



“A SPEECH OF SUFFERING”: JAMES BALDWIN'S LITERACY CHALLENGE TO BLACK NATIONALISM

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Building the Revolutionary Black Man

Construction of a collective identity is an intrinsic component of all collective action. Protest groups rely on this principle for communal strength, support, and survival (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007). But the bounds of a common identity often preclude individuality to the point of destruction. In 20th century America, the singular male identity of the Black nationalist movement suppressed unique, queer perspectives into obscurity; ultimately characterizing the revolutionary Black man as an ideal, rather than a veritable brother. James Baldwin echoed in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that the “failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power [...]” (p.23). This critique, as political as it is literary, highlights the fundamental flaw of 20th century Black nationalism: Black futures designed with colonial imagery and its impossible identities cannot survive. In his own fiction, Baldwin seeks a realist alternative. His literary exploration of Black male homosexuality through the tragic romances of his 1962 novel, *Another Country*, exposes the low viability of the Black male ideal.

The charge to redefine the Black male identity was central to the Black nation-

alist movement from its inception, as centuries of dehumanization throughout slavery had shattered Black masculinity as a social concept (Shin & Judson, 1998; Armengol, 2012). Consequently, the language of 20th-century Black resistance often framed liberation with the restoration of manhood and oppression as castration, supporting a sexualized vocabulary of domination which inadvertently aligned Black freedom with white patriarchy (hooks, 2014). As such, the Black Nationalist movement propagated an image of Black American masculinity constructed around hypersexuality, virility, and social authority as evidence of manhood, asserting that the renaissance of Black patriarchy was vital in establishing a balance of power between races (Armengol, 2012). But this framework excludes homosexuality from Blackness altogether. In direct contrast to the dominant view, Baldwin expanded the possibilities of Black liberation and “[...] resisted an uncritical embrace of black nationalism, developing a vision of the homosexual instead as the chief instrument of cultural renovation” (Shin & Judson, 1998). He realized this vision with protagonist Rufus Scott, a Black jazz musician surviving Harlem during the heat of the Civil Rights Movement.

Performing the Revolutionary Black Man

Throughout *Another Country* (1962), Rufus's insecure attachment to the sexual politics of the Black male identity results in endless personal anguish. The novel opens discontinuously with Leona, a white Southern divorcée, as Rufus's first observed paramour. Leona is immediately enticing to Rufus. She provides him with an opportunity to combat his oppression by exerting power over a white person. He confesses this in hindsight: "to remember Leona was also—somehow—to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father [...] the white policeman who taught him how to hate," (p.6). Even his younger sister, Ida, quickly recognizes "You'd never have even looked at that girl, Rufus, if she'd been black. But you'll pick up any white trash just because she's white. What's the matter—you ashamed of being black?" (p.28). Rufus performs the traditional masculinity expected of him and, as a result, the world identifies him as fierce, brash, and charming. He weaponizes this posture to dominate Leona, physically and mentally. He exerts his rage onto his white girlfriend as an attempt to feel power, but he cannot escape history. The inverted dynamic of Rufus and Leona's relationship is incredibly delicate. Despite his position

as the abuser, Rufus feels beneath Leona as a Black man. This insecurity is reinforced by Leona's singular use of the word "boy" early in their relationship:

"Don't call me boy,' he said.
'Well,' she said, looking startled, 'I didn't mean nothing by it, honey'" (p.30).

Concerning this term, Clive Baldwin explains that in the South, the diminutive usage of the term 'boy' infantilised African American men and, in turn, their response was the construction of a new male identity that was synonymous with the dominant expectations of masculinity (2020). Leona's word choice creates a tension visible only to Rufus. With one word, the masculine identity at the root of Rufus's perceived power becomes impugned, and his illusion of control begins to collapse. The inevitable truth is that, as a white woman, Leona holds social power over Rufus. However, while he fervently rejects this subjugation in relation to white women, he readily endures it with men.

The Queer Threat to the Black Male Ideal

Lost in Manhattan, following their breakup, Rufus retrieves his troublesome memories of Leona. He finds himself impoverished and alone in his

hometown. He considers having sex with an unfamiliar white man in exchange for dinner, after commenting that “[...] on a winter night, a boy can be bought for the price of beer and the promise of warm blankets” (p.41). Baldwin’s choice to repeat the term “boy” in this context denotes Rufus’s derogatory attitude towards homosexuality. He implies that a man who can be bought for sex by another man deserves a lesser title—they are not real men. In support of Baldwin’s critiques on queer sexuality, Marc Lombardo writes that the fact that we must constantly ostracize the other—letting the “freak” know that they are a “freak”—suggests that the boundary between us and them is not nearly as sharp as we imagine it (2009). Rufus thus refers to men who sleep with men as ‘boys’ in order to distance them from the strong Black man he considers himself to be. But this perception shifts as he begins the transaction. As his apprehension culminates, he pleads, “I’m not the boy you want, mister,” (44). Baldwin’s choice of appellation now finds Rufus turning the diminutive onto himself. He accepts the title automatically with his offer of sex. Rufus lacks the ability to exert power in gay interactions; he feels too vulnerable. He puts his entire identity as a Black man at risk in daring to embrace queerness. Black masculinity is defined as incom-

patible with homosexuality to such an extent that Rufus will willingly infantilise himself before associating the two states with one another. This mechanism places Rufus in a wretched position—inadvertently endorsing Black inferiority to a white man. He ultimately reinforces the very same emasculation that his community so desperately wishes to escape. Baldwin uses the character of Rufus, at his most desperate, to critique the proximity of the ‘ideal’ Black male identity to white supremacy. His dual analysis of race and sexuality is a literary challenge to Black expectations of masculinity, which punish a vulnerable class of Black men with no path to total liberation. Black, gay men remain burdened with little social power and multiple oppressors; they contradict the ubiquitous image of powerful Black men which Black nationalists have propagandized. Ironically, by mirroring the same structures of oppression which they seek to overthrow, the movement diminishes the potential of collective Black freedom. The liberation they offer is incomplete and, thus, cannot endure without reconstruction.

The Violence of Revolutionary Desire

Baldwin expounds upon the danger of the Black male identity in Rufus’s complex relationship with Eric, a young

white man of Southern aristocracy. This innocent first love devolves into, but does not start with the same physical violence that Rufus threw at Leona. Instead, it carries a tenderness which Rufus does not extend to any other lover in the novel. Rufus finds his purest experience of romance in Eric. It is within the limits of this love that Baldwin continues to illustrate the threat of the Black male identity. At the dawn of their relationship, Rufus felt “[...] a flood of affection for Eric. And he felt his own power” (p.46). As with Leona, he enjoys feeling authority over a person whose social power exceeds his own. But this attraction is paradoxical. He goes on to describe that “[...] the hands that were meant to hold Eric at arm’s length seemed to draw Eric to him; the current that had begun flowing he did not know how to stop” (p.46). Baldwin expresses Rufus’s own view of his sexuality by implicating his hands, rather than his mind or heart, as the tools that form the connection. He personifies a part of his body as a separate entity to minimize his agency. This speaks further to the total incompatibility of homosexuality with the common Black male identity—Rufus cannot even take responsibility for his own emotions. Additionally, Baldwin’s choice of the word “meant” in this phrase connotes a biological imperative with heterosexu-

ality. This phrasing presents homosexuality as an inherent act of defiance to Rufus’s own nature.

The deep conflict between his identity and desires is thus inevitable, and the conflict manifests as emotional violence, tormenting both parties far beyond the span of their relationship. Throughout their affair, Rufus “[...] despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, [...] with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest” (p.46). Rufus claims to abhor Eric’s gender, but truly, his intolerance lies in his own same-sex attraction. Eric cannot be a man because this would implicate Rufus as a homosexual. Yet, the constant denigration Rufus casts upon Eric manifests as physical anguish. Rufus is continually distressed by the guilt and confusion of his violence. His masculinity corrupts the most loving relationship he will ever experience; the ensuing guilt torments him up until his death. In a taxing attempt to conform to his societal standard, Rufus creates and receives devastating violence for himself and all those near him.

Rufus reflects on his failed relationships in his final moments, while contemplating suicide. As he stands on the George Washington Bridge, “The wind tore at him, at his head and shoulders, while

something in him screamed, ‘Why? Why?’ He thought of Eric. His straining arms threatened to break. I can’t make it this way” (p.87). Baldwin’s juxtaposition of internal and external pressure in this scene stresses the direct bond between Rufus’s environment and his hopelessness. The deep conflict between his heart and the expectations of his society builds the intolerable pressure which drives Rufus to the bridge. He just cannot cope with the ineludible racism of his environment. He cannot cope with the inevitable violence of his romantic relationships. He feels he has no alternative to the corrupted love he has given and received all his life. He believes he has no home in his Harlem community; therefore, he can no longer live.

At his funeral, Rufus’s childhood reverend acknowledges that “He was a bright kid and he was full of the devil. [...] But that boy was one of the best men I ever met” (pp.120–121). Nearly every character comments casually on Rufus’s beauty, despite his troubles. Baldwin characterizes Rufus with such appeal to emphasize the major flaw of Black masculinity—he humanizes the victims of the common identity. He subverts traditional morality by affirming that all categories of Black men hold value; they all merit empathy and grace. Rufus is loved by his community. Nonetheless, he succumbs to the terrible pressure

which has suffocated him his whole life. The burden of oppression and its compensatory Black masculinity work to infect each of his relationships until they become unsustainable. Moreover, they ignite an identity crisis which cannot be solved. bell hooks explains in her 1989 framework, *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, that “[...] when you hear the broken voice you also hear the pain contained within that brokenness—a speech of suffering; often it’s that sound nobody wants to hear.” Rufus’s experience as a Black man in America is a dynamic speech of suffering. His environment holds no home for him: his Blackness is poorly accepted by his white peers while his queerness is prohibited by his community. Altogether, he is a taboo created by an ill-fated model of masculinity. Through Rufus’s tormented perspective, Baldwin exposes a painful reality that his country seeks to bury.

The Human Cost of the Black Male Ideal

Another Country reflects the unsung pain of a social context wherein Black homosexual men are ostracized into silence. Rufus is an ordinary Black man in New York City. He yearns for power and control over his circumstances. He is weakened by the constant cruelty he en-

dures. But despite the many failings of his society, Baldwin asserts that a model of Black manhood which demands heterosexual authority is the true storm of Rufus's pain. The boundaries of the mid 20th-century Black male identity compelled men like Rufus to parade hypermasculinity despite the violence it incites, while forcing queer Black men to deny themselves in order to belong, ultimately reproducing the same oppressive logic which Black communities sought to escape. The toxicity of his identity isolates Rufus from his community and creates a violent internal conflict which ravages every romantic relationship in his life and, finally, his relationship with himself. Total Black liberation requires that we expand the social and emotional possibilities available to us, rather than continue to restrict them. In *Another Country*, Rufus is the broken voice through which Baldwin demands reconstruction of the Black male identity for a sustainable, revolutionary future, and the survival of the Black community altogether.

Rufus Scott jumps from George Washington Bridge in the first chapter of *Another Country*. He is mourned, not profoundly, and his loss is absorbed calmly by everyone who knew him. For the remainder of the novel, Baldwin continues to trace the faults of his society through his sister, his lovers, and his

friends left behind. As a realist, Baldwin could not provide resolutions he never witnessed; his fiction affirms that deconstruction of the Black male ideal must unfold across generations. Beyond the pages of critique, change will come from active reimagining of power within Black communities. Central to this process is the elevation of Black women as community leaders independent of men, alongside sustained continued interrogation of rigid masculinity within institutions—from barbershops to the Black Church—where gender norms remain consecrated. The path forward hinges on collective accountability and the affirmation of a multiplicity of Black identities. In doing so, we reject colonial remnants of oppression to establish a fully free and self-determined Black future we can all belong to.

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