

The Darkness Outside: Intimacy as a Means of Relief and Emancipation in James Baldwin and Alice Walker

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The Darkness Outside: Intimacy as a Means of Relief and Emancipation in James
Baldwin and Alice Walker

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Abstract

In this thesis I will argue that in the works of James Baldwin and Alice Walker, intimate moments represent a view into the text's political message. Both authors offer sincere and compassionate relationships as an effective form of relief or liberation for black people from the conditions white supremacist patriarchy enforces on them. An intimate interaction can involve no more than two characters and it is a moment of self-discovery through the exposure of self-relevant feelings and experiences to another person. White people enjoy intimacy as an exploration of themselves and other people because as a privileged group, they can move comfortably outside of these interactions. However, for black people in the United States, intimacy is a necessary shelter from a society that constantly mortifies their sense of self-worth.

Intimacy can be a moment of happiness and growth, as occurs in the relationship between Celie and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, but it is unattainable when the character harbors resentment and self-deprecation, such is the case in Rufus, the protagonist of the first section in Baldwin's *Another Country*. Indeed, in order to access an earnest and genuine relationship with other people, the characters need to be ready to love themselves, which becomes difficult when they have been violently subjected to white supremacist standards their entire lives. Shame tied to race, gender, and sexuality, I argue, is the most effective means of alienation Baldwin and Walker's characters have to battle in order to make their internal lives and material conditions bearable.

Dedication

To Sara.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, mom and dad, for packing last minute meals, giving last minute lifts, the hugs on the doorstep. I would never have made it here without you.

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1. Introduction

Although the term “intimacy” is of common usage in English, it is used vaguely and there is little agreement on what kind of effort has to come from both parties, in what circumstances intimacy can be attained, and what are the complexities and implications of sharing an intimate moment. For this reason, the task of expressing the psychological and social experience of intimacy has evolved into a complex thread of academic discourse. In their essay “Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process,” sociologists Reis and Shaver have reviewed this dialogue and created a summary of the sociological definition of intimacy.

The process begins when one person expresses personally revealing feelings or information to another. It continues when the listener responds supportively and empathetically. For an interaction to become intimate, the discloser must feel understood, validated and cared for. (367)

The terms “intimacy” and “intimate” derive from the Latin words *intimus* (innermost) and *intimare* (to make the innermost known). In this thesis, intimacy is synonymous to emotional and intellectual authenticity, a pure form of love where the characters deliver parts of themselves they were conditioned into understanding as shameful. In the context of this thesis, intimacy between characters is identified as the moment in which two characters are transparent about what society deems shameful about their identity. Intimacy therefore opposes social performativity. This includes, in Baldwin’s case, shame tied to race, sexuality, and deviance from gender expectations. In *The Color Purple*, shame is evident in Celie, the protagonist, who has been constantly abused since her childhood and dehumanized by her father and her husband.

The thesis is divided in three chapters: chapter one is an overview of the meaning of intimacy for the African American community in the United States. Chapter Two analyzes intimacy in heterosexual relationships, and the obstacles that come with the clash between black manhood and white womanhood and vice versa. Chapter Three analyzes the stigmas that come with queerness and how difficulties coming from inside or outside the relationship can potentially prevent or foster intimacy between the two parties.

Although there are few sources that specifically study intimacy in Baldwin and Walker, I have found various sources that analyze racial and gender dynamics in their texts. To locate a stable definition of intimacy, I will be using the definition of scholars Harry T. Reis and Phillip Shaver in their essay *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process*. The leading scholar that I refer to in this dissertation is bell hooks, who has published encompassing and in-depth material on gender and racial dynamics in African American cultural history. Other leading sources include Linda Abbandonato's queer analysis of *The Color Purple* and Dwight McBride's study of *Giovanni's Room*.

2. Intimacy from Slavery to the Twentieth Century

There is little agreement in the academic world on the ontological definition of intimacy. Definitions in the dictionary overlap on very few elements on what it means to be intimate with another person. The most characteristic description of intimacy can be found in its etymological definition: The word intimacy derives from Latin *intimus* “inmost, innermost, deepest” (adj.) and the verb *intimare*, making the innermost known. African American author and intellectual Maya Angelou makes the case that “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (76). Indeed, in both James Baldwin and Alice Walker, intimacy is an exchange and intermingling of the characters’ untold stories, a display of their deepest feelings, and the creation of a mutual understanding.

The concept of intimacy in itself emerges, according to Daniel Juan Gil, during the Early Modern period. In his essay *Modernity and Emotion in the Early Modern Discourse of Sexuality*, Gil argues that the development of Capitalism solicited the gradual creation of intimacy and the creation of a hierarchy based on social connection and no longer on lineage (865). Indeed, Gil notes that in Modernity, sexuality becomes a form of protection for individuals that have to navigate a set of deeply rooted and enforced social norms:

Neither social nor antisocial, sexuality will come to seem asocial insofar as it constitutes a place apart where powerful connections spring up between people who have in some important way dropped out of the functional dimensions of early modern society. (862)

Intimacy was therefore born as a shield from an increasingly competitive society, where individuals needed spaces to release themselves from the public's gaze and explore themselves.

Moreover, to support this case, Gil quotes Luhmann, who contends that

as modern society relies more and more on impersonal connections, it also lays the groundwork for increasingly deep personal connections. These intense personal bonds are part of the individual's effort to cultivate a sense of self that does not rely upon a stable position within a social hierarchy. At the same time, intimate relations compensate persons for the alienation that comes from exposure to impersonal social systems that are not respecters of persons. (863)

Intimacy initiated, according to Gil and Luhmann, as an escape from a rigorous social hierarchy that assessed individual value based on how well they navigate the social world as opposed to their personality and the richness of their interior lives.

Intimacy is therefore particularly precious as a means of withholding space from a social or economic presentation of the self. Sociologist Erving Goffman maintains that although social performance is always split from the true self, there are roughly two types of performance. The first type is the sincere performance, namely when "the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on" (10). On the other hand, there are instances when the individual contrives their performance. This takes place "[w]hen the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term sincere for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance" (10). In this section, Goffman argues that there is a form of performance on the social stage that requires restraint and fabrication, often

when the individual has an interest in giving a specific impression on the other party. The need to fabricate a performance can depend on gender, sexuality, and class other than skin color. A woman might need to perform compliance in a job interview, a gay person might need to perform straightness in a hostile environment, a poor person can give off the impression of being wealthier. However, skin color can seldom be performed. For this reason, black people in the United States need to perform their social selves in the attempt to compensate the prejudice and the stigma that come with their blackness.

This performative self comes with a long history of physical and psychological oppression. In the African American experience, specifically during slavery, slaves had to contrive their performance to please their owners and limit the abuse they had to endure. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass proves this to be the case. In a brief anecdote, he describes an interaction between the slave owner Colonel Lloyd and a slave who was unaware he belonged to him. When Colonel Lloyd asks him if his owner treats him well, the slave says that he does not. Two or three weeks later, the slave was sold to a new master, “snatched away. . . with a hand more unrelenting than death” (31). While reflecting on this episode, Douglass concludes that “. . . It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their own condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind” (31-32). Inevitably, under this type of pressure slaves were taught to behave and express themselves despite their true opinions: Every interaction they had with their superior had to be accompanied with a performance. Their safety depended on this performance, and it had to be convincing and impeccable to create the opportunity to escape harm. Even when they were convincing, they could still have been brutalized to the master or slaveholder’s whim.

The necessity for black people to perform does not end with the abolition of slavery; The behavior of white policemen in the twentieth century post-abolition America often mirrors the role of the slaveowner in slave narratives. While the ideology of slavery revolved around the dehumanization of black people, with the Thirteenth Amendment, black people go from being dehumanized to being criminalized: “Section 1: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (U. S. Const.). The loophole of prison labor and the need of cheap or free labor after the Civil War lead to the mass incarceration of African Americans for petty crimes. According to Michelle Alexander, the writer of *The New Jim Crow*, with the collapse of legitimized slavery, the white south felt the necessity to restore the subjugation of African Americans, while maintaining the national economy dependent on their free labor.

During the decade following Redemption, the convict population grew ten times faster than the general population. . . It was the nation’s first prison boom and, as they are today, the prisoners were disproportionately black. . . The criminal justice system was strategically employed to force African Americans back into a system of extreme repression and control, a tactic that would continue to prove successful for generations to come. (32)

While the abolition of slavery meant that African Americans were finally free from ownership of white individuals, the loophole in the legislations still made them an easy target to enslavement on behalf of the state through prison labor. Moreover, the lack of financial reparations to African American communities and their ghettoization perpetuated the disproportionate power dynamic between black people and white institutions.

This issue created great anxiety in African American literature for centuries to come. For instance, Chico, the protagonist of James Baldwin's short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" is an African American musician who goes back to New York after having lived in Europe for years. As he approaches the customs authorities, Chico thinks:

I had once known how to pitch my voice precisely between curtness and servility, and known what razor's edge of a pickaninny's smile would turn away wrath. . . . Once I had been an expert at baffling these people, at setting their teeth on edge. . . . But I was no expert now. These faces were no longer merely the faces of two white men, who were my enemies. They were the faces of two white people whom I did not understand, and I could no longer plan my moves in accordance with what I knew of their cowardice and their needs and their strategy. (881)

In this passage, Baldwin displays the struggle of having to feign an identity, which is what Goffman would define as a cynical performance. When interacting with white authorities, Chico has to adapt to degrading aspects of the white imagination: He has to distance himself as much as he can from the image of the violent black man, while at the same time he must show that he fits into the stereotype of harmless, lobotomized individual of the white imaginary. In his book *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein defines the figure of the pickaninny as "a subhuman black juvenile who was typically depicted outdoors, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence." There are various degrading depictions of pickaninnies, but according to Bernstein "[i]t is this absence of pain that that unifies the construction of the pickaninny across differences." (34) By evoking the image of the Pickaninny in a moment when Chico is facing a threat, Baldwin is drawing a clear analogy between the psychological violence of degrading black people through racialized representation,

and the potential physical violence that can occur when black people do not correspond to the image that is assigned to them in the white imaginary. There is thus an extremely performative element into being an African American in the United States, as an oppressed group they need to please the expectations of a powerful majority that constantly marginalizes them under the threat of battering, incarceration, or murder.

These expectations are upheld through hard power, such as the threat of physical brutality or imprisonment, as well as soft power, namely the use of culture to manipulate the image of African American. In her book *Salvation: Black People and Love*, bell hooks notes:

A white person who hires a black maid expecting that this person will be fat and funny just like Aunt Jemima on the pancake box will most likely find and choose that type of person. . . [t]he image of the large mammy figure was largely a product of racist white imaginations. Historian Herbert Gutmann was one of the first scholars to call attention to the fact that research showed that the average black female who worked in a white home after slavery was usually a young underdeveloped girl and not the overweight mammy figure extolled by whites. This figure existed first in the white imagination and then the reality followed. (49-50)

Through this example, hooks proves that white stereotypes of black people are not only toxic because they degrade and dehumanize black people, but also because they provide a model for reality and expectations with material consequences that require a specific performance on the part of black people. The stage directions that derive from white supremacy inevitably exhaust the black individual, forcing them in a grotesque performance of naivety or foolishness.

This violence affects the value of the environment where they are allowed to perform themselves. Indeed, hooks also argues that “[s]urvival in a racist society often dictated that black

people adjust to values and social mores imposed on us by the white world, which often affected our capacity to be loving” (10). The role that black people are constantly forced into affects them profoundly: Because of the way they are treated and represented is compulsively degrading and dehumanizing, their ideas of self-worth and the perceived depth of their internal lives is not acknowledged by mainstream culture. This creates a partition between the complexity of their perceived emotions, and the platitude and mortification of their depiction in white supremacist imagery. This inevitably reflects in the parts of their lives they live separately from white people, which is where intimacy becomes important.

bell hooks talks about the collective efforts slaves invested when they were constantly marginalized. hooks affirms that “[d]espite the dehumanization enacted by the dominant culture of white supremacy, with spiritual resiliency enslaved black people worked to create a subculture where bonds of affection could be forged and sustained” (20). In Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, this effort is especially evident from his mother’s manifestations of love. When Douglass was born, she was moved to a different plantation, and would nonetheless risk her life at night to walk to his room, after an entire day of slave labor, to have time with her son.

She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get. . . She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. (18)

This moment of speechless connection shows how Douglass’ mother material and psychological conditions did not prevent her from reaching out to her son, yet their living conditions severed their intimate time together.

A deeper understanding of white supremacist influence on intimacy entails the pervasive factor of dehumanization, a component which becomes increasingly evident during the backlash of abolition. This component starts to emerge during an individual's growth, as the parents are often torn between raising their children to experience their emotional lives to their full capacity, and trying to teach them to bend their affective needs and performative selves to fit the limited, if existing, space that is carved for them in society. In her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison shows this conflict when Hannah, Sula's mother, asks her mother Eva if she ever loved her and her siblings.

“I mean did you? You know. When we was little.”

. . . “No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinking.” . . . “You settin' there with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been full of maggots if I hadn't.”

“I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talking 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?”

“Play? Nobody was playin' in 1895. . . Niggers was dying like flies.” (68)

In this section, Hannah and Eva confront their different perceptions of intimacy and parental love. The image of parenthood that Morrison portrays in her novel shows how parents' constant urgency to provide for their children and the necessity to protect them prevents them from providing emotional support. This inevitably leads to the impossibility for children to experience intimate moments with their parents, which affects their relationships as they grow up. Both Baldwin and Walker often display parenthood in their stories to show how the parents' behavior molds the character's perspectives and ideas of themselves and of the people they are involved with in future relationships.

Baldwin provides a similar concern in his short story “Sonny’s Blues,” which features a suggestive scene where the narrator and protagonist is remembering the afternoons he spent with his parents as a child, and connects his experience to all black families living in New York City at the time:

There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes. . . . For a moment nobody’s talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside Everyone is looking at something the child can’t see The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about The child knows that they won’t talk any more because if he knows too much about what’s happened to them, he’ll know too much too soon, about what’s going to happen to him. (840-841)

In this example of domestic intimacy, Baldwin is depicting the dilemmas of parental love towards black children. This form of love requires negotiating between raising a child with the awareness of the violence in the social world and protecting them from it before they have to come in contact with it. Intimacy comes into play on two different levels in this situation: First, the living room becomes a space where the child is surrounded by loving family members whose greatest desire is to keep the child safe. Moreover, Baldwin shows this safe space as a place where the parents can quit performing their social selves, but still have to hide their pain from their child with the intent to acquaint him with the troublesome reality of black life as late as possible.

In his piece “My Dungeon Shook” from *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin further explains the conflicts of black parenthood, showing the double difficulty of bearing oppression and protecting one’s loved ones. This text represents a form of intimacy through kinship, where

Baldwin lovingly addresses his nephew, who is named James after him. In doing so, he is implicitly addressing black American youth, providing motivation and relief to all the hardships that come with being black in the United States. In this essay, Baldwin is acknowledging the detrimental effect of white supremacy over black people while giving hints on how to bear the adversities. One, to consciously resist his degradation while constantly reminding himself of his worth through those who love him, in this case his uncle, Baldwin himself: “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger. I tell you this because I love you and please don’t ever forget it” (4). Another solution he gives his nephew is to understand the root and nature of his oppression, and understand and love his oppressors, who ignore their responsibilities as an oppressive group: “You must accept [white people]. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope” (8). While providing his nephew with this survival manual for a black man, he also reminds him of the beauty of his existence, and the purpose that comes from his connection to his kin:

For here you were, big James. . . : to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against a loveless world. Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. . . And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children’s children. (7)

Through this loving and personal letter, Baldwin gives an example of caring and intimacy, where in directly addressing a loved one and understanding their struggles as his own he creates room for healing and growth for his nephew and for a new generation of black people that is preparing to inhabit the world.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker also underlines the importance of parental guidance, as it forms the character's behavior in future relationships as well as their perception of the self. Celie, the protagonist of the novel, is a character whose sense of self-worth has been completely annihilated in her relationship to her parents. While her mother was stuck by an invalidating illness during most of her childhood, her father, who later turns out to be her step-father, rapes her and in doing so impregnates her twice. Her stepfather then gives her hand in marriage to a man, Mr. _____, who treats her like a maid, a nanny to his children from his previous marriage, and a sexual slave. When talking to her friend and lover Shug, Celie describes the sex she has with Mr. _____, showing how he objectifies her:

He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there he never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

She start to laugh. Why, do his business, she say. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you.

That's what it feel like, I say. (81)

In these moments, the relationship between Mr. _____ and Celie shows that there is no room for intimacy. In her essay "The Closet of the Soul", Walker thinks back to both characters, noting that neither of them is healthy: "They are, in fact, dreadfully ill, and they manifest their dis-ease according to their culturally derived sex roles and the bad experience early impressed in their personalities" (80). Certainly, there is a double layer of oppression in Celie's case, as her womanhood amplifies the oppression she endures as a black person. But even then, the character of Mr. _____ and the way he tends to treat Celie is the product of how he saw himself dehumanized throughout his growth. In the same essay, Walker continues to explain Mr. _____'s

character. She argues that Mr. _____'s father, Old Mr. _____, is part white, as he is the son of a master and his slave.

Mister¹ learns how to treat women and children from his father, Old Mister. Who did Old Mister learn from? Old Master, his slave-owning father, who treated Old Mister's mother and Old Mister (growing up) as slaves, *which they were*.² Old Mister is so riddled with self-hatred, particularly because of his black "part," and the slave "part" (totally understandable, given his easily imagined suffering during a childhood among blacks and white who despised each other). . . The contempt that Old Mister's father/owner exhibited for his black slave "woman" (Old Mister's mother) is reflected in Old Mister's description of Shug Avery, who, against all odds, Albert loves: "She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats." *This is a slave owner's description of a black woman*. But Albert's ability to genuinely love Shug, and find her irresistibly beautiful – black as she is – is a major sign of mother love, the possibility of health. (81)

The inability of Mr. _____ to find peace with himself, as well as the treatment of women he inherited from his father, makes him rigid and angry in his relationship to Celie, while Celie's initial feeling of worthlessness prevents her from standing her ground against Mr. _____.

Intimacy is not a given, it must be achieved. *The Color Purple* displays a process whereby both characters that are initially sick and dismembered by cultural constructs, who manage to understand themselves and other people through gains and losses. In her relationship to Shug Avery, Celie finds an attentive listener that gives her validation and the chance to tell her own story. When Celie elopes from the household, Mr. _____ is deprived from the subject on

¹ Walker refers to Mr. _____ as "Mister" in this essay.

²This is not to imply that all the sexist cruelty among black people was inherited by white slave owners. . . [note by Walker]

which he would exercise oppressive and unjust power. He healed through the intimacy he builds with his son, who comforts him for his loss.

Harpo went up there plenty nights to sleep with him, say Sophia. Mr. _____ would be all cram up in a corner of the bed. . . You know how little he is, say Sofia. And how big and stout Harpo is. Well, one night I walked up to tell Harpo something – and the two of was just laying there on bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy in his arms. (231)

Losing Celie commences a process where Mr. _____ is forced to embrace his fragility and make it known to others, preparing him slowly to embrace Celie and respect her as a human being when she will go back to live with him. It also makes him aware of his own vulnerability while accepting Celie and himself as complex, valuable, worthy human being.

Intimacy therefore becomes particularly valuable and rare precisely because it satisfies a self that is unsatisfied both in the public world and in the perception that this world imposes on oneself. Intimacy restores the individual's sense of themselves, while connecting them to other people who acknowledge the weight of their sufferings. Baldwin and Walker center intimacy in their novels as a central component for the characters to center themselves. Although intimacy is a universal feeling, the way we experience it varies depending on our societal position. Because African Americans are constantly compelled to perform for their social selves, other than constantly enduring white supremacist oppression, their intimate sphere is vastly affected from their conditions. In Douglass, as in Walker and Baldwin, black parents can dedicate little or no time to dedicate to their children's emotional literacy, as most times they are busy protecting and providing for them. Describing a place of intimacy that becomes more valuable, precisely because it satisfies a self that is unsatisfied with the public world.

3. Heterosexual love

It is ideal to think that intimacy implies severing oneself from the toxic norms that regulate race and gender expectations in the social world. Intimacy offers a relief and an escape from the social gaze, as it implies the disclosure of the non-social self without fear of judgement. Nevertheless, during intimate intercourse the individual will still carry all the gendered and sexualized power dynamics that they internalize from the white supremacist patriarchy. Both in Baldwin and in Walker, intimate moments between men and women represent an exploration between racial and gender dynamics, and how they reflect in the characters' intimate lives. Indeed, Baldwin's groundbreaking novel *Another Country* features a relationship between a black man and a white woman – Rufus and Leona – and its diametrical opposite, a white man with a black woman – Vivaldo and Ida. In this text, Baldwin navigates the American century-old anxiety of miscegenation and explores all of the difficulties involved in interracial relationships, even when involving white liberal individuals who fail to be honest about their unconscious bias against black bodies.

The Color Purple does not observe interracial relationships, although all the heterosexual relationships that exist in the narrative represent deeply rooted gender dynamics: Mr. _____ treats Celie as less than a human being both in private and in public. But more importantly, Walker sets out to prove the generational character of patriarchal violence through the character of Harpo, Mr. _____'s son, who spends most of his adult life married to Sofia, an assertive and confident woman who does not allow him to subjugate her. The combined study of these two

texts gives a perspective on the many different obstacles of white supremacist culture that prevents all the characters from genuinely connecting to each other. In all these relationships, interracial or not, these characters fail to find each other because of the simplistic images they have learned to project on their partners since their childhood. The only way out of this vicious cycle is for them to unlearn this inherited prejudice while taking responsibility for it. In *Another Country*, all the characters end up in a train wreck of emotional destruction precisely because they fail to strip their relationships from their preconceptions. In *The Color Purple*, on the other hand, one of the major factors that determine the happy ending is the reconciliation of the patriarchal characters with their female counterparts through the gradual shift of gender roles that takes place when the women quit subscribing to their subjugation.

In *Another Country*, Baldwin is testing the compatibility between individuals of different races and genders, providing an in-depth exploration of the different layers of oppression, namely the intersection between racial and gender oppression. In doing so, he explores the multifaceted quality of the subtle and pervasive anxiety of interracial sex and miscegenation, a tension that has been present in American society since the early settlement period. In 1662, Virginia already had a law that asserted that “if any Christian shall committ ffornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the ffines imposed by the former act [500 pounds of tobacco]” (Higginbothan and Kopytoff 102) . With the institution of slavery, Virginia issued laws that prevented relationships between white women and African slaves, although it was common practice for white male slave owners to rape their female slaves unpunished.

The anxiety of miscegenation survived and was strengthened after abolition, as the white population feared that the emancipation of African Americans and the advancement of Civil

Rights posed a threat to longstanding color caste system that privileged white people regardless of their social and financial condition. Authors and philosophers from the nineteenth century addressed the issue in defense of the legalization of intermarriage. Such was the case of George W. Cable's *A Freedman's Case in Equity* (1885), which was met with a response from Southern newspapers that claimed that "intermarriage, social ruin, and racial warfare would result if his views were followed" (Turner qtd. in Andrews). Interracial relationships therefore embodied the bulk of racial anxiety and a means to maintain segregation.

However, most American novelists were trying to defend miscegenation by portraying mulattos as harmless, hardworking individuals, in the attempt to spread "the best advertisement the race could show to a skeptical America" (Andrews 308). An example of this can be found in novels such as W. D. Howells' *An Imperative Duty*, published in 1892. According to Andrews, "Howells took the unprecedented step of allowing a near-white woman to marry a suitor who urges her to choose their happiness over what she at one point conceives as her 'imperative duty' to devote herself to humanitarian work among black people" (310). As much as Howells' intentions are undoubtedly positive, this novel mystifies the amalgamation of races, whereby the offspring of interracial couples is always a humble individual who is prone to duty while uninterested in participating in the white dominated job market. On the other hand, there were authors from the turn of the century such as Thomas Dixon, who wrote *The Clansman*, the novel that inspired the feature film *Birth of a Nation*. Dixon also wrote a novel called *The Leopard's Spots* in 1902, where he fueled the fear of "the black man's supposed sexual aggressiveness" and portrayed the black leaders in the novel as "uniformly dangerous to the virtue of white women and the sanctity of the family" (Andrews 312). These writings bear witness to the obsession that surrounded miscegenation during centuries of American history and culture, and the series of

tropes that surrounded the narrative on interracial relationships, such as the aggressive sexualization of black males and the threat of the amalgamation of races.

During the twentieth century, a groundbreaking novel that confronts the topic of miscegenation is *Light in August* by William Faulkner. The novel features Joe Christmas, a white passing individual with African American ancestry who lives on the margins of both white and black society. A violent and tormented character, Christmas is accused of the murder of his former lover, a white woman named Johanna Burden. Christmas will eventually get shot to death and castrated. According to Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, miscegenation anxiety is key in the novel's plot, as it represents "the principal means by which Faulkner contemplates and represents the imperiled state of white masculinity in the post-Reconstruction era and . . . the white male obsession with black manhood" (176). As the various authors from the nineteenth Century, Faulkner intended to portray miscegenation and interracial relationships to denounce the rampant racism of the post-bellum and post-abolition South. However, like his predecessors, Faulkner designs the tragic ending of Joe Christmas without studying the nature of Christmas' malaise, thus failing to give a multi-dimensional and detailed account of how people of color are socialized in a ruthless white supremacist society. Indeed, Abdur-Rahman continues arguing that "[l]ike many of the black characters in *Light in August*, Joe Christmas has little interiority and even less discernable motivation for doing what he does. Like the flat surface of a painting, he is a drawn figure" (177). The evolution that Baldwin will bring to the fore with *Another Country* comes with maintaining the tragic quality of interracial relationships while including substance to the character, showing how the tragedy comes with his internalization of the image that society has branded on him.

Finally, to fully understand the culture that Baldwin studies in *Another Country*, one must remember that at the time of the novel's publication, miscegenation was not only a social anxiety, but an actual piece of legislation, as it was forbidden by the law in seventeen states. Although New York, the state where the novel takes place, never issued anti-miscegenation laws, other states would need to wait until *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967 – five years after the publication of *Another Country* – to see them deemed as unconstitutional (Coleman). The social and legal framework that originated from the representation of interracial relationships since colonial settlements inevitably created a barrier of toxic conventions between black manhood and white womanhood.

In *Another Country*, Rufus and Leona, immediately exhibit a form of incommunicability. The two meet in a jazz bar in Harlem where Rufus is performing as a drummer. Rufus' first approach to Leona is a mock invitation to intimacy. As he steps down from the stage, he asks her, “ ‘What's on your mind, baby?’ . . . ‘What's on *your* mind?’ she countered, but it was clear that she simply had not known what else to say” (372). Considering Reis and Shaver's definition of intimacy as “the expression of personally revealing feelings or information to another” (367) and the definition of intimacy itself as “making the innermost known,” Rufus and Leona start their relationship by asking each other to reveal what is on their mind. However, neither of them answers the question, foreshadowing a superficial relationship where their bodies connect, but their inner realities do not.

This dynamic repeats itself multiple times in the conversation that follows. Just as they meet in the jazz club, Rufus invites Leona to a house party, and they share a taxi on the way there. Leona gradually shares information about her past life in the South:

She said nothing but she seemed, in the darkness, to tense to blush. . . “I’m glad I ain’t got to hurry none about getting home early tonight.”

“You ain’t got to worry nohow. I’m a big girl.”

“Honey,” he said, “you ain’t bigger than a minute.”

She sighed, “Sometimes a minute can be a mighty powerful thing.”

He decided against asking what she meant by this. He said, giving her a significant look, “That’s true,” but she did not seem to take his meaning. (374)

Leona is signaling her availability to tell Rufus about her past by reminiscing when her despotic family imposed a curfew for her to come home at night. Rather than inquiring for clarifications on what was disturbing her, when Leona says “[s]ometimes a minute can be a mighty powerful thing”, Rufus decides to apply her statement to his own life, furthering the misunderstanding that was already taking place between them. While this was an opportunity for the two to reveal their own personal conflicts, they further enclose themselves in their own pain.

Proximity yet failure to communicate becomes a constant as Rufus and Leona further attempts to establish a connection with each other. As they are in the elevator by themselves on their way to the party, it becomes clear that Rufus is attempting to explore Leona, but is afraid to acknowledge the complexity of her story and her emotions.

Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off. He wouldn’t be around enough to be bugged by her story. He just wanted her for tonight.

(376)

Here, Baldwin shows that while Rufus has a tenderness and a yearning for human connection, he is attempting to suffocate emotion with the intent of maintaining a position of power within the

relationship. According to Lorelei Cederstrom, “[i]n his relationship with Leona, Rufus reveals the intermingling of love and hate that characterizes the interaction between a black man and a white woman” (179). Indeed, Rufus’ interest in Leona’s internal life emerges even after they have sex. When she reveals her tragic domestic abuse, Rufus “pushed out of his mind all of the questions he wanted to ask her” (385). Apparently, Rufus is so crippled from his trauma in navigating the world as a black man in the liberal north, that he scrolls off the emotional weight of the damage that was done to Leona as a woman in a white misogynistic south.

Rufus and Leona are indeed kept apart from each other through the trauma that their social condition inflicts upon them. Once they are at the party, they go out the balcony and consume their relationship for the first time, in a shocking sex scene where all their latent resentment emerges:

He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. She began to cry. *I told you*, he moaned, *I’ll give you something to cry about*, and, at once, he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die. A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies. (384)

This encounter shows why intimacy will never be possible for Rufus and Leona. Rufus imagines a lynch mob, which often implied the mortification of the black man’s masculinity, sometimes even with the severance of genitals. This context makes his intercourse with a white woman a possibility to revendicate his masculinity. Leona, however, does not seem to find his violence disturbing. Although she cries while they have sex, immediately after she remarks “[i]t was so

wonderful” (384). Leona was therefore left apparently undisturbed by Rufus’ violence, as if, as Cederstrom assumed, “Rufus is. . . only the means by which Leona punishes herself for her failure to deal with the racial politics of her culture” (179). Rufus and Leona therefore fail to achieve intimacy because they do not investigate into each other’s emotional reality, dismissing each other’s humanity and rather viewing each other as objects of desire.

Baldwin further highlights the friction between black manhood and white womanhood through a flashback of Rufus’ experience from before he met Leona, of a night he spent with his best friend Vivaldo and his girlfriend Jane, both white. Jane brings Rufus and Vivaldo in a bar neither of them knew. Rufus then starts complaining about the bar and teasing Jane, with whom he was not in good terms. He assumes an increasingly sardonic tone, making Jane upset with him, until Jane tells him “[i]t doesn’t smell any worse in here than where you come from, baby” (393). Here, Rufus feels an overpowering anger and decides at once to leave. When Jane feels the tension rising, she grabs Rufus’ hand, and tells him

“I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.” He tried to pull his hand away; she held on. He relaxed, not wanting to struggle with her. . . “Please, you must believe me, Rufus!” “I believe you”, he said, and rose; to find a heavy Irishman standing in his way. (393)

Rufus and Vivaldo are then battered by the men in the bar, who assumed they were a threat to Jane. Rufus is aware of the branding of interracial relationships, and how white men perceive his presence before a white woman as dangerous. His violence and inability to connect to Leona is a revolt and an embracing of the perceived image of the black man in American society. Indeed, the relationship between Rufus and Leona makes a lot of sense when considering the complex narrative that was historically cultivated in the United States when it comes to miscegenation. In

his essay “Miscegenation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Novel”, William L. Andrews reports that

Southern apologists understood post-war political, social, and economic upheavals on the racial front in the simplest of terms. Reconstruction could be seen as a kind of attempted rape of the South in various literal and figurative ways. White supremacy as a political and social system had to be retained to combat. . . the threat of the black man not merely as political opponent or economic competitor, but ultimately as a sexual rival. . .” (306-307)

This model influenced American ideology to the extent that it was internalized both by white and black people, and Rufus is revolting against this antagonization and sexualization of the black male body.

The model Andrews describes also affects Ida, Rufus’ sister, both in her everyday life and in the relationship she entertains with Vivaldo. Indeed, Andrews shows that this sexualization applies to black women as well, which he articulates as “the threat of the black woman as dusky temptress” (307). This idea is evident as Baldwin describes Ida’s experience as a waitress:

Even when she was being friendly there was something in her manner, in her voice, which carried a warning; she was always waiting for the veiled insult or the lewd suggestion. And she had good reason for it, she was not being fantastical or perverse. It was the way the world treated girls with bad reputations and every colored girl had been born with one. (494)

Ida therefore has to live every moment of her public life with the awareness that she was exposed to the possibility of being overtly sexualized by her acquaintances or her customers.

The reflection of Ida's identity in the American imaginary of the black woman emerges constantly in her relationship with Vivaldo. The first time they have sex, Vivaldo feels "that he was traveling up a savage, jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous dripping foliage" (524). Here, Vivaldo is unwittingly exoticizing Ida's body. He is projecting his idealization of black female bodies by comparing her genital features to a jungle and a river. Jane Gallop has called this phenomenon transference, namely "the process of idealization that unwittingly obscures more complex social relations" (Abel 472). In her book *Black Looks*, bell hooks retraces the history of representation of the black female body in the United States, reporting that "[the black woman] is there to entertain guests with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts" (67). The parallel that Vivaldo makes in his mind between Ida's body and a jungle corresponds to the imagery that was imposed on him by white American media. Indeed, when hooks comments on how Ike Turner modeled the image of Tina Turner based on "The Perils of Nyoka, a fifteen-part Republic Picture serial from 1941," she notes that "Ike's pornographic fantasy of the black female as wild sexual savage emerged from the impact of a white patriarchal controlled media shaping his perceptions of reality. His decision to create the wild black woman was perfectly compatible with prevailing representations of black female sexuality in a white supremacist society" (67). In a similar manner, Vivaldo, who would probably watch serials such as *The Perils of Nyoka* as a child, learned to associate black female bodies to the wild jungle queen imagery that dominated the white imaginary. Baldwin further demonstrates his understanding of the exoticization of black female bodies in his short story "Come Out the Wilderness" from his collection of short stories *Going to Meet the Man*. The story is about the struggles and anxieties of a young black woman, Ruth, as her relationship degenerates with a

white man, Paul, who is falling out of love with her. Their sex is reminiscent of the sex Vivaldo has with Ida: “And slowly she surrendered, opening up before him like the dark continent, made mad and delirious and blind by the entry of a mortal as bright as the morning, as white as milk” (913). In both these scenes, the exoticization and the awareness of the racialized gaze of the partner determines the impossibility of intimacy. The fact that both Paul and Vivaldo are exoticizing their black partner means that their categorizing prevents them from fully appreciating their complexity and their subjectivity. Unwittingly, they are subscribing to the sexualized “wild” black woman that had dominated representation of black women in nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture.

Because the dominating theme of *Another Country* is the problematic and hypocritical nature of white liberalism, Baldwin built Vivaldo as the representation of a white, liberal, well-meaning man who has to struggle with the violent tendencies that have been ingrained in him. Vivaldo’s struggles mainly depend on his obliviousness toward the implications of being white in an interracial relationship. The severe consequences of his misunderstandings emerge in his relationship with Rufus as well as his romantic involvement with Ida. Ida and Vivaldo also fail to achieve a level of intimacy as equals because racialized power dynamics are an ever-present visitor both in their sexual and in their everyday life. In times of misunderstanding between them, Vivaldo feels overwhelmed by the conflictual nature of their relationship, he thinks to himself “*Oh, God, make her love me, oh God, let me love*” (492). Like Rufus and Leona, Ida and Vivaldo come close to reaching an adequate level of intimacy: Vivaldo is clearly seeking an authentic connection with Ida; however, his past experiences in the white supremacist patriarchy have gradually created a shield that blocked all forms of totalizing and unrefined feelings towards her.

Vivaldo's strive to achieve a genuine, intimate relationship with Ida takes place because of the hollowed relationships that preceded. Indeed, until Ida, Vivaldo's only contact with black women was with prostitutes. This issue comes up early on in their relationship, when during their first sexual encounter, Vivaldo relates to her as if she was his own possession, "[he] was struck by the way she looked at him; looked at him as though she were indeed a virgin, promised at her birth to him. . ." (522). His fantasy of being the first man to have sex with her denotes his need to be the keeper of her chastity and the dominating member of the relationship. Moreover, when Rufus reveals to her that this was not the first time he has sex with a woman of color, she asks:

"Were they friends of my brother's?"

"No. No. I paid them"

"Oh." (523)

Ida found this notion disturbing precisely because she knew that his past experience with black women made it so that his concept of black female bodies was entirely dependent on their sexualization. According to Cederstrom, "in Vivaldo's world, the sexual object, often black, exists merely to be used. . . Vivaldo's relationship with Ida has been a defiant attempt on his part to reunite love and sex" (181). The complexity of Vivaldo's relationship to sex workers emerges when he remembers seeking their services in Harlem, where he

merely dropped his load and marked the spot with silver. . . But even simple pleasure did not take long to fail - pleasure, as it turned out was not simple. When, wandering about Harlem, he came across a girl he liked, he could not fail to wish that he had met her somewhere else, under different circumstances. (483)

Clearly, Vivaldo is seeking intimacy over sex, and yet his perception of the world around him prevents him from achieving a relationship that outreaches mere bodily pleasure. Vivaldo's naïve

to his condition as his cultural upbringing has not taught him the importance of honesty and transparency to himself as well as toward the people he loves.

As in Baldwin, Walker also sets out to study how gender relations are scarred by internalized white supremacist standards. As Jermaine Singleton argues, “Walker, along with . . . Baldwin, represents the psychic effects of white supremacist terror in the form of an unassimilable void that is compensated for unwittingly on gendered and sexual terms” (84). In *The Color Purple*, Walker designs a network of toxic heterosexual relationships that follow similar patterns of subjugation be it effective – as in the case of Celie and Mr. _____ – or merely attempted – as occurs between Harpo and Sofia – and shows how certain members of the post-abolitionist African American community have embraced and perpetuated patriarchal norms.

Indeed, in *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays heterosexual love as a constant drive for dominance for the man, and survival for the woman. The novel starts with Celie telling the story about how her stepfather, Alphonso, raped her when she was thirteen years old. The opening sentence of the chapter being: “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (1). The novel thus opens with the traumatic event that begins a long line of Celie’s forced subjugation to men. According to Lauren Berlant,

Rape here only intensifies the negation that grows from the ongoing patriarchal subjugation of women. Her oppression, as represented early in the novel, circulates around the vulnerabilities that grow from her gender, as constructed within the social space which her “Pa” respectably occupies. (838-839)

Celie’s identity is thus nullified through her gender. Moreover, her humanity is further diminished through the value that the men around her assign to her body. After her stepfather impregnates her twice, he gives her hand in marriage to an older man, whom Celie calls Mr.

_____. The transaction between her stepfather and Mr. _____ shows how both of them treat her as if she was a commodity.

She ugly. [Alphonso] say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God had done fixed her. . . Fact is , he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. . . She can take that cow she raised down there back of the crib. . .

(9)

[Mr. _____] say, Let me see her again.

Pa call me. Celie, he say. Like it wasn't nothing. Mr. _____ want another look at you. (11)

This process of commodification of Celie's body is evident here through the way Alphonso and Mr. _____ mortify her physical appearance and treat her marriage to Mr. _____ as a commodity transaction. According to Linda Abbandonato, the system that caused the temporary demise of Celie's identity can be defined as "compulsive heterosexuality." Through Lévi-Strauss' definition of marriage as 'the exchange of women as "the system of minding men together",' Abbandonato argues that marriage is "a social contract between men and. . . the kinship system [is] a means of reinforcing male power through the circulation of women. . . Compulsory heterosexuality thus becomes the basis on which society operates and the exchange of women the condition whereby the patriarchy flourishes" (1109). Indeed, the men in Celie's life never question her sexuality: While Alphonso used Celie's body to make her "do what your mammy wouldn't" (1), Mr. _____ uses Celie in the attempt to reproduce, a mere sexual object: "[Mr. _____] clam on top of me and fuck and fuck even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me" (117). The idea of Celie sharing intimacy with Mr. _____ is hardly contemplated by both of them. Mr. _____ objectifies her and dismisses her emotional life. In doing so, he poses himself

as a threat to her. Celie, on the other hand, internalizes the worth that Mr. _____ assigns to her. As Abbandonato notes, “[c]ompulsory heterosexuality enforces Celie’s subjugation and erases her subjectivity” (1110).

Celie’s apparent loss of identity affects the form of the book itself: She starts writing her journal to God, literally believing in what her stepfather told her after he raped her, “[y]ou better tell nobody but God”. However, “[t]he God she conceptualizes is a cruel father whose identity merges ominously to Pa’s; when asked whose baby she is carrying, Celie tells the lie that is the truth: ‘I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say’” (1110). Because Celie grows into the idea that her value can only be assessed by other men, she addresses her thoughts and feelings to another man, one whose judgement will validate her reality without dismissing or hurting her.

While Celie represents a model of the successful nullification of the woman, Sofia represents a rebellion to the normalized heterosexual relationship. Sofia becomes Mr. _____’s daughter in law when she marries Harpo, Mr. _____’s eldest son. Sofia displays a behavior that is completely opposite to Celie’s. From the first interaction Sofia has with Mr. _____, it is clear that she has had the possibility of rising against patriarchal violence and is prepared to question male authority with wit and criticism. Harpo introduces her to Mr. _____ when she is already pregnant, and Mr. _____ proves to be skeptical of Harpo being the father. He tells her she has no intention to allow him to marry her.

But she laugh. . .

She say, What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. . .

He say, Your daddy done throwed you out. Ready to live in the street I guess.

She say, Naw. . . I'm living with my sister and her husband. They say I can live with them for the rest of my life. She stand up, big, strong, healthy girl, and she say, Well, nice visiting. I'm going home. (33)

From the way Sofia is introduced in the story, it is quite clear that she has no intention to succumb to the power Mr. _____ or Harpo intend to exercise on her. This passage foreshadows how Harpo will eventually internalize his father's views on gender roles despite his initial attraction to Sofia for her ability to stand her ground.

Harpo originally seems to enjoy Sofia's assertiveness and grit. This emerges when Sofia comes to work in the fields at Mr. _____'s plantation, and occasionally requires Harpo to take care of their newborn baby. Harpo goes to his father to complain about Sofia's behavior.

[Harpo] say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk.

To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me. . .

You ever hit her? Mr. _____ ast.

. . . Naw suh, he say low, embarrass.

Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who go the upper hand (37)

Although Harpo was originally attracted and pleased with Sofia's personality, he absorbed Mr. _____'s perverted concept of heterosexual relationships as mere subordination of a woman to a man.

Harpo ends up internalizing his father's perspective and thus eradicates the possibility of sharing intimacy with Sofia. Sofia continues to stand her ground every time he tries to give her orders; her imposing physique, compared to Harpo's slender body, allows her to prevent him

from beating her, and she respond to his attempts by fighting back. Harpo struggles to endure Sofia's physical and mental prevarication as he feels it as an abasement of his masculinity.

I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa.

Oh, Lord, I say.

When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you. . .

[Sofia] do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes. . .

[I say] Sofia love you. She probably be happy to do most of what you say if you ast her right. . . Mr. _____ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. _____ and he don't love me. But you his wife, he say, just like Sofia mine. The wife spose to mind. (66)

Unlike Celie and Mr. _____, Harpo and Sofia's marriage was not arranged. Harpo courted her and fell in love with her assertive and vivacious personality. His necessity to prevaricate to preserve his masculinity through the annihilation of Sofia's agency will cause their relationship to degenerate and their intimacy, which used to be present in the beginning, will eventually disappear.

I'm gitting tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog. . . I don't like to go to bed with him no more. . . Once he git on top of me I think bout how that's where he always want to be. . . The worst part is I don't think he notice. He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I'm thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him. Heartfeeling don't even seem to enter into it. (68-69)

Mr. _____'s view on gender roles shifted Harpo's focus from pleasing Sofia, to curing his own ego. This process, which Celie observes from the outside, completely annihilates any possibility for the couple to achieve intimacy. Harpo is no longer interested in Sofia's emotional and intellectual realm because his father has showed him to use women's bodies exclusively as a vehicle to serve his own purposes.

This toxicity is a constant in the novel until Celie stands up to Mr. _____ and asserts her purpose beyond her own body. After she leaves Harpo, Sofia will be arrested for talking back to the mayor's wife, while Harpo starts a relationship with Mary Agnes, whom he calls Squeak because of her feeble physique and personality. When Celie finds out that Mr. _____ has been withholding the letters her sister has been sending from her, she decides to break free from her oppressive life with Mr. _____ and to elope to Memphis with Shug Avery, taking Mary Agnes with them. They make the announcement at the dinner table before the entire family, suddenly breaking the silence that Celie had maintained for decades.

I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now?

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. . . (206)

I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. . . But I'm here. (214)

This point of the novel represents an awakening for Celie and a break for the female characters that had insofar subscribed to their submission. Celie asserts her existence before Mr. _____ who had only used her body and her labor without giving her any form of acknowledgement or affection. Mr. _____ shows his perplexity by telling Celie that he thought she was happy, which proves that he had no care to understand her emotions. In these passages, the dynamics between

the male and female characters break, as with Celie's departure Mr. _____ and Harpo are both compelled to reflect upon their behavior and their concept of women.

With the collapse of patriarchal power in the household, there follows a reassessment of gender roles, creating a balance that makes intimacy finally possible amongst the characters. With her deliverance from her abusive marriage, Celie gets to explore her artistic talents and becomes a seamstress, while Mary Agnes becomes a singer. Most importantly, Mr. _____ and Harpo are compelled to carry out the domestic labor of the household without the slave labor that Celie has been providing. After Celie and Shug live together for some years, Shug falls in love with another man, and Celie resolves to go back to the old plantation. The first time Celie returns is for the occasion of Sofia's mother's funeral. Here, she sees Mr. _____ had radically changed his behavior since her departure. At the reception, Sofia tells Celie that Mr. _____ became more religious than he used to be.

He don't go to church or nothing, but he not so quick to judge. He work real hard too.

What? I say. Mr. _____ work!

He sure do. He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman.

Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finish. (229)

Eventually, it will become clear that Mr. _____ has changed his ways and has developed a respect for other women, but his redemption to Celie's eyes begins with the news that he is performing labor that is normally assigned to women. Indeed, through the disbanding of gender roles, the characters slowly manage to reach out to each other and to create stable and balanced connections.

This is evident through a conversation that Celie overhears between Harpo and Sofia the day before the funeral.

Harpo say, Whoever heard of women pallbearers. That all I'm trying to say.

Well, say Sofia, you said it. Now you can hush. . .

What it gon look like? say Harpo. Three big stout women pallbearers look like they ought to be home frying chicken. (224)

Here, Harpo is showing some resistance to the gradual reassignment of gender roles that Sofia, Celie and Shug struggled to reassess during the novel. However, as always, Sofia has it her way and Harpo has to unlearn the tasks that he was raised to associate to different genders.

Mr. _____ was compelled to perform 'feminine tasks' when Celie left and there were no women left to help him. However, Mr. _____'s process liberates him as he discovers the empowerment of being independent and letting go of accumulated resentment and need to dominate.

Look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don't mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience. (267)

Mr. _____ has surrendered to Celie's demand for consideration and has found himself by taking care of himself as opposed to having someone else to it for him. In her essay *Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, Candice Marie Jenkins notes that

Mr. _____'s participation in . . . traditionally 'female' activity [is] an indication, perhaps the most striking, that his character has divested from the patriarchal behaviors which marked him as a tyrant in earlier portions of the novel. In other words, his acceptance of traditionally female gender roles goes along with his humanization in the text. (985)

It is indeed the bending of gender roles that opens the possibility for happiness on both sides.

Even Mr. _____, who was on the powerful end of the relationship, gained his own serenity in opening his possibilities to learn. The crumbling of his toxic conceptions is further evident when he tells Celie that he likes Shug because

Shug act more manly than most men. . . Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. . .

Mr. _____ think this all stuff men do. . . What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it.

Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either.

You mean they not like you or me.

They hold they own, he say. And it's different. (276)

At this point, Walker is showing how Mr. _____'s growth derives from the unlearning of his imagination of men and women. The fact that he was in love with Shug from before he even met Celie was proof that there was hope for him, as he loved her for being intelligent and straightforward. Even when she was sick and weak, he took her in his protection and helped her get better, showing his unconditional love and will to sacrifice.

The novel is a journey where the women strive to have the patriarchal figures in their lives not only to "make their innermost known", but also to consider their "innermost". Indeed, intimacy can be achieved with a consideration of the opposite party as an equal and cannot take

place otherwise. The one intimate moment between Celie and Mr. _____ comes towards the end of the novel, as the two of them sit on the porch and reminisce about their past as a married couple. It is clear that at this point their relationship consists of an old, amicable love, completely stripped from sexual nuance. The love they shared for Shug is what brings them together as old friends, and provides a bridge for the both of them to understand each other's pain.

I'm real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me.

Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars. (278)

Finally, the mending of the relationship between Celie and Mr. _____ is Walker's demonstration that there is the chance for love regardless of the toxic masculinity that Mr. _____ inherited from his father, Old Mr. _____. The characters in *The Color Purple* slowly carved their space in the world, and through this hard work eventually managed to connect to each other. Their emotional realities start to mingle with each other once they started recognizing each other's full humanity rather than projecting their own concepts of gender. This does not take place in the interracial relationships of *Another Country*, where despite the characters' desperate attempts to love each other unconditionally, they occasionally get close to moments of intimacy but they do not achieve it.

Both novels therefore convey the message that intimacy implies that detecting and letting go of the culturally constructed images is the only way to embrace each other's complexities. Acknowledging and understanding the other person's most powerful emotions can only be possible when we completely accept them as equals. Characters such as Vivaldo and Leona both assumed that their relationship with a black partner was enough to prove to themselves and to the

world that race was not an impediment for them to be intimate with a person of color, and yet the overpowering grasp of white supremacist culture made it so that they needed to reach into the most rotten parts of their conscience to address their latent racial bias.

4. Homosexual love

A psychological inquiry into intimacy and same-sex relationships from 2011 reveals a crucial question at the heart of this thesis: How is social stigma translated into personal relationships, and does it change the way people experience intimacy? If so, does it hamper or encourage greater intimacy? David Frost, who conducted the study, found that negative stereotypes of intimacy for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals “reaffirm heterosexist opportunity structures, which privilege heterosexuals’ opportunities to express and achieve intimacy while impeding the intimacy-related goals of LGB individuals” (1). The results showed that participants “were able to allow both their experiences of stigma and their experiences of intimacy to coexist in an integrative story, thus illuminating how stigma becomes more or less meaningful in their pursuits and experiences of intimacy” (5). According to the study, social stigma has an influence on the intimate parts of relationships, be it positive or negative. James Baldwin describes a type of social stigma that violently and constantly interacts with the intimate experience of his queer characters, who are always men; Walker, on the other hand, shows a different type of stigma that affects lesbian women more than gay men, as Celie, the queer protagonist of the novel, suffers from the complete erasure of her sexuality. In other words, while male queerness is under attack, female queerness is rendered invisible.

In James Baldwin’s works, homosexual relationships require that one has to accept their deviance from the norms especially in their intimate moments. Indeed, they are compelled to let go of the heterosexist gaze they have involuntarily absorbed from their culture. Baldwin’s contemplations on gender and sexuality were groundbreaking for his time, as he had already

understood the inextricable nature of sexism, racism and homophobia. This notion is currently well-engrained in critical theory as intersectionality, a word Kimberlé Crenshaw coined in 1989, but only entered as a definition on the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2017 as “the complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect”. A prototype of this all-encompassing understanding found its way in Baldwin’s essay *Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood*, where he rebukes the violent and binary quality of the American ideal of manhood as “rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white” (815). In Baldwin’s view, American culture is responsible for creating a set of fictitious and unachievable standards of manhood.

Baldwin wrote this essay as part of a conversation that was already thriving amongst black queer intellectuals. In 1980, five years prior to the publication of *Freaks* in *Playboy*, Audre Lorde was already commenting on the connections between various forms of oppression in her essay *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*:

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me”. In america [sic], this norm is usually defined as thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian [sic], and financially secure.

It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. (116)

Both Lorde and Baldwin had detected white American masculinity and heteronormativity as a myth at the root of all different forms of violence and oppression.

According to Baldwin, accepting one’s homosexuality comes with the collapse of the myth of masculinity that Americans are force-fed from childhood. In *Freaks*, he describes his

discovery of his own queerness at the age of sixteen, when he started a loving relationship with another man while his Evangelist identity was constantly tugging his sleeve:

For what this really means is that all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself.

(819)

The struggle of Baldwin's homosexual characters revolves around this pivotal realization. The only path to achieving intimacy requires the acceptance of one's homosexuality, and to do that, one has to refuse the Western ideals of manhood.

Accepting the duplicity of this ideal does not mean that he will be able to experience a peaceful social life without persecution from other parties, but by accepting his deviances from the "American Ideal of Manhood," in David's case his homosexuality, one can finally find peace in his intimate relationships and live an honest and open emotional life. David's character in *Giovanni's Room* represents the failure to unlearn American standards of masculine practices, as he wastes his life trying to adapt to a monographic, unachievable label. Indeed, despite his attraction to men, David spends his youth in the desperate attempt to fit into the forced standards of heterosexuality. In *Another Country*, Baldwin explores different possibilities of homosexuality: Eric is the only major character who openly accepts his homosexuality without attempting to conceal it to himself or the people around him. Baldwin shows how Eric discovered and came to terms with his sexuality in his adolescence as a member of the white aristocracy in a bigoted town in the heart of Alabama, as he falls in love with LeRoy, a young black boy one year his senior. Despite the homophobic pressures from his family and

acquaintances, Eric gracefully accepts his love for LeRoy. However, a different, more complex situation presents as he pursues his romance with Rufus. Because Rufus refuses to accept his attraction to Eric, he projects his shame on him by humiliating him.

While all the homosexual relationships that take place in Baldwin's world involve men, the queer relationship in *The Color Purple* is between two women, Celie and Shug Avery. In Baldwin queerness is a painful trap in a spiteful and lonesome jungle where white supremacy and heteronormativity are totalizing and inescapable forces. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's relationship to Shug leads to her sexual and personal liberation from all the painful relationships with men. Through Shug, Celie finally realizes her sexuality and finds a partner that sees her beyond the thick web of oppression that had insofar kept her from growing and understanding her potentials. Moreover, Baldwin's novels have a hovering anxiety concerning social stigma, perhaps because they take place in New York City where race is always a distinctive brand and white opinion always finds its way to mar the characters' view of themselves as well as their experiences in the social world. Meanwhile, *The Color Purple* displays a set of characters that interact with each other in an African American community. White supremacy is still a lingering presence that pulls the strings of oppression from behind the stage, as Celie's biological father was lynched and her mother remarries with Alphonso, who traumatizes and abuses her. Nevertheless, Celie hardly interacts with white people. Her sexuality is never taken into account as the men around her commodified her. However, because the option of homosexuality was never presented to her, she did not have the chance to antagonize it.

Giovanni's Room is Baldwin's most overt critique to American heteronormative practices. The novel displays and examines all the steps in David's life that lead him to the impossibility of living a happy life with Giovanni. The starting point where David began to build

his ideal of manhood was through his relationship with his father. When Giovanni was a child, his mother passed away and his father was not able to connect with him if not through a chauvinistic, distant relationship that David found alienating, as he unconsciously refused his “manly” manner to turn away from profound and complicated emotions:

We were not like father and son, my father sometimes proudly said, we were like buddies. . . I didn't want to be his buddy, I wanted to be his son. What passed between us as masculine candor exhausted and appalled me. . . He thought we were alike. . . I did not want to think. . . that my mind would grow so pale, without hard places and sharp, sheer drops. . . [h]e wanted me to look on him as a man like myself. But I wanted the merciful distance of father and son. . . (232-233)

David's father did not give him the loving education that would have allowed him to grow beyond “masculine candor”, prompting his compulsive reluctance to experience his emotions mindfully. The overpowering efficiency with which David's father's tendencies indoctrinate David into American ideology is expressed in sociologist Michael Kimmel's essay *Masculinity and Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity*. Here, Kimmel observes that “the father is the first man who evaluates the boy's masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life” (34). David's father is the embodiment of the generational passage of the American idealization of masculinity, as Baldwin understood the importance of the father's gaze in the formation of David's sense of his masculinity.

The aftermath of the affectless traits that David inherited from his father start to emerge as David falls in love with a boy during his adolescence. Their romance sparks spontaneously

from a close friendship. After they make love, David wakes up feeling happy and at peace with himself. However, his peace is soon interrupted with a realization that terrifies him:

But Joey is a boy. . . The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured until madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. . . Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me. . . A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-hearted, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. (226)

David wakes up from his peaceful slumber with his lover to his concern for his father's disappointment. This passage exposes all the anxieties that will haunt David for the rest of his life. He views homosexuality as a threat to his masculinity, which would determine his fall from grace and his father's disappointment. Indeed, his homosexuality seems to be a means of severance from his father, as he laments that he "had no one in the world but me." David experiences his queerness as an eerie and terrifying pit of humiliation and uncertainties, as his only narrative of homosexuality had insofar only been the punchline of a dirty joke.

Baldwin conveys David's experience through the images he associates with his queerness. In the passage above, he has identified it as a dark cave. However, the imagery he uses most to describe his sexuality is through dirt. "Dirty" has the double meaning of physical filth and of the impurity David detects in everything that concerns his homosexuality, making him constantly isolated and anxiety ridden. He starts by projecting his sense of dirtiness on Jacques and Guillaume, both gay, who were with David on the night he met Giovanni. Jacques, Guillaume, David and Giovanni go from one bar to the next in a taxi with them in the middle of

the night. In understanding how David views this scene, one can also understand the way David views himself.

[Their lewdness] bubbled upward out of them like a fountain of black water. But Giovanni leaned back against the taxi window, allowing his arm to press my shoulder lightly, seeming to say that we should soon be rid of these old men and should not be distressed that their dirty water splashed—we would have no trouble washing it away. (256)

David found it easy to refer to Jacques and Guillaume as lewd and dirty because, as he had not yet had sex with Giovanni, he believed that his homosexuality was buried deep within him and that he had it under control. This thought will turn to be futile when he and Giovanni have the chance to make love, as he surrenders to his feelings towards him.

. . . I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything but moan. He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes*. (273)

Through Giovanni, David is compelled to come to terms with his desires and his sexuality. While David's homophobic beliefs keep him still, his human search for love and intimacy unwillingly drive him toward Giovanni.

Baldwin's opinion surfaces through the voice of Jacques, who had already recognized David's attraction for Giovanni on the night they met. He also detected his reluctance to act upon it, and admonishes him about the dangers negating his sexuality:

Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, *hélas!* in the dark.

And if you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty—they *will* be dirty because you

will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe. (267)

In considering his relationship to other men dirty, David is in full flight from himself and Giovanni. Intimacy, Jacques argues, is what David needs to save himself from his pornographic and affectionless image of homosexuality. But the only way he can achieve intimacy is by treading the terrain that has been forbidden to him in his upbringing, letting go of the comforting idea of his masculinity.

Unfortunately, David holds on to his ideals of manhood until the end. He will spend his entire relationship with Giovanni either partially present or desperately attempting to escape from him. When his girlfriend Hella comes to Paris, David behaves as if he has to wake up from a dream, feeling compelled to spend his time with her. When he is with her, although he does not feel for her what he feels for Giovanni, he thinks to himself: “I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed” (304-305). Despite David’s emotional and physical attraction to Giovanni, which should make Giovanni’s room feel like home to him, David longs for what Lorde calls the “mythical norm”, which keeps pushing him towards his loveless relationship with Hella. In his essay “Straight Black Studies,” Dwight A. McBride notes that David associates home to Hella, “the heteronormative narrative laid out for him as his American birthright”, and this association suggests “a rather complicated relationship between home, nation, and sexuality” (81). This is true especially considering that *Giovanni’s Room* was written in the mid-fifties, a time where home and family were the ultimate ambition for young Americans: The family was a sacred

untouchable nucleus, obviously heterosexual and, as Stephanie Coontz argues her book *The Way We Never Were*,

A product of direct oppression. . . Even for people not directly coerced into conformity by racial, political, or personal repression, the turn toward families was in many cases more a defensive move than a purely affirmative act. Some men and women entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism. (110-111)

David let American ideology design his expectations of domestic life, an ambition that his emotional and sexual desire made his adherence to the crippled and fictitious image of the American family. The universal impossibility of the narrative of the family was already evident in the broken family where David grew up in himself, where his father continued pretense that they had a real connection created an irreparable crack between the two.

David continues to perform heterosexuality, thus never openly loving Giovanni. When Hella comes to Paris, David tries to leave Giovanni, as if their relationship were a small parenthesis in David's heterosexual life. The two argue, as Giovanni accuses David of refusing to love both him and Hella:

You do not. . . love anyone! . . . You love your purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe diamonds down there between your legs! You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody touch it—man or woman. You want to be clean. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap—and you do not want to stink, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. (336)

Here, Giovanni is using David's concept of dirt against him. David's inability to accept his queerness is symbolized by his obsession with cleanliness, while Giovanni has the bravery to accept his sexuality and make peace with it. The "soap" that Giovanni accuses David to cover himself is the barrier that prevents him from loving freely and mindfully. His impossibility to be intimate with Giovanni principally involves his obsession to categorize his homosexuality as an external factor, filth, as opposed to something that he cannot separate from himself. As McBride argues,

Giovanni did not care for purity. Rather, he wallowed in the dirt of the unclean places of the psyche, the cluttered rooms where life, for him, really happened. . . David. . . represents the pitfall and suffering of a life lived in observance of the rules about what we should be, how we should love, indeed, what we should feel. . . [A]lthough David lives he is the one who represents a more profound death [than Giovanni's] – indeed, an emotional death that he must live with. (82)

McBride hints to Giovanni's death, as he is accused of a murder he did not commit and sentenced to death. However, as McBride notes, while Giovanni dies having loved at the full of his abilities, David continues to live without the potential to create intimacy with other people.

A similar pattern emerges in Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, where a young adolescent from Harlem has to come to terms with his homosexuality while in the tight grip of an Evangelist community, his father being a preacher. Baldwin describes their small apartment as constantly filthy:

The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean. . . Dirt was in every corner, angle, crevice of the monstrous stove, and lived behind it in delirious communion with the corrupted wall. . . Under this dark weight

the walls leaned, under it the ceiling, with a great crack like lightning in its center, sagged. . . John thought with shame and horror, yet in angry hardness of heart: *He who is filthy, let him be filthy still.* (19-20)

The association between dirt and homosexuality is therefore a constant in Baldwin's writing. Dirt represents a form of impurity, a parasite from which the characters cannot free themselves.

Through his Evangelical upbringing, Baldwin learned to use dirt to embody deviance from heteropatriarchal standards. On commenting this passage, Roderick Ferguson observes "[b]ecause that household has historically been idealized and embodied in the white middle-class heterosexual home, the 'dirt' symbolizes the ever present and constantly regenerating racial, class, gender, and sexual differences that require heteronormative regulation" (437). Both John and David's anxiety of deviating from societal expectations are embodied in dirt, a form of repulsion for their stigmatized identity.

The conclusion of *Giovanni's Room*, cold and painful, consists of David's remorse towards Giovanni as well as his inability to come out to Hella. Hella knew that David was withholding a part of himself to her, but David insisted on keeping his secret from her:

"Please. I want to go home. I want to get married. I want to start having kids. I want to live someplace, I want *you*. Please David. . ."

I moved away from her, quickly. . .

"What's the *matter*, David? What do you *want*?"

"I don't know. I don't *know*."

"What is it you're not telling me? Why don't you tell me the truth? Tell me the *truth*."

I turned to face her. "Hella – *bear* with me – a little while."

“I want to,” she cried, “but where *are* you? You’ve gone away somewhere and I can’t find you. If you’d only let me *reach* you – !” (353)

Hella is giving David the chance to be honest about his sexuality and his past. Despite his remorse for Giovanni’s death, David has not learned from his pain and keeps using Hella to feign his heterosexuality. Hella is another victim of David’s deceit: In failing to be honest with the people that loved him, man or woman, David has completely isolated himself in a suffocating and painful cycle of suffering. Because he conceals so much of himself, he is not intimate with Hella nor with Giovanni, and ends up alone and miserable.

While David implodes in his shame, Eric from *Another Country* accepts his queerness from the beginning. Raised in a small city in the heart of Alabama, Eric was a member of the local white, conservative aristocracy. As he is introduced in the novel, he reminisces about his first relationship in his hometown in Alabama with LeRoy. At the age of sixteen, Eric had already experienced intimacy more than David did in both his relationships with Hella and Giovanni. Indeed, although Eric knew that the people in his town were mocking and humiliating him behind his back, Eric still decided to be with LeRoy:

He was frightened and in pain that the boy who held him so relentlessly was suddenly a stranger; and yet, this stranger worked in Eric an eternal, a healing transformation. Many years were to pass before he could begin to accept what he, that day, in those arms, with the stream whispering in his ear, discovered; and yet that day was the beginning of his life as a man. What had always been hidden was to him, that day, revealed and it did not matter that, fifteen years later. . . [he was] still struggling to find the grace which would allow him to bear that revelation. For the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true and must be borne.

But how to bear it? (549-550)

Eric's success in accepting his homosexuality lies in his ability to integrate his courage to pursue it in his own definition of manhood. His bond with LeRoy was the first step of a long and painful journey that would allow him to experience his love life with joy and commitment. This does not mean that Eric suffers from his queerness, but despite he does not know "how to bear it", he still decides to experience, as Baldwin's definition of "revelation" suggests,

[t]he human imagination is perpetually required to examine, control and redefine reality, of which we must assume ourselves to be the center and the key. Nature and revelation are perpetually challenging each other; this relentless tension is one of the keys to human history and to what is known as the human condition. (815)

Eric embodies Baldwin's ideal of experiencing the mythical norm while expunging self-loathing and pain. In his essay "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity," Baldwin comments on the importance of facing pain, as he defines America an emotional kindergarten: "[a] people determined to believe that they can make suffering obsolete. Who don't understand yet a physiological fact: that the pain which signals a toothache is a pain which saves your life" (68). The emotional honesty Baldwin is proposing as a defeat for the toxic ideology that suffocates David in self-pity is the honesty and curiosity that are needed to earn intimate connections, to know oneself and to know the Other.

Baldwin shows how it is easier for Eric to experience his queerness compared to LeRoy. When they are talking about their future, Eric proposes they stay with each other, saying that he does not care about what everybody would think about them,

"You a nice boy, Eric, but you don't know the score. Your daddy owns half the folks in this town, ain't but so much they can do to you. But what they can do to me —!. . . You

better get out of this town. Declare, they going to lynch you before they get around to me”. (549)

This goes to show that it is harder for black men to openly experience their queerness as they are already an easier target. The consequences for Eric could have been losing his family, while for LeRoy, he could have been lynched.

This double difficulty in accepting queerness for a black man emerges in Rufus’ liaison with Eric. While Rufus did not embrace this honesty to connect to Leona, he failed to embrace it in the brief but intense relationship with Eric he had years before. Indeed, as Rufus is roaming the street in a state of blind anguish, he remembers Eric with remorse: “He despised him because he came from Alabama; perhaps he had allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely” (405). His contempt for Eric is similar to his abuse of Leona in that he vents his revenge toward the racial caste system that destroys him. Moreover, he hates Eric for confidently defying the scheme of masculinity that he clings to as the only part of him that can potentially protect him from his blackness to the eyes of white people. He pushes Eric away as he keeps telling himself that he did not engage with him because of his own sexual drive. He even scorns Eric’s queerness, as he “despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity” (406). However, in retrospect, Rufus also admits that he was attracted to Eric both on a physical and an emotional level, as he remembers the intense moment when he was leaving Eric, and he

put his hands on Eric’s shoulders. He did not know what he was going to say or do. But with his hands on Eric’s shoulders, affection, power, and curiosity all knotted together in him – with a hidden, unforeseen violence which frightened him a little; 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. (405)

Rufus' inability to connect with Eric as well as Leona derives from his denial to look into his own depersonalized complexity. Rufus lived a nerve-wrecking life of dissociation from those who loved him because he was never prepared to quit despising himself. Seeing Eric's vulnerability in his queerness, Rufus uses his adherence to masculinity to confine Eric to the lower end of the power dynamic between them. The "power" Rufus talks about derives from his safer position as a non-openly queer person, which emerges when he tells Eric "I'm not the boy for you. I don't go that way" (405), or, even more, when he remarks "I'm almost as young as you are. I don't know – much – about it" (405). With these two statements, Rufus is implying that Eric is the only queer member of the couple, while his attraction to him shows that that is not the case; moreover, he carves his position in the safer realm of his manliness and heterosexuality. Although there was potential for Rufus to find a helpful and understanding partner in Eric, he was not able to find the strength to renounce to his privilege as a heterosexual man, as he probably understands it as one of the few privileges he has.

While in Baldwin homosexual characters have to deal with the burdening stigma of the heteropatriarchal gaze, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's lesbian relationship to Shug represent a means of liberation. Celie's journey in *The Color Purple* is an expression of the practice that Walker will later define as "a womanist", namely "[a] woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (7). Celie's relationship to Shug is a manifestation of her sexuality as well as her refusal for the emotional draught that she found in the men in her life: While Alphonso and Mr. _____ had shown no

emotion but anger and had not given her the opportunity to foster her “emotional flexibility”, Shug opened Celie’s self-awareness and the possibility of love.

Nevertheless, in their first interaction, Shug humiliates Celie the same way Alphonso and Mr. _____ did: “[s]he look me over from head to foot. Then she cackle. Sound like a death rattle. You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it” (48). Shug scorns Celie’s physical appearance to make her feel worthless and undeserving. However, after their friendship consolidates, Shug confesses the reason why she did not respect Celie at first: “when I come here, say Shug, I treated you so mean. Like you was a servant. And all because Albert married you” (127). Their relationship thus starts, on Shug’s part, as a competition for Mr. _____’s attention. Celie, however, did not perceive this competition, as she had already been attracted to Shug since she first saw her picture drop from Mr. _____’s wallet when Mr. _____ first came to visit her home to ask for Nettie’s hand in marriage:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then [sic] me. . . I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing. (7)

Celie becomes aware of Shug Avery shortly after she is aware of Mr. _____. While Shug’s appearance beguiled her from the very beginning, Mr. _____, did not interest her, and neither did any other man. Celie’s queerness is therefore evident from the beginning, yet it is completely brushed off and not considered by all the other characters, in a phenomenon discussed in the previous chapter, that Linda Abbandonato refers to as “compulsory heterosexuality.”

Celie first meets Shug Avery because Shug gets sick and is in need of serious attention and care. No one in the town is willing to help her, so Mr. _____ decides to take her in the house

and have Celie look after her. Once Shug overcomes her initial malice toward Celie, she starts sympathizing with her. The first positive interaction marks the beginning of the intimacy they grow together. When Shug is sick, Celie gives her a bath, and Shug asks her:

You ever have kids?

I say, Yes ma'am.

She say, How many and don't you yes ma'am me, I ain't that old.

I say, two.

She ast me Where they is?

I say, I don't know.

She look at me funny.

My kids with they grandma, she say. She could stand the kids, I had to go.

You miss 'em? I ast.

Naw, she say. I don't miss nothing. (51-52)

In this scene, Shug and Celie are in different positions, but each is vulnerable to the other: Shug is naked, sick and malnourished, while Celie, unknowingly to Shug, is attracted to her: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (51). In this moment of nakedness, they exchange information that bring them close together, that both have children that have been taken away from them. However, Shug, who is not attached to Celie yet, stops her emotional confession: She alleges that she does not miss her children, although that is clearly not the case.

From here, Shug and Celie become gradually closer to each other. Celie feeds her and takes care of her, and Shug feels the love of a caregiver for the first time since her childhood:

[s]he melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. . . She hum a little toon.

What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing. . .

Something I made up. Something you helped scratch out my head. (55)

This passage starts Celie's re-evaluations of the norms that she has learned from the church and from her family. From something as apparently harmless as humming, Shug is doing before Celie something that for her is a sin merely to witness: A woman confidently expressing her sexuality through her own creativity. In her essay "Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," Candice Marie Jenkins argues that characters such as Shug "can be interpreted as 'cultural infidels,' precisely because their sexual or domestic misbehavior threatens a narrative of black community sanctity, which, due to the historic influence of white racism on black intimate life, has larger political meaning for black people" (975). Celie is participating in Shug's transgressive self-expression by listening to her, but even more by being acknowledged as her inspiration. Celie's growth out of her role as a servant begins here.

Shug's role in Celie's growth becomes increasingly central, as she introduces Celie to sexual pleasure and masturbation. Before Celie met Shug, her first experience of sex was as a brutal violation by Alphonso. Then, when she married Mr. _____, sex became an obligation, as she became an object for Mr. _____ to vent his sexual drives. While her first experience entails her desire to disappear and for her to evade her body, in the second scenario she is completely

nullified, he own needs neglected. When Shug understands this about Celie, she incites her to look at her own genitals in the mirror.

She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?

Naw. . .

You come with me while I look, I say.

And us run off to my room like two little prankish girls. . .

I lie back on the bad and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. . . Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. . .

Where the button?

Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.

I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. . . [J]ust enough to tell me this the right button to mash. (81-82)

Celie is discovering her own body and her own sexuality which had been violently erased since her childhood. Her discovery of her own body becomes a gleeful experience, as Shug creates a feeling of sisterly complicity between them. In his essay “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” Christopher S. Lewis argues that Celie’s discovery of her own sexuality comes with her discovery of existence: “Celie’s articulation of sexual pleasure is also the articulation of her very body and presence. Walker positions Celie’s woman-directed masturbation and vulnerability as the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced” (162-163). Intimacy here takes place on an especially profound level: Celie’s relationship with Shug comes with revelations about herself. Before Shug, Celie’s self-awareness is completely erased along with the possibility of her queerness; as

she gets to know Shug, she finds out the possibility of existing unapologetically and experiencing her sexuality freely, an option she had never considered as it was never laid out before her.

Other than helping Celie discover her own body, Shug helps her break down her toxic, patriarchal idea of God. Until Shug and Celie discover Nettie's letters in Mr. _____'s trunk, God is Celie's only confidant. But once Celie finds that Nettie is still a presence in her life, she turns her journal entries to God, to letters to Nettie. Finding out that Mr. _____ had invested so much intention in hurting her and keeping her apart from her sister, Celie has a spiritual crisis, where she loses all the devotion she had towards God.

What God do for me? I ast.

She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death. (199)

Then she say: Tell me what your God look like, Celie. . .

Okay, I say. He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted. . .

[t]hat's the one that's in the white folks' white bible. . . (201)

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. (203)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Celie's deeply-rooted belief in patriarchal power emerges from her addressing God, the embodiment of patriarchal power, whom now we find she envisions as a white man. In meeting Shug, she discovers the possibility of being in love with a woman, an option that she never contemplated. But she also finds that all the structures that she

believed justified her oppression were false, and that she does not have to be devote to a man judging her from above, but she needs to be devote herself to the people she loves and respects.

Shug's character unlocks Celie's ability to question her role as a woman, which further emerges even more when Celie wears pants for the first time. Indeed, in the novel, women wearing pants represents a means for them to seize patriarchal power.

[L]et's make you some pants.

What I need pants for? I say. I ain't no man.

Don't git uppity, she say. . .

I don't know, I say: Mr. _____ not going to let his wife wear pants.

Why not? say Shug. You do all the work around here. It's a scandless, the way you look out there plowing in a dress. How you keep from falling over it or getting the plow caught in it is beyond me.

Yeah? I say. (152-153)

Pants are not just a garment: They are a statement, a way for Celie to make herself as powerful as Mr. _____ in the household. Celie is concerned that Mr. _____ is going to be upset about her wearing pants, as he would feel threatened by her attire.

Celie's empowerment through Shug is further addressed when the two move to Memphis and Celie discovers her ability as a seamstress and uses it to make pants for the people she loves. Shug encourages and supports Celie's enterprise, as she purchases the fabric and gives her a room for her to work with the money she makes from her music.

. . . I say, You know, I love doing this, but I got to git out and make a living pretty soon. . .

She laugh. Let's us put a few advertisements in the paper, she say. And let's us raise your prices a hefty notch. And let's us just go ahead and give you this dining room for your factory and git you some more women in here to cut and sew, while you sit back and design. You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way. (220-221)

Once Shug had given Celie the inner strength to leave her oppressive household, she gave Celie the means to support herself. However, Berlant warns that the relationship between Celie and Shug can be seen as the reinstatement of the old power dynamic Celie has recently escaped:

“Through Shug, both a sexual and economic provider, Celie gains the *nom du pere* of capitalism: a trademark, which becomes a part of Celie's new signature, itself a reflection of Shug's own nominal dissemination on the road map of her culture” (852). This observation becomes especially relevant because despite Celie’s liberation through Shug, their relationship as women still shows that Celie has internalized her role as an inferior and continues to play it out even without the threat of impending violence.

In Baldwin as well as in Walker, stigma heavily affects the intimacy in queer relationships. In Baldwin, the constant pressure from the social world makes it complicated for the characters to accept themselves, making it even harder for them to make themselves vulnerable around the people they love. This makes intimacy impossible because the threat of violence from the heteropatriarchal world as well as the internalized concepts of the characters create a barrier between them that they cannot overcome unless they take the dangerous and liberating step of embracing their identity. In Walker, the relationship between Celie and Shug breaks down the stigmas that Celie had internalized about herself. Indeed, Shug is a force that shatters all the notions that, in Celie’s mind, justified her oppression. In having a relationship with a woman, Celie is reconsidering the parameters that were set out for her by the men in her

life, finding a way to exist unapologetically, to discover her own sexual pleasures and to live independently without the support of other men.

5. Conclusions

This thesis investigated the importance of intimacy as a means to provide genuine human connections in the works of James Baldwin and Alice Walker. Intimacy here is intended as a mutual exchange of vulnerabilities and understanding, which creates the grounds for a profound relationship. Intimacy becomes especially important for minorities, as it can be a cure for the sense of alienation that comes with non-conformity. In the works of James Baldwin, that I have observed in this thesis, namely *Another Country*, *Giovanni's Room* and the collection of short stories *Going to Meet the Man*, the characters hardly ever achieve intimacy, as they desperately grasp for each other, and seldom succeed to reach a common ground.

Walker provides a hopeful portrayal of an intimate relationship, Celie and Shug, in the midst of a network of toxic relationships. Intimacy between Celie and Shug becomes a salvation for Celie and ultimately for Mr. _____ and Harpo, who have to reconsider their roles in men. Baldwin, on the other hand, uses intimacy, or the lack thereof, to show all the complex layers of oppression that come with race, gender and sexuality in mid-century United States. In the chapter on heterosexual love, I sought to find how Baldwin thinks about the intersectional qualities of race and gender: Indeed, through the relationships between Rufus and Leona and Vivaldo and Ida, Baldwin shows their unconscious attachment to the images they internalized of themselves and others from the white supremacist heteropatriarchy that was cultivated through years of degrading representation. In Walker, the relationships between man and woman make up for a hellish and perverted subjugation, as Celie is raped by her step-father and abused and hurt by her husband, Mr. _____.

In his portrayal of homosexual relationships, Baldwin shows how the binary ideals of gender, race and sexuality damage the characters in an obsessive rush to protect their manhood at the expense of surrendering themselves to their emotions and making themselves vulnerable to the people they love. This is the case for David in *Giovanni's Room*, who does not let go of the inherent ideal of manhood that he absorbed since his childhood, even if it requires he sacrifices his relationships the people he loves. Eric from *Another Country* refuses these ideals early in his

life, as he falls in love with LeRoy. Eric represent the healthiest model of homosexuality precisely because he never hides or denies his attraction to men. Rufus, however finds it more difficult to accept his attraction for Eric because he fears that giving up his idea of heterosexuality would make him even easier to humiliate: Indeed, Baldwin makes the case that being black and queer has an extra layer of social vulnerability. In *The Color Purple*, Walker gives insight in the lesbian relationship between two black women. While Celie's sexuality was completely erased when she was given in marriage to Mr. _____, she had the possibility to navigate her relationship with Shug freely. While Baldwin's queer characters are under attack for defying an ideology that despised their sexuality, Celie only finds solace and validation in her relationship with Shug. Indeed, Shug puts Celie in touch with a perspective that for once does not come from the oppressor, so that Celie discovers her own sexuality, her worth and re-evaluates her understanding of religion.

Intimacy is therefore a key concept for the interpretation of these novels, as it shows whether the characters are willing to "make their innermost known," showing their deepest vulnerabilities to each other. Vulnerability is a fundamental passage to prevent alienation and create an unconditional and genuine relationship, yet it is especially hard for characters both in Baldwin and in Walker to make themselves defenseless in a society that already debases them and exploits them. However, creating this vulnerability is the only way to save oneself, as in the case of Celie, and to avoid the most tragic consequences, as happens with David and Rufus. As Baldwin argues in his essay "Nothing Personal," "[t]his is why one must say *Yes* to life and embrace it wherever it is found – and it is found in terrible places; nevertheless, there it is" (705). Intimacy calls precisely for this precious and difficult form of honesty that Baldwin professes, whereby the individual needs to risk themselves to seek safety.

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