

Exploring Gender and Sexuality in Writing

Ashley Rogers

Masculinity and Femininity are terms that scholars often find difficult to define. Many definitions of the two terms are created "as forms of sex-appropriate behaviors [and] manifestations of a historically based, culturally shared phantasy about male and female biologies" (Gatens 13). Masculinity and femininity in the Black community are often seen as stagnant terms, and any drastic changes to expected, unspoken gender roles are frowned upon. Before the Great Migration, the primary role of Black women was to be the caretaker for their families, prioritizing marriage and children. After the Great Migration, there was a shift in this dynamic where many Black women were encouraged to "give their careers priority over making plans to marry" (Harley 343).

Similarly, Black men "endorse the importance of economic provider roles, and family responsibility and involvement" (Hunter 24). Generally, the roles of caregiver and pleaser are applied to Black women, and the role of protector is applied to Black men. In literature, Black masculinity is described in a way that is "often culturally generic, fragmented, and aloof" (Jackson 198). Black masculinity can be impacted by "struggle, community, achievement, independence, and recognition" (204). Though many factors influence Black masculinity, there is a level of agency and autonomy that Black men have been able to access, which has allowed them to navigate different spaces and claim definitions of masculinity as environments change and become more diverse. Black women, on the other hand, "are generally characterized by a different and substantially more negative set of traits than women in general" (224). While Black women may possess agency and develop autonomy by defining their femininity, the views of the public and their communities are often the final determinant of whether their definitions are

accepted or acknowledged. Undergirded by the theoretical tool of intersectionality, this paper will analyze the constructions of masculinity and femininity in the works of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde. It will do so by first understanding how both authors engage Black women and men in their works.

Defining Intersectionality and Representation

Feminist scholar V. M. May argues that intersectionality is an "analytical and political orientation that brings together several insights and practices developed largely in the context of Black feminist and women of color theoretical and political traditions" (3). Essentially, intersectionality is a term used to encapsulate the lived experiences of people without prioritizing one aspect of their identity over another. For example, intersectionality looks at the experiences of a Black woman as both Black and a woman. Intersectionality is an important concept related to representation because it allows for multiple identities to be acknowledged and respected as opposed to one identity being the standard. It accounts for varied and different experiences even within the same community and eliminates the use of token identities as the norm.

James Baldwin and Representation within His Work

James Baldwin is known for writing on the "Negro problem." Most of his work was dedicated to criticizing America, specifically white America, for their treatment of Black Americans. His body of work focused on nationality, interracial relations, sexuality, racism, and how America needed to change. Baldwin's novels, essays, and interviews are well studied for how they called America out, in love, and made people talk about topics that America did not want to address. Many praise Baldwin for his ability to highlight intersectionality in his novels; however, when addressing internal racial conflict, Baldwin had blind spots. Though he depicts

many men in his writing and interviews as having fluidity in terms of their sexuality and gender, that same fluidity and understanding is not applied to the women in his oeuvre.

He uses his novels to draw attention to a wide range of themes that plague America, including but not limited to racism, classism, and views on sexuality. In his novels *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's male characters display toxic masculinity because of internalized self-doubt and conflict. Rufus, the main character in *Another Country*, is a poor Black musician who struggles with internal rage and is constantly searching for love. His main love interest in the novel is a white, Southern woman named Leona. Their interactions are primarily violent, as displayed in the beginning sex scene where Rufus tells Leona, "Go ahead, fight. I like it" (*Another Country* 15). He makes misogynistic comments such as, "Honey, as long as you know how to make a man as happy as you making me, you don't need nothing else" (18). Their relationship is filled with violence, yet he continues to claim his love for her.

Though Rufus's love interest was a woman, he had many interactions in which his sexuality was in question. In one scene, Rufus is hungry, and "a big, rough-looking man, well dressed, white" comes out of a bar offering to pay for Rufus' food in exchange for sexual relations (*Another Country* 27). Rufus also talks about how he treats a man whom he was previously intimate with, stating, "He had despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity" (*Another Country* 29). Much of Rufus' character was developed on the idea of self-hatred. Readers are inclined to feel sorry for Rufus despite his toxic traits because of the internal conflict that he faces throughout book one. In so doing, Baldwin points to external factors as the reasons why the men in the novel display toxic masculinity, are abusive, and do not seek ways to rectify their internalized self-hatred.

This level of toxic masculinity is also displayed in David, the main character of *Giovanni's Room*. David is an American man who moves to Paris and finds a woman named Hella, whom he plans to marry. David and Hella's relationship is rocky because David does not love Hella. His sole purpose for marrying her is to meet societal expectations. He frequently made comments to her about gender roles and womanhood, stating that he did not "see what's so hard about being a woman. At least, not as long as she's got a man" (*Giovanni's Room* 66). This statement implies that the only purpose for women is to marry and please a man. Though David was engaged to Hella, he had a very intimate relationship with Giovanni, an Italian man who moved to Paris after losing his child shortly after birth. David and Giovanni lived together in Giovanni's room, a place where they were able to be intimate with one another without the judgmental views from the outside world. Their intimacy is cut short when Hella and Giovanni meet. Shortly after, David and Giovanni have a heated conversation in which Giovanni tells David that his problem is that he cannot love a man or a woman (*Giovanni's Room* 75). In response to this comment, David tells Giovanni, "But I'm a man," and proceeds to ask him, "What do you think can happen between us?" (*Giovanni's Room* 76).

Here, Baldwin displays another man who struggles with self-conflict. David struggles to define what is masculine and feminine. He struggles with his love and intimacy for Giovanni compared to his weak emotional attachment to Hella. However, his relationship with Hella is deemed more socially acceptable than with Giovanni. David also displays toxic masculinity in his interactions with Giovanni as he questions whether Giovanni is trying to make him act as if he is a woman. Though Rufus and David are portrayed as men of different races, both characters get away with displaying toxic traits and abusing women (sexually, physically, mentally, or

emotionally). Baldwin also gives David grace as he is presented as a man who struggles with internal conflict, familial issues, and defining his identity as a young white man in Paris.

On the contrary, Baldwin uses his female characters to display gender-conforming stereotypes. Often, he depicts women who are heavily reliant on the men in their lives. If this is not the case, he settles by giving them an insignificant role in the novel. One of the most prominent examples is Ida, Rufus's sister in *Another Country*. Ida speaks critically of Rufus's white friends. She makes lots of claims about how she and her lover, Vivaldo, are different because he is a white man living in New York, and she is a Black woman. Though Ida is very conscious and critical of the way the white Americans around her act, she is a woman who is actively seeking male companionship. During a social gathering, Vivaldo gets jealous of the attention she receives from other men, which upsets Ida. She goes to find a place to be alone, and when Vivaldo goes looking for her, she states that he sees her as "nothing but a whore" (*Another Country* 249). This interaction is characteristic of how Ida and Vivaldo act towards each other in the novel. They are codependent, although their relationship is based on racial tensions. As the woman in the relationship, Baldwin creates Ida's character as defenseless when it comes to loving Vivaldo. All the independent traits she expressed before they were in a relationship seem to fade as she gets lost in him and their relationship. Baldwin makes Ida's character heavily reliant on a man, and outside of her connection to Vivaldo or Rufus, Ida's character development is incomplete.

Relatedly, in *Giovanni's Room*, Hella's role in the novel and position in David's life is treated as insignificant. Periodically, Hella is mentioned as the woman David will marry; however, this confirmation is only offered when David uses her to validate his masculinity. Towards the end of the novel, after David and Giovanni are separated, Hella and David talk

about their relationship moving forward and what they should do considering the revelation of David's love for Giovanni. Hella pleads with David to get married, start having children, and move somewhere else so they can solely focus on their relationship. After David hesitates to respond to her plea, she continues, asking him to “let [her] be a woman” (*Giovanni's Room* 241). She pleads with him, addressing her willingness to do whatever it takes to keep him and have him love her, even if that means giving up parts of herself. Baldwin writes Hella's character as highly reliant on David to move forward with her life. She questions her womanhood because David does not love her in the same way that she loves him. Ida and Hella are treated as women whose sole purpose is to find and love a man. Beyond the men they are involved with in the respective novels, there is no character development, and their identities are characterized by their interactions with men.

In this way, Baldwin treats women as if they are disposable. These women have a “sense of guilt [that is] often tied to their desire to break away from roles that have been defined for them, or to their failure to fulfill a role” (Harris 5). Women in his novel are “evaluated based on how well they complement, satisfy, and work toward the happiness of the men in their lives” (Harris 8). Women are also stripped of the sexual autonomy that men in the novel receive, as all the relationships presented are heterosexual. On the contrary, men are allowed to form both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. The men are also given an identity based on their respective actions and are not governed by the acts of their significant others. Additionally, the men in the novels are excused from accountability as their environmental conditions are used as acceptable explanations for their abusive behaviors and tendencies.

Baldwin's Conversations about Gender Expectations and Sexuality

Baldwin's work is known for pushing boundaries. The works were heavily criticized during the time in which he wrote them. Though Baldwin's novels and other works can be commended for calling out white Americans for the way they treat Black Americans, they fall short when it comes to speaking on intraracial issues. Baldwin's sentiments in his novels regarding character development are also reflected in his interviews and other works. In "Revolutionary Hope," a conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, the two scholars discuss race relations, including interracial and intraracial connections. Lorde brings into conversation how Black men harm Black women. In response, Baldwin states that the harm that Black men inflict upon Black women's bodies is a product of the outside factors that drove them to that point. He argues, "It's his [a Black man's] responsibility but it's not his fault" (Revolutionary Hope). In doing so, Baldwin absolves Black men from any guilt as it pertains to Black women. Instead, their actions are seen as a product of the racist, poverty-stricken environments in which they were raised. He argues that it is also the responsibility of Black women to know that Black men do not mean to harm them and to recognize that they are only a product of the "enemy." This is unfair to Black women as it does not validate the pain that results from Black men's actions. It also puts Black women in a position where they must be the bigger person, understanding and accepting of unruly behavior because there are other factors impacting the men in their lives. Baldwin also does not speak about how external factors impact Black women. Instead, Black women are held responsible for both their actions and the actions of others.

Audre Lorde and Representation within Her Work

Audre Lorde is a Black feminist scholar. One primary difference between Lorde and Baldwin is that most of Lorde's work spoke to her experiences as a Black lesbian woman in America. Lorde's poems, essays, and talks are well-known for discussing feminist thought, specifically how Black women are treated in the feminist movement. While Lorde does not speak extensively on interracial issues, she does address how Black women navigate the patriarchy and gives them autonomy and fluidity in a way that Baldwin does not.

Audre Lorde uses her works to encourage women to live their lives the way they deem fit as opposed to operating under the guise of the patriarchy and men in their lives. In her essay, "Transformation of Silence," Lorde speaks about how Black women have "on one hand always been highly visible"; however, on the other hand, they "have been rendered invisible through depersonalization of racism" (*Sister Outsider* 42). Lorde makes this argument in terms of both the feminist movement and how Black women are treated generally. She argues that Black women are disregarded and discredited both inside of their race and from outsiders as well. She then states that it is up to women to learn about each other, "break that silence and bridge some of the differences" between them (*Sister Outsider* 44). For Lorde, there is no standard for how a woman should look or behave. Instead, differences within women should be acknowledged and treated as equally important.

In another one of Lorde's essays, "Poetry is not a Luxury," she speaks about how women use poetry to survive. This essay defines poetry as a "revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play" (*Sister Outsider* 37). Towards the end of the piece, Lorde talks about why women must be able to express their experiences through writing. She states that "within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our [Black

women] feelings were not meant to survive" (*Sister Outsider* 39). She then examines how women are used as "unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes" meant to please men and feel the pain of doing so without complaints (*Sister Outsider* 39). Lorde uses her writing to highlight that women write to give themselves a space to embrace their identity. Women write to give themselves and other women recognition and autonomy. She also calls out men for using women solely for self-preservation, the betterment of themselves, or for pleasure.

Baldwin and Lorde in Contrast

Baldwin does not allow women the same intersectional identities he affords to men in both his fiction works and interviews. In his work, Black men embrace multiple parts of their identity. For example, Rufus is a Black, poor, bisexual musician. All these identities come through in Baldwin's portrayal. The same could be said for David, the white, poor American bisexual man who moved to Paris to find himself. This same liberty is not extended to the women he writes about, for they are only talked about in relationship to men. As a man, Baldwin has the privilege of solely acknowledging the different aspects of men's identities while ignoring women's intersectionality.

On the other hand, Lorde creates space for women as she speaks about her experiences as a Black lesbian woman. She uses her intersecting identities to embrace other women and encourage them to do the same. Her primary focus in her work is on the recognition of the different aspects of women's identities, but she also engages with men in her writing. As a woman, she has no choice but to focus on the dominant majority as they are the ones, more often than not, silencing women and refusing to acknowledge that women are here to do more than just please men.

Conclusion

Black cultural workers such as Baldwin and Lorde are heavily relied on as sources of Blackness and Black representation in their respective communities. At first glance, their work is seen as a critical way to critique systemic oppression perpetuated by white America. Baldwin's method of choice was to dive deeply into America's shortcomings. On the other hand, Lorde's method of choice was to look internally at womanhood and how women supported each other to survive. Though these scholars are seen as prominent members of the Black community, they are also humans who struggle with stepping out of their personal biases. Baldwin, as seen through his work, seemed unable to fully represent women as more than caregivers, lovers, and reliant on men. Though Lorde recognized intersectionality in different identities, she could not fully speak on men's identities. She could only speak to her experiences as a woman and how men impacted that experience for her. Baldwin and Lorde's work allows readers to understand the importance of listening to other people's stories and validating the different parts of their identities that make them who they are. Without understanding intersectionality, one is inclined to have tunnel vision, where the only identities accepted, acknowledged, or deemed significant are the ones that closely align with one's identity.

As readers, it is also essential to avoid transferring the burden of representation to writers and thinkers like Baldwin and Lorde—even now. As two widely studied thinkers, their ideas, speeches, and thoughts are frequently analyzed and often treated as models for their respective identity groups. This practice is harmful as it limits people with similar intersecting identities to the versions Lorde and Baldwin represent instead of letting them forge their identities.

Works Cited

Baldwin, J. (1993). *Another country*. Vintage international.

- Baldwin, J. (2013). *Giovanni's room*. Vintage International/Vintage Books.
- Gatens, M. (1996). *Imaginary bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*. Routledge.
- Harley, S. (1990). For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880-1930. *Signs*, 15(2), 336–349. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174489>
- Harris, T. (1987). *Black women in the fiction of James Baldwin*. University of Tennessee Press.
- Hunter, A. G., & Davis, J. E. (1994). Hidden voices of Black men: The meaning, structure, and complexity of manhood. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25(1), 20-40.
- Jackson, R. L. (2004). *African American Communication & Identities: Essential Readings*. Sage.
- Lorde, A., & Browne, M. L. (2020). Poetry is Not a Luxury. In *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Books.
- Lorde, A., & Browne, M. (2020). Transformation of Silence. In *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Books.
- May, V. M. (2015). *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.
- Mocada-Museum. (2014, January 15). Revolutionary hope: A conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde. Tumblr. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>