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THE SUFFOCATINGLY NARROW CONFINES OF BLACK MASCULINITY
AND THE BLUES PRESCRIPTION FOR ESCAPE

IN JAMES BALDWIN, ERNEST GAINES, AND AUGUST WILSON

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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and the Blues Prescription for Escape
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This thesis examines the effects of a confining, misrepresentative black masculinity and the possibilities for escaping it, as manifested in James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962). It explores Baldwin's proposed blues prescription for escape as a process of self-discovery, shared experience, and recognition, and applies this model to the black male protagonists in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) and August Wilson's *Fences* (1983). Through character analyses of Rufus Scott in *Another Country*, Grant Wiggins and Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, and Troy and Cory Maxson in *Fences*, I identify the causes of their figurative and (sometimes) literal imprisonment, the effects of that imprisonment, and the possibilities for breaking free. What is more, I suggest that Baldwin's proposed other country can be extended, not only to Gaines and Wilson, but to other twentieth century literature about black males as well. This study extends previous correlations between African American literature and black masculinity studies as found in the work of Keith Clark, Maurice Wallace, and Peter Caster by examining the process through which black males can renegotiate the constructions of their masculinity.

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I: Introduction: Relocating to Another Country of Representation

One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds. This is why his history and his progress, his relationship to all other Americans, has been kept in the social arena. He is a social and not a personal or a human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence. . . . In this arena the black man acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life. . . . If he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken. . . . The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. (Baldwin "Many Thousands" 24-25, 38)

In his 1951 essay "Many Thousands Gone," James Baldwin defines the reality of black masculinity in twentieth-century America as an image constructed in the minds of Americans and alive in the hearts of black males. Built by the misrepresentations emerging from statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, and remote violence, America's image of black males is impersonal and dehumanizing. It is a stereotype in black face, like the Jim Crows of minstrel shows, at once emasculating and destructive. On the stage of American social history, the black male has been chronically type-cast and if he breaks character, the audience panics. Yet, if he stays in character he risks submission to this role. In this historical interplay of observer and performer, the black male is relegated to an obscure thought fabricated in the minds of others. Situating the black male in this manner imprisons him in the darkness of our minds, denies him compassion, and refuses him humanity. Through the confining misrepresentations of his identity, the black male obtains a sociological and sentimental image of himself quite different from the appearance he has in life. Escape from his imprisonment is perilous, yet essential, for America's image of him lives also in his heart. Once he surrenders to that image, escape is impossible, flight fruitless, hope extinguished.

James Baldwin's 1962 novel, *Another Country*, forges the treacherous escape route through which black males have the potential to relocate to another country of representation. In *Another Country*, which is about the complex relationships individuals have with their environment, each other, and themselves, Baldwin addresses the constellation of issues plaguing black males who are trapped in the lenses constructed by others. Vehemently opposed to Richard Wright's 1940 protest novel *Native Son*,¹ Baldwin sought to rewrite Bigger Thomas through his development of his black male protagonist, Rufus Scott, whose suicide is the catalyst to his friends' searches for knowledge of themselves and others. Rufus carries the heavy burden of America's image of him until it ultimately drags him to the bottom of the Hudson River. Neither his self-image nor his physical body survive, but rather, each buckles under the internal and external pressures, and Baldwin offers his reader prime seating through which to witness the destruction of Rufus from all sides. It is this reality of the social illusion of black male identity and the effects of its weight that I will examine in *Another Country*. More than representing the destruction of a black man, *Another Country* proffers a solution to the "Negro problem," that is, the "inescapable feelings of envy and loathing" that black males, in particular, evoke (Cose 1). The escape route to another place that Rufus imagines shortly before he commits suicide, a place "away from all these nowhere people, where a man can be treated like a man" (68), is my point of departure from Baldwin to more recent texts, specifically Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) and August Wilson's *Fences* (1983).² In *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Fences*, I will examine Baldwin's proposed bridge of escape and the other "countries" where freedom is possible.

My primary objectives are to examine the effects of a confining, misrepresentative black masculinity in *Another Country*, to delineate Baldwin's proposed escape from that limited perception, and to demonstrate the ways in which Baldwin's text and its proposition of "another country" construct a bridge to other African American fiction of the twentieth century. Confining his only black male protagonist in *Another Country* within the misrepresentations of black masculinity, James Baldwin simultaneously illuminates the necessity and the difficulty of Rufus's escape from these imprisoning images of the black male. By furnishing Rufus with partial responsibility in his own doom and a potential escape route, however, Baldwin's text proposes a solution to the "Negro problem" of the social and literary arenas. Through *Another Country*, Baldwin unlocks the potential for escaping the imprisonment of black masculinity and challenges his literary successors to traverse a new country of black male representation. If, as Aliyyah Abur-Rahman contends, "Baldwin's life project was to locate, or if necessary to forge, a place for the black, the impoverished, the artist, the gay—the oppressed and weary 'outsider'—in his own country" (1), then this place, this other country that Baldwin begins to establish in *Another Country*, is his solution for replacing the confining constructs of society with a broader place to roam, space to breathe. This more expansive space is where Gaines and Wilson roam in *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Fences* as they carry Baldwin's "life project" beyond his text and through African American literary tradition.

The invisibility of the black male has long been mimicked in his absence from American masculinity studies. During the emergence of U.S. masculinity studies, black males were omitted completely or understood to be only a slight variation of European-

American men. The assertion of black masculinity studies as a separate or sub-discourse to those of American masculinity did not arise until 1994. The first surge of American masculinity studies, spanning from 1984 to 1994, was more of a trickling stream for black masculinity as only a few works acknowledged black males, such as *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (Staples), *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (Majors and Mancini Billson), *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? Afrikan American Families in Transition: Essays in Discovery, Solution, and Hope* (Madhubuti), and *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Wallace). In 1994, a second surge in American masculinity studies emerged and black masculinity no longer floundered in the wake of the outpouring, as this influx produced numerous texts that situated black males at the center of their masculinity studies. These works included Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin's "Testeria: The Dis-ease of Black Men in White Supremacist, Patriarchal Culture," John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*, and Thelma Golden's *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. Critical theory finally asserted the irrefutable link between American masculinity and race, an assertion that led to the 1995 establishment of the *Journal of African American Men*. In the twenty-first century, black masculinity studies have continued to flourish with works such as Christopher B. Booker's *I Will Wear No Chain!: A Social History of African-American Males*, Ellis Cose's *The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America*, Gamal Abdel-Shehid's *Who Da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*, Peter Caster's *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in*

Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film, and Maurice O. Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture 1775-1995*. Since 1990, over one hundred articles and books have been published about black male identity in contrast to only a handful published in the seventies and eighties.

Keith Clark's *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2002), in particular, acknowledges and stretches the intersection of black masculinity studies and the works of Baldwin, Gaines and Wilson. In contrast to Clark's primary focus on the structural elements of each author's work, namely, setting, narration, and plot/story construction, my focus is on the particular representation of black males in Baldwin, Gaines, and Wilson through character analysis. Clark, adopting an interdisciplinary approach similar to that of Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham's *Representing Black Men* (1996) and Phillip Brian Harper's *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996), synthesizes literary, social, and gender criticism in order to investigate black male representation (2). For Clark and others, this interdisciplinary approach is crucial to understanding the misrepresentations of black male identity. While I have learned from their insights, my own approach has been to begin with a textual analysis of black male representation, which enables me to examine the methods through which literary, social, and gender roles can be renegotiated.

While Clark begins to build the continuities between the texts of Baldwin, Gaines, and Wilson, I extend these continuities to the questions of escape and freedom. I share Clark's argument that Baldwin interrupts "typical" black male representation and, thus, becomes the bridge linking the limited representation of early African American fiction

to the new, post-WWII “country” of black male representation explored by Gaines and Wilson. While many texts have theorized Baldwin’s altered vision of black masculinity and his desire to rewrite the terms through which black men are defined, those texts are lacking a broad exploration of what this escape and freedom may look like for black male protagonists in and after Baldwin. My project is focused on how black males can and cannot escape the restrictive terms of socially and culturally defined black male representation, and even more directly, on what it looks like to break out of the narrow confines of black masculinity and to cross the bridge to another country.

Historically, the representations of black males have been limited by the cultural imagination. If one component of (white) American masculinity is characterized as man-as-observer, as Carolyn Porter describes Henry James’s American men (123), then black masculinity can be described as man-as-observed. Black males internalize the damaging images of themselves they see reflected by the (white) cultural imagination. The product of this spectator-specimen relationship is the image that is produced when, according to Baldwin’s statement, Americans think of black males through “statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence” (“Many Thousands” 25). Consequently, “The Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds” (“Many Thousands” 24), as mere projections on the pages and screens of the cultural imagination. This image construction is similar to the idea that Wallace terms “spectragraphia” in *Constructing the Black Masculine*, “a chronic syndrome of inscribed misrepresentation,” which implies an imperfect, illusory, and myopic cultural vision that creates and perpetuates the suffocating confines of the black male image (30-31). These inscribed misrepresentations are the projection of thought onto the screen of reality. The screen

thus captures the image within set boundaries of restricted categorization. Baldwin terms these boundaries a cage: “Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization. . . . We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed” (“Everybody’s” 20). These “cages” or “screens,” though bequeathed to us at our birth, are the things that most betray us. This betrayal is a result of the discrepancies between the projected images on the screen and the personal image behind the screen. Black masculinity as defined through these misrepresentations, including those that Clark delineates as phallus, predator, and pariah (47), is suffocatingly narrow. In addition to Clark’s triad of identity categorizations, a chronic projection of black males as unintelligent and subhuman, as brutes with physical strength only, also casts a shadow over black male identity. As a screen of misrepresentations over the individual these images skew not only the spectator’s view of his specimen, but also the individual’s view of himself.

The screen that separates perception from actuality, spectator from individual, and individual from self traps the black male within these projected images. This imprisonment, however, is doubly constricting as it is first “without” and then “within” that these boundaries confine. A black male “acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life” based on these categorizations, and this foreign “aspect” is soon domesticated as it “lives also in his heart” (Baldwin “Many Thousands” 25, 38). This cage or screen is similar to Jacques Derrida’s theory of the frame in *Truth in Painting*. According to Derrida’s theory, a frame is constructed for judging a work, arresting the subject in narrow boundaries and thus creating a new image (qtd. in Wallace 29).

Building upon Derrida's notion of the frame, Wallace extends this image-construction to the perceived images of black males, resulting in his theory of spectragraphia (Wallace 30). In terms of black masculinity, Derrida's frame is the white, patriarchal, heteronormative categorizations that define the black male subject. In Baldwin, Gaines, and Wilson, these confining categorizations emerge as gazes, cages, and shadows. It is within the boundaries of a frame that the image is projected and within its borders that the spectator judges the subject. These images, laid atop the black male subject, also limit his vision of himself. Thus, the restrictive categorization of black masculinity and the absorption of that classification imprisons black males in an image, a portrait that is not themselves, but a socially-imposed projection of what they are alleged to be. These frames, gazes, cages, and shadows arrest the subject in their restrictive boundaries, imprisoning him within a narrow field of vision.

Removing the layers of culturally projected images while simultaneously projecting a desirable image is the only escape from this incomplete, dehumanizing categorization. Releasing oneself from this imprisonment cannot be accomplished by running away, as the arresting images are components of a (white) American vision of black males that lives also in their hearts. "This is a warfare waged daily in the heart," Baldwin insists in "Everybody's Protest Novel," "a warfare so vast, so relentless and so powerful that . . . panic motivates our cruelty, this fear of the dark makes it impossible that our lives shall be other than superficial" (18). This existence in the "darkness of our minds," composed of a series of misrepresentations cast on to individuals, makes the quest for freedom risky and arduous. It is this dangerous superficiality, then, that must be destroyed, or at least overcome, in order to establish another country where freedom is

possible. This is the importance and power of escape, an escape that cannot be effected through a bitter railing against the cage, but must be achieved by destroying the cage, or, at least, by redefining the boundaries of it in order to make space for a self-constructed image beyond mere categorization.

Ideally, for Baldwin, it is restrictive classification that must be escaped:

Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning.

Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions. (“Everybody’s” 19)

Thus, escape wills one to release his grip on the only definitions available to him in the whirling chaos because these categorizations are the cause of the confusion. Escape, then, also implies a certain “suicide” of self. Letting go of the definitions bequeathed at birth is a crucial component of escape from the narrow spaces rigidly designed for life’s pegs.

Resisting (white) American constructions, the blues, both its music and philosophy, inform Baldwin’s prescription for escaping the imprisonment of the narrow confines of black masculinity. Listening to Bessie Smith records, Baldwin heard himself and recognized that the process of locating his origins was a cadence, “a question of the *beat*” (qtd. in Standley 4), and thus intimately tied to the dynamics of the blues. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. defines the blues broadly as “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much

more” (5). This broad cultural history of the blues, specifically the “folk philosophy,” not only inspired Baldwin’s escape from white society’s image of him, but also his prescription for escape in *Another Country*. Blues music is essential to “making life livable” (Daniels 15). It allows the listener to hear himself and bear his burden. As a philosophy, the blues emphasizes overcoming adversity rather than wallowing in despair. Both the music and the philosophy are inextricably linked to the community. As Baldwin’s prescription for escape, the blues combines all of these elements. The blues-as-process is deeply rooted in personal experience, requiring the singer to come to terms with the past, the present, and himself. Having come to terms with each of these pieces, the blues performer must share his song and it must be received by the community. This sharing and receiving of experience is the only escape from the imprisonment of misrepresentation because it requires a man to express himself in his own terms and for that self to be received, an interaction that requires the observer of objects to become a witness to reality.

II: *Another Country*: Falling Beneath the Gazes of Others

Another Country reflects the process of imprisonment, self-examination, and (deferred) escape. In *Another Country*, Rufus Scott's existence has been constructed by the fixed gazes of others, an existence and a gaze that he neither redefines nor escapes. Walking through Central Park with Leona, Rufus recognizes that without Vivaldo, "There was a difference in the eyes that watched them. Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm" (29). For Rufus, this is the three-hundred year old gaze of the scrutinizing slaveholder as he reviewed the specimens for sale, a gaze both dangerous and dehumanizing. Through the onlookers' lens, Rufus sees himself. Arrested within this and the other images projected on to the screen of his illusory existence, Rufus is unable to separate the image from his sense of self. In the hours before Rufus commits suicide, Bessie Smith's voice echoes the feeling of imprisonment resulting from the observers' stares: "*I wouldn't mind being in jail but I've got to stay there so long. . . .*" (82). Her words dominate Rufus's inner dialogue until he is consumed by them. For Rufus, the confines of black masculinity are suffocating, as he gasps for air beneath the layers of society's projections. After reemerging from a month-long disappearance, Rufus reveals to Vivaldo, "I don't want to die," and begins to cry, wishing, instead, that he could stand up and breathe. "He wanted to stand up, breathe, and at the same time he wanted to lie flat on the floor and to be swallowed into whatever would stop this pain" (54). Simultaneously, Rufus desires for room to breathe, outside the asphyxiating pressures from without and within, and to succumb to whatever would stop his pain.

The weight of the chronic layering of misrepresentations becomes too much to bear, and Rufus realizes he has yielded to others' images of him. These depictions do not represent who Rufus is, yet once he surrenders to them, the images become his only sense of self. Rufus "was aware, perhaps for the first time in his life that nothing would stop it [the pain], nothing: this was himself . . . His body was controlled by laws he did not understand" (54). His life ends shortly after this realization, much as it is begun in the text of the novel: "*You took the best; so why not take the rest?*" (87). Floundering under the pressures of the ever-duplicating images of American history, American literature, and (white) American gazes, Rufus gives up the rest willingly:

Something in Rufus which could not break shook him like a rag doll and splashed salt water all over his face and filled his throat and his nostrils with anguish. He knew the pain would never stop . . . He lifted himself by his hands on the rail, lifted himself as high as he could, and leaned far out . . . while something in him screamed, Why? Why? . . . and then the wind took him, he felt himself going over, head down, the wind, the stars, the lights, the water, all rolled together. (87-8)

Unable to find a way to break the cycle of pain, Rufus allows himself to be swallowed into whatever would stop the anguish. Just as the final images of wind, stars, lights, and water converge, Rufus's self-image merges with those of society's projections. Rufus lifts himself as high as he could and plummets from the bridge built "to honor the father of his country," a fitting descent from the white, patriarchal structure that cast the oppressive shadows beneath which Rufus had fallen on the first pages of the novel.

Still, Rufus's question is left unanswered, "Why? Why?" Why does Baldwin restrict Rufus to such an end? Sarah Beebe Fryer argues that Baldwin was painfully aware that America, "where the first three leading causes of death for young black males (accidents, homicide, and suicide) can be related directly to social causes," was a dangerous place for young black males (22). Completed nearly a decade after the publication of "Many Thousands Gone," in which Baldwin delineates the causes of the "Negro problem" in America, *Another Country's* creation spanned caustic but formative years in America. During World War II, industrial production skyrocketed and saw the migration of thousands of African Americans to northern cities for employment in factories. This demographic change and the inclusion of African Americans in the military represented an increased visibility of the diversity of America. Despite these momentary advances, the visibility that was encouraged during wartime was gradually diminished at the war's end. The seed, however, had been planted, and the fifties witnessed significant growth in the Civil Rights movement, progress that would alter the nation. Nevertheless, these advances were consistently greeted with vicious acts of violence that left many blacks battered, bruised, and dead. One needs only to remember the name of Emmett Till to recognize the violence with which panic-stricken Americans would respond if their image of black males were threatened. It was not until the murder of Emmett Till that white media took an interest in such racialized violence, despite its prevalence in the South (Hampton 106). Even from the safe haven of France, however, Baldwin was acutely aware of the dangers of his country and the seemingly impossible prison of racial categorization, a confining frame upheld by fear, intimidation, and

violence, and largely ignored by white media outlets. Even as the laws changed, society did not, and the war raged on in the social arena.

In the fictional world constructed in *Another Country*, Rufus, too, joined the military to fight for his country, a country that still did not fight for him. One of his only memories of his service is of violent humiliation in boot camp: “He remembered, suddenly, his days in boot camp in the South and felt again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth” (12). Yet, it is not these instances alone that cause Rufus’s demise. When *Another Country* opens, Rufus has been so beaten down that he scarcely has the energy to be angry anymore (3). The city’s “great buildings,” which surround him, are likened to a dark phallus or sharp spear that “guarded the city which never slept” (4). Rufus, characterized as one of the “fallen,” walks beneath these images of phallus and violence, two of the constant misrepresentations cast on the screen of black male identity. Rufus surrenders to the perceptions of others and the image in his heart, thus narrowing his opportunity to escape their confines.

Throughout the short time in which the narration is focused on Rufus, he is most often engaged in a performance act of one of his imposed black male identities. In his abusive relationship with Leona, a poor Southern white woman, Rufus often fulfills the identities of phallus and predator. Leona and Rufus’s relationship is a narrative of violence that reaches its apex the night Vivaldo comes to visit them and finds Leona, “her face swollen and dirty with weeping” (55), sitting on the bathroom floor. Rufus had been beating her, and while this scene highlights his fulfillment of a brutal and predatory role, the violence is rooted deeply in a desire for dominance. Rufus demonstrates this need for white, heteronormative authority through the sexual designation of phallus, as it is the

assumptions of Leona's infidelity with other colored men and the revelation of Leona's well-endowed husband that provoke Rufus's violent outburst. Threatened by the loss of his only source of power, the phallic image ascribed to his black male identity, Rufus violently seeks revenge. He assaults Leona, telling her: "I wouldn't have to beat you if you'd tell the truth" (56). Leona tells Vivaldo that Rufus seems possessed by something foreign, "Something's got all twisted up in his mind" (59), and yet the foreign matter is actually now domestic, a constructed image of predator and phallus projected on to Rufus until it obstructs his own vision and becomes a reflection of himself. Leona recognizes the effects of his apparent imprisonment, telling Vivaldo that "Rufus ain't going to kill nobody but himself . . . if he don't find a friend to help him" (59). Still, Rufus does not seek a friend to help him, and if he had, Vivaldo, who is growing "tired of Rufus's story" (71), likely would have avoided the contact. Both Vivaldo and Rufus remain emotionally distant from the situation and each other, and Rufus wishes only to withdraw. Desiring to be free of this space and this place, Rufus thinks, "wouldn't it be nice to get on a boat again and go someplace away from all of these nowhere people, where a man could be treated like a man" (68).

In the first violent scene between Leona and Rufus, Rufus again acts out the violent predator-phallus projection of his masculinity. Drunk and high, Rufus forces himself on Leona. She begins to fight back, to which he responds, "Go ahead, fight. I like it" (20). Surrendering as if she were his prey, Leona stops struggling and begins to cry. "Honey, you ain't got nothing to cry about yet" (21), Rufus promises her. A performance motivated by a need to exert power and effect pain, the assault endeavors to dominate Leona, forcing her beneath Rufus so that she will remember him for the rest of

her life. Referring to his penis as “his weapon,” he feels himself “strangling, about to explode or die” (22). He sees the source of his power as a black male, his identity as phallus, as a weapon he can use against others. Through his violent use of this weapon, Rufus feels himself choking, as if he and his weapon were inseparable and fighting against the same suffocating confines. Finally beating Leona with all of his strength, Rufus feels “the venom shoot out of him” (22). This venom, which disseminates Rufus’s self-destruction and carries the cycle into the future, is both damaging and deadly.

Despite Rufus’s intentions for Leona to be a mere sexual conquest, their violent coexistence continues until it destroys them both, drawing them further into the confining spectragraphic matrix. “They fought all the time. They fought each other with their hands and their voices and then with their bodies: and the one storm was like the other” (53), often emerging spontaneously. The continuously impending storm of violence, which lingers ominously in their relationship and in Rufus as he picks fights with white men and is thrown out of bars, makes Rufus realize he is falling. “The eyes of his friends told him that he was falling. His own heart told him so” (53), and yet Rufus has fallen too deeply into the darkness of America’s minds, beneath the cumbersome, culturally-imposed images of black male representation, to summon the “breath to call for help” (53). The weight of these misrepresentations begins to smother him, and “The air through which he rushed was his prison” (53).

The origins of Rufus’s distorted self-image are multifaceted. Rufus notes that to remember Leona was to “remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem . . .” (6). This connection between his experience with Leona and that of his family and environment illuminates

the complex beginnings of Rufus's imprisonment. Rufus remembers Harlem: "the juke box, the teasing, the dancing, the hard-on, the gang fights and gang bangs . . . the boys too far out, jackknifed on the stoops . . ." (6). To Rufus, Harlem is the juke box and the dancing of its legendary jazz scene; the teasing, the hard-on, the gang bangs of its dangerous phallocentrism and sexual violence; the gang fights, the boys too far out, jackknifed on the stoops of its threats of violence within and beyond Harlem's boundaries. Each part of Harlem, along with the rage his father, are part of Rufus's inheritance, images burned into his perception of himself and his country. One of the most detrimental images he receives is the one his father offered him as a child: "*A nigger, he said, lives his whole life according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine*" (6). The rage, the "beat" to which one lives and dies is doomed to be repeated, as the "venom" he "throws up in there" will perpetuate the doom and demise of the race, the vicious cycle of self-destruction. Rufus attempts to flee the beat of Harlem, only to realize that it is "simply the beat of his own heart" (7). Rufus internalizes this rage-filled cadence and lives according to its violent undulations. As the beat of his own heart, Rufus is unable to escape it.

In the aftermath of Rufus's suicide, Baldwin suggests a different beat. With Rufus's death as their catalyst but Eric as their guide, Vivaldo and Ida are Baldwin's candidates for escape.³ Eric, who becomes the beacon who illuminates the path of escape, was conflicted between ill-fitting feminine and masculine identities as a child. As a result, he realized that "There were no standards for him except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions,

the hideously mechanical jargon of the age” (212). Deciding that he would not permit society to impose its strict definitions on him, Eric sets out to create his own definitions as he goes along.

This shedding of society’s standards for his own, however, is a painstaking and painful process, evinced in *Another Country* by the treacherous sea of memory: “The sea of memory washed over him again and again, and each time it receded another humiliated Eric was left writhing on the sands. How hard it was to be despised! how impossible not to despise oneself!” (261). Through the sea of memory that continually washes over Eric and leaves him humiliated, Baldwin elucidates the importance of Eric’s coming to terms with the past. Only then can Eric begin anew on the shores of another country. According to Ernesto Javier Martinez in “Dying to Know: Identity and Self-Knowledge in Baldwin’s *Another Country*,” this “figurative suicide,” a risky surrendering of his former idea of self, is a painful extinguishing necessary to the successful manifestation of Eric’s identity in the world (785). Martinez argues that Baldwin examines “how self-knowledge in oppressive contexts often depends on people making extreme shifts in their conception of self—of who they are in relation to their society” (783). Because Eric has made this treacherous shift, removing the arbitrary labels of the categorizations of others and defining himself in his own terms, he is able to maintain the most stable relationship in the novel, with his partner Yves, and guide others through the stormy sea of memory.

While this “figurative suicide” is a necessary step in the process of gaining self-knowledge, agency is also a crucial component of the journey. While navigating towards the depths of self and coming to terms with experience and suffering is a formidable

undertaking, its necessity outweighs its difficulty. The responsibility to know ones' self and to negotiate that self in the world was an essential element in Baldwin's creation of Rufus: "There are no antecedents for him . . . Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people" (qtd. in Standley 104). Unwilling and unable to overcome the destabilizing and dangerous effects of releasing his grasp on the straws of his definitions, Rufus is consequently unable to fulfill this responsibility of knowing himself. Nevertheless, by giving Rufus the authority to construct and project his own image into existence, Baldwin rewrites the powerless black male victim of protest fiction. It is through this agency that Baldwin presents the possibility of escaping the confines of black masculinity, of making invisible men visible.

The necessity of manifesting one's own identity in the world is the performance act of the blues, through which the personal experience is shared and, ultimately, received. The blues is the naked self, exposed without the cloak of white, patriarchal society's projections. For this reason Baldwin describes Eric's film performance, which reveals more of Eric than could be seen "when he was being," as an "exposure" (330, 326). On screen, his "masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine either . . . it was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures" (330). By projecting Eric's "exposure" on to a movie screen, Baldwin suggests that while Eric may choose his frame and the image he projects on to it, he cannot break away from all boundaries of vision. He has control over what the audience sees, but not how they see it.

While locating, knowing, and projecting oneself is crucial to the process of the shared experience, that new image must be received and the recipient must bear witness to it. Baldwin demonstrates the necessity of this reception through the difference between the responses to Eric's and Ida's "exposures." Similar to Eric's debut, Ida's first singing performance is also described as an "exposure" (256). Through her song, she reveals her private fears and pain over the death of Rufus with a "quality [that] involves a sense of self so profound and so powerful that it does not so much leap barriers as reduce them to atoms" (254). Both Eric and Ida are projecting their own images over the projected images of society. However, they are not equally received. Vivaldo and Cass receive and acknowledge Eric's exposure, but no one wants to bear witness as Ida unmask her suffering. The difference in reception illuminates the duality of the blues escape. Not only must one come to terms with and share the suffering, but it must be received. Through this partnership, both aspects of imprisonment can be overcome through the responsibility of both the performer and the observer.

While bearing witness to another human being's experience crosses race and gender lines in *Another Country*, Baldwin places a crucial emphasis on the importance of what Eve Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, terms a "homosocial" connection between men (1-2). This emphasis is illustrated through Vivaldo's remembrance about Rufus the night before Rufus disappears:

I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms . . . I had the feeling that he wanted someone to hold him, to hold him, and that, that night, it had to be a man . . . I loved Rufus . . . I didn't want him to die. But when he was dead I thought about it . . . I guess I still wonder,

what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been—afraid. I was afraid that he wouldn't understand that it was—only love. (342)

In this moment, Vivaldo recognizes the importance of a male connection: “that, that night, it had to be a man.” Unfortunately, Vivaldo realizes this importance after Rufus has committed suicide. The male-connection that is significant to Baldwin's blues prescription for escape fails to materialize for Vivaldo and Rufus because of Vivaldo's sexual anxiety. The fear that Rufus will misread Vivaldo's love obstructs both Vivaldo and Rufus from their embrace, in the same ways (white) heteronormative American patriarchy obstructs Rufus from any vision of himself.

In placing stress on this “homosocial” connection, Baldwin is introducing alternatives to the heteronormative criterion of “authentic blackness” and to the traditional hierarchical relationship of patriarchy. As Abur-Rahman explains, “Early black novelists endeavored to refigure blackness as (hetero)normative so the black Americans could enter the cultural mainstream” and through this effort “authentic blackness” maintains the qualifying standards of “phallogentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” (2-3).⁴ Baldwin recognizes the connections between heterosexuality and black manhood, of being a “real” man in America and in African American literature, and he deems this trend dangerous and deadly. This rigid equation of masculinity with heterosexuality only further pushes Rufus towards disintegration. While denying this categorization of blackness by emphasizing the “homosocial” connections between men, Baldwin also rewrites American patriarchy. According to Shin and Judson in “Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin and the Primer of Black Masculinity,” Baldwin uses

the “all-encompassing” ideal of brotherhood to replace the centrality of redemption through the father (248). In doing so, Baldwin is removing the burdening image of a vertical hierarchy of power and projecting an image of the horizontal equality of comradeship.

While Vivaldo fails to bear witness for Rufus, he is given a second opportunity through his relationship with Rufus’s sister, Ida, as they undertake the blues prescription for escape. While Vivaldo is struggling against the rigid categorizations of masculinity, Ida is struggling against those of black femininity. Slowly, with the help of Eric, Vivaldo comes to terms with his past, his complicated relationship with Rufus, his sordid adventures with black prostitutes in Harlem, and his painful childhood. As a result, Vivaldo begins the process of self-discovery. Unfortunately, Ida’s inability to identify and construct her own self-image stunts Vivaldo’s progress. Once Ida finally goes through the process of self-discovery and shares her experiences with him, something she would not have been able to do if she did not love him (430),⁵ Vivaldo realizes that “Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night; not even the mines. And the light was not white either, even the palest light held within itself some of its origins” (430). This realization mimics Eric’s that there are no standards, categories, or frames that “fit” a person. Regardless of this progress, however, Vivaldo and Ida’s fate is left undetermined and open-ended.

Despite the potential success of Ida and Vivaldo’s release from the imprisonment of their socially-constructed identities, Baldwin restricts Rufus from taking this escape route. When questioned about his own physical escape to another country, Baldwin responded:

I've thought often about your question, about running away from the problem. At first, I wondered if it was cowardice, wondered whether I should have stayed to fight. But I couldn't have done anything. I would have been thwarted in ways in which I was free in France. I probably would have been killed. (qtd. in Standley 266-7)

The ways in which Baldwin had been thwarted in America are similar to the ways Rufus is thwarted, and so Baldwin's "other country" remains an open-ended proposal for the future rather than a panacea for the present. Accordingly, the escape that Baldwin urges as the path to another, less suffocating country is unavailable to Rufus within the text of *Another Country*. His life is not imagined outside of the racial tension in America in the fifties and sixties, but his death has the potential to spawn revelations imbued with possibility. This possibility, however, rests in the authors and the texts that inherit *Another Country*.

III: *A Lesson Before Dying*: Breaking Through the Cages of Categorization

The first words of *A Lesson Before Dying*, “I was not there, yet I was there” (4), echo the first words of *Invisible Man*: “I am an invisible man” (Ellison 3). However, while the invisibility of Ellison’s protagonist is attributed to the blind gazes of others, the phantasmagorical presence of Grant Wiggins at Jefferson’s trial is a result of the “same old story” chronically told in Southern courtrooms: black men wrongly accused of murdering whites. Jefferson is a young black male in Bayonne, Louisiana, who has been accused of murder, found guilty by a male, all-white jury, and sentenced to death, all within the first seven pages of the novel. Set in late 1940s Louisiana, *A Lesson Before Dying*’s action comes before that of *Another Country*’s late 1950s and early 1960s context. Bayonne is segregated and the racial tensions run deep. Inequality is rampant as in the denial of schoolteacher Grant Wiggins’s requests for better supplies for his school. Injustice circulates through the action of the novel: “Twelve white men say a black man must die . . . Justice?” (157). Nevertheless, these realities do not materialize as excuses or insurmountable obstacles that keep Grant Wiggins and Jefferson from renegotiating their lives as men. Like *Another Country*, the story of *A Lesson Before Dying* relies on the death of a young black male. However, while Baldwin sought to demonstrate the destruction of a young black male from all sides in his portrayal of Rufus Scott, Gaines leaves the destruction behind as he illustrates the grueling journey towards the reconstruction of Jefferson’s black male identity. Death is imminent; Jefferson is sentenced to death on the final page of the first chapter, but destruction, victimization, and defeat are up for negotiation.

Within the walls of his prison cell, Jefferson must break down the barriers of his psychological imprisonment. Jefferson, who is incarcerated in the town jail, awaiting his death sentence, cannot break free of his cell, but he can overcome his figurative imprisonment. Seen by (white) society as a predator after Brother and Bear's murder of Mr. Gropé, and even more so, by whites and mulattos after his conviction, Jefferson scarcely maintains his humanity in the eyes of others. More detrimental than these categorizations, however, is Jefferson's absorption of the image of him presented to a jury of white men by his court-appointed attorney in the opening pages of the novel:

Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool . . . Look at the shape of his skull . . . Do you see a modicum of intelligence? . . . A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? . . . I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (7-8)

Evocative of the auction block and stud farm comparisons Rufus makes with regard to the gazes of others, these descriptions define Jefferson under similar terms: as an “it,” with animals for ancestors, separate from civilized (white) men. In his lawyer's argument, Jefferson is supposed to be a defenseless beast, and even though the hog metaphor is not intentionally harmful, it is entirely ineffective and brutally damaging to Jefferson's soul. Jefferson digests this sense of self, manifests it through his behavior, and adopts the resulting expectations of being a “hog.” Refusing to care about others and

refusing to eat because he believes they are just fattening up a hog to kill, Jefferson loses all sense of personal worth and dignity. The law consigns him to his prison cell, but Jefferson himself enters the cage of black masculinity that the attorney constructs for him, a cell in which Jefferson sees himself as nothing more than a subhuman, unintelligent, agency-less hog.

Jefferson needs not only to escape the image of the hog, but also the historical, (white) American misidentification of blackness as criminality. In his narration, Grant refers to the prison cell as a cage maintained by (white) America: “Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, we, us, white folks all, have decided it’s time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time” (158). This cage and its boundaries are subject to the whims of the white law: the sheriff, the governor, the deputies. In *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film*, Peter Caster explains the process through which blackness has become misrecognized as criminality (12). After the abolition of slavery, prisons, especially Southern ones, became sites of racial containment. In 1888, the board of directors for South Carolina’s prisons declared, “After the emancipation of the colored people . . . we had to establish means for their control. Hence came the penitentiary,” and that same year, an Alabama prison administrator claimed that the 250 percent greater mortality rate of black prisoners was a result of their “weak constitutions” (Caster 8). Such attitudes combined with the overrepresentation of African Americans in prisons (a result of such attitudes) begin to explain the criminal misrepresentations of black males. To escape the cage of these categorizations, Jefferson must first recognize their construction.

While history shows that the prisons and death sentences were inescapable for many black males, Gaines demonstrates that the misrepresentations of the cultural imagination are negotiable. From 1930 to 1942, the United States witnessed the most state executions of any period in American history, and black men disproportionately received the death penalty in comparison to their white counterparts (Caster 33). While Jefferson has no hope of physically relocating to another country, he and Grant have the opportunity to redefine the one in which they live. Grant explains to Jefferson that it is up to him to “show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you’re nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong” (191), but Jefferson cannot do it without Grant. He writes in his journal, “Mr wigin . . . nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody” (232). Through Jefferson and Grant, Gaines acknowledges Baldwin’s blues prescription for escape, showing that through love and brotherhood black men can effect change in the world in which they live.

Before Grant can effect change in his community, however, he must reconcile with the futility of his desire to run away. Set in the years immediately following World War II and the Great Migration, *A Lesson Before Dying*’s setting makes physical relocation a feasible reality. Grant has seen many of his classmates flee the Bayonne plantation. They have “gone to the fields, to the small towns, to the cities—where they died . . . And there were those who did not go anywhere, but simply died slower” (62). Despite migration North or flight someplace else, the fate of black males remained the same. Grant slowly realizes that running away, which seems like the only solution out of the pain and away from the responsibility, will not change his fate. Rufus died in New

York City. Jefferson would die in Bayonne, Louisiana. The vicious cycle is too wide, too tempestuous to escape by a mere change of location.

Grant's desires to run away only further imprison him between contrasting cages of categorization. As a young man, Grant fled twice only to return to the Bayonne plantation. The first time, he visited his parents in California, and the next, he left in pursuit of a university education, which his aunt saw as an opportunity to free Grant from the same cycle of fate for black males on the plantation. Despite this education, Grant is not free enough to help himself or any other members of his community. Reverend Ambrose reminds him that despite his university degree, Grant has learned nothing about his own people, and thus, knows nothing about himself: "What did you learn about your own people? . . . No, you not educated boy . . . You far from being educated. You learned your reading, writing, and 'ritmethic, but you don't know nothing. You don't even know yourself" (215). University education, then, cannot amount to any successful solution if Grant is still ignorant of the people that surround him and the person that he is. His education, which alienates him from both the black and white communities, becomes a roadblock in his path of escape. Focused on the inadequacy of Bayonne and his futile desire to leave it, Grant remains ignorant of the possibilities for change. Rather than making a life in Bayonne, Grant constantly wonders what it would be like to get away and breathe: "I need to go someplace where I can feel like I'm living . . . I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here. I know we can do better someplace else" (29). Convinced that life is only livable outside of Bayonne, Grant remains a stagnant figure in the Bayonne landscape. For Grant, however, the physical place is not the only source of pain from which he desires to run. He also, as Julia E. Connelly argues in "The Avoidance of

Human Suffering,” desires to avoid human suffering, suffering that surrounds him and consumes him (385). To run away from the realities of the suffering around him and within him would leave Grant in the same willful ignorance from which Vivaldo suffers. As a result, the vicious cycle of black males dying would continue, and Grant, refusing to exercise his own agency, would continue to wonder “where [things] were changing” (151).

Arrested by the tensions between his university education and his Bayonne roots, Grant is trapped between the different ways he has to represent himself. His teacher, Matthew Antoine, a biracial figure trapped between conflicting cages of identity, always taught him that running away was the only solution for escaping his fate of becoming “the nigger [he] was born to be” (65). These words from his teacher, of whom Grant notices little besides his blatant self-hatred, imprison Grant in the battle between who he should be and who he is. At odds with whom Antoine says he will inevitably become but unable to articulate it in his environment, Grant consistently struggles with the representations of “who” he should be. Entering into the Pichot house, Grant finds himself teetering between contrasting expectations: “I tried to decide just how I should respond to them. Whether I should act like the teacher I was or like the nigger that I was supposed to be . . . To show too much intelligence would have been an insult to them. To show a lack of intelligence would have been a greater insult to me (47).” Wrestling between these two extremes of absorbing the cage or railing against it, Grant has lost all sight of who he is.

Though more subtly than in *Another Country*, blues music’s presence is felt in *A Lesson Before Dying* from a juke box in the Rainbow Club and from the radio whose

music keeps Jefferson company in the cell. More profound, however, is the emergence of Baldwin's blues prescription for escape. Specifically through the intertwined dynamics of self-discovery and shared experience, Grant, as David E. Vancil argues in "Redemption According to Ernest Gaines," "must first be delivered from his own malaise of resentment against his people for their history of remaining downtrodden . . . [and] must come to terms with his hatred towards whites, who are themselves trapped in roles they have inherited or accepted blindly" (489-90). Through his interactions with the community, and specifically with Jefferson, Grant discovers these things about himself. Only then does Grant come to understand that there is responsibility to self because there is a choice in self: "And that's all we are, Jefferson, all of us on this earth, a piece of drifting wood, until we—each one of us, individually—decide to become something else" (193). Everyone has equal agency in deciding who they will become. This freedom, however, comes with traversing the stormy sea of memory that washes over and humiliates Eric in *Another Country*. Only by excavating the past can Jefferson and Grant begin to recognize society's misrepresentations and begin the process of escape. Relying on the blues philosophy that stresses overcoming adversity rather than wallowing in despair, Jefferson and Grant take the first steps to another country of representation.

Through his experience with Jefferson, Grant slowly comes to terms with Matthew Antoine, his family, his responsibility, and his complicated relationship with God. By unearthing each of these pieces, Grant gains a better understanding of what it means to be man, a hero, a myth-breaker, and he shares these revelations with Jefferson. As a participant in this experience, Jefferson realizes his worth as an individual and his place in the community. He writes in his journal, "Sometime mr wigin i just feel like

tellin you i like you but i dont kno how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never said it to me” (228). It is this connection to another human being, specifically the shared experience with another male, that catapults Jefferson to a place, another country perhaps, that he could not have reached alone. The shared experience’s connection with the notion of brotherhood is crucial to Baldwin’s blues prescription for escape. As the narrator of Baldwin’s short story, “Sonny’s Blues,” realizes, “Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us be free if we would listen, and that he would never be free until we did” (24), Grant and Jefferson also recognize the importance of sharing and bearing witness to their experiences as men on the path to freedom. While Miss Emma and Tante Lou were the catalysts to Grant and Jefferson’s connection, they were unable to reach Jefferson in the ways that Grant did. It had to be two men, trapped in the narrow confines of society’s cages, discovering themselves by discovering each other. However, it is not only Grant who is transformed by the end of the novel. Jefferson, too, recognizes that his responsibility to himself, of defining himself as a man in his own terms, is a responsibility, also, to his community. Grant still struggles with his sense of responsibility to others, his sharing of his experience, and his desire to run away, and when the novel closes, it is unclear as to whether or not Grant will continue to traverse and light the path that Jefferson forged. Regardless, it is only through Grant and Jefferson’s shared experience that another country becomes possible.

Through this blues escape route of self-discovery, shared experience, and recognition, Jefferson and Grant are able to rearrange the paradigm of the black male.

Grant, once he is personally and fully committed to Jefferson, realizes the gravity of the situation:

I want you to chip away at that myth by standing. I want you—yes, you—to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man—more a man than they can ever be. That jury? You call them men? That Judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better. They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human—and they believe it to this day. (192)

At this crucial moment with Jefferson, Grant helps him to redefine what it means to be man. Being a man is defined by actions, not by arbitrary physical characteristics or the patterns of social history. This redefinition is an act of destruction against the confining categorizations of black masculinity, constructed and chronically reconstructed by the limited expectations of others for over a century. Rather than being imprisoned within the cage bequeathed to him at his birth, a man, as Grant argues, should be defined by his actions. Only one of the deputies, Paul Bonin, who treats Grant and Jefferson as human beings and friends, represents a glimmer of hope that these confining cages will slowly deteriorate. Bonin says to Grant, "I saw the transformation. I'm a witness to that" (254). Even though this confining masculinity may not be immediately destroyed in the minds and eyes of all (white) observers, Jefferson changes it in his heart with the help of Grant's redefining. It is the breaking down of these walls around a man's image of himself, however, that are crucial in renegotiating his existence in the world. Jefferson and Grant take the first steps to another country, but to change the chronic misrepresentation of the

black male there must be persistent re-representation of him. Jefferson's transformation is only the beginning of that change.

In reimagining what it means to be a man, Gaines also rewrites the ways in which these transforming notions are transferred through generations. Replacing Baldwin's notions of the reproduction of self-destruction through Rufus's venom with the self-hatred taught by Matthew Antoine, Gaines creates a country that does not inevitably reproduce men in cages. Matthew Antoine taught the young black males of Bayonne this self-destruction, both through his words and his unmistakable self-hatred. It is not a natural cage of existence, but a learned one. If Grant continues this pattern, the results will remain constant. Grant needs Jefferson to prove to him the reality that he always questioned: a black male can break down the confining walls of society's structures. However, after Jefferson's death, the carrying forth of this new reality into another country is up to the living.

While Grant's future is left open-ended, Gaines leads us to believe that Grant will carry the torch Jefferson lit into the classroom and guide his students to this country. As Jefferson begins to cry during the poignant moment when Grant explains to him how important Jefferson is to his community, Grant wonders, "I cry, not from reaching any conclusion by reasoning, but because, lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole. Is that what he was thinking as he looked at me crying?" (194). The final three words of the novel, when Grant finally returns to the classroom after hearing of Jefferson's death, are "I was crying" (256). Is he crying because he finally realizes that he is a part of the whole, that he is an individual who does not have to wait for things to change around him, but can effect that change and put it in motion through Jefferson's example?

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the obstacles in their paths, Grant and Jefferson must learn to love and to understand in order to become proud, black men, responsible to themselves and to their community (Hebert-Leiter 102). Jefferson achieves this on the day of his execution, “He was the strongest man there,” and his final words were for his Nannan, “Tell Nannan I walked” (253-4). With Jefferson’s strength, Grant must also become responsible to himself and to his world. It is up to Grant, the schoolteacher, to share the experience, to peel away the myths perpetuated by his nation’s forefathers, to encourage his students to take root rather than flight, so that they may reverse the vicious cycle and construct their images in a new light, a light that will illuminate the way to another country of representation.

Yet, is this Baldwin’s other country? A young black male is again sacrificed so that others may live, an unfortunate reality that causes the echo Grant hears: “When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man . . . ?” (174). When Jefferson finally realizes that he is a human, “Yes, I’m youman, Mr. Wiggins,” he also recognizes that “nobody didn’t know that ‘fore now . . .” (224). Why is it only in the face of death that Grant and Jefferson begin to navigate towards this other country? The death of black males, such as Rufus by suicide and Jefferson by death sentence, were common recurrences in the mid-twentieth century, perhaps the continuing destruction resulting from the chronic syndrome of misrepresentation Wallace elucidates through spectragraphia. Is it only in the context of death that the difficult process of self-excavation and sharing experiences can begin? As part of Baldwin’s legacy and the legacy of the twentieth-century, someone may have to die so that others may be free.

IV: *Fences*: Overcoming the Shadows of the Past

August Wilson's 1983 play *Fences* portrays the journey of multiple generations of African Americans who are discovering and establishing their spaces in the world against the shadows of the past. Troy Maxson, the play's black male protagonist, and his relationships, specifically with his son Cory, comprise the central interactions of the play. Both a written text and a performance script, *Fences* challenges the chronic misrepresentations on the page and the stage. When performed, Wilson's play offers an extra dimension of representation by releasing his characters from the page, giving them space to roam and room to breathe. As the production provides new scenery for the presentation of the black male, the stage supplies the space on which black masculinity can escape the misrepresentations branded on the cultural imagination from minstrel shows and protest novels. *Fences* seeks recognition not only through visual representations, but also through auditory presentations. The narrator's voice is absent. Everyone tells his own story. With every production and every reading, Wilson's *Fences* offers its audience the opportunity to bear witness to human experience and history.

Set in the front yard of Troy Maxson's old two-story brick house, *Fences* foregrounds the space that Troy has garnered for his family. Since the action of the play happens in this singular space, the audience must bear witness not only to the characters but to their place in the world. The roots the family has planted there are the result of sweat, toil, and sacrifice. Still, the fruits of their labors have yielded only this small plot of land. The yard is defined by its partially-constructed fence, which is the only element of the scene that changes over the course of the play. Its change is piecemeal and gradual. This slow process illuminates the construction of the fence as something

intentionally built piece by piece, “to keep people out . . . and . . . to keep people in” (61). Thus, the fence around the yard serves as a constant reminder that the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are deliberately fabricated and not inherently existent.

In America, the color line has been one of the most prevalent dividing lines that have established such boundaries. In the twentieth century, when America’s cities were welcoming the world at their portals, they were denying many already there. Wilson illuminates this conflict in his prologue:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. . . . The descendants of African slaves . . . came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them.
(xvii)

The city is not the only place that rejected African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. The color line bled into all aspects of American life, including its favorite pastime. In the context of the play, the fences built to hold people and things in or keep them out include American baseball, whose barriers simultaneously defined an American ideal and denied black Americans entry. Set in 1957, a decade after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball, *Fences* navigates the racially tense terrain of dreams deferred.

Troy Maxson’s frustration with baseball’s color barrier and the racial discrimination that built it plagues the rest of his life: “I’m talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don’t care what color you were” (10).

The discriminatory boundaries of baseball excluded Troy from its fields and relegated him to the Negro Leagues. Even though Troy could have easily hit a baseball over the fence and out of the park, he could not break through the racial barricades erected around the Major League's clubhouses and stadiums. By the time Jackie Robinson breaks the color barrier in 1947, Troy, who is fifty-three years old when the play opens, is too old to play professionally. Even though Jackie Robinson was hailed a hero by many, Troy refuses to see him as such. The fundamental problem with Jackie Robinson as a hero, for Troy, is the fact that Robinson was not selected to play in the Major Leagues based on his ability alone. As Susan Koprince argues in "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," Jackie Robinson "was regarded as a role model: an exemplary human being, someone who didn't smoke or drink, who was not hostile and defiant, and who was likely to get along well with white players and baseball executives" (351). Troy, who is both hostile and defiant, could not have fulfilled these secondary requirements. He even takes issue with Jackie Robinson's lackluster ability: "Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! . . . Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody" (10). To Major League teams, Troy, too, was a nobody, reduced to such because of his color. For Troy, this knowledge engenders a lifetime of bitterness.

The baseball field, with its own performers and spectators, is the place where constructions of masculinity are both perpetuated and challenged. In the United States, baseball has been intertwined with constructions of masculinity as both a "rite of passage between fathers and sons" and a "nostalgic commemoration of a manliness away from urban complications and corruptions" (Santo 1). As a result, the American baseball field has become the stage on which the images of American masculinity have been embedded

into the cultural imagination. According to Albert Spalding, baseball promoted “American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash . . . Energy . . . Spirit; [and] American Vim, Vigor, Virility” (qtd. in Santo 1). Yet, as Troy so often reminds Rose, Bono, and the audience, black ballplayers were denied access to the Major Leagues. As a symbol of an American ideal that excluded black males, baseball defines American masculinity as white.

Within baseball’s diamond frame and Troy’s heart, American masculinity and black masculinity fiercely compete. As Avi Santo explains, “Even after racial barriers fell, baseball remained a contested site in which minority players continued to have to prove their worth and their manhood by complying with white standards” (1). Also raging within Troy, this competition reveals his “double-consciousness—his complicated experience as a black man in a white-dominated world” (Koprince 357). Ever-present reminders of the world where he was refused entry are written into the scenery: the ball made of rags that hangs from the tree and the baseball bat that leans against it. These reminders taunt Troy and the white, patriarchal masculinity that baseball embodies becomes both the object of his desire and the source of his hatred.

Simultaneously railing against the cage of (white) American masculinity and wishing to establish a place outside of it, Troy Maxson is imprisoned in his double consciousness. Rather than being confined within a strictly defined cage like Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Troy is imprisoned in the shadows of his rejection. As Susan Koprince argues, Troy is “driven to see himself (and measure his success) through the lens of white America” (353). This white, patriarchal “fiction of archetypal masculinity,” as Clark terms it (100), is “characterized by such measures as the oppression of women,

the glorification of violence, the struggle for dominance, and the embrace of a capitalist agenda that measures success through the accumulation of money and material goods” (Caywood 79). Through this lens, Troy’s perception of his existence and his worth is inadequate and his measure of success is ill-fitting. By absorbing the standards of (white) America as his own, Troy sentences himself to a lifetime of disappointment.

Troy’s frustration with his life emerges from his inability to meet the economic ideals of power and dominance perpetuated by patriarchal definitions of masculinity. In “‘We’s the Leftovers’: Whiteness as Economic Power and Exploitation in August Wilson’s Twentieth-Century Cycle of Plays,” Çiğdem Üsekes connects the desire for power to economic concerns. Black Americans, who are living in a capitalistic society that has long equated property and wealth to power but often denied them opportunity to acquire either, struggle with overcoming the commodification of their blood, sweat, and tears (Üsekes 124). Troy is familiar with this struggle, as he tells Rose, “Woman . . . I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain’t got no tears. I done spent them” (40). Troy’s masculinity is in constant conflict because he measures his success by the same American system that he attributes to the devil. In one of his elaborate stories about “seeing the devil,” Troy defines the devil as a “White fellow . . . got on good clothes and everything. . . . He say ‘I’ll give you all the credit you want but you got to pay the interest on it.’ . . . Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it’ll be hell to pay” (15). American capitalism was built on the ownership of human flesh, and the resulting cycle of power and suffering has captured Troy in the whirlwind.

Much like Grant in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Troy's attempts to free himself only further imprison him in the very standards that he despises. Both frustrated with selling the use of his muscles and his body and consumed with acquiring power, Troy demands that a black man have the same opportunities as a white man. He questions his boss, "Why you got the white mens driving and colored lifting? . . . 'what's the matter, don't I count?" (2). After being granted a position as a driver, Bono reveals that Troy has "been fighting with them people about driving and ain't even got a license" (45). Exercising his power by questioning the racial equality of the positions, Troy obtains a position as "the first colored driver" for which he is not qualified. Troy's advancement, then, is subject to the same criticism Troy gives Jackie Robinson's, and, again, Troy becomes something that he hates. Driven only by a desire for power, Troy's move to the driver's seat proves dissatisfying. He tells Bono, "It ain't like working the back of the truck. Ain't got nobody to talk to . . . feel like you working by yourself" (83). By ignoring the importance of the connection to others, Troy demonstrates his preoccupation with the white, patriarchal constructs of American masculinity. The answer to his question to his boss, "Don't I count?" remains the same, and Troy gains no power from the situation. Chosen because he hinted at racial discrimination and not because of his merit, Troy remains an invisible member of the masses defined only by his color.

Troy's inability to gain power according to (white) patriarchal measures of economic success leads him to seek power in his personal relationships. Troy tries to exercise control over the lives of his wife Rose, his brother Gabe, and his son Cory. Every Friday Troy hands his paycheck over to Rose, an emasculating act when seen through the (white) American patriarchal lens. As a result, Troy, believing that a wife

should submit to her husband, exercises a misogynist attitude towards her. On one occasion, he remarks to her, “You supposed to come when I call you, woman” (43). Even though Rose often ignores or counters Troy’s comments, she is trapped beneath the shadow of him. Aware that her life has limited possibilities without Troy, Rose remains devoted, recognizing “*Troy’s spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults*” (5). In their relationship, however, Troy’s spirit fails to illuminate a path of escape. Instead, their marriage is a struggle for dominance that imprisons them both.

The economic power Troy seeks from his brother Gabe also confines Troy by making him a participant in the American capitalist agenda. Gabe, who was wounded at war and has a metal plate in his head, believes he died, went to heaven, and came back as the Archangel Gabriel. As compensation for getting “half of his head blown off,” the army gives him a “lousy” three thousand dollars (28). Despite his sacrifice, Gabe’s life is reduced to financial reparation. Struggling beneath the economic measures of success he has adopted, Troy participates in this commodification when he takes Gabe’s three-thousand dollars and uses it to buy his house. Thus, the house, which remains the defining backdrop to *Fences*, becomes a constant reminder of black sacrifice and white compensation. While Troy acknowledges, “That’s the only way I got a roof over my head . . . cause of that metal plate,” he does not appear to harbor any guilt for the situation. After Rose tells him, “Ain’t no sense blaming yourself for nothing. Gabe wasn’t in no condition to manage that money. You done what was right by him,” Troy can only respond, “That ain’t what I’m saying woman! . . . If my brother didn’t have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of”

(28). Unable to measure success by any means other than through the accumulation of money and goods, Troy continues to struggle under (white) America's looming shadow.

The barriers of this "archetypal" American masculinity, which shape Troy's conceptions of himself and the world, are bequeathed to his son, Cory. Consumed with bitterness over the rejection and discrimination that crushed his baseball dreams, Troy reconstructs a similar barrier around Cory's dreams of playing football. Troy recognizes that even a decade after Jackie Robinson changed the complexion of American baseball, "The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team" (34). Wishing to protect Cory from the disappointments he has faced, Troy erects a blockade in the path of Cory's dreams. Troy forcefully tells Rose, "I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. . . . I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports" (39). By imprisoning Cory's dreams in Troy's past, Troy limits the agency Cory has in his own life. Troy neglects to do for Cory what he does for Bono, his best friend. Bono reveals that Troy showed him how "to take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other" (62). While Troy provided this model for Bono, he is unable to do so for Cory. In an effort of patriarchal protection, Troy's good intentions are overshadowed as he becomes the barrier that he resents the most.

Overwhelmed by constant defeat in his struggles for dominance, Troy seeks freedom from his failures. Much like Grant in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Troy feels as though he has "been standing in the same place for eighteen years" (70). In an effort to "steal second," Troy engages in an extramarital affair with Alberta (70). Troy believes that Alberta allows him to be free: "It's just . . . She gives me a different idea . . . a

different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems . . . be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain't never been" (69). Troy's feeling of freedom comes, not from Alberta, but from avoiding his responsibilities. Alberta becomes a destination to which Troy runs when the pressures of bill-paying and home-ownership become too much to bear. By running away from these difficulties, however, Troy does not free himself of them. Instead, Troy's extramarital affair foils any attempted escape from the pressures he feels at home, much like Grant's attempts at running away in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Resulting in the birth of a baby girl, Troy's affair only narrows the walls of his imprisonment. Because Alberta dies in childbirth, Troy must take responsibility for his daughter Raynell. Thus, the pressures and problems are exacerbated, not alleviated.

By measuring his success by white and middle class American standards, Troy creates pressures that can only be abated by removing the inadequate benchmarks defining him. Living in a patriarchal, capitalist society where he must earn money to survive, however, makes this endeavor arduous. If he wishes to break free of society's pressures, Troy's double consciousness as a black man living in a white world requires a fuller perspective of his life than the one he has adopted. In order to have any chance for freedom, Troy must remove the lens of white America that muddies his view of himself and the world. In the shadow of these ill-fitting standards, Troy perceives himself to be inadequate and his hardships to be failures. As a result, Troy fails to see the successes of his family and his life. Even though Troy attributes whiteness to Death when he

describes it as wearing “a white robe with a hood on it” (12), Troy is unable to recognize that the white cloak he wears over his masculinity is the shadow that is smothering him.

Troy understands his fate as a black male living in the shadows of white America, but his progress is stunted by his inability and unwillingness to change it. Excluded from (white) Americans’ conceptions of masculinity, Troy must renegotiate what it means to be a black male through his own history. He begins this process when he is fourteen. Sitting with Bono and his first son, Lyons, Troy digs up his past and shares it with them. In doing so, he remembers the day he realized that the time had come for him to leave his daddy’s house (52). After a brutal beating over a girl, which escalated to a full physical conflict, Troy realized he was no longer afraid of his father: “Now I thought he was mad cause I ain’t done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man . . . at fourteen years of age” (52). Troy acknowledges that the world suddenly got big after he left his father’s house and that it was a long time before he could cut it down to a manageable size. Similar to Rufus’s realization that the beat of Harlem was the beat of his own heart, Troy discovers that “Part of that cutting down was when I got to the place where I could feel him [his father] kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years” (53). For Troy, cutting down the world to where he could handle it involved coming to terms with his past and realizing his inevitable connection to it. In making moves away from his father, however, Troy faces the reality of being unable to find a job or a place to live. To eat, Troy began to steal. Stealing led to a bullet in his chest, a man knifed to death, and a fifteen-year jail sentence. Circumstances and his choices landed Troy in a jail cell,

fulfilling (white) society's criminal expectations of him. In jail, Troy learns how to play baseball, the sport that eventually leads Troy to imprison his black masculinity in the shadows cast by the light of an American ideal. Unlike Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Troy is released from prison, but not from the prison in his heart.

Troy's inability to fully confront his past and his failure to reciprocate for others causes him to remain stagnant and unable to navigate his way out from beneath the shadows of a (white) patriarchal masculinity. Troy begins the self-examination essential to the blues escape when he digs up his childhood experiences and begins to define himself within and against them, but he cannot complete the process. Even though Troy acknowledges crucial pieces of his complex past, he is unable to reconcile with the past that denied him entry to Major League baseball. Even if Troy had been able to fully acknowledge and overcome his history, his escape would have failed. Baldwin's blues prescription for escape relies on community interaction and reciprocation, and while Troy is always willing to share his story, he is unwilling to bear witness to the stories of others. Troy's responsibility to himself is too often unaccompanied by his responsibility to others, which inhibits his progress and the progress of others. In refusing Cory the freedom that he was denied, for example, Troy only continues the cycle of rejection.

Through blues music and philosophy in *Fences*, Wilson utilizes Baldwin's prescription for escape. In place of the inadequate measures Troy employs, Wilson uses the blues as a measure of African American experience. In its broad definition, the blues in *Fences* includes everything from Rose's spirituals and Gabe's hymns to Troy's song about his old, loyal dog, Blue. When telling the story of the fight with his father that impelled Troy to move away from him, Troy mentions good old Blue, who was licking

his face when he woke up, battered and bruised (52). Of all the songs in *Fences*, Troy's song, "I had a dog his name was Blue/You know Blue was mighty true/You know Blue was a good old dog . . ." (99), which is directly linked to his past, has the most power to unite the singer and the listener. According to Wilson, blues music is "a flag bearer of self definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators" (qtd. in Gantt 22). Among the rules the blues set down were those Baldwin prescribed as an escape route in *Another Country*: a process of self-discovery and shared experience that relies on acknowledging the past and bearing witness to others' suffering. Wilson acknowledges this process, as well, as the only path by which his characters can illuminate their experiences beyond the shadows of (white) patriarchal masculinity.

In *Fences*, acknowledging and overcoming the sins of our fathers is vital to the blues prescription for escape, and, thus, fundamental to Troy's inability to break out of the confines of (white) patriarchal masculinity. Wilson's epigraph illuminates the agency we have in the acceptance of our past:

When the sins of our fathers visit us
 We do not have to play host.
 We can banish them with forgiveness
 As God, in His Largeness and Laws.

The process of self-excavation, then, involves one's stepping away from the sins of his father, finding his own place, and planting his own roots, which requires an acknowledgment of both his and his nation's past. Troy recognizes his father's evil, but

cannot banish his father's sins from his soul. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy," he reveals to Bono and Lyons; "Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living" (50-1). He did not have the "walking blues" that Bono describes, but "stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be" (51). Troy's sense of responsibility for family comes from his father, but it is a responsibility Troy runs from by the end of the play. Like his father, who "wasn't good for nobody" (51), Troy becomes a threatening shadow over the dreams of others. Troy also plays host to the sins of his forefathers who created an America in which a black man was only three-fifths human, an America whose ideals did not include him. The patriarchal American masculinity that the forefathers embody is insurmountable for Troy. As in baseball, "a contest cannot end in a draw: one team must eventually lose (or 'die')" (Koprince 356). Trapped beneath white definitions but always railing against them, Troy's only freedom is in death.

Even though *Fences*, like *Another Country* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, relies on the death of its black male protagonist as a catalyst for change, Troy's death does not guarantee freedom. In the aftermath of Troy's death, all hope for escape from the suffocatingly narrow confines of masculinity lie in Cory, who, unlike his brother Lyons, has stepped outside the fence his father built in order to establish his own life. Even though Troy's death brings Cory home to confront his past, his death does not necessarily make Cory's freedom possible. At the end of the play, Lyons, Troy's son from a previous marriage, is serving a three-year prison sentence for theft. He tells Cory, "You learn to deal with it like anything else. You got to take the crooked with the straights. That's what Papa used to say" (94). Following his father's footsteps into jail, Lyons

gains no freedom from his father's death. By juxtaposing Lyons and Cory in this final scene, Wilson demonstrates that it is through agency, not death, that freedom is obtained.

Cory is *Fences*'s only hope for escaping the shadows of both his father and his nation. When Cory returns home, he goes through the same process that Troy does when Troy realizes that he is inextricably connected to his father. Just as Troy's father was "kicking in his blood," Troy's shadow sinks into Cory flesh:

Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you . . . I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow . . . (96-7)

As a crucial piece in the excavation of Cory's past, Troy's looming shadow must be acknowledged and overcome. As Rose explains to Cory, "You can't be nobody but who you are. . . . That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with" (97). Cory's two options are the same as those available to other black males such as Rufus, Grant, and Jefferson: grow into the image or make the image fit. Still, Cory's future, much like that of Vivaldo and Ida in *Another Country* and Grant in *A Lesson Before Dying*, remains open-ended.

It is not certain that Cory will succeed, but in the final pages of the play, he takes the first steps on the path to escape by acknowledging the interconnectedness of his father's past and his own life. Shortly before his father's funeral, Cory begins singing

Troy's song about Old Blue. Gradually, Raynell joins in and sings along. By the final verse, Cory and Raynell are singing in unison:

Blue laid down and died like a man
 Now he's treeing possums in the Promised Land
 I'm gonna tell you this to let you know
 Blue's gone were the good dogs go
 When I hear old Blue bark
 When I hear old Blue bark
 Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark
 Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark. (99-100)

Together through their father's song, Cory and Raynell acknowledge their shared past and the possibility of the future. By singing Troy's song, Cory and Raynell are bound to "one another and to the mixture of pain and unarticulated love that is their common inheritance" (Gantt 11). The common inheritance of experience comes through their father and the blues, two crucial stepping-stones on the path towards freedom that Wilson forges.

In negotiating the path to another country, Wilson demonstrates the gradual strength that gathers through generations of self-empowerment and communal responsibility. It is up to each man to negotiate his own identity against the shadows of his past. Fences are always being built, to keep people out and to keep people in. While responsibility lies in the one building the fence, whether it be a father, a mother, a sport, or a nation, it also rests in the individual, who may choose to take a self-conscious, self-sacrificing, self-preserving step outside of the fence. These are the gradual strides to

another county, where African Americans' dreams, to "breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity" (Wilson xvii), can become realities.

V: Conclusion: Peering Through the Cracks

Vivaldo's offer to Rufus after he returns from a month-long disappearance, "You can lie here in the mornings and look at my ceiling. It's full of cracks, it makes all kinds of pictures. Maybe it'll tell you things it hasn't told me" (52), is James Baldwin's offer to his literary successors. Much as the cracks of the ceilings and sidewalks in the novel, *Another Country* challenges the depths and heights of black masculinity, rupturing its rigid boundaries. For the crevice to become a chasm, the depths of a man must be released from beneath the projections of others. Only then may the expansive possibilities and complexities of black male identity begin to be fathomed. The cracks on the ceilings and sidewalks of *Another Country* are the result of Baldwin pushing back, challenging the pressures of the cage bequeathed to him and Rufus at birth. Through Rufus's eyes, the crack is just another narrow, confining space, but through Baldwin's proposal for escape, that narrow space has the promise of another country.

In the cracks of a sidewalk, a flower can grow, and through a crack in the ceiling or a wall, a ray of light can illuminate the dark spaces enclosed. This opportunity for growth and insight is possible for black males because of the crevices Baldwin begins to shape and Gaines and Wilson continue to expand. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant uses these narrow spaces to chip away at the myths about black males as Jefferson cracks the frame of society's criminal expectations and subhuman speculations. Through Baldwin's blues prescription, Grant and Jefferson begin to break down the cages that confine them and in sharing their experiences, illuminate their lives for others. In *Fences*, Troy is trapped in his frustration that the space he desired to break through was only wide enough for Jackie Robinson, but Cory is able to begin to negotiate his own space in the world

beyond the fence of his father's yard. With his father's death, Cory has the opportunity to choose life.

The implication of this gradual breaking down of society's gazes and cages reaches beyond the pages of *Another Country*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and *Fences*. These novels do not merely crack the image of a helpless Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, but they begin to crack the frame of the black male in American social history. Like the confining images of black males, history itself is a construct. It is told and taught and absorbed as fact. The act of acknowledging the voices of black males and bearing witness to their experiences in the world redefines and reconstructs history. In order to understand the effects of history's fabrications, it is necessary to hear the voices of black males. In order to understand history as a construct, it is necessary to hear the voices of those that have described black males. The discrepancies between these voices illuminate the illusion of authenticity, and juxtaposing the two renders the structure visible. Once an observer acknowledges his frame of vision, it begins to crack. Awareness, either of the categorizations we impose and absorb or the cages we rail against and flounder within, ruptures the rigid boundaries of confinement. It breaks the trance of American observers accustomed to confining black males to obscure thoughts, and, thus, begins to break the images that also live in the hearts of black males.

Through the cracks and crevices created by Baldwin, Wilson, and Gaines, the fabricated portraits of black males are seen as illusions. These cracks make a different kind of picture and garner space in which a different story can be told. Because Baldwin began to break the cycle of the sentimental and sociological images of black males, Rufus, Grant, Jefferson, Troy, and Cory have agency in their lives. The responsibility of

knowing themselves is one that some will choose to shirk, but those that choose to embark on the treacherous path of self-discovery thrust a new image on to the page. These characters do not merely have the power to reshape themselves and transform their texts. With recognition, these black male protagonists have the potential to reconstruct the frames of black males by offering a complex personal story of black male identity. Peering through the cracks, one can see the possibilities on the horizon.

James Baldwin believed that if someone could bear the burden of his experience, he could begin to change it (qtd. in Standley 155). The burdens of the misrepresentations of black males must not and can not be borne by them alone. Like Paul Bonin in *A Lesson Before Dying*, we are all witnesses to the transformation. As witnesses, rather than observers, we share the burden of experience and the responsibility to change it. If we take Baldwin's proposal seriously, then by acknowledging our complex histories, sharing our diverse experiences, and bearing witness to one another, we have the opportunity to forge other countries of representation. In these places, where a man can be released from the suffocatingly narrow confines of black masculinity, black males acquire space to live, breathe, and flourish. While these other countries may be cold and unfamiliar, they are also courageous and promising. They are one path out of the darkness and into the light.

¹ Richard Wright mentored Baldwin in the beginning, inviting Baldwin to his home and helping him find a publisher for his novel (Pierpont 1). With the publication of “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Wright is shocked and hurt, and the essay signals the break between Wright and Baldwin (Pierpont 1).

² Even though *Fences* was not published until 1986, the first staged reading was in 1983.

³ As a point of interest and possibly intersection between Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Baldwin’s *Another Country*, Ida, the name of the only black female character in Baldwin’s novel, is also the name of the woman to whom Ellison dedicates *Invisible Man*.

⁴ Baldwin understood this measure of authentic blackness. “Baldwin occupied a complex position in the politics and culture of the sixties,” simultaneously an “outspoken advocate of civil rights” and a vilified black man “for not being black (read *masculine*) enough” (Shin 250).

⁵ While not central to my argument, love—as an action with the power to change the world—was an important addition to this process for Baldwin (qtd. in Standley 48).

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