

ABSTRACT

“*Beneath The Open Sky*—James Baldwin’s Negro and the Other Stranger(s) in the Room: Imagining a Future History of Black Queer Becoming in a Global World”

How are we to make sense of Baldwin’s silence about the HIV/AIDS pandemic and avoid his critical thought and fiction slipping into merely a radical black pragmatism in contrast to neoliberal idealism or delusions of global democracy that present a black/queer existence unencumbered by the perpetual realities of dying and disease? Throughout his critical thought and fiction, Baldwin challenges the political embodiment of kinship symbolized by white Father/Mother nation. The assertion of a radical politics of love as decolonial praxis, at the end of *The Fire Next Time*, for instance, attempts to engage the opacity of relations (between self and Other) of feeling (“racial tensions that menace”), a becoming-in-conflict with rationalist metaphysics. Embracing abjection and fugitivity as part of the everyday experience of black life, Baldwin’s work anticipates current dialogues in black study between Afro-pessimism and black optimism, which splits along the narrow fissure of black fungibility in a distinction between ‘social death’ and ‘stolen life’ as it pertains to the humanity of ‘the black’ existence at the border of modern [‘Man’]. However, for Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, Marlon Riggs (all of whom had their lives cut short due to HIV/AIDS), and other black LGBTQ’s whose vision of a radical black queer art-activism—guided by the motto “Black Men Loving Black Men Is A Revolutionary Act”—ushers in the black health crisis movement, Baldwin presents a choice of impossible possibility, a “hunger for self-recognition” prescribed by a radical black queer tradition realized only by a spatiotemporal undoing of its authority, an ontological and epistemological collapse of the black queer body, “onticide,” to use Calvin Warren’s word (indebted to Baldwin who is himself in need of undoing) (Hemphill, *Brother To Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*: iv; Warren, *Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics*: 11).

Thinking about Baldwin’s politics of love as the realization of freedom in becoming, for reasons that I will make clear throughout my presentation, this essay will examine two aspects of its revolutionary potential. First, I will consider how love as a source of estrangement and resilience engages cultural memory as collective loss (history-herstory) that allows for the impossible, alternative logics of kinship (*Stranger In The Village; The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American*). How does memory as remembrance disturb/unrest/dislodge the forgotten history [herstory] of symbolic order? How is history utilized as a technology of un-freedom?

The second aspect I will give thought to addresses how love displaces racialized shame with a critical aesthetic praxis of rage that overcomes violence and is a radical site for interracial intimacy based on a mutuality which might allow for ontoepistemological disclosures that exceed colonial exploitation and oppression (*The Devil Finds Work*). Here, I am interested in the ways Baldwin’s irrational critique moves between what he describes as a kind of madness embodied by a ghostly virility of niggerized existence and a re-imagined historicity that seizes upon the impossible possibility of ontoepistemological destruction. It is here that Baldwin is at his most powerful and vulnerable, as social pariah (on par with Socrates, W.E.B. DuBois, Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon) engaged in a critical philosophical reconstruction of the humanist project.

Baldwin's critical thought—as a radical alterity of blackness, at the point at which it intersects with multiple forms of incommensurability, difference, along a perforated axis of gender, race, class, and sexuality—demonstrates a possible impossible nonconforming black queer subjectivity within the fabulation of western civilization. However, I will argue that in undoing silences and iterative conformity at the crux of his irrational critique of black genocide, paradoxically, it is Baldwin's disavowal of the colonial experience of black Americans (a trace of his American exceptionalism) as well as his bracketed [queer/bisexual/gay] identity and a cosmopolitanism which undergirds his internationalism and contributes to an astigmatic vision of black life that ultimately reinforces certain structural inequalities at the boundary of a nascent neoliberal capitalism (*Equals In Paris*). In conclusion, pursuing Baldwin's "unimaginable country," a future US "reordered" through "the concept of black freedom," his version of messianic time (*No Name in the Street*), I briefly imagine how revisiting Malcolm X's effort to take the US to the International Criminal Court of United Nations for "violating the UN charter of human rights" (Malcolm X, *Malcom X Speaks*: 54)—failing to ensure equal protection under the law to black Americans going as far back as 1865—might create an opening for the reconstruction of state sovereignty and provide an adequate framework for confronting the limitations of those ethical perspectives guiding global AIDS initiatives, which fail to deal with the interlocking complexities of something like heterosexist racism when confronting social justice issues. To elucidate my overall position at places throughout the paper, I will draw comparisons to the thought of Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Vincent Carter.

This paper is a work in progress. A different, unrevised version of it was recently presented at "The Evidence of Things Not Seen: Queering Europe With James Baldwin" conference, University of Bern, Switzerland, 22-23 February 2018.