

**Tentative title:** Seeking *Another Country*: Baldwin and Performance.

### **Prospectus**

In this paper I propose readings of James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1962) and Horace Ové's film *Baldwin's Nigger* (1969), discussing the ways in which these texts are in conversation with each other. The first part of *Another Country* is mainly concerned with Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer who is constantly dealing with the internal and external effects of racism and white supremacy. These effects are destructive, leading Rufus to severely mistreat the people with whom he associates, women in particular, and ultimately, he commits suicide as a result. The rest of the novel deals with the implications of Rufus's life and death for the other characters, including his sister and white friends. The film *Baldwin's Nigger* is documentation of a talk conducted by Baldwin and Dick Gregory regarding the position of colonized people, particularly black people, in the world, and the issue of the struggle for self-determination that is taking place at this time. The talk itself takes place in England.

In my reading of *Another Country* I want to focus on a particular moment where Rufus, after wandering through the streets of New York, is solicited for sex by a stranger, a white man. In response to this proposition, Rufus says "I don't have a thing to give you" (Baldwin, 44). The "thing" that is the referent of this response is presumably Rufus himself, and this deceptively simple response raises a whole host of questions. What does it mean to be a thing, or what does it mean to think of oneself, or be thought of, as a thing? In having Rufus use the language of possession, Baldwin seems to ask what it means to possess a self, to possess things, to possess others, and to even have the capacity to own? These questions animate the lives—the daily performances; movements—of Rufus and the other characters in this novel, and I want to examine these movements and performances, teasing out their implications for thought regarding

race, gender, sexuality, and the objectification of the other. Further, these questions challenge normative notions of subjectivity itself, and I want to examine the ways in which Baldwin reveals the dangerous and corrosive character of (self) possessive and individuated subject-hood as well as that of the world borne out of this positionality in relation to the other. I propose that in this revelation, Baldwin serves as an opening through which alternative ways of being with each other can be conceived.

Approximately five minutes into *Baldwin's Nigger*, James Baldwin gives us this formulation:

When you try to stand up and look the world in the face, like you had a right to be here. When you do that—without knowing that this is the result of it—you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world...And by the attempt to walk from here to there, you have begun to frighten the white world.

What is it like to walk with Baldwin? What does it mean to stand and walk in the way Baldwin describes in these phrases? I plan to analyze, not only Baldwin's words, but also his performance of this argument: the stances, gestures, movements, and more generally, the modes of performance, of being, that Baldwin inhabits and deploys during the course of this talk that animate and enrich his words. In short, Baldwin's argument is not reducible to the words transcribed above. I want to show that through his words and his performance of them, Baldwin acts as an entry point to thinking through different ways of being with each other that are not predicated on notions of (self) possession and individuation. I want to argue that a concurrent reading of performance in *Baldwin's Nigger* and *Another Country* a generative project in that with both texts, I am primarily concerned with the different performances of subjectivity under the influence of white

supremacy and racism, and how Baldwin uses these moments to imagine and enact alternative modes of being.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources:**

Baldwin, James. *Another Country*. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.

*Pressure; Baldwin's Nigger*. Dir. Horace Ové. British Film Institute, 2005. Film.

### **Secondary Sources:**

Lepecki, Andre. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

In Chapter 5, “Stumbling Dance: William Pope.L’s Crawls,” Lepecki’s attention to performances of black male subjectivity, and the act of standing, is particularly pertinent to my discussion of *Baldwin’s Nigger*, But is also helpful in thinking through the issues present in *Another Country*.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81. Print.

In this essay, Spillers examines takes up a discussion of black women and the processes through which they are objectified and dehumanized in American discourse. She analyzes the effects of slavery on the black body, making a distinction between the “body” and the “flesh,” and arguing that, through slavery and its afterlife, the black body has been continually reduced to flesh. This is helpful to my discussion of the ways in which body and flesh, and their relation to subjectivity is working throughout both texts involving Baldwin.