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Restorative Practices in English Language Arts: My Journey Towards Linguistic Justice

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Restorative Practices in English Language Arts: My Journey Towards Linguistic Justice

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Arts in English with a Teaching Specialization

21 April 2024

Dr. Heather Jordan, First Reader

Dr. Rachel Walsh, Second Reader

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My Journey Towards Linguistic Justice: An Analytical Narrative

The beginning of the 2021 school year presented many new and unexpected challenges to my career. I suddenly found myself required to teach through an online platform to a group of students who sat before me disillusioned with the state of the world they thought they knew just one year prior. The COVID pandemic stirred political and societal tensions brewing just below the United States' polished surface. I quickly realized that I needed more education, and better words to discuss heavy and necessary topics, such as racism and sexism, with my students. I knew that in my undergraduate English courses I was always challenged to broaden my worldview by allowing myself to see the world through another's eyes. I wanted to earn my master's in English, but I wanted an education that tied into my passion for teaching. It wasn't enough to only broaden my worldview, I also wanted to be able to help my students love reading so that they too could become more empathetic humans. Bowling Green offered me the perfect cross-section through their Master of Arts in English with a specialization in English Teaching.

The common thread that runs through all my research is equity. This is a topic that is of great importance to me. I began my teaching career in the inner-city of Cleveland, Ohio. The population of my school was 98 percent Black, one percent Hispanic, and the final one percent was split between Native American and Asian. I came out of my private Christian undergraduate program so neglectfully unequipped for the cultural shock I experienced. I had so much to learn

about racism from my students, colleagues, and neighbors, and I did so eagerly. However, in retrospect, I made many mistakes as not only a teacher but also as a human. When I left that job, I took with me a passion for minority students who were not receiving the quality education they each deserved. I witnessed the systemic racism that kept these students in impoverished schools taught by inexperienced (myself included), often white teachers, who lasted a mere month to a year in their roles as educators. I didn't have the answers, but I knew I wanted to do something to aid the change. I wish I could change the past and relive that experience, but like Maya Angelou reminds me, "When you know better, do better."

It was during my time in Cleveland that I also began to think of language in a new way; intelligence should never be measured by a person's adherence to arbitrary language rules. My students spoke what I now know as African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I thought it was my role to guide them all to better grammar. Yet, as I read through their essays it didn't feel right to "correct" them. I read beautiful, heart-breaking, authentic stories from my students; to change their words was to change their story, their culture. In Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, I have found research that supports that intuition. The rules of Standard American English (SAE) have been formed by European and American culture, one that has always valued the word of the White, educated man to be the standard. However, SAE is only one of many dialects of the English language that are mutually intelligible. This means that all dialects are generally able to understand each other, which is the true goal of language. Any bias for SAE is racist in nature.

Each class that I have taken over the past three years had a strong impact on my understanding of the world and ultimately made me a more compassionate educator. In my first course, I read Macbeth through a feminist lens. This research excited me and inspired me to continue to broaden my thinking in "Graduate Writing" with Dr. Hoy, during which I wrote my

first portfolio essay “Ain’t Ain’t a Word: Grammar’s Place in an Ever-Changing Language Curriculum.” I was exposed to many new methods that began to shine a light on the racism that lurks beneath the standard English Language Arts education in America. I also began to learn about anti-racist pedagogies that attempt to dismantle the inequity in my field. I learned about labor-based grading that focuses more on a student’s important thoughts and effort than on their ability to adhere to Standard White English grammar and speech patterns. This learning was furthered in my “Teaching of Writing” course with Dr. Chad Duffy, where I deepened my understanding of anti-racist pedagogy in teaching writing. My final culmination of research for this course resulted in a presentation to share with my colleagues, titled “Practical Anti-Racist Writing Pedagogy for the Secondary Teacher.” I hope to have the opportunity to present this to my colleagues at my Career and Technical High School and eventually the college to which I hope to transition my career.

In my summer 2023 course “From Baldwin from Black Lives Matter” with Dr. Rachel Walsh, I was introduced to an author who has had a profound impact on my outlook, James Baldwin. Baldwin's writing reflects a deep engagement with the socio-political landscape of his time, offering incisive critiques of systemic injustice while exploring the intricacies of personal and collective struggles for liberation and belonging. Baldwin connected the intersectionality between Black oppression, toxic masculinity, gender roles, and sexuality by displaying a unique vantage of American culture—an outside view. Baldwin moved to Turkey and France where he was able to see the problems of America from the outside. It was because of his outside view that Baldwin was able to clearly define the spaces and places in *Another Country*. I wrote “Eternal White Innocence: The Fragility of White Spaces and James Baldwin’s *Another Country*” in

which I explored Baldwin's representation of space alongside my reading of Robin Diangelo's *White Fragility*. This essay serves as my substantial research project in my portfolio.

The writing and revision of "Eternal White Innocence" profoundly changed me. I have had the chance to read from influential scholars in Black queer studies, such as Lorraine Hansberry, Nathaniel Rick, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Eddie Glaude. The unique worldview I now hold is one which can only be shaped by the places I've been and the books I've read. I recognize the privilege I embody and my responsibility to use that privilege to best support and represent all my students, regardless of skin color or sexual identity. I will do this by representing authors of all genders, races, ethnicities, sexualities, and capabilities. I will value the unique perspectives and dialects of each student I am privileged to teach. I will never grade a student by their ability to adhere to arbitrary syntactical rules. I will use my privilege to help and never to harm. I am deeply grateful for the education I have received over the past two years.

I plan to continue my education. I will never stop reading works that expose me to alternative points of view, or stories that make me more empathetic as a teacher. I hope I can continue to inspire students to read as some of my greatest joy comes from guiding my students to look at the world through someone else's view. I will use the lessons, research, and critical thinking I have gained through this program to do my small part to make this world a kinder and more just place.

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20 March 2024

Ain't *Ain't* a Word: Grammar's Place in an Ever-Changing Language Curriculum

The fact that the English language is constantly evolving is undeniable. In 2023, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary added 690 new words like 'rizz,' 'simp,' 'bussin,' and 'mid' (2023). While Merriam-Webster asserts that adding new words and definitions is a sign of a "healthy language," not everyone feels overjoyed by these changes. This poses a dilemma for English language and literacy teachers. How does one go about teaching English grammar in a way that simultaneously preserves the integrity of a language rich in tradition yet is also inclusive of all students? The answer to this question is complex; it is dependent upon a teacher's unique set of beliefs and is widely debated amongst professionals. However, upon researching the topic, there is one clear conclusion: the current system is flawed.

The English language is unique because it does not have a single origin. English, as we know it today, is derived from the Germanic, French, and Latin languages that were blended into one complex system of communication. English can be grouped into three stages that sound very little alike. Old English is almost unrecognizable to the modern English speaker, sounding foreign to the listener's ear. The Middle English of Shakespeare's time is readable, but for most students, it requires a translation and multiple footnotes to explain the incredibly different connotations that were held at the time. Even within the modern English of today, multiple

dialects can be almost unrecognizable to the outsider's ear. With that being said, it is hard to describe which version of English is the correct variety or even the original. Through the process of standardization, Americans have chosen the vernacular that favors those who speak standard white American English (SWAE). The idealized English "is not just that a variety is chosen as the model for the standard because it is associated with a prestigious social identity, but it also enhances the powerful position of those who speak it" (Fuller, Wardaugh 31). Language, after all, is one of the strongest foundations of culture, and it is only fitting that those in power would select a language standard that justifies their superiority. Standard American English (SAE), often referred to as "academic English," is composed of that which is uttered by the white, educated male.

Standardization of the English language has proven problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it places a strain on the language itself. Language is meant to grow and change with its users, but standardization attempts to eliminate the natural diversity and variety that make it come alive. Secondly, according to Fuller and Wardaugh, "such prescriptivist views are inherently classist and discriminatory against anyone who is not a member of the privileged class" (32). This viewpoint is highly problematic for a large majority of the country, including People of Color, non-native English speakers, and the economically disadvantaged. The idea that language competency should be expected of everyone relies on a standardized kind of English that does not include language varieties such as African American Vernacular English, for example.

Sociolinguists recognize AAVE as a dialectical variety of the English Language that is complete with its own set of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic rules. Lisa J. Green of the University of Texas asserts that "when speakers know AAVE, they know a system

of sounds, word and sentence structure, meaning and structural organization of vocabulary items and other information” (Green). AAVE originated from West African languages and blended with portions of English during the times of slavery. It is a language rich in history, no less respectable than SAE. There are several recognized, rule-governed dialects of English, such as Chicano English, Cajun English, Hawaiian Pidgin, and Southern White American English. Not only do these dialects have a different vocabulary than SAE, but they also include unique grammatical rules.

The current grammar-teaching methods are not only systemically racist; they are also xenophobic. Those who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) suffer the discrimination of having what is deemed poor grammar. In an article for the National Council of Teachers of English, Bailey suggests that “every child who enters our elementary schools has acquired by that time an adequate control of the basic structures of some language system” (570). In this sense, each child comes to school with a fully functioning means of communication that is valid. EFL students have to work twice as hard to grasp a new grammatical system that is often completely different than that of their native language. Teaching these students requires empathy and understanding that phonological pronunciation and syntactical organization are more challenging for them, but that they too have a language that is rich in culture.

Because most people who use poor grammar do so without having a choice, judging them based on their grammar usage upholds systems of oppressive classism. Many students fall into the category of economically disadvantaged, meaning that they do not have the access to opportunities that students of wealth or privilege have. Each year, perfectly qualified college applicants are rejected because of language performance, through standardized test scores and required essays in applications, which is another way of keeping economically disadvantaged

people from receiving the education necessary for upward progress. Those students who are accepted are also disadvantaged by being placed in remedial English or writing courses at the expense of the student. This creates another challenge for the English Language Arts Educator. In her article, “Some Aspects of the Impact of Linguistics on Language Teaching,” Bailey argues that many students have “a different grammatical system and that the efforts of the teacher to teach the child the new grammatical signals are being undermined by the phonological weakening” (573). It is often not the fault of the student or a refusal to learn that creates the challenge in the classroom for students, but the dominance of the child’s first language. Teaching formal written English requires the teacher to first understand and respect the student’s native language, whether foreign, AAVE, or some other dialect, instead of regarding ASE to be the idealized norm.

What does racial and linguistic justice look like in language and literacy education? A classroom rich with dialectic variety is ideal. Language and grammar education must be intersectional and culturally relevant. However, this is not an easy task, even for the most vetted educators. Baker-Bell began her career by teaching a largely Black body of students in a Detroit High School. It was at this school that she began to question her identity as an educator when her students asked the question, “What I look like speaking standard English? It don’t even sound right.” While Baker lived her life as a Black woman and spent many years as a Black educator, she admits that she “was ill-equipped to address the critical linguistic issues that they were raising” (7). After much research, she now realized that the attitude of most educators dismisses AAVE as “linguistically, morally, and intellectually inferior” (Baker-Bell 8). Not only has AAVE been dismissed as substandard, but labels like ‘academic language’ go unquestioned. Baker-Bell is not alone in this way of thinking. According to Alim and Smitherman, “the fact that White

people consider themselves the ‘standard’ by which ‘Others’ are measured – has real and tangible effects on the lives of People of Color” (171). History has done much damage to the self-esteem of People of Color, not only by denying their language but often also denying their very existence. In order to move forward, the United States educational system must equip teachers to respect the Black Language pedagogy, allowing students to find pride in their language, while instilling within them the flexibility to code-switch when necessary.

The educational system can and should do better. This begins with culturally sensitive training for educators. Many English Language Arts (ELA) teachers enter the field with little to no specific training on how to teach grammar and syntax, but they have already established a set of “beliefs,” as Rabia Hos terms it (70). This belief system often upholds the racist or xenophobic attitude of a white language superiority. Unequipped with the necessary tools to teach and a belief that they are there to correct students’ native language problems, teachers develop a savior complex. Many teachers are guilty, if not proud, of being referred to as a “grammar nazi.” These are the teachers, found across the U.S. who passionately remind their students that “ain’t *ain’t* a word,” willfully neglecting the fact that it has appeared in dictionaries since the 1830s. This does not a grammar education make. The purpose of this lesson is to shame students for an acceptable colloquialism because it meets the agenda that denies dialects of validity. During my undergraduate studies, I took many required literature and grammar courses, but it wasn’t until my senior year that I finally had the opportunity to take a course designed to prepare me to teach ELA specifically. This was the most helpful course I took in undergraduate school, but, unfortunately, it was the only one of its kind. All ELA educators should not only receive several content-specific courses but should also be required to take at least one Teaching English as a Second Language (TESoL) course in undergraduate school, where they can learn to

teach students who enter the classroom with a fully developed language, to both find pride in their native language, as well as strengthen reading and writing skills in Standard English.

Even those educators who set out with good intentions often struggle with making their beliefs match their practices in the classroom. After a 16-week study of teacher cognition amongst ELA and EFL teachers in San Antonio Texas, Okan Onalan found that “what teachers do in the classroom may not necessarily reflect their beliefs about how grammar should be taught” (Onalan 2). This is a fact that I know all too well. When I took my first job in downtown Cleveland, I found a disconnect between my own beliefs about grammar instruction and my teaching methods. Like many teachers, I entered the classroom with an idealized notion that I would rid students of their bad grammar and help each one rise to English Language proficiency. I too aimed to eradicate the “ain’t” and the “finna” from my student’s vocabulary. I failed to understand the validity of my own students’ native language. It wasn’t of a willful mindset to disrespect my students in this way but of a miseducation. Fortunately for myself and all language teachers, it is possible to create a connection between the students and teacher’s goals for language learning. In the article “Unpacking the Discrepancy between Learner and Teacher Beliefs,” Hos quotes Barkhuizen in his argument that:

If we as teachers, are aware of where our learners are coming from (how they approach language learning, what they feel about their language learning experiences, and how they act upon these feelings), we will be able to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom. (qtd. in Hos 71)

When students' and teachers' beliefs line up, genuine learning takes place. A set of respectfully mutual beliefs is necessary to break free from the conservative notion that standard White English is superior.

Along with racial and dialectical sensitivity, the method used to teach grammar is crucial to student success. Though the proper method has been debated for centuries, there is one pedagogy that has been proven to improve the proficiency of all students, and that is teaching grammar in context. Teaching grammar in context is largely inspired by Contextual Teaching Learning (CTL). CTL is a method of teaching in which lessons and activities are closely related to a student's culture, real-world situations, and learning abilities (Amin 71). This type of learning has many benefits for students of diverse backgrounds because it accounts for an individual's strengths and challenges in the classroom. One of the most important tools in this type of grammar instruction is writing. Writing is one of the most challenging tasks for students, especially those who are learning English as a second language, including those who are native AAVE speakers. However, as Amin asserts, it is through writing that "students can reinforce the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary that they have learned. Thus, grammar plays the most important aspect in writing" (73). Grammar and writing have a symbiotic relationship within grammar education, meaning that the two must mutually be taught together. Analyzing a student's writing will allow an educator to select the appropriate activities to implement based on common weaknesses. This means that teaching grammar in context will help students minimize grammatical errors within their writing. However, culturally relevant grammar education requires more than just assigning essays and highlighting errors for students to correct.

The best practice for teaching grammar in context includes aspects of student-centered learning and culturally relevant examples. The student-centered philosophy encourages teachers to "provide authentic and natural materials for students to acquire the target language in real and natural situations" (Wang 306). In many of my lessons, I use, as Sean Ruday suggests, music, community conversations, and social media to link grammar lessons to culturally relevant

material (50). Through using examples from pop culture, Tweets, and hit songs, students become very engaged in learning. Allowing students to choose their own examples of grammatical concepts is one of the five steps Ruday recommends to help students make grammar lessons student-centered. The second step is for teachers and students to reflect on the importance of the concept. The first question students always have is, “Why does this matter?” Especially for EFL or ESL students, the answer to this question is crucial. In the case of the student that Baker-Bell quoted, “What do I sound like speaking standard English?”, a discussion of language coding and the appropriate time for Standard English is necessary to assure students that their language is valid but there is still room to improve communication with a specific audience. Another important step, according to Ruday, is to have students share their findings. As he states, “This further centers their unique ideas, experiences, and identities” (51). The final step is to have students reflect on the experience and the relationship to other learning activities. One of the most critical aspects of culturally-relevant language and literacy education is allowing students to explore and find their own meaning in learning.

There are many things to consider when reevaluating the current system used to enforce grammar education. First, it is important to ensure educators receive the proper training during undergraduate courses, including content-specific training, as well as English as a Foreign Language training. Second, schools must ensure that teachers’ beliefs match up with a culturally relevant pedagogy. This belief system must recognize that the English language is flexible and that grammar is not merely prescriptive but a tool to improve communication. Simin Wang defines the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar as follows: “The prescriptive grammarian specifies what is right or wrong while descriptive grammarian tries to avoid making judgments about correctness and concentrates on describing and explaining the

way people want to say” (304). This distinction is important to culturally relevant grammar education because if teachers were to focus their beliefs and methods around a descriptive approach, students will not only be validated, but they will discover value in improving their communication skills. Thirdly, teachers must teach grammar in context, utilizing a student’s culture, language, and beliefs as a strength in the classroom. A reshaping of the role of grammar is also necessary. Myhill and Watson note that while many traditional approaches view grammar as a “set of structures which can be assessed as correct or incorrect,” she believes that it should be viewed as “a resource, a meaning-making system through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves” (45). This very closely resembles the notion of grammar that I have adopted over the past eight years of my education experience. Language and grammar are tools to help an individual communicate thoughts clearly to an appropriate audience. Mistakes and variations of proper grammar do not make an individual any less worthy, nor do they prevent communication.

In order to increase the dialectic variety in the ELA classroom, teachers and students should begin by discussing the following questions adapted from the University of Puget Sound:

1. Do I assume that the English I speak and write is the only way to communicate ideas?
2. Do I use the terms “correct English” or “standard English” or “proper English”? If so, do I accept the value judgments inherent in these terms?
3. What assumptions do I make about a writer or speaker based on the English that they use?
4. What are words that I use in my writing and speech that may be markers of my culture?

5. What are words specific to my academic discipline that may not be understood outside that discipline?
6. What are writing conventions specific to my academic discipline? (University of Puget Sound)

It is recommended that students are allowed to read these questions and have time for self-reflection before holding a full-class discussion. These questions dig into deeply held biases and may make students feel discomfort, but the answers are essential to disrupting the systemic racism embedded in the standardization of the English language.

Grammar still has a place in the ever-changing language curriculum. However, educators must realize that its place has shifted. Traditional methods of teaching grammar have failed students of color, EFL students, and those who are economically disadvantaged by demeaning their culture and language. The English language is complex, and like a living being, it evolves. So too, must the methods used to teach it. The many variations of English are what make our language rich and unique. Teachers must embrace dialectical diversity and teach grammar in a way that is sensitive to those complexities, thus fostering the growth of both the learners and the language. The truth is that “ain’t” has been a recognized word for many generations, and educators must adapt their mindset to realize that the way things have always been done is not the way they should always be done. It is time to rearrange educational priorities and recognize that utilizing a language curriculum that is systemically racist and xenophobic is not conducive to the progress of the U.S. educational system. A change of heart is necessary for forward movement. It is clear what must be done; the only question that remains is what are we waiting on to do the work?

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ENG 6800

17 March 17, 2024

Eternal White Innocence: The Fragility of White Spaces and

James Baldwin's *Another Country*

Introduction

James Baldwin was a prolific American writer and social critic whose ideology was far beyond his time. He occupies a position of great influence in 20th-century American literature and cultural discourse. Born in the midst of the Great Migration, facing profound racial tensions and social upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement, and political transformation, Baldwin's literary works are a nuanced exploration of identity, race, sexuality, and humanity. One of the nation's most prominent scholars of African American Studies, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. refers to the period in which James Baldwin wrote his famous essays and novels as the “after times.” This period is unique in that Baldwin viewed “the collapse of the civil rights movement, bearing witness to a time when many thought the nation was poised to change, only to have darkness descend and change arrested” (16). This worldview allowed James Baldwin to not only capture the intricacies of Black lives before and after the Civil Rights Movement, but also to challenge the white heteronormative biases of a turbulent America.

As an observer of both the personal and societal realms, Baldwin's works, ranging from novels such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) to essay collections like *The Fire Next Time*

(1963), delve into the threads of systemic racism and injustice. Baldwin warned his nephew in a letter, included in *The Fire Next Time*, of the harsh truth:

This *innocent* country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason.

(TFNT 7)

Glaude discusses Baldwin's moral duty to tell truth by examining the danger of the alternative. White innocents hide behind the lie: ". . . the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of Black people and how it deforms the soul of the country." (8) America cannot improve by denying that racism exists; they must accept that racism is operating under cover every day. Honest conversations need to take place to make true change. Fortunately, Baldwin was not afraid to tackle tough topics.

This introductory section sets the stage for an analysis of racial innocence and white heteronormative spaces within Baldwin's *Another Country*. Baldwin's literary legacy continues to reverberate through contemporary discussions on race, equality, and the struggle for social change, but his influence cannot continue if his existence as a Black queer man has no place in white spaces.

Banned Baldwin

I first encountered James Baldwin in my final year of graduate school. I entered the local library and searched the classic literature section for Baldwin; there was nothing. I typed his name into the reference page—again, nothing on the shelves. Mount Vernon, Ohio of Knox

County has a 96.5 percent white population as of the latest (2023) census. As of today, the Knox County (of Ohio) Library only offers 6 of Baldwin's novels in eBook format. There is not one physical copy of his texts available to borrow in the entire county. Copies of other classics, such as Hawthorne, Harper Lee, and Dickens, were in no shortage. Frustrated, I checked the local bookstore. They welcome a more educated and liberal clientele, and I held hope. His books were not on those shelves either. I purchased my copies on Amazon, perplexed as to why I could not find classic American Literature in my proudly American small town. After finishing *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the reason became clearer. Baldwin, a queer Black author, "rejected political labels, sexual labels...and questioned the notion of racial identity" (Rich 2016). The fact that I could not purchase a single copy of Baldwin in my town was no longer a mystery.

This represents a problem, not only in my small town but in America at large. The COVID pandemic stirred up a politically motivated banning of texts from academic spaces. According to The American Library Association and its Office for Intellectual Freedom, "273 books were affected by censorship attempts in 2020, many with content that highlighted race, gender and sexuality" (qtd. in Bellamy-Walker). Most recently, Florida, as part of its stop W.O.K.E law, has banned AP African American Studies due, in part, to James Baldwin's texts being part of the curriculum. Black History is still required to be taught in Florida's public schools. However, Governor Ron DeSantis argues that "When you try to use black history to shoehorn in queer theory, you are clearly trying to use that for political purposes" (Pendharkar 2023). James Baldwin, in his mere *existence*, challenges the white heteronormative authority from which DeSantis speaks. What this logic fails to address, however, is that for many Black queer people, survival is political and liberation cannot be granted without cooperation from the white heteronormative oppressors. White people cannot grant freedom to a people it denies exist.

Representation is important for two key reasons. First, it allows readers to view the text as mirrors that reflect and validate their existence. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it allows readers to view the texts as windows, through which they are granted a glimpse into another person's life. This is important for building empathy and awareness. An article in *Education Week* discusses the impact of this banning on AP African American Literature. Patrick Johnson, the Dean of Northwest College and Black queer scholar notes that "It would be best that those who are not scholars of African American history to leave the question of what should and should not be included in that history to those scholars" (Pendharkar 2023). It would only make logical sense that the people who tell the story should be those who live it. Black and queer identities are often lumped together due to their designation as 'other' in a white heteronormative society. Their existence must be represented in media. James Baldwin is important because his work elucidates the co-articulations of race and sexuality. It is also precisely why he is the target of current bans in a racist and unjust society.

White Innocence

While I could not borrow a James Baldwin text from my local library, I did pick up a copy of *White Fragility* published in 2018 by Robin DiAngelo. Reading this text alongside *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* added a complex and meaningful nuance to my racial understanding of Baldwin's lifework. Even amidst the political unrest, most (White) Americans would deny that racism exists outside of newspaper headlines and violent images on television. DiAngelo confronts many of the reasons why white people struggle to admit that racism is still alive and well. Most important of these reasons is that "white norms *are* violated by naming white power" (DiAngelo 86, original emphasis). Additionally, because racism is viewed as evil, ". . . white people's moral objection to racism increases their

resistance to acknowledging their complicity with it” (Diangelo 108). Diangelo, an anti-racist trainer, knows exactly why AP African American classes and James Baldwin texts are being banned. She knows from personal experience that “if and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance” (Diangelo 101). It is beneficial to deny that racism still serves its primary function in America, and because of this, it is much easier to remain “innocent,” a word Baldwin first uses in *The Fire Next Time*.

Before white innocence can be defined, it is important to take notice of what it means to be white in America. “Race is a social construction, and thus who is included in the category of white changes over time” (Diangelo 18). Ethnicity needn’t matter as long as one’s skin is pale enough to pass. This is what has allowed groups like the Jews and Italians to assimilate into the white race. Though it can be checked on the National Census, “white” is not a cultural identity, at least it wasn’t at its foundation. Because of a lack of unique identity, whiteness became associated not with what it was but what it wasn’t. White meant to be anti-black. Diangelo reasons that:

There was no concept of race or a white race before the need to justify the enslavement of Africans. Creating a separate and inferior black race simultaneously created the “superior” white race: one concept could not exist without the other... whites need black people; blackness is essential to the creation of white identity (91).

Because white people have no group identity, they are able to attribute all undesirable traits, such as laziness, violence, and sexual deviancies to the ‘other’ black group. Baldwin supports this in “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” in which he writes, “The white man’s...private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro” (1962). What this allows white people to ideologize is

that “Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm” (Diangelo 25). To be white is to be racially innocent.

Innocence is defined as “freedom from guilt” or a “lack of corruption,” according to the Oxford Dictionary. White innocence is a topic that both Diangelo and Baldwin address in their texts. This innocence comes at a high price—in terms of its creation, upholding, and defense. Diangelo depicts multiple layers of this so-called innocence. First, because white people are not raised to view themselves racially, “or to see white space as racialized space, we position ourselves as innocent of race” (62). We have no race, we see no color, and we therefore cannot possibly be racist. Diangelo additionally contends that the violent crimes perpetrated on people of color are “trivialized through white claims of racial innocence” (62). Even in admitting white privilege, white people perpetuate racial innocence by not admitting their complacency about or participation in a system that purposely privileges them. This is particularly troublesome because it is this perceived innocence that prevents the US from racial progress.

This is a problem that James Baldwin knew all too well. Baldwin wrote to his nephew in “My Dungeon Shook” from *The Fire Next Time* of such innocence. He warns his nephew that unforgivable crimes have been committed in this country that these innocents “do not know” and “do not want to know” (TFNT 4). Baldwin uses *innocent* not as a “lack of corruption,” but instead, as a willful ignorance, one that continues to benefit the very person who denies it. Later in his career, in “A Letter to Americans,” Baldwin referred to this ignorance as “not merely phenomenal, but sacred, and sacredly cultivated.” Unfortunately, jaded by the death of many loved black and brown friends, Baldwin also knew that most Americans would never be able to admit to their willful ignorance, and “this fact contains mortal danger for the blacks and tragedy

for the nation” (1968). Denying racism only perpetuates its reign. Baldwin made this abundantly clear by reminding his readers that “it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the *innocence* which constitutes the crime” (TFNT 5-6, emphasis mine). To move forward, both Baldwin and Diangelo know that white people must shed their innocence.

Spaces and Places

It is easy to remain comfortable and innocent of racial relations when the spaces in which one lives are still segregated. The fact that my rural town does not offer James Baldwin books and only allows me to interact with people of color on occasion is, unfortunately, all too common in this country. Baldwin cautioned his nephew that “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish (TFNT 7). Redlining is a serious problem in today’s America, but for Baldwin, who wrote this letter before The Fair Housing Act of 1968, it had even more detrimental effects. Unfortunately, life in America is still deeply shaped by racial segregation. Crime, poverty, lack of quality education, and lack of healthcare allowed white people to define these “other spaces (not white)” as “bad, dangerous, crime-ridden and to be avoided; these neighborhoods are not positioned as sheltered and innocent” (Diangelo 37). Vivaldo discusses these border shifts in *Another Country* as he and Cass ride through Harlem on the way to Rufus’s funeral. Vivaldo acknowledges that these avenues were probably once beautiful with horses chained out front but now they are dilapidated, and what had “once been home” now was “prison.” (114) In this way, white people have been protected by aversive racism. They did not have to avoid these black spaces because they were black but because they were dangerous. They could send their kids to schools not because they were whiter but because they were “better.”

By determining what does or does not belong in their places, white people have established safe and comfortable spaces where they can control the environment. In Amy Reddinger's study of *Another Country*, she draws on Michel de Certeau's distinction between place and space. Place "... exists on a map or as a proper noun." Space, however, is "created through lived experience." She further explains that "while place is knowable and mappable in specific geo-political terms, space is layered with both visible and veiled histories, signs, symbols, and experiences." (117) In this way, while one may share a place with someone of different skin color, they also exist in an entirely different space.

James Baldwin emphasizes the difference between place and space through Vivaldo and Rufus in *Another Country*. Reddinger suggests that readers view *Another Country* as "supplementing and complicating an inquiry into these very questions of national belonging through a narrative interrogation of a range of characters' varying abilities to make (and keep) home" (Reddinger 118). The two share home and place in NYC. However, each man occupies different spaces. Rufus is from the black streets of Harlem; Vivaldo is from a poor immigrant community of NYC. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin reminds his nephew that "You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason." (TFNT 7) Vivaldo lived where he lived because his family was poor. He wasn't limited to a single destiny because of his skin color. Cass reminds him of this point before Rufus's funeral when she says "but they didn't happen to you *because* you were white. They just happen. But what happens up here happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a difference." (AC 113-114) While Vivaldo may share some cultural experiences with Rufus, they are never fully able to understand the other's lived experiences due to the distance of space between the two.

In *White Fragility*, Diangelo discusses the confusion that takes place when segregation is blurred for poor urban whites. She notes that they may “live near and have friendships with people of color on the local level because white poverty brings white people into proximity with people of color in a way that suburban and middle-class life does not.” The important distinction still lies in space as Diangelo also addresses the fact that upward mobility for “whites from the lower classes” usually means “leaving friends and neighbors of color behind.” After all, “upward mobility is the goal of every American, and the social environment gets tangibly whiter the higher up you climb.” (66) White people who grow up in Black spaces may feel that they have lived the same experience, but they will never fully comprehend the challenges of their Black sisters and brothers because they still embody White privilege.

There is no space as idealized and historically white as the suburbs. During Baldwin’s life in America, segregation changed its facade. Instead of explicitly stating that people of color were not welcome, they enacted housing laws, restricted loans, and harassed outsiders who tried to enter their white spaces. In what is now known as the “white flight,” white people moved from the cities to the suburbs as the influx of black people in their space was too great. Diangelo proclaims that this white flight is:

. . . another aspect of white racial innocence, as it is often justified by beliefs that people of color, (again, especially Black people) are more prone to crime and that if “too many” black people move into a neighborhood, crime will increase, home values will go down, and the neighborhood will deteriorate (Diangelo 62).

This is a common assumption and misconception, yet there is a lack of statistics to support this claim. Attributing crime to skin color is dangerous because it unfairly “reverses the actual direction of racial danger,” a narrative, Diangelo calls “one of the most pernicious” (47).

White suburbs, created during the white flight, were problematic for several reasons. They prevented people of color from accessing safe and affordable housing. They prevent white people from gaining exposure to other cultures, races, and ethnicities, thus leading to a lack of empathy. Many white people never have to “consider how sheltered and safe their spaces may be from the perspective of people of color (e.g. Trayvon Martin’s experience in a gated white community)” (Diangelo 47). They allow white people to silently perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes of Black neighborhoods. The creation of white suburbs also shaped access (or lack thereof) to quality public education. They also established an unhealthy white heteronormative status quo. Reddinger contends that the suburbs are “both a symbol of escape from the city as well as a reminder of its limits.” Additionally, she views the suburb as “the supreme signifier of cultural "norms" of the postwar era” (126). Suburban whiteness became indistinguishable from heteronormativity, and the White lived experience ultimately became the goal for people of all places. The consequence, of course, is that the suburban dream “becomes the vehicle for a clear articulation of the (im)possibilities of postwar, urban, black, and queer identities” (Reddinger 10). Within white suburban spaces, Black and queer people are denied existence.

Baldwin wrote many characters whose existences were deemed illegitimate by white heteronormativity. Rufus Scott from *Another Country* is the perfect example of an identity that exceeds the binary of heteronormative ideology. Rufus, a black and queer man cannot justify his love for three white people in his life: Leona, Eric, and Vivaldo. His inability to reconcile these feelings, alongside his understanding of how white supremacy has warped his world, become unbearable. He also must contend with his self-hatred for the same-sex desires in his body. Rufus doesn’t fit in any of the spaces he encounters in New York City. He initially found his beat as a drummer growing up in Harlem, but at the end of his life, he knew he would “never (be) going

home any more” (86). In his 2012 article, W. Lawrence Hogue, suggests “Rufus' death (suicide) results from his inability to escape oppressive racial, social, religious, gender, and sexual categories...” He also notes that it is the “refusal of society to allow his unacknowledged and unrecognized complex, fluid, multiple, and dynamic subjectivity to exist and thrive” (5). Rufus cannot handle his desires, his relationships with white people, or his inability to find acceptance in his spaces; he seeks solace in a binary that should not exist. Ultimately, these pressures lead Rufus to feel that he “can’t make it this way” (87). He dropped his Black body into the black water, and it was over.

During the decade it took Baldwin to finish his masterpiece, *Another Country*, he spent the majority of his time in Turkey. MJ Zaborowka, in *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade*, notes that “*Another Country* marked a turning point in Baldwin's career, as it provided him with a space to question American binary constructions of race and sexuality and to arrive at an articulation of what we would today call a queer identity” (102). Turkey was a safe location for Baldwin where he was free from the restraints of Eurocentric patriarchal logic and where he could explore his identity as a black queer man and a writer. Baldwin’s preoccupation with places, spaces, and their possibilities is evident through Rufus and his attempts to make a home in the various spaces he finds himself.

Rufus’s character and ultimate tragedy are depressing but not unexpected. What Baldwin is able to do in *Another Country* is to expose a different kind of tragic character that began to form at the cusps of the white suburbs—the white progressives. Baldwin and Diangelo have much to say about these conundrums of a people. Diangelo observes that many people “who lived in *white suburban neighborhoods* and had no sustained relationships with people of color were absolutely certain that they held no racial prejudice or animosity” (3). Unfortunately, this is an

ongoing misconception or blind spot in logic. Despite their best conscious intentions, white progressives continue to cause “the most daily damage to people of color.” I align with Diangelo’s definition of white progressives as “white people who think they are not racist, or are less racist, or in the “choir,” or already “gets it.” The danger in this logic is that is those white progressives “uphold and perpetrate racism” by spending more time convincing others they are not racist than dismantling the oppressive machine at the heart of America (5).

James Baldwin makes his feelings for white liberals clear through his depictions of Cass and Richard in *Another Country*. Cass and Richard are excellent examples of racism that is obscured by progressive thinking and living. Cass is white, and "came from New England, of plain old American stock" (AC 36). Though they now live in a blended area of the city, the couple’s suburban ideology still works its way into conversation. Their sons, Paul and Michael, return from an outing with blood smears and tears in their eyes. Worried, Richard asks his oldest son if he “got into a fight or...beat him up or what? Paul explains that he and his brother were approached by some “colored boys” they had “never even saw before!” He proudly admits to his father that he “knocked a couple of teeth down his throat.” Richard explains this situation away by saying that “the world is full of all kinds of people” and that they should watch out for “people like that” (243). Richard needn’t actually say who *those* people are as the message rings loud and clear, prompting Eric to interject that “some colored people are very nice” (243). After the children have left the room, Richard admits to Eric that “This whole neighborhood, this whole city has gone to hell. I keep telling Cass we ought to move, but she doesn't want to. Maybe this will change her mind (AC 245). This exchange demonstrates deeply held prejudices, but none of the three white characters would ever admit to participating in a racist practice. The

safe white spaces of the suburbs have allowed people like them to flourish, to say one thing but privately behave in contradictory ways.

Baldwin did not speak highly of the white progressives. In “Letter from A Region of My Mind,” he recognizes that he owes his invitation to speak with Elijah Muhammed to the “incredible, abysmal, and really cowardly obtuseness of white liberals.” He also reveals, from personal experience, that “the little connection that the liberals’ attitudes have with their perceptions or their lives, or even their knowledge—revealed, in fact, that they could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man” (1962). He provides his audience with an example of this through Vivaldo. Vivaldo is a white man who grew up in the poor slums of NYC. He was raised near people of color, sharing schools and playgrounds. He imagines himself to be open and progressive. His best friend Rufus is a black man, after all. Yet, on Rufus’s last night of life, Vivaldo had “no sense of him as a man,” just as Baldwin cautioned. Rufus desperately needed a friend on his last night of life, but Vivaldo “yawned and felt guilty. He was tired of...Rufus’s story, tired of the strain of attending, tired of friendship” (AC 71). Despite his best efforts to be Rufus’ friend, Vivaldo failed him completely. He later admits to Eric that he wanted to reach out and help Rufus but he was afraid, afraid Rufus wouldn’t “understand that it was—only love” (342). That Vivaldo loved Rufus is hard to deny. However, the point that Baldwin and Diangelo both make is that loving Black bodies is not enough. Diangelo notes that “Individual whites may be ‘against’ racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group” (Diangelo 24). White liberals may have good intentions, but they still participate in a system that tips the scale of justice unfairly in their direction. Vivaldo viewed Rufus as a symbol, and he likely knew that he was a victim of his

circumstances, but he never allowed himself to fully love Rufus as a man. The spaces Vivaldo occupied did not allow him to.

The places and spaces through which Rufus travel in *Another Country* are of great importance to fully understanding Rufus's demise. As Reddinger argues, reading *Another Country* in terms of spatiality allows readers to view "space as a system of meanings—to see space . . . as text"—but also reminds us of “the important work of literary interventions and the multiple possibilities for (re)imagining national, urban, and domestic spaces (117). Rufus is originally from Harlem, the antithesis of white suburban heteronormativity. The National Commission on Urban Problems stated in 1968, “we found conditions much worse, more widespread and more explosive than any of us had thought” (qtd. in Goldstein 3). In many ways, Harlem isn't real to those blinded by Eurocentric worldviews. Those who live within the sheltered confines of white space are able to pretend or even forget that such places exist. White heteronormativity is the default and all other identities are marked “other.” Rufus leaves his parents and finds his way to the imagined utopia of Greenwich Village.

Poet Harold Norse viewed Greenwich Village as "an oasis of liberation to which, from all over America, young men and women flocked to express their socially unacceptable lifestyles” (Zabarowska 3). For this reason, many of Baldwin's characters, even Baldwin himself are drawn to this progressive place. In some ways, Greenwich Village was ahead of its time. In others, it continued to function as a proponent of racism and heteronormativity. While the Village offers hope, the suburbs, briefly depicted in the novel are “arguably always present, structuring the city by defining the boundaries and limitations of both the city and a character's mobility” (Reddinger 127). Rufus imagined that he could share a life with his white girlfriend Leona in Greenwich Village, however temporarily. Even in the Village—“the place of liberation”—Rufus experiences

aversive racism. As he's walking with Leona, a young couple passes by and Rufus can feel the "sheepish glance the man gave them as they passed" and the young woman's face "closed tight, like a gate" (AC 28). Greenwich Village, though less openly racist than other spaces in NYC, is still full of prejudice and discrimination that operates silently through passing glances and backward comments. Rufus may be able to exist in this space but he certainly will not be able to thrive.

Rufus struggled to find a home in any of the spaces he tried—not Harlem, not Greenwich Village, and not in the heteronormative domestic sphere with Leona. Rufus takes out his pain and shame on Leona, admitting to Vivaldo that he's destroying her, but "she's destroying me too." Racially innocent Leona doesn't understand that she could be a part of the problem—the Southern space she comes from wouldn't allow it. She only knows to tell Rufus that there's "nothing wrong with being colored." To which, Rufus replies, "Not if you a hard-up white lady" (AC 53). Leona may love Rufus but Baldwin has shown us that loving our Black brothers and sisters is not enough. To stop there lumps Leona into the white liberal group that fails to miss the point.

Rufus doesn't fit into the spaces he views as options. This drives his dream of going across waters, "someplace away from all these nowhere people, where a man could be treated like a man. (AC 52). Reddinger observes that Rufus yearns for "escape from the limits of New York and the racial, gendered, and sexual oppression imposed by the historical legacy of the space in which they live" (125). After Leona is admitted into the psychiatric ward, Rufus feels that he is officially lost and spends his last month alive as an unhoused person. He travels the streets, where he experiences fears of the police and predatorial men who will pay "a beer and the promise of warm blankets" for his body (AC 41). One man tries to get him too drunk to say no with the bribe of a sandwich. There is no safety for Rufus in the streets.

Moving between locations is risky business, and Rufus's homeless state provides no safety for him. "He thought of walking to Harlem but he was afraid of the police he would encounter in his passage through the city" (41). This is the kind of racism most white people do not struggle to comprehend. It is more obvious when one only needs to look at the news to see how often people of color experience police violence or are victims of sexual violence. It would be easy to hope that the streets are a neutral territory owned by neither side of the race war, but that is not the case. Rufus tells Vivaldo that "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" (AC 52). The lack of safe space for Rufus is both literal and figurative. "Rufus's lack of home reflects not only his inability to have a material place of dwelling, but also reflects a larger, epistemological challenge to having a "place" within the city, and in turn, the nation" (Reddinger 128).

Rufus, much like Baldwin, felt that he had no place in any of the spaces he tried to live his life. He feels like the abandoned child America never wanted to be born. In his 1955 collection, *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin speaks of his own relationship to the Eurocentric canons of art and literature and recounts:

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa" (6).

As a so-called Bastard of the West, Rufus questions "Ain't I your baby too?" and begs of the air, "Do you love me? Do you love me?" (AC 9). Feeling abandoned by the white Christian God, his friends, and his nation, Rufus ultimately decides to take his own life on the bridge "built to honor the father of his country" (87). The irony is rich and deeply heartbreaking. As Reddinger argues,

it is as though “Rufus—as a queer black man—cannot escape his life possibilities as defined within the space of New York City” (Reddinger 129). The same nation that promised “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” denied him all three based on the color of his skin. The spaces formed from systemic racism and heteronormativity deny his existence.

Healing Spaces

In order to move forward and create a world in which identities such as Rufus’ and Baldwin’s can safely exist, there are several things that need to happen. It is imperative that people gain the ability to view the world from different places. In *Another Country*, Eric travels to France for a few years where he is able to partially dismantle the harmful racist and homophobic ideologies inculcated in him through his Southern American upbringing. While it is true that not everyone has the opportunity to be world travelers, there are other ways to expand their worldview. All people are capable of changing their space. This can be done by creating and sustaining friendships with people of color. Diangelo points out that if there is a lack of racial diversity in her community, she must “Get out of my comfort zone and change my environment.” The responsibility to break up segregation belongs to white people and “addressing racism is not without effort” (144). When an entire race of people is out of sight, out of mind, it is nearly impossible to remember their humanity. Segregation only perpetuates such apathy.

As Baldwin said in his “Letter from a Region in My Mind, “we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women” (140). While it will take both races working together to challenge racism and heteronormativity, it is important to note that the burden of education that must occur is not equal. “The expectation that people of color should teach white people about racism is another aspect of white racial innocence that reinforces

several problematic racial assumptions” (Diangelo 64). There are a multitude of mediums through which white people can learn, but the best place to start is still in the pages of books. Diangelo urges her readers to “seek out information from books” as there are many people of color who “*are* committed to teaching whites about racism on their own terms” (146, original emphasis). Authors, like James Baldwin, have been educating white audiences for centuries, they just need a willing audience. Baldwin has made it clear, however, that this is not his responsibility.

In the final chapter of *White Fragility*, Diangelo offers ways to move forward. She suggests that Americans “demand we be given this information in schools and universities and that we not be required to take special elective courses to be exposed to it” (146). Baldwin’s books, AP African American History, and equity training are currently being banned. What is happening in America right now is a backlash of white innocence, especially of white heteronormative and patriarchal origins. The people behind these decisions (mostly white males) are holding onto a desire to return to “the good ol’ days.” They want to “make America great again.” This framework is particularly dangerous because statements like this illegitimize the lived experience of people of color. America did not provide “good ol’ e days” for many groups of people, especially their Black brothers and sisters.

In the quest for creating a more just world, white people must also remember the warning from James Baldwin not to become another white progressive. Cass, Richard, Eric, and Vivaldo all challenged the status quo by maintaining friendships and romantic relationships with Black people. Eric engaged in sexual relationships that undermined heteronormative power. However, all of these characters continued the racist and homophobic ideologies with which they were indoctrinated. It is not enough to be nice to or even love people of color. Rufus demonstrated that

black and queer humanities cannot be sustained in white heteronormative spaces. Diangelo warns that:

The default of the current system is the reproduction of racial inequality; our institutions were designed to reproduce racial inequality and they do so with efficiency. To continue reproducing racial inequality, the system only needs white people to be really nice and carry on, smile at people of color, be friendly across race, and go to lunch together on occasion. interrupting racism takes courage and intentionality (153).

This denial of truth, or lie, is one with which Baldwin was far too familiar. The façade has neatly covered the trauma that Baldwin and many other Black Americans have suffered. Eddie Glaude, who has studied Baldwin's life and influence for over 30 years, notes that "It has never been America's way to confront the trauma directly, largely because the lie does not allow for it" (46). To confront the truth is inconvenient. It would mean accepting that great harm has been caused by the white people of this country. Baldwin knew that in order for white people to avoid this uncomfortable reality they invented "a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, [a system that] is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense" (qtd. in Glaude 47). It will not be easy and it will get ugly but Americans must face the simple truth: racism is not gone; it's just gone silent.

Americans love to falsely believe that they have made "progress," but when white people are not even allowed to access the texts of black men who share their lived experiences, we cannot hope to truly progress. Again, I could not walk into my public library in rural America and leave with a Baldwin text in my hand. In a world where white people are convinced that they hold no racism because they have a black family member or work with people of color, they deny an oppressive system that serves them despite their smiles and innocence. Schools cannot

pick and choose which histories they want to accept as truth. Finally, white people must not imagine themselves as the exception to the rule. Vivaldi, in conversation with Rufus about the obsession with black sexualities, asserts “I’m different,” to which Rufus can only respond, “I bet you are” (AC 70). As a white liberal, Vivaldo does not see that he upholds systemic racism by imagining himself as an unwilling participant.

In 1962, James Baldwin published *Another Country*. It was not widely accepted. The Chicago Board of Education tried to have it removed from a junior college when a 26-year-old woman complained of its contents. The novel has had to contend with white fragility and censorship since it saw the page. It is not only the novel that has been declared dangerous. J. Edgar Hoover kept a file on Baldwin at the FBI that ran 1,884 pages long, in which he was labeled “a well-known pervert” and a “threat to national security” (Rich 2016). Outside of the white heteronormative sphere, Baldwin himself is dangerous. Access to James Baldwin’s books, and any books that allow readers to establish empathy for a different group of people, is more important now than ever. History is in the past. Slavery happened. Violence and lynching happened. Racism is still operating, even if it is uncomfortable to admit. Baldwin warned Americans that “We have constructed a history which is a total lie, and have persuaded ourselves that it is true” (LtA). He also charged Americans to “Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.” (TFNT 8)

James Baldwin remains relevant in contemporary discussions of race and sexuality, but his influence cannot continue if his existence as a black queer man does not appear in white spaces. “Now that. . . the national discussion of race has largely retreated from debates over proposed solutions to a debate over whether problems still exist, Baldwin’s work has regained its influence” (Rich 2016). America can no longer deny that racism is real, as Baldwin warned that

innocence, or willful ignorance, “constitutes the crime” (TFNT 6). It is time to stop being innocent, and it’s time to start creating safe spaces for our loved black and queer friends to exist freely and authentically.

Baldwin remained optimistic about America’s future. He never let the pain he suffered at the hands of white people breed hate in his heart. He, in fact, loved America: “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (NKMN 9). Baldwin felt called to point out America’s problems, so that change could truly begin. It is unfortunate that James Baldwin didn’t get to see his dream realized. However, the American people are still capable of growth and change. Baldwin knew that there was no time like the present. He reminded readers that “There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.” (NKMN 32). It is time for change, and the time is now.

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