Baldwin's secretary and biographer David Leeming tracks this same movement: “Finally, Vivaldo’s brief affair with Eric is a metaphor for the shedding of the kind of innocence that prevents him from knowing Ida. Since Eric had once made love with Rufus, Vivaldo’s night with Eric was for Vivaldo a love act, by proxy, with Rufus.”

In claiming that “Eric . . . helps [Vivaldo] past gender and sexual orientation” and that “[h]e is then ‘positioned’ for a fully human relationship with Ida,” James Dievler also marks this too-easy slippage past sex to the foundational issue of race. Ultimately, the stakes involved with exploring new streets are much lower in sexual excursions than in racial ones.

The critique I am offering here does not stem from a disagreement with the claim that knowing one’s racial other—and thereby, Baldwin would say, knowing oneself—is remarkably difficult and painful. Rather, I am bothered by the way the gay male body becomes utterly available as part of that “queer” process, for why should it make sense that Eric would serve in the capacity he is made to? Why should we not question the representation of the gay man as the relatively unproblematic sexual partner of straight men? Baldwin explicitly thematizes prostitution when other characters’ bodies are traded on—Rufus, Ida, and Eric’s French boyfriend, Yves, all prostitute themselves—but Eric’s relationship with Vivaldo receives no such treatment. Indeed, in Eric’s case, as I will more thoroughly demonstrate below, gay male sexual and emotional accessibility is privileged and appreciated, naturalized and narrated with neither commentary nor the irony that would encourage critical distance. Interestingly, the resulting interpretive silence makes for strange bedfellows. Under various readings of Eric’s ability to conjure a kind of sexual healing for Vivaldo operates a powerful and dangerous intersection of gay and queer cultural fantasies. On the one hand is the fantasy of the gay man’s wish to have sex with “the” (read “any”) straight man, whether to be validated as a man by the straight man’s masculine authority or to be validated as a woman in contrast to that authority. On the other hand is the fantasy of perverse queer desire that tends to privilege sexual border crossings per se. The two fantasies converge such that the same kind of faulty logic that might have been—but is pointedly not—used to naturalize the exchange of a woman, Ida, between white men precisely is used to naturalize the exchange of the homosexual man, Eric, between straight men in Another
Country. The gay man willfully serves the needs of straight men, he does not think to refuse straight male sexual advances, and ultimately, despite what he may or may not say, he wants it. And the reader is encouraged to want it for him. Eric is not given the chance to reject the conflation of his homosexuality with sexual availability, largely because that availability allows Vivaldo to transcend sexual and then racial categories—to become, in a word, queer.

If I have made a case above for denuding gay heroism as gay prostitution, the racial ends of which are used to justify the sexually appropriative means, I want to continue by redoubling my focus on the ways that those means are made invisible, for they are not erased by race alone. Rather, there is another justification that hides the misuse of the gay man, one rooted in Baldwin’s most privileged term, “love,” and the notion that “love is refused at one’s peril.” Of Eric’s role in the novel’s search for love, Leeming writes that “[o]n the level of parable . . ., Another Country has at its center the observing artist-mediator played by Eric, who preaches and practices a lesson of acceptance and love among a group of American who are ‘victims’ of the incoherence of American life, who must find their own identity before they can love and be whole.” In other words, as Eric gives not only his body but, more important for Baldwin and for the novel, his heart, love transcends and overshadows the sex act. This love, I argue below, is a specifically gay love. Yet as the troublesome dynamic of sexual availability defers to the pacifying glow of love, the gift of gay love, rather than being ironized by the fact that it is anchored in a dubious sexual trade, is naturalized as an option for the heterosexual man in need. Gay love to the rescue.

THE STRAIGHT USES OF GAY LOVE

If, as I argued in chapter 2, homosexual categorization represents deadly paralysis in Giovanni’s Room, a markedly gay love would seem to offer the potential for liberatory destabilization in Another Country, with Eric, the out gay man, representing the anti-David. Eric would seem to embody a category-busting, deconstructive potential: by crossing lines that mark off sexual taboos, we can also forge bonds across racial lines. Told as a flashback, the initial instance of that dual crossover comes when Eric’s adolescent homoerotic desire for his friend LeRoy releases him from the racist grip of his native Alabama. He pleads with LeRoy, “You’re not a nigger, not for me, you’re LeRoy, you’re my friend, and I love you.” LeRoy’s reply, “You a
nice boy, Eric, but you don’t know the score” (205–6), will later be echoed in the sentiments of Ida. LeRoy exhibits greater empathy than Ida, though, presumably because he understands the interracial dynamic of the situation through his own homosexual desire for the white boy. Indeed, the gay love shared between the two youths takes on a revelatory function, as, lying by the stream, LeRoy

worked in Eric an eternal, a healing transformation. Many years were to pass before [Eric] could begin to accept what he, that day, in those arms, with the stream whispering in his ear, discovered; and yet that day was the beginning of his life as a man. What had always been hidden was to him, that day, revealed and it did not matter that, fifteen years later, he sat in an armchair, overlooking a foreign sea, still struggling to find the grace which would allow him to bear that revelation. For the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true, and must be borne.

As Eric learns to bear and comes to embody the “meaning of revelation,” LeRoy—and black gay male sexuality—disappears from view. LeRoy’s disappearance is not mere precedent for Rufus’s erasure later in the novel. It not only establishes a pattern of black male abjection and death, though it does this as well; more important, the trajectory from LeRoy to Rufus traces an ontological shift, a change in what it is possible to be as a black man in America. Specifically, if LeRoy is a black gay youth, Rufus can never “be” a black gay man. That identity, as I will conclude, represents an impossible subject position in Another Country. My point for the moment, though, is that thanks to LeRoy, Eric has learned the lesson that vexes his straight counterpart Vivaldo: how to love the black man and thereby be revealed as a man. Crucially, if white gay Eric is able to “love” Vivaldo, this is only because another gay person, the black adolescent LeRoy, has prepared him for that later preparatory moment.

Mimicking the encounter between LeRoy and Eric, the sexual union of Eric and Vivaldo is represented primarily as a loving and revelatory exchange. After a night of drinking, Vivaldo passes out in Eric’s bed, and Eric falls asleep beside him. They awaken to the “monstrous endeavor” of bringing to fruition something “long desired” by both. “[T]hank God it was too late [to stop],” thinks Vivaldo (383). Having failed to initiate his own loving moment with Rufus, Vivaldo thus inevitably turns to Eric for his love lesson. Eric’s importance to Vivaldo, much like Ida’s, lies in his ability to artifi-
cially re-create a sexual union between the straight white man and his dead friend, for Eric and Rufus have been sexual partners as well. Vivaldo’s mind races during sex with Eric.

Rufus had certainly thrashed and throbbed, feeling himself mount higher, as Vivaldo thrashed and throbbed and mounted now. Rufus. Rufus. Had it been like this for him? And he wanted to ask Eric, What was it like for Rufus? What was it like for him? . . . Had he murmured at last, in a strange voice, as he now heard himself murmur, Oh, Eric. Eric. (386)

What was it like to experience this as Rufus did, Vivaldo wants to know. What was it like for the black man to be loved? Vivaldo’s questions re-establish his desire to share in Rufus’s experience, to achieve a level of racial intersubjectivity previously denied him. His call to Eric thus operates as an act of racial ventriloquism by which Vivaldo attempts to unite his voice with Rufus’s.

Afterward, confident that “there was a man in the world who loved him,” Vivaldo realizes that “[h]e loved Eric: it was a great revelation.” Vivaldo begins the following exchange:

“I love you, Eric, I always will, I hope you know that.” He was astonished to hear how his voice shook. “Do you love me? Tell me that you do.”

“You know I do,” said Eric. . . . “I love you very much, I’d do anything for you. You must have known it, no? somewhere, for a very long time. Because I must have loved you for a very long time.”

“Is that true? I didn’t know I knew it.”

“I didn’t know it, either,” Eric said. He smiled. “What a funny day this is. It begins with revelations.”

“They’re opening up,” said Vivaldo, “all those books in heaven.” (387)

The hyperbole of Eric’s claim, that the act of sex with Vivaldo is somehow akin to divine revelation, invokes the concept of “love” in problematic ways. First, it reveals the extent to which Baldwin will go to distinguish loving male-male sexual relations from male sex acts that are otherwise motivated. Eric and Vivaldo supposedly transcend the purely physical, rising above the cheap trade of male sex made by closeted men, “that ignorant army. They were husbands, they were fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers; and they were everywhere. . . . [Their need] could only be satisfied
in the shameful, the punishing dark, and quickly, with flight and aversion as the issue of the act” (211). Distinguishing male-male sex as redemptive when it is loving, Baldwin portrays “ignorant” male-male sex as the darkest act of sexual betrayal. Sex acts between men thus stand at the poles of sexual liberation and confinement. Whereas female-male relationships in the novel are marked, in the end, by compromise, male-male unions, operating at the extremes, are impossibly situated as idyllic or doomed.

Vivaldo and Eric, reveling in the revelation of their mutual love for each other, clearly fall into the former category. But just what does this revelation reveal, particularly about Vivaldo? What does his newfound love, one that takes shape through sexual union with a gay man, say about him? It would appear that Vivaldo has at last found the “only love” he so desired to share with Rufus. But why, in that case, is he not afraid that Eric, too, will misinterpret that love as homosexual? What does this hypocrisy expose?

Here we find the second and more troubling point about the coupling of Vivaldo and Eric. Unlike the anxiety-producing near miss with Rufus, the encounter with Eric, as Vivaldo well knows, cannot possibly call into question his heterosexual identity. Contrary to Vivaldo’s declaration, he does not and cannot reciprocate Eric’s gay love. Instead, in response to his overwhelming need, the straight man can only receive. On waking, Vivaldo quickly understands that “Eric really loved him and would be proud to give Vivaldo anything Vivaldo needed” (383). Eric proceeds to offer himself up to Vivaldo as a disciple or servant: “Eric bowed and kissed Vivaldo on the belly button, half-hidden in the violent, gypsy hair. This was in honor of Vivaldo, of Vivaldo’s body and Vivaldo’s need” (383–84). Honored in the act of sex with a gay man, the straight white man and his need are the focus of the exchange. Even though it is the straight man who “surrender[s] to the luxury, the flaming torpor of passivity,” as he whispers in Eric’s ear “a muffled, urgent plea” (385), it is the gay man whose peril increases. In taking the (supposedly) dominant role of the “giver of the gift” (385), Eric diminishes himself, bowing, kneeling, giving, serving. His love is, quite literally, a selfless love, an act of giving himself up so that Vivaldo can feel “fantastically protected, liberated” (387). Although Vivaldo does not view Eric as “the inferior male of less importance than the crumpled, cast-off handkerchief” (384), as he had his previous male sex partners, he nevertheless realizes that, as was the case in those sexual excursions, the stakes of this sexual exchange are very different for Eric and himself. Eric gives his love as a man “condemned to men”—to borrow Vivaldo’s words—thus giving something that, as Vivaldo is aware,
puts the gay man at great risk. The sexual encounter is, in fact, underwritten partly by the fact that “Eric had risked too much” not to continue (384). What propels Eric—gay love—is therefore also the source of his danger: his love will be unreturned and is, indeed, unreturnable.

In *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, Didier Eribon identifies a “structure of inferiorization” at work in the creation of homosexual identity. For Eribon, the concept of “the insult” encapsulates all the “processes of subjection” by which a homosexual is made to be gay. Through a critically reflective process of self-reinvention, or “resubjectification,” however, the gay man reappropriates and transforms his identity, essentially making himself over as gay in response to the violence by which society has made him gay. Eribon can help us to understand not only the construction of the gay man’s identity but also his capacity to love as a response to inferiorization and insult. In the scene quoted above, rather than exhibiting a revelatory or transcendental love, Eric demonstrates a particularly gay love, one created by the way he understands himself in relation to his straight male partner, who is himself constructed as the subject by whom and against whom the gay man has long been inferiorized. Unlike Vivaldo, Eric brings to the male-male sex act “all those intensely lived experiences” that coalesce around “homosexual acts,” “around their very possibility, around the impulses that lead to them, around fantasies that have been nourished by images and models perceived since childhood, and even around the fear of being recognized as one of those people [he] know[s] are likely to be called a ‘faggot.’” With such a special relationship to the male-male sex act, a relationship moored by fantasy but also fear, how can Eric also not have a special relationship to the love he expresses in that act? More pointedly, can the gift of gay love given to a straight man be anything but the expression of yet another homophobic insult?

The important question becomes, does the gay love Eric gives reflect his subjectification by insult or a resubjectification in response to the inferiorization that constructs him as gay? I fail to see evidence of a conscious or even unconscious reinvention of the gay man by the gay man in the scene quoted above. In fact, Eric’s coming to consciousness copies, rather than rewrites, the script of the gay man serving, to use the metaphor suggested by Vivaldo, as cumrag for the straight man, despite the reversal of insertive positions and the thin veneer of Vivaldo’s “love” that helps to gloss over this fact. Missing is the endangered sense of self that one would expect the “reinvented” gay man to ascertain and defend against when asked by the straight man to
give him the gift of love. Missing is Eric’s deep knowledge—a learning that surely borders on intuition—that Vivaldo has abused gay boys in the past (as, indeed, he has). Eric shows no signs of inner conflict, no sense of gay jeopardy. In fact, he seems wholly satisfied with his liaison with Vivaldo, and that satisfaction notably does not emerge in terms of the gay man’s conquest of his culturally valued other. Eric is, simply, satisfied, his gift requiring a divestment of himself in honor of Vivaldo and in service of the revelation Vivaldo must experience in order to return to Ida. In this uniquely homosexual exchange, an evacuative trade-off that only the gay man is capable of making, we should not read a transcendental gay love but, rather, a heteronormative reabsorption of a very culturally bound gay love. In short, Eric gives love as the straight man’s gay man, as a subjected subject of desire.

Kevin Ohi also offers an important critique of transcendence in Another Country, arguing that seemingly redemptive moments in the novel function so as to “unsettle[e] any subjective ‘revelation.’” For Ohi, however, Eric’s “thwarted revelation” stems from a more generalizable “epistemological disadvantage,” one demonstrated both in the narrative and in the Jamesian opacity of Baldwin’s language. Eric and the others do not achieve self-knowledge in supposedly revelatory encounters but, instead, come face to face with the impossibility inherent in the project of identity: “The unveiling of a self in Baldwin usually reveals only its own process of unveiling, revealing not a positive ‘content’ around which a coherent identity might coalesce, but a traumatic kernel we might conceptualize as a ‘crypt.’” Liberation becomes less a utopic vision than code for the struggle for greater self-awareness amid a “traumatic center” of sadness that is the American condition. While Ohi’s reading of Baldwin deftly undermines liberal/progressive interpretive teleologies, I think it does so by reading from within Baldwin’s ideological wheelhouse. My argument, like Ohi’s, is that Baldwin evacuates gay identity of content, but I contend that he does so only by relying narratologically on specific social-sexual experiences and histories that give gay identity meaning. If revelation is thwarted in the novel (and I agree that it is), this is not because an utter lack of self-knowledge defines Eric’s “epistemological disadvantage” but, rather, because the self-knowledge Eric has is actively unknown, covered over by a heteronormative divestment of the gay self.

Accordingly, the assertion that Baldwin introduces “loving gay male sex” into straight-gay male relations makes the playing field on which sexuality exists as a lived experience deceptively level for gay and straight char-
acters. Vivaldo does not enter into loving gay male sexual relations, because the stakes that partly define those relations as homosexual do not apply to him. He neither works to creatively redefine himself as gay nor is made to be gay through a failure to do so. Indeed, Vivaldo, by virtue of the fact that Eric is made to be gay through the unquestioned and unquestionable heterosexual appropriation of his gay love, is made to be straight. Put another way, Vivaldo loves Eric from the position of the straight man having sex, albeit “lovingly” instead of violently, with the gay man. To argue that “homosexuality . . . is normalized in Another Country” and that “it offers itself up as a relatively unproblematized possibility to anyone (at least to any male)” is both to hit and miss the mark. Homosexuality is indeed “relatively unproblematized” compared to race, but what is normalized is not homosexuality but a brand of heterosexuality achieved through male-male sex—hardly an unproblematic revision and, indeed, an evacuation of the sex act in which much of gay male identity is intimately invested. Vivaldo, I protest, is fucking straight.

I mean this literally. In fucking Eric, Vivaldo engages in a performative act that not only reflects but also constructs a straight identity. “Straight” does not merely describe Vivaldo in an ontological sense but connotes an enactment (it is what he does when having sex with Eric) made possible by virtue of a particular kind of straight privilege. Sara Ahmed’s insights in Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others are helpful in understanding the intractability of Vivaldo’s straightness and, by extension, the theoretical problems with queering straight characters. Grounding her analysis in phenomenology, which “emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds,” Ahmed argues that we might once again privilege the term “sexual orientation” rather than “sexuality” or “sexual identity.” Indeed, she takes seriously questions about what it means to be oriented sexually. By working at the intersection of queer studies and phenomenology, Ahmed recasts the notion of “sexual orientation” in part as a matter of one’s spatial orientation toward or away from possible love objects.

If we presume that sexuality is crucial to bodily orientation, to how we inhabit spaces, then the differences between how we are oriented sexually are not only a matter of “which” objects we are oriented toward, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world. Sexuality would
not be seen as determined only by object choice, but as involving differences in one’s very relation to the world—that is, in how one “faces” the world or is directed toward it. Or, rather, we could say that orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one’s desires, mean inhabiting different worlds.41

Citing Judith Butler on how sexual orientations are performatively shaped and produced rather than random or coincidental, Ahmed further proposes that “the ‘nearness’ of love objects is not casual: we do not just find objects there, like that.”42 Instead, “[w]hat bodies ‘tend to do’ are effects of histories rather than being originary.”43 Sexual orientation must be thought not simply in terms of the object toward which one tends but also in terms of its conditions of emergence and in terms of the socio-spatial conditions of one’s own approach to an object. The shaping of the sexual possibility, or sexual orientation, thus reflects “intertwining histories of arrival.”44

Not surprisingly, given its enormous power in Western culture, compulsory heterosexuality dramatically shapes the ability of bodies to come into contact and to appear in the field of erotic possibility. The given history of sexual orientation is thus the history of what Ahmed calls “the straight line,” an orienting force that privileges the heterosexual couple as a “social gift” and facilitates that couple’s extension into space while also, recursively, being shaped by that couple’s presence. In a section of *Queer Phenomenology* entitled “Becoming Straight,” Ahmed continues to move the discussion far afield from an interiorized identity and toward a field of possibility: “Heterosexuality is not then simply ‘in’ objects, as if ‘it’ could be a property of objects, and it is not simply about love objects or about the delimitation of ‘who’ is available to love, although such objects do matter. . . . Rather, heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, of how objects are arranged to create a background.”45 As ground is cleared by body histories, life sequences, and accumulated habitations of space, the heterosexual extends in such a way as to create the impression of a straight line, a well-ordered life, one that, if successful, will extend the heterosexual straight into the next generation.

By contrast, queer bodies, objects, and desires are those that deviate from the straight line, that are “off line,” that are on a slant, that exist “at an oblique angle to what coheres” along the straight line.46 Perceiving an object’s queer orientation to the straight line can thus disorient the well-ordered,
straight-oriented viewer. Yet, because “the work of ordinary perception . . . straightens up anything queer or oblique,” the relationship between that which is “on line” and that which is “off line” is often “fleeting.” More often, “[q]ueer objects, which do not allow the subject to approximate the form of the heterosexual couple, may not even get near enough to ‘come into view’ as possible objects to be directed toward.”

While Ahmed posits a fleeting relationship between heterosexual and queer orientations, especially as queer bodies tend not to (or “fail” to adequately) inhabit the charmed space cleared by “straight tendencies” for the heterosexual couple, I want to posit a more proximate but no less vexed and no more visible relationship between straight and queer orientations. If queer bodies deviate from the accumulated history that creates the straight line (so that often they literally do not come into view), might it not also be true that they sometimes either deviate or are made to deviate in such a way as to intersect the straight line, to crisscross it at various non-random points and precisely for certain straight perspectives? What if, to extend Ahmed, becoming straight requires encountering queer objects along the very line and in the very space cleared for and by heterosexuality as a way of all the more rigorously straightening the line, of keeping it straight? Put another way, what if tracing the straight line by connecting the dots of objects given to us by heterosexual culture reveals queer dots coinciding with that line, the queer objects littering the path of straightness like so much roadkill—unrecognizable, twisted, queered indeed? What if people become straight not only by turning away from queerness but by requiring that queers continually contort themselves by turning back toward and crossing over the straight line? What if the history of how heterosexuals arrive depends on the fleeting availability of queer objects “as things to ‘do things’ with?” If “queer” has resounded as part of a liberatory social and intellectual drumbeat, have we ignored the ways queers have continued to be not liberated but, in new and painful ways, bent out of shape by and for the sake of compulsory heterosexuality?

I find Ahmed so useful for my own inquiry into Another Country because the book is staked on the very problematic of characters’ intertwining “histories of arrival,” particularly the raced, gendered, and sexualized backgrounds that put some bodies in touch and others out of touch, that bring some bodies into view and shift others out of view. If Ahmed’s queer phenomenology suggests that bodies, as love objects, might be rethought as (the histories of) things that are or are not within reach, and if, as I have just
suggested, the visibility of queer love objects might be inversely proportional to their proximity to straightness such that the nearer the queer love object is to the straight line the more invisible it necessarily becomes due to the paradoxical straight need for queers to be here and to not be here, then what does it mean for Vivaldo to be sexually oriented? What does his “successful” reaching out to Eric mean about how their histories, according to Baldwin, can intertwine? What does Vivaldo’s failure to reach out to and touch Rufus mean? What objects are reachable for Vivaldo, and why?

Conveniently, Baldwin gives us a handy locus of comparison, the bed. Recall that Vivaldo shelters Rufus in his bed one night but that he cannot reach across the quarter of an inch between them to hold Rufus and “only love” him. Faced with Rufus’s back, Vivaldo is confronted with a bodily horizon, an edge that operates as an absolute limit. We can now understand Vivaldo’s inability to love (and potentially have sex with) Rufus as a function of his straight white male orientation: he is oriented in such a way—which is to say, his tendencies toward certain objects have accumulated in such a way—as to make impossible the extension of himself into space that would result in the breach of the distance between himself and Rufus. In this scene, Vivaldo arrives, once again, in the space of white male heterosexuality, making him unable to reach across what would seem to be an utterly penetrable divide. How, and in such a small bed indeed, could he not hold Rufus? As I have suggested, Baldwin turns to Ida and Eric to explore this question along racial and sexual lines, respectively.

The question now becomes, in the next bed, Eric’s bed, does Vivaldo’s sexual orientation change? If we take sexual orientation as a matter of phenomenology, it does not. Rather, the gay man’s bed in Another Country (and wider culture) becomes one more of those spaces oriented around the straight body that allows that body to extend straight into space. Heterosexual orientation can require that gay objects be placed precisely in straight paths and that gay objects are made available anything but casually or randomly. In Another Country, straight people encounter gay men’s bodies on purpose, intersecting the “history of the coming to speech of gay people” and interrupting the processes by which gay men “reformulate” themselves. Instead of a queer realignment or an act of what Ahmed characterizes as queer slipping away, the “plot point” at which Vivaldo closes the space between himself and Eric actually re-establishes the impression of the straight line. Thanks to his straight orientation (the ways he extends into space vis-à-vis other bodies), Vivaldo does not give up the possibility of sex with
non-heterosexual love objects, as heterosexuality would seem to require; in fact, his orientation constructs and insists on that possibility. Further, it is through this straight demand, rather than in spite of it, that Vivaldo enacts the impossibility of him ever mistaking himself for the gay man with whom he has sex.

That Eric's journey as a gay man has prepared him for this moment in which he can love, by serving the needs of, the straight man would be disturbing enough alone. Synthesizing Eribon's and Ahmed's arguments, we might even say that Eric's own bed becomes, in this moment, a place of pure phenomenological gay insult, the ultimate heteronormative straight space. Even more troubling, though, Eric's insulting exchange is masked by the transformative, healing power of his love, gay love thus dissolving into universal love that anyone, gay or straight, can experience. The value that Baldwin held so dear, love, thus erases the history of the gay individual—especially the black gay man, as I will demonstrate shortly—who bears the burden of revelation in the novel. Only by forgetting that gay love has a history (of subjectification as well as spatial orientation) can the affair between Vivaldo and Eric in Another Country become purely symbolic, “a metaphorical rendering of Vivaldo's transcendence beyond a categorical approach to identity.”

This move—from the literal (contextual, historical, experientially informed) enactment of male-male sexual love to the symbolic ( ahistorical, “queer”) representation of transcendent love—places the loving homosexual in a dangerous position. When male-male sexual love becomes the switch point for liberal humanist visions of social progress, attention to the motives and emotions of the homosexual man recedes and is replaced with a focus on the straight man's liberation. Rather than reading Eric in terms of his strategic role as a revelation figure who offers other characters “a different way to live and love,” we might, instead, read him in the way that seemed obvious in reading Rufus, as an object of symbolic exchange. If, as Terry Rowden has suggested, Rufus actually represents not black men but, rather, “the kind of black male that Baldwin needs to serve his ideological purposes,” Eric can and should be read with the same critical distance. Just as America trades on the life of gay and straight black men in the novel, the novel trades on/in the sexual love of black and white gay men. The wants and the needs of the gay man, left behind in the search for a more universal (now seen to be heteronormative) love, must be taken into account.

If Another Country encourages the reader to forget that gay love has a past, it also prohibits the possibility that gay love has a future.
sion astonishing in its undisguised manipulation of the gay man, Vivaldo makes clear that Eric's love can never be enacted again and, impossibly, that it also must be given endlessly and forever. Immediately after sex, Vivaldo warns Eric, "It may never happen again." He later admits, "I'm sort of hiding in your bed now, hiding even in your arms maybe. . . . But I don't, really, dig you the way I guess you must dig me. You know? . . . So what can we really do for each other except—just love each other and be each other's witness?" (395-96). While, as a queer scholar, I find compelling Robert Reid-Pharr's idea, raised in a different context, that "the transcendent is not fixed but always fleeting, even peculiar,"53 I find it peculiar beyond all patience that Vivaldo would at once flee from this moment while simultaneously demanding Eric's lifelong devotion: "I want you to love me all my life" (397). Thus recruited into a bizarre witness protection program, the gay man is integral, needed, yet hidden away as an ever-absent presence for straight male orientation. In this version of love, Vivaldo has his cake and eats it too, while starving Eric gets the cavity.

Although Vivaldo provides the primary test case for sexual and racial exploration in the novel, Eric's revelatory sexual power extends to less central characters as well. Dievler humorously writes, "In the simple sense that he sleeps with almost all the other characters in the novel, Eric is a significant character."54 Excepting Rufus for the moment, Eric has sex not only with Vivaldo and Yves55 but also with Cass Silenski, mother of two and disenchanted wife of author Richard Salinski, another of the novel's prostitutes, who has sold out his dream of writing important fiction in order to produce valueless but lucrative mystery novels. But if sexual flux affords characters insight into other conflicts within their lives (primarily racial, but, in Cass's case, also gendered) the terms of these sexual explorations for the individuals involved vary dramatically.

The heteronormative uses to which homosexuality is put are blatantly revealed in Eric and Cass's affair, "an encounter [that] almost parodically dramatizes an oedipal model of heterosexual desire."56 When Cass realizes she has no faith in or respect for her husband's writing, she looks to Eric to make her feel something real, something authentic. She says to Eric, after she confesses to her husband and ends the affair, "That was you you gave me for a little while. It was really you" (407). A sexual relationship with a gay man (infantilized though he is) is meant to show the importance of freeing desire from the constraints of convention and makes Cass feel once more like a "real" woman. But again, why does she need Eric? Why does she not,
for instance, become a writer herself (like one of the women writers with whom Baldwin was familiar) as part of her search for authenticity? Because Eric’s centrality to his friends’ liberation—mirrored by his centrality to a scene from his latest movie in which his character operates as a force of calm, magnetic gravity in an uproarious sea of friends at a café—requires that they encounter and literally move through him. Cass’s character is therefore sacrificed by the narrative of her own (gay-inspired) liberation. The depth that Rufus had earlier seen in her, his sense that “she knew things he had never imagined a girl like Cass could know” (78), goes unexplored, her own promise unfulfilled. Like Vivaldo’s affair with Eric, Cass’s brush with “authenticity” rings of heteronormative sexual tourism. She returns to her husband, Richard, who she knows will not sue for divorce, because he “hasn’t got the courage to name [Eric] as correspondent” (407). The homosexual thus secures the heterosexual relationship in two ways: Cass has had the “real” experience she wanted and can now more honestly relate to her husband, and Richard, who cannot face the public shame of admitting to having been cuckolded by a gay man, is powerless to seek a divorce. Although Eric has less to lose in his affair with Cass, for “he had never loved her” (404), Cass, not Eric, ends the relationship. Sexual exploration with a gay man is short lived. Cass, like Vivaldo, quickly reasserts her heterosexuality, never doubting the transitory nature of her “queer” sexual encounters with Eric.

By forging a theory of healing love on the gay man’s body, Baldwin both prescribes (rather than destabilizes) homosexual identity and simultaneously erases it through straight people’s heteronormative return to race and gender matters. A further paradox emerges in the relationship between homosexuality and male-male sex in the novel: as Baldwin makes clear through other instances of prostitution, male-male sex acts are not particular to homosexuality—sodomy is not represented as an exclusively gay sex act—yet it is precisely and exclusively through male-male sex that the homosexual bestows his revelation. Male-male sex is therefore not gay yet also quintessentially gay. The act bespeaks an absence of sexual labels that depends, ironically, on the abundant homosexual experience that facilitates the discovery of a suddenly universalizable love. If we focus on this end, we can certainly argue that Baldwin advocates “a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call ‘postsexuality,’” achieved through “sex that is itself taking place beyond the socially constructed senses of sexuality that have dominated the twentieth century.”57 But the specific means by which Baldwin accomplishes this deconstruction of sexuality exact very
different prices from straight and gay “lovers,” the price of gay love—one is tempted to say real gay love—itself.

The boldly assimilationist sexual project of Another Country, like less dramatic efforts at the assimilation of homosexuals, thus ultimately participates in what Leo Bersani has called the “de-gaying” process underway on a variety of fronts. This is so not simply because any man might have sex with any other man in the world of the novel (“gay sex” loses meaning) but because any man might share something much more intimate: gay male love. Gay love is constitutive of homosexual identity in the novel yet is also always under erasure, given up as a gift to the needy straight man who has not learned to love men on his own. In this way, Eric is made to be gay—same-sex desire being the root of his revelatory intersubjectivity—even while he is divested of the interiority that Bersani identifies as a crucial “breeding ground” for “redrawing [one’s] own [gay] boundaries” and thus resisting being made the target of America’s homophobic need for both the homosexual’s presence and his annihilation.58

**CONCLUSION: IMPOSSIBLE STORIES**

I have taken a largely critical view of Baldwin’s compromise, this “gay trade” by which the gay man serves as plot device and point of exchange for heterosexual liberation and is thus made to appear salvational. I have therefore fallen in line with a critic who once said, “James Baldwin’s novel Another Country has, as the cliché says, something for everyone—in this instance, something offensive for everyone.” But what were Baldwin’s options? The notion that a heterosexual might need a homosexual represented a radical idea in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Baldwin was writing Another Country. Outside the capitalist niches of personal style and home decor, it is a radical idea still today. Compared to other notable works of fiction dealing with relationships between gay and straight males, Another Country breaks new ground by reversing the theme of the gay man’s obsession with and rejection by the straight man. I intend to offer here, then, less a damning critique of Baldwin than a new strategy for examining the “radical” or “revolutionary” role of the gay man in Baldwin’s novel.

Is there not, underlying Baldwin’s overlapping fantasies of sexual and racial cohesion, a deeper conflict, a more complicated version of the tension with which this chapter began? As the homosexual helps to make the white
man’s reconciliation with the black man possible, are raced masculinity and homosexuality envisioned so that one exists at the price of the other? If the black man is sacrificed to white America, must the homosexual and homosexuality be symbolically sacrificed in order to repay the white man’s debt? And is there not a more fundamental sacrifice—that of the black gay man?

The black gay man becomes extinct, an impossibility in the novel. We catch a brief glimpse of his vanishing figure in LeRoy, Eric’s childhood friend who emerges refigured as Rufus, having fully learned the impossibility of his black gay existence. But the black gay man has been sacrificed in his youth. To call Rufus a black gay man may be true in some essentialist way, but the reader can never really know, given the warped creature Baldwin gives us in the grown man Rufus. By that point, Rufus’s desire, his social status, his very meaning has been overwritten by the American “race problem.” Just as we cannot know Joe Christmas’s racial identity in Faulkner’s Light in August, we cannot know Rufus’s sexual identity; and just as the former’s race status is obscured by sexual indecipherability in the text, the latter’s sexual status is obfuscated by the powerful meaning of his race. A great tragedy of the novel is that if Rufus is gay, we cannot know it, because he is made to be so symbolically black. Rufus’s race dramatically overdetermines the texture of his social relations so that even his sexual relationship with Eric fails to mark him as gay. “[B]ecause it is Rufus’s status as a black man and not his sexual identity, whatever it may be, that makes him essentially unacceptable and places him outside of the positive community that Baldwin is conceptualizing in Another Country,” argues Rowden, “whether Rufus can best be coded as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual is finally unimportant.” Rowden thereby suggests that the more central problem of the novel is “how ambivalent was Baldwin’s relationship not only to the sexuality of the black man, but to the simple fact of the existence of black men in society.”

When Leeming calls Rufus “an instrument of history” who “is too broken to accept love or to give it,” we see that perhaps Rufus functions more like Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native Son than Baldwin would have liked to admit. Feeling emasculated by whiteness, Rufus seeks to bolster his threatened black manhood by exerting sexual power over a white person, subordinating considerations of sexuality to raced masculinity. Although Rufus “had despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity,” he does not so much punish him for his homosexuality as for his whiteness, for, thinking of his ex-girlfriend, Leo-
James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination

na, he recognizes that “Leona had not been a deformity. And he had used against her the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way” (46). Sedgwick contributes to an understanding of the complicated relationships expressed here when she observes that “a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systematically with each other. . . . [A] person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may by the same positioning be enabled through others.”

With the black gay man an impossibility, Rufus defaults, at least in relation to Vivaldo, to straight. Consequently, the absent but structurally integral story created by the failure of Vivaldo and Rufus to consummate their straight relationship through sex, counterintuitive as that sounds, represents the void Vivaldo attempts to fill through sex with Eric. Indeed, (white) straight-gay male sex tries to reproduce or mimic the abstraction that is straight black-white male sex in the novel. The (white) gay man, in this scenario, must be gay in order for the sex to happen in the first place, but he must also occupy the role of the absent (black) straight man for the union to come to full fruition and meet its true mark. Incredibly, the gay man is forced into an imitation of straightness, a coercion reminiscent of the closet, through sex with a straight man.

Cleaver’s accusation that Another Country reflects Baldwin’s racial death wish as a black man now seems not only homophobic but exactly backward. The man that Baldwin fantasizes and perhaps theorizes in Another Country, the man he has the most urgent hopes for, is not a “white bisexual homosexual,” as Cleaver would have it, but a white heterosexual, as Baldwin would have it—that is, as the kind of straight man Baldwin wishes him to be. Though I have already argued, in chapter 1 of this study, that Baldwin does not write strictly autobiographically, Leeming, Baldwin’s cherished friend, observed that Baldwin “was drawn not to other homosexuals but to men who were sometimes willing to act homosexually, temporarily, in response to a need for money and shelter or to what can only be called his personal magnetism and persuasiveness. The nature and length of the given relationship always depended on how much the lover resented or was psychologically unnerved by playing a homosexual role or by being controlled by that magnetism.”

What Baldwin wishes Vivaldo to be can therefore be linked to the author’s own erotic investment, returned yet not fully returned, in Lucien Happersberger, who was, according to Baldwin, “the love of my life.” Yet in Another Country, Baldwin does not want Vivaldo for Eric as he wanted Lucien for himself. The erotic attentions of the white straight
man, routed through the homosexual, have another object as their aim. To adapt David Gerstner’s term, Vivaldo is a more complex figure of Baldwin’s “white seduction” than if he were merely a stand-in for Happersberger. Gerstner’s primary concern is the way that “the cinematic” is deployed as a process of aesthetic negotiation by queer black artists responding to the seductions of queer white culture. The inventive result for these artists, Baldwin among them, was an “erotic commingling” or “[q]ueer pollination of artificial boundaries” such as black/white and gay/straight so as to “giv[e] fresh life to the relations between black men.”65 Ultimately for Gerstner, “[i]f black culture is seduced by the white order of things in Baldwin’s work, it is so to the extent that their relationship is persistently destabilized—at once turned inside-out and then outside-in again. It is re/disfigured.”66 As seduced by white culture as Baldwin undeniably (and, à la Gerstner, productively) was, the fascinating seduction he dares to—but cannot fully—imagine in Another Country is between white and black straight men. Working outward from the novel, we see that in Baldwin’s queer imaginary, straight white men (distilled into Vivaldo) must seduce and be seduced by the straight black Cleaver, not the gay black Baldwin.

For is straight male-male sex between black and white men not what Baldwin is really after here? But how to have these men come together lovingly, sexually, in a revelatory experience, without one of them being gay? That story seems to be nowhere in modern literature. This absent story becomes, for Baldwin, a—perhaps the—question of race. But the goal of racial union is not compelling enough, in a racist, sexist, heteronormative society, to legitimate sex between straight black and white men. Re-shaped as all the other relationships and identities in the novel may be, that relationship is never “re/disfigured.” So Baldwin’s novel insists—indeed, must insist—that a gay man occupy one of the straight male positions as men come together to work toward racial union. To put it another way, the gay man takes the pressure off of the straight men, who would otherwise be forced to come together, lovingly, on their own. Of course, they do not, and even in the Baldwin’s brilliant queer imagination, they cannot. Straight male-male sexual love remains an abstraction, unformulated, queerer than it is possible to say.67 Baldwin thus makes a virtue of necessity: the plot cannot work without the tumbler that falls into place like the missing piece of Vivaldo’s novel—the accessible gay white male body. So, very much in LeRoy’s absence, Eric becomes the hero.

Had Rufus and Vivaldo come together, perhaps Baldwin would have
identified a more liberatory sexual act. Perhaps, too, Baldwin's vision of pro-
iferating sexual possibilities might seem more believable, and his characters
might seem truly free of sexual categories. But the failure of straight men to
have sex with each other indicates an underlying immobility in the novel, a
heternormative stasis in which women and black/gay men are prostituted,
the first explicitly and the last implicitly, to the straight white man, who is
therefore ever more securely positioned, for all of his sexual and racial ex-
perimentation, in the seat of privilege.