

To many degrees of success, our group discussed James Baldwin's Another Country. Our preliminary meetings consisted discussion of plot, genre, and literary devices. We were quick to note Baldwin's rhetoric and close attention to detail: almost every sentence seems motivated to some extent. At first, we interpreted, quite incorrectly, that Baldwin was speaking out against racism and homophobia. Before any of us had read the entire novel, this viewpoint was easy to sustain: Rufus and Leona's relationship was an interracial one and in particular one whose failure is blamed on social misunderstanding. This blame, however, is ultimately shallow, as our group found out. To this and other ends, we discussed Another Country not as a device for social reform or personal narrative but instead as an *alternative social narrative* on the idea of identity.

*(What follows is my attempt to summarize the extensive ideas that our group discussed. This interface of a social narrative was not used in our discussions but is a literary object that I see fit to explain in a broad sense how we arrived at our group activity and discussion questions. The reader is asked to excuse my fastidious aside in the abstract. Its relevance cannot be ignored.)*

A social narrative is a story that a society constantly retells itself to affirm its very sense of self: The 'bad guy' is always beaten by the 'good guy'; all good dogs go to heaven; the struggle against poverty is synonymous with the struggle against the upper class; the girl always gets the guy. The parallel of a social narrative is one that equally well describes the same events but for reasons other than (or even directly opposing) those of the social narrative; it is the *alternative social narrative*. Such a narrative might say that the failure of the 'bad guy' was poor planning of the evil plan; that there is no canine heaven; that the lower class has fewer lucrative abilities; that the guy and the girl are simply compatible and there is no 'universe' bringing them together in a clandestine union. Quite simply, an alternative social narrative is no less logical than the social narrative that it opposes (although it is often more humorous); yet it is commonly rebuked because it challenges the society's basis for self-identity: its *raison d'être*.

To narrow this idea, we discussed that the social narrative that Baldwin speaks against is the role of individual identity as a function of social visibility. This narrative says that an individual's social perception is a concise descriptor of the individual's "true" self. This narrative is the social basis for stereotypes, racism, homophobia, and a litany of social devices that claim to provide a discrete identity for individuals based on a single (commonly visible or otherwise announced) attribute. It is also, however, the basis for many individuals' sense of self. It is the indicator that sets one apart from another: the ground from which one measures social voltage. The same social narrative that oppresses the black woman is also the one that allows her to feel empowered for overcoming obstacles founded in her race and gender. If we remove this social narrative and replace it with its alternative---one that says that race and gender are incompetent personal adjectives---then we say that the woman must have some *other* reason for feeling empowered; that perhaps her sense of self is unqualified if it is based solely on her overcoming the obstacles whose agency is removed.

This led us directly to question the validity (or at least the possibility) of this alternative social narrative in real (id est, Western) society. Baldwin's society has this alternative narrative in place the place of our society's stereotyping, (*'discretely identifying'*), narrative and simply proposes an avant-garde social exemplar and is, as such, *not* exploitable by our sociological methods. Yet the question still stands: does Baldwin's contrivance have some common elements with our own culture? Are we completely trapped in an archetype-reinforces-stereotype, difference-is-aversion society? To what extent do we define ourselves based on our social visibility, and to what extent do we make ourselves socially visible in accordance to our self-identities? Succinctly, *how recursive is the relationship between identity and visibility, and is this recursion a tautology on the relationship between identity and action?* Unfortunately this question is not easily answered. Some might argue (or even formally prove) that this question *cannot* be answered. It reduces quickly to the philosophical paradox of social existentialism and as such quickly digresses into the very abstract. It was therefore a challenge in our group's weekly meetings to discuss these ideas in the context of Another Country and come to any conclusions. We decided to phrase the abstract question into questions that could be *approached* by the class through Another Country, while still leaving them very abstract and aligned with the gravity of their philosophical basis.

We decided to introduce our ideas in the same way that we observed them: first very concretely and then in terms of the increasingly abstract. We needed a way to exhibit the relationship between identity and visibility in society. To this end, we used the wide diversity of our class to our advantage. The challenge was to examine the wrongdoings of others and to focus explicitly on what "caused" them. For having experienced a wrongdoing that was the result of a socially-visible indicator (e.g. race, class, sexuality, etc.), one would take a step back. from the center of the circle. Someone who had been wronged on the count of racism and homophobia would take two steps back, and so on. If someone were to remain in the center of the circle, one would be "completely normal" -- i.e. completely socially ideal. Yet by the end of the exercise, nobody remained in the center of the circle: The Archetypical Ideal was out doing charity work for the day. The remark was then that *nobody* truly sits at the social voltage-zero. Even the preconception from the start that perhaps someone in particular might be further "in" the circle than others at the end was wrong. We added a catch-all "other" category to ensure that nobody truly was in the center, but perhaps we should not have: nobody was fewer than three steps out of center; most were four or more. The salient point then is that society cannot judge everyone based on a strict point of reference because one does not exist. The judgment then cannot always be the result of some visible "difference" factor, and the perceived notion of identity-by-difference is shallower than one may suspect.

The idea behind this exercise is credited to Claire, who also thankfully made our point more obvious at the end of the exercise. My opinion was that we should have done at least a five-minute introduction to the idea before actually demonstrating it, but that approach would almost certainly have been met with a skewing of the results (remember that Baldwin's point, to which ours is tangential, challenges one's very identity: stakes that are hard to voluntarily

concede). What we should have done after the activity, then, was summarize these points explicitly and in more detail. We wrote our discussion questions with our points in mind, but we did not assign any particular person the task of ensuring that each question's transcendent idea was expressed. It is my impression that the class was well introduced to these ideas by the class discussion; the only way we could have improved this would be to lecture on the philosophical points and show sufficient examples from the text. Truly these ideas are fairly salient and not difficult to see; they are simply difficult to describe, and usually it is simply easiest to observe them in a special circumstance (e.g. Another Country). This misses the point and adds little to the discussion of generalized belonging. My contribution on this front was to continually abstract my group mates' ideas in relation to Baldwin until we arrived at the aforementioned idea that is transcendent of Baldwin. I cannot take credit for my group's understanding of the material, yet I would credit, in part, our group's broader scope to my propensity for abstraction (and superfluous verbosity whose ironically obfuscated apothegms merit laurels all their own). Occasionally this abstraction was simply my taking a concrete sentence and abstracting it, e.g., "Vivaldo has sex with men but isn't gay" versus "Baldwin doesn't let his characters define themselves or others based on their sexuality"; other times it was posing new questions entirely. So while our group might have raised more questions than it answered and although a considerable portion of our time was spent on in-class discussion, our goal to generalize the ideas of Baldwin was met to, again, a large degree of success.