

The benefits of  
homosexuality;  
rejecting bodies,  
identity and desire in  
'another ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* nearly all of the central characters experience anxiety, confusion, or conflict when it comes to the interweaving of their bodies, identities, and desires. The character of Eric however, a homosexual expatriate who returns to New York in the middle of the novel to pursue a career in acting, could be argued to not experience such crises, even when he engages in an affair with the heterosexual and married Cass. In fact, Eric's affair with Cass in no way confuses his homosexuality.

When we are first introduced to Eric he is living in France with his lover of just over two years Yves. Baldwin presents Eric and Yves as having a healthy, loving, and mutually respectful relationship free of the racial, gendered, and classed subtext that is present in the relationships of all of the book's other characters. During the first chapter in which Eric is introduced, the couple are presented by Baldwin as content with each other:

"[Eric] and Yves had been together for more than two years and, from the time of their meeting, his home had been with Yves. More precisely and literally, it was Yves who had come to live with him, but each was, for the other, the dwelling place that each had despaired of finding." [1]

This passage shows the level of happiness and completeness that stems from Eric and Yves's relationship through an achieved sense of "home", while the final sentence suggests that this relationship, and the genuine happiness that comes from it and its sense of "home", is the end result of a long process of searching for a person each were capable of loving. This therefore suggests that Eric, before leaving New York and moving to France where he met Yves, faced internalised crises concerning his identity and

desires that were resolved through the consummation of a relationship with another man. It is the fact that, after deciding to move back to New York, “[he] did not want to be separated from Yves” [Baldwin, pp. 158] that shows that Eric, through his relationship with Yves, has come to accept and be happy with his homosexuality.

Eric’s acceptance and comfortableness in his homosexuality is seen throughout the rest of the novel, as is his sense of loyalty to Yves and their relationship. However, his identity as a homosexual is made queer when he begins the affair with Cass, a friend from before he left New York. Baldwin presents this affair as coming from a mutual agreement between Eric and Cass:

“‘ You make me feel very strange,’ [Eric] said.

‘ You make me feel things I didn’t think I’d ever feel again.’

‘ What do I make you feel?’ [Cass] asked.

‘ You do the same for me.’ She sensed he was taking the initiative for her sake.” [Baldwin, pp. 242]

By being a homosexual who is willing to engage in a sexual relationship with a woman, Eric presents a complex interweaving between the concepts of bodies, identity, and desire, or rather lack thereof. The affair between Eric and Cass suggests that bodies, identity and desire are not intrinsically linked or interwoven.

Baldwin suggests that just because Eric identifies as homosexual, and is part of a loving homosexual relationship, he is not prohibited from desiring women. In a similar example in her book, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose presents the argument that men who are married to women and identify as heterosexual yet still desire having sex with other men are not necessarily homosexual or closeted homosexuals.[2] The presentation of Eric's affair is also reminiscent of Carl Wittman's assertion in "A Gay Manifesto" that a homosexual identity is not solely based on sexual desire, who one has sex with, but rather a social identification, a willingness to label oneself as homosexual, a "capacity to love someone of the same sex" regardless of who else one may desire.[3] The gender of one's sexual partner, Baldwin, like Jagose and Wittman, suggests, does not define one's own sexuality; sex and sexuality are two non-corresponding concepts. Desire, in the case of Eric, is presented as indiscriminate and ambivalent towards identities and bodies, allowing one individual who identifies as a homosexual man to desire another individual with the body of a woman in an act of sexual fluidity.

While Eric is seen to be able to embrace a sexual fluidity separate from his identity as a homosexual, Cass, on the other hand, experiences certain problems through her interweaving of bodies, identity, and desire. Vivaldo, a mutual friend of Eric and Cass, notes that concerning the affair "it was not Eric that surprised him, but Cass." [Baldwin, pp. 271] This suggests that Cass is assumed to be more traditional, more demure or prudent than Eric.

Perhaps, unlike for Eric, the issue is not the body that is desired and the impact that this desire has upon one's identity, but rather the existence of

the desire itself. As Vivaldo's girlfriend notes, "Cass is a grown woman with two kids. What about those kids? ... Those kids are going to hate her".

[Baldwin, pp. 272] The assumption is that there is a double standard when it comes to promiscuity. There is no issue when Eric, a homosexual male, engages in a sexually fluid affair despite being in a committed relationship, but Cass is condemned by her friends as she is a married mother who cheats on her husband, in spite of engaging in an affair that abides by her sexual identity.

Perhaps this is connected to what Wittman states in "A Gay Manifesto", that "sex for [women] has meant oppression, while for [homosexuals] it has been a symbol of our freedom." [Wittman, pp. 5] Sex, the act of combining bodies and desire, is inherently gendered, and is thus vastly different for men and women, even if one were to disregard sexuality. The affair for Eric does not challenge his homosexuality, but rather consolidates it, if we are to follow Wittman's argument, by being a symbol of his sexual freedom due to his ability to disregard naturalized gender roles. For Cass, however, it symbolizes an unacceptable differing from fixed gender roles and a continuation of sexual oppression, for, as Wittman goes on to say, "One major problem [for homosexuals] is our own male chauvinism"; Eric continues a sexual exploitation of Cass due to their differences in gender. [Wittman, pp. 5] For Cass, who seeks to escape her stifling, mundane marriage, the affair with Eric is condemned due to the fact that women, through the fixed nature of gender roles, are not allowed to act upon their desires.

When it comes to how bodies, identities, and desires are interwoven in *Another Country*, the results of this interweaving is determined heavily by gender. For Eric, there is no discernible interweaving of these three categories due to his acceptance of sexual fluidity; he is able to see the distinction between all three and how all three can remain separate. However, it is only due to Eric's status as a male homosexual, his living outside of gender roles, that he is able to engage in sexual fluidity with no consequences to his identity, to the bodies he desires; it is because he is homosexual that the affair with Cass does not confuse his homosexuality. For Cass, however, for whom sexual fluidity is not an option due to her living with the constraints of naturalized gender roles, the interweaving of these three categories is unacceptable and signifies a conflict with the gender roles that she is defined by and lives within. However, Cass, unlike Eric, is not capable of breaking away from gender roles completely and she thus faces significant consequences, for, as Eric says once Cass's husband, Richard, becomes aware of the affair, "Richard's talking about suing for divorce and getting custody of the children." [Baldwin, pp. 329]

The novel presents the interweaving of bodies, identities, and desires as complicated and that the interweaving of these three categories is the reaffirming of the gender roles fixed within society. Baldwin, through the character of Eric, suggests that it is through recognizing the lack of connection between these three categories that the individual can truly be happy with themselves, and free themselves of confusion that these categories, and the fixed gender roles that they promote, create.

## **Works Cited**

[1] James Baldwin, *Another Country*, (New York; Dell Publishing Company, 1963), p. 158

[2] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory*, (New York; New York University Press, 2001), p. 7

[3] Carl Wittman, “ A Gay Manifesto”, *Course Reader, Queer Theory*, Instructor: Cheryl Kader, UWM Spring 2016, p. 4