ALL THOSE STRANGERS

The Art and Lives of JAMES BALDWIN

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Douglas Field

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All Those Strangers

For Sonny, a budding poet and disturber of the peace

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Introduction

. . . all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin. . . . There's the older brother with all the egotism and rigidity that implies. . . . Then there's the self-pitying little boy. . . . There's a man. There's a woman, too. There are lots of people here.

—EVE AUCHINCLOSS AND NANCY LYNCH, "DISTURBER OF THE PEACE: JAMES BALDWIN—AN INTERVIEW"

Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

—WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF"

I want to begin by speculating, not on Baldwin's reputation as seen by literary critics, but to consider him from another country outside the boundaries of academia. It is, of course, difficult to gauge how readers respond to a writer and the very notion immediately introduces a tumbling set of questions: What kind of reader? From which country? From which racial, economic, or cultural background? I would like, though, to leave my questions dangling in their rhetorical wilderness and suggest, quite simply, that there is something remarkable about Baldwin's life and work—something more than charisma—that continues to draw readers from inside and outside of the academy. Readers of Baldwin often have more affection for his life and work than those reading the works of Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, two writers with whom he is frequently grouped. On a simple level, given the choice, most people would rather spend an evening carousing with Baldwin than a more formal and cerebral evening with Wright or Ellison. As I have traveled, researching this book, I have been struck by the varied responses to Baldwin in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. Teachers tend to sigh with envy at the thought of working on Baldwin; many include at least an essay or novel of

his in their American literature courses, often wishing they could do more. Students are often drawn to his penetrating but comprehensible prose, and those lucky enough to read for pleasure (or instruction) often marvel at his searing and impassioned writing. Baldwin, for many readers, is the voice of the civil rights movement, the angry and eloquent voice of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), a writer who came of age in step with the dawn of televisual culture. Frequently cited as an inspiration to queer writers and readers both black and white, Baldwin is correctly lauded for being one of the first "out" African American authors. His work, which grapples with a number of difficult twentieth-century concerns, including those of race, sexuality, religion, and displacement, may indeed, as the Irish writer Colm Tóibín puts it, "fit whatever category each reader requires."[1]

Taking heed of the author's own description of himself as "all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin," this book looks not at a fixed notion or reading of James Baldwin, but instead at the shifting and developing James Baldwins from the 1940s to the 1980s. In so doing, it avoids reducing the author and his work to one or other critical idea; it aims to exceed rote, institutionalized parameters by reading Baldwin's work in relation to several key contexts. Its structure, therefore, is not chronological or sequential, but selective and exploratory and the book makes no claim to be a conventional biography, though it necessarily covers cultural context and important events in Baldwin's life, along with his work.

While I engage with a range of Baldwin's well-known and neglected works, I have honed in on certain aspects of his more troubling texts, in particular *Giovanni's Room* (1956), a novel that is not generally held up as representative of the author's work. As we will see, Baldwin's second novel is not only a groundbreaking account of male homosexuality but also an acute reflection on racial anxieties during the Cold War. When viewed through more recent theories of transnationalism and the Black Atlantic, *Giovanni's Room* emerges as a prescient meditation on home, exile, and nationality, rather than a work that sits uncomfortably on African American literature syllabi because there are ostensibly no black characters. For the purposes of this book, the illegitimate status of Baldwin's second novel—one penned by an African American, but not overtly about black Americans—serves to highlight the ways in which racial authenticity is frequently canonized to the detriment of texts, like *Giovanni's Room*, which do not ostensibly demonstrate this quality. While the novel is held up as a pioneering work of homosexual literature, Baldwin disavowed this interpretation, claiming it was about love. Ultimately, the precarious status of the novel reflects and refracts Baldwin's own position as an author in the ways that he repeatedly thwarts critical expectations.

This book also focuses on Baldwin's fiction and nonfiction to show how his work responds to and shapes important changes in American culture from the 1950s to the 1980s. As one critic astutely points out in relation to Baldwin's

essays—to which I would add his fiction—it was arguably the case that "the political climate changed, not necessarily Baldwin's essays."[2] The purpose of the present book is threefold. First, it hopes to shed light on some under-researched areas in Baldwin's life and work, such as his life on the Left, his FBI files, and his relationships to Africa, and the civil rights and Black Arts Movements. Second, it contributes toward a broader understanding of some key twentieth-century themes, including the Cold War, African American literary history, religion, spirituality, and transnationalism. Finally, it shows that Baldwin's ideas and writing—like those of most writers—were often in flux. It is, therefore, crucial to distinguish between his early reviews of other writers' work in the *New Leader* and *Commentary* in the 1940s and his more experienced writing after the mid-1960s. It is only by paying attention to Baldwin's developing rather than fixed views, his ideological shuffles and even his outright contradictions, that his large body of writing begins to cohere.

Here, it might be useful to illustrate the book's main concerns by looking at some of the controversies and paradoxes surrounding Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country* (1962), a work that shaped his literary reputation but one commonly seen as his last accomplished novel. In his recollections of its writing, Baldwin recalls both how the novel "almost *killed*" him and "made him feel as if he were giving birth following a long-term pregnancy."[3] *Another Country* represents something of a crossroads, not only in Baldwin's career but also in the political and sexual landscape of mid-twentieth-century United States. The novel was a searing indictment of liberal midcentury New York City, written by a man who had left the United States nearly fifteen years before. As Magdalena Zaborowska, author of *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade*, has suggested, though a quintessentially New York novel, *Another Country* "articulated a turning point in Baldwin's views on race and sexuality in a transnational context."[4] For Baldwin, America is increasingly the "other country," a place that he needed to leave in order to write about it.

Spending several weeks on the *New York Times*' bestseller list, *Another Country* catapulted Baldwin into the league of major writers. Despite the novel's commercial success, however, critics were divided, with the New York literati in particular dismissing the novel outright. In many accounts of Baldwin's literary odyssey, *Another Country* is a turning point where the tight modernist control of his first novel (and to a certain extent of *Giovanni's Room*) became unanchored, ending with the commonly perceived narrative bagginess and self-indulgence of his remaining three novels. Although Baldwin recollected that his third novel "saved his life as a writer," the damning critical assessments suggest that the author, like the character of the tormented saxophonist in *Another Country*, "had received the blow from which he never would recover."[5] Augusta Strong, reviewing it in *Freedomways*, a leading African American political and cultural journal of the 1960s, concluded that *Another Country* was "a novel that those who have admired his

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earlier work must find bafflingly inexpert and disappointing."[6] Even as sales soared, Irving Howe declared with authoritative gravitas that "Baldwin's future as a novelist is decidedly uncertain."[7]

The disparity between the critical reception and the sales suggest the ways that Baldwin's work, even from the early 1960s, unsettled literary critics who struggled to place him—and then berated him for it. For the Jamaican-born civil rights activist Michael Thelwell, Baldwin's third novel was met "with some of the most fatuous, inept, and at times downright dishonest criticism" that he had seen, a view shared by Norman Podhoretz, the former editor of *Commentary*, who noted that readers "were repelled by the militancy and the cruelty of its vision of life."[8] Podhoretz, who was writing as a liberal before he re-emerged as a neoconservative, claimed that Baldwin, in fact, achieves "a totally new, totally revolutionary conception of the universe."[9] According to Thelwell, *Another Country* deeply unsettled its white reviewers because "no previous novel by a Negro has ever appropriated this function [writing about white consciousness] so completely, probingly, and relentlessly."[10] Thelwell concludes that "the [white] reviewers were just not prepared to have their class prerogative of defining and interpreting the dynamics of their own social experience assumed by this black man from Harlem."[11]

For Thelwell and Podhoretz, Baldwin's third novel was revolutionary in the way that it looked anew at the racial and political landscape of the United States and this innovative approach was something that preoccupied the author. In "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," an article published in the *New York Times Books Review* the same year as *Another Country*, Baldwin rejected the white male literary canon of American letters (singling out Faulkner, Eliot, and Hemingway), urging young writers to break away. "[T]he air of this time and place is so heavy with rhetoric, so thick with soothing lies," Baldwin wrote, "that one must really do great violence to language, one must somehow disrupt the comforting beat, in order to be heard."[12] In a *Transatlantic Review* interview with John Hall, Baldwin pointed out that "[a] lot of people in that book [*Another Country*] had never appeared in fiction before," adding that there were "no antecedents" for his protagonist, Rufus Scott, a musician whose downfall drives the novel.[13]

Baldwin's novel was revolutionary in another way, suggested by the short story writer Eugenia W. Collier's conclusion that it provides "as the cliché says, something for everyone—in this instance, something offensive for everyone."[14] Many reviewers, including the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, were simply appalled at the graphic descriptions of sex—and particularly interracial sex. Augusta Strong wrote that *Another Country* "begins and ends in an animal comprehension of sex," a curiously vague comment that fails to pick up on the emotional force of Baldwin's descriptions of sexual encounters. Stanley Hyman, then-critic for the left-leaning journal the *New Leader*, even suggested that Baldwin had made the sex scenes graphic to help sell the book,

concluding with the "hope that the hundreds of thousands who read it as pornography will profit from the Negro bitterness and fury to which they are incidentally exposed."[15] In one of the most damning and well-known indictments of the novel, the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver described the novel's protagonist, Rufus Scott, as "a pathetic wretch . . . who let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in the ass . . . [and] was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man."[16]

Baldwin's emphasis on sex, and in particular his depiction of Eric, the novel's "white Southern bisexual" character, might instead be seen as a radical rewriting (or re-Wrighting) of earlier themes in African American literature. Eric, the reader learns, owns a copy of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*, and his first homoerotic encounter occurs with an African American servant who tends the furnace. In contrast to *Another Country*, where the furnace is associated with desire, in Wright's novel, it is the place where Bigger tries to dispose of Mary Dalton's body. By transforming the furnace from a site of heterosexuality and violence into a site of homosexual love, Baldwin offers an alternative vision to Wright's novel, suggesting, as he wrote in relation to *Native Son*, that there is "a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence."[17]

Although Baldwin claimed that his aim in *Another Country* was "to show how a difference in skin color between two lovers could corrupt everything, even the most sincere and intimate feelings," most critics objected to his coupling of love and racial politics.[18] The *New York Times* complained in its 1962 review that "[l]ove does not lead to community, procreation, productive collaboration, character change, or even personal security."[19] Echoing Goodman, the poet Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) stated that the phrase "'[p]eople should love each other,' . . . has very little meaning to the world at large."[20] Lest such criticism be attributed to the fervor of an inflamed political era, later critics have also puzzled over Baldwin's faith in the power of love. At the end of the 1990s, one critic wrote: "By 1962 . . . in the face of increased black activism and demands for civil rights, it would have seemed disingenuous for Baldwin to claim that individual love could conquer racial discord."[21] Baldwin's despairing accounts of relationships between black and white—Rufus and Vivaldo, Rufus and Leona, and Rufus and Ida—suggest, on the contrary, that love, as he made explicit in his next novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) was "not enough" to deal with racism.

The above criticism, though, does point to the surprising, even troubling absence of a political framework in *Another Country*. Cleaver castigated Baldwin for abdicating his social responsibility, writing that Baldwin's third novel was "void of a political, economic, or even a social reference," a view shared by the *New York Times*, who complained that there was no discussion of political action or any solution to the problems raised.[22] Baldwin based Rufus on

his friend, Eugene Worth, who committed suicide, like Rufus, by hurling himself off the George Washington Bridge. Worth encouraged Baldwin to become a member of the Young People's Socialist League, briefly lighting his leftist political torch. And yet if Eugene was the model or inspiration for Rufus, then why is there no mention of the political Left?[23]

The reasons for the disparate critical views of *Another Country* are in part illuminated by a closer look at the historical and political time frame of the novel, as well as Baldwin's developing political views. Some would argue that white liberalism had reached its peak in the 1960s, which, by implication, might explain many white reviewers' discomfort with Baldwin's relentless attack on their ideological position, a connection that Michael Thelwell explicitly makes.[24] By the late 1960s, Baldwin's declaration from a decade earlier that "[n]o one in the world . . . knows Americans better, or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro," enraged black militants, even though Baldwin had amended his message of love in his 1963 essay, *The Fire Next Time*, to include consciousness raising.[25] By 1972, Baldwin had fueled his prose with borrowed rhetoric from the Black Power movement.

A more straightforward explanation to the confusion and unenthusiastic critical reaction generated by *Another Country* may in fact be attributed to the argument that the novel—conceived, written, and set in the 1950s—belongs to the political and social sways of that decade, which bore witness to the birth of the civil rights movement.[26] As one critic points out, "[t]he climate of the late fifties in which Baldwin's novel was set offered little possibility for social revolution, leaving Rufus with only the self-destructive path of individual rebellion."[27] Baldwin's novel can be read less as a timely social comment on emerging civil rights tensions that came to the fore in the 1960s, but more as a reply to prominent critics such as Lionel Trilling, who insisted in the late 1940s that racial matters were subordinate to class as a focus for the novelist.[28]

Yet, despite such potentially clarifying claims, *Another Country* remains a puzzling and enigmatic work. If, as Baldwin stated, Rufus is "the black corpse floating in the national psyche," why is the black community largely absent from the novel? And why is the only developed African American male character, Rufus Scott, killed off in the first fifth of the novel? Why, then, is "the figure for Baldwin's self-representation—the gay black man—so determinedly written out of the work that, he insisted, he "*had* to write?"[29] If white liberalism can offer no answer to "the racial nightmare," what suggestions does Baldwin give?[30] How is the reader to reconcile Baldwin's views that there is an impasse between black and white, that they can never understand one another, with Ida's insistence, as an African American woman, that "you've got to *know*, you've got to know what's happening?"[31] Is Baldwin toeing a liberal humanistic line—that the suffering of any person is really

universal—or he is suggesting instead that there are irreconcilable differences between black and white?

The contradictions and paradoxes surrounding *Another Country* suggest the ways in which Baldwin was frequently called upon not only to "bear witness," as he termed it, but to represent and stand for one or other movement. Although his work may indeed, as Tóibín suggests, fit whatever category each reader requires, by the late 1960s, Baldwin was only too aware of the perception that he was "an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak."[32] As Baldwin repeatedly stated in interviews, he was not a spokesman for the civil rights movement. At the same time, Baldwin lived in turbulent political times and was only too aware that an artist, as he put it, "has always been a disturber of the peace."[33] As *Another Country*'s reception illustrates, Baldwin's work is frequently contradictory and often inflammatory; he is a writer who confounds and therefore remains both reflective of his turbulent age and relevant well beyond it.

Baldwin lived long enough to acknowledge that his work left him open to "a vast amount of misunderstanding."[34] Born James Jones in Harlem in the year 1924, Baldwin took his first steps as the Harlem Renaissance gathered momentum and grew up during the Depression, dying sixty-three years later in the south of France midway through Ronald Reagan's second term in office. An inveterate traveler who lived in the United States, France, and Turkey, Baldwin's work traversed disciplines and scaled genres, uncontained, it seems, like the writer himself, by conventional boundaries and categories. Baldwin's writing demands a new kind of critical reading: not only one in step with the political, cultural, and literary developments that his work inhabits but also one that recognizes the harmony of paradox and contradiction—to "recreate," as Baldwin wrote early in his career, "out of the disorder of life that order which is art."[35]

In Baldwin's work the writer refuses to stay still: dancing in and out of frame—or in and out of focus—as scholars point their critical lens, searching for "the flash of cinematic revelation."[36] For others, the writer "seems . . . to always slip the yoke of his various identities, some self-imposed, others not."[37] There is, of course, a danger of celebrating or even fetishizing ambiguity in Baldwin's work, not least because of the writer's repeated references to his life and work as indescribable or irreducible. Frequently, Baldwin describes his life and work in aphoristic riddles, writing, for example, that he conceived of his "life as a journey toward something I do not understand."[38] I want to make it clear, however, that the paradoxical moments in Baldwin's work are also shot through with coherence; that his call to individual experience and morality demands belief in "one's own moral center." Baldwin's writing sustains a number of distinguishing characteristics, as well as paradoxes and riddles, often riffing on familiar themes. In his first collection

of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin declared that "[a]ll theories are suspect," adding that "one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright."[39]

For Baldwin, who later wrote that it was "impossible to indoctrinate" him, theories were inadequate because they failed to capture the complexity of life.[40] Baldwin's repeated repudiation of theories, labels, and identity categories presents a major challenge to literary critics and cultural historians who strive to place his work within a critical narrative.[41] As the introduction to a 2011 volume on Baldwin makes clear, "[f]or too long one Baldwin has been pitted against another Baldwin, producing a series of polarities that has skewed our understanding: his art against his politics; his fiction against his nonfiction; his early writings against his late writings; American Baldwin against European Baldwin; black Baldwin against queer Baldwin."[42] Criticism has tended to focus on Baldwin as either black or gay, essayist or novelist, religious writer or fierce critic of the church in ways that often say as much about the contemporary critical climate as they do about Baldwin.[43]

Despite recent strides in the study of Baldwin's work, it resembles, as Quentin Miller puts it, "a half-finished jigsaw puzzle rather than a complete portrait."[44] One particular example is Baldwin's shifting relationship to religion and the church, which has divided literary critics, who claim variously that the author was secular or preoccupied with religion. A close examination of Baldwin's views on religion and spirituality—and in particular his Pentecostal past—reveals his developing views on religion rather than a mere set of surprising conundrums. To borrow from Whitman, Baldwin contained multitudes that often seem to contradict one another. If, as Baldwin wrote early in his career, America is a "country devoted to the death of the paradox," then it seems, too, that literary criticism has a tendency to skirt round, rather than confront the contradictions in the writer's work.[45] A similar denial of paradox lies in much of the early criticism that examines Baldwin as a black queer writer. These approaches mirror the ways the author was repeatedly sidelined by black activists on account of his sexuality and there have been some remarkable and sometimes unexpected silences about his sexuality. That said, some recent scholarship has dismantled earlier, more simplistic criticism that tended to view Baldwin's sexual and racial identities as somehow mutually exclusive—or at least unconnected.[46] And yet the elephant in the room of less sophisticated readings of Baldwin as a queer writer is his repeated disavowals of the terms "gay" and "homosexual," as well as his unflattering, at times offensive, descriptions of "effeminate" homosexuals. As a fierce critic of identity categories, it is unlikely that Baldwin himself would have taken to the term "black queer."[47]

Although Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, is frequently taught as a pioneering text of homosexual American literature, little criticism points to its more uncomfortable portrayals of male homosexuality, in particular, its portrait of a transvestite character, a figure who blurs the distinctions between masculine and feminine, salvation and damnation:

> It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death. . . . It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a horrifying lasciviousness. . . . The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix . . . and made one feel that the mummy might, at any moment, disappear in flame.[48]

In Baldwin's description of the transvestite, the figure is terrifying because s/he cannot be located. Here, as elsewhere, Baldwin's writing troubles the critical romance of "fluid" identity: liminality or undecidability for the writer is rarely celebrated. The transvestite is a paradox: neither wholly female nor male, a figure who for David, the novel's protagonist, is both mesmerizing and repulsive. As Baldwin's writing reminds us, association with one identity category or other, such as black or homosexual, does not preclude a spectrum of reactions, attitudes, and seemingly contradictory responses.[49] To suggest otherwise is to limit the complexity that Baldwin's writing embraces—even, and indeed especially—when it makes for uncomfortable reading.[50]

Baldwin's discussions of masculinity are another case in point. Although he provided welcome relief from the aggressively heterosexual black masculinity championed by the likes of Eldridge Cleaver in the 1960s, Baldwin's views on black manhood were not static. In fact, as David Ikard has noted in his study of gender and African American culture, Baldwin seems at times caught in the crossfire between Cleaver and critics who question the author's treatment of women: "Whereas Cleaver condemns Baldwin for misrepresenting black men, [Trudier] Harris [in *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*] attacks him precisely for his uncritical view of black womanhood," particularly in the way that his female characters depend on men to assert their female identity.[51] Ikard is right to call attention to Baldwin's precarious position. In a conversation with the poet Nikki Giovanni, published in 1973 as *A Dialogue*, Baldwin's responses underscore his complicated position as an elder statesman, illustrated by his numerous references to "your generation" in conversation with the younger poet. At times, Baldwin seems to reproduce the very masculinist rhetoric he was once famous for critiquing: "Your manhood is being slowly destroyed hour by hour, day by day," Baldwin tells the poet, addressing Giovanni as "sweetheart."[52] As the conversation becomes charged, Baldwin seems challenged by Giovanni's position as a radical

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