

James Baldwin and The Black-Italian Nexus

In his memoir, *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen provides a sober assessment of his fabled friendship with saxophonist, Clarence Clemons:

“ . . . no matter how close we were, I was white. We had as deep a relationship as I can imagine, but we lived in the real world, where we’d experienced that nothing, not all the love in God’s heaven, obliterates race.” (244)

While Springsteen--son of Adele Zerilli—does not discuss his relationship with Clemons within the context of African American/Italian American relations, the topic is of increasing interest to scholars of Italian America across disciplines. As the quote above suggests, African American and Italian American relations—within the lived experience as well as the imaginaries of each group—have been complicated and necessarily influenced by the context within which they developed, the “real world” Springsteen recognizes. They have been marked by both hostile confrontations as well as affinities that have sometimes led to racial crossings. African American writers going back to the early 1900s have also referenced this conflicted relationship, most notably James Baldwin (Skerrett).

Italian American violence against African Americans was emblazoned on the national consciousness with the 1989 murder of Yusef Hawkins in the then largely Italian neighborhood of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn. The locals’ racist taunting of African American protesters was widely reported in the media “who positioned Italian Americans as the most racist of whites.” (Guglielmo and Salerno, 6-7). Such violence was not new; it extends back to the earliest encounters between the two groups who often shared urban and sometimes suburban spaces. (Carnevale) It may be difficult then to consider that relations or understandings between the two could also be more agreeable.

In his recent book, John Gennari explores the “black-Italian nexus” which he describes as “a complicated intersection between Italian America and African America, a space of hopeful encounter and wary suspicion, dangerous, sometimes violent collision, and magnificent, joyous collusion.” (Gennari, 9;8). Baldwin’s Black and Italian American characters in *Another Country* seem to confirm this assessment, illustrating the ways in which the two groups overlapped and yet often remained at odds.

The two literal countries referenced in the title are France and the U.S. Most of the story takes place in New York. Within the city, the setting shifts between 1950s Harlem, Greenwich Village, the Upper West Side, and Brooklyn, neighborhoods which then might as well have been different countries. The title also appears to reference the social divides of race and class, as well as the separateness of the individual within a couple, heterosexual or homosexual, each person his or her own country. Baldwin sums up the fundamental mystery of the journey to reach that other country in a question posed early on in the novel: “What *do* two people want from each other . . . when they get together?” (426)

At the center of the novel are two African American characters—Rufus, a jazz drummer, and his sister, Ida who works as a waitress while pursuing a singing career. Both are connected to

Vivaldo Moore, an aspiring writer whom Rufus describes as “an Irish wop,” (386). Indeed, Vivaldo plays a pivotal role in the novel; he is connected to varying degrees with all of the other main characters and a good portion of the book is told from his perspective. Although Vivaldo is able to form relationships with Rufus and later with, Ida, we watch him struggle with their deep seated suspicion of him as a white man, no matter how liberal his views or how marginally white his class and ethnic origins

Baldwin is attuned to the barriers Italian Americans have faced as a group that was racialized far beyond the early years of the out-and-out racial nativism of the early 1900s. In addition to their proximity to Blacks and others at the margins of mainstream white society, their liminal status was linked to their prolonged climb out of the working class, a social position they maintained in the aggregate well into the postwar era. The two groups intersect in other ways, such as styles of self-presentation and performance (Gennari, 12), cultural crossovers and borrowings that have been especially pronounced in music, from jazz (Celenza) to doo-wop (Cinotto) to hip hop (and “hip wop”). (Sciorra) They have also shared stereotypes regarding criminality, intelligence, and sexuality, to name a few. And Southern Italians had their own history of racialization in their home country that influenced how they were perceived in the U.S. Immigrants from southern Italy were commonly singled out by native born Americans including government officials for their color (“swarthy”) as well as other physical features that suggested black ancestry. At times, it may have been these very commonalities that fueled Italian Americans’ desire to distinguish themselves from African Americans once they absorbed the racist narrative of their adopted country.

Given this history of racialized overlap, it should not be surprising that African American authors have incorporated Italian American characters into their work. According to literary critic, Samuele F. S. Pardini, African American authors including Baldwin have used the ambiguous racial positioning of Italian Americans to interrogate notions of race. Focusing on the literature of the Jim Crow era, what Pardini calls the “invisible blackness” of Italian Americans allowed Black authors to de-center and subvert racial essentialism and its consequences:

Gradually, the African American literary investment in the invisible blackness of the Italian Americans allows the credible dilution and the seeming hiding of color from the black subject and reorients the discourse about race from a color-dominated issue to questions pertaining to twentieth-century America . . . the question of who is white and what is whiteness. Whiteness, not blackness, tied together a political system and a social order.” (Pardini, 82).

In *Another Country*, Baldwin’s attention to Italian American difference extends beyond the character of Vivaldo. In describing Vivaldo’s walk through his Greenwich Village neighborhood, Baldwin sardonically recognizes the ostracism of the immigrant generation by the white mainstream that stoked their animosity towards Blacks:

“He walked along MacDougal Street. Here were the black-and-white couples, defiantly white, flamboyantly black; and the Italians watched them, hating them, hating in fact, all

the Villagers, who gave their streets a bad name. The Italians, after all, merely wished to be accepted as decent Americans and probably could not be blamed for feeling that they might have had an easier time of it if they had not been afflicted with so many Jews and junkies and drunkards and queers and spades.” (631).

Elsewhere, Baldwin writes of the immigrant generation as more tolerant of African Americans than their Americanized children who had imbibed the racism of the larger society. This understanding was based on his experience as a longtime resident of Greenwich Village. In one instance, he took shelter from a group of threatening whites in an Italian owned restaurant where he had previously been unwelcome:

I was *in*, and anybody who messed with me was *out*—that was all there was to it, and it happened more than once. And no one seemed to remember a time when I had not been there. I could not quite get it together, but it seemed to me that I was no longer black for them and they had ceased to be white for me, for they sometimes introduced me to their families with every appearance of affection and pride and exhibited not the remotest interest in whatever my sexual proclivities chanced to be. They had fought me very hard to prevent this moment, but perhaps we were all much relieved to have got beyond the obscenity of color.* (Baldwin, quoted in Guglielmo & Salerno, 2).

In *Another Country* as well, Baldwin presents moments of possibility between the immigrant generation— “the Italians”—and African Americans. In one scene, Vivaldo’s ex-girlfriend (white) taunts him about his Black girlfriend in full view of groups of Blacks and Italians. Vivaldo observes:

“The blacks now suspected him of being an ally—though not a friend, never a friend!—and the whites, particularly the neighborhood Italians, now knew that he could not be trusted. . . . And laughter rang down the street . . . the suppressed, bawdy laughter of the Italians—for, after all, Vivaldo was one of them, and a male, and apparently, a gifted one—and the delighted, vindictive laughter of the Negroes. For a moment, behind him, they were almost united—but then, each, hearing the other’s laughter, choked their laughter off. The Italians heard the laughter of black men; the black men remembered that it was a black girl Vivaldo was screwing.” (633-4).

Here Baldwin hints at some common ground, or at least its potential, between the two populations that is stifled by the social realities of race.

For his part, Vivaldo wants to identify with Blacks; he relates his past life, “a tough neighborhood” in Brooklyn, to Ida’s home in Harlem which he finds “so familiar.” (464-6) According to Vivaldo, in his neighborhood “ . . . you had to be tough, they’d kill you if you weren’t, people were dying around us all the time, for nothing . . . You had to be a man where I come from, and you had to prove it, prove it all the time . . . Most of the kids I knew are dead or in jail or on junk. I’m just a bum; I’m lucky.” (464-466).

Vivaldo's relationships with Rufus but even more particularly with Ida force him to confront his past, leading him to emphasize the similarities over the differences between himself and Ida. Walking through her Harlem neighborhood, Vivaldo tells his white friend, Cass:

“I walked through that block and I walked in that house and it all seemed—I don't know—*familiar* . . . there were the same kids on the block that used to be on my block—they were colored but they were the same, really the same—and hell, the hallways have the same stink, and everybody's well, trying to make it but they know they haven't got much of a chance. The same old women, the same old men—maybe they're a little bit more *alive* . . . I kept thinking, They're colored and I'm white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?” (465-466)

Yet Cass—ironically, the high WASP wife of Vivaldo's friend and mentor, Richard--contradicts him—“But they didn't . . . happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened. But what happens up here . . . happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a difference.” (466). Ida too reminds Vivaldo of all the ways that the kids on his block are not the same as the kids in Harlem. All Vivaldo had to do was leave Brooklyn and its ethnic and class markers. But even though Rufus and Ida leave Harlem for the bohemian life of Greenwich Village, they cannot leave their blackness behind. Indeed, racial oppression is a palpable, inescapable presence throughout the novel as we watch its corrosive effects on Rufus and Ida though they come to very different ends in their struggles to deal with it. The quotidian experience of racism is a burden that Vivaldo, for all of his sympathy and affection for Rufus and Ida, cannot fully share.

There are moments when Baldwin highlights Vivaldo's own class/ethnic oppression to which he seems strangely oblivious (as he is to his own bisexuality). In describing Vivaldo's thoughts about getting together with a blonde woman, Baldwin writes:

“And he was abruptly very excited, as he had been years ago, at the prospect of making it with a chick above his station, a chick he was not even supposed to be able to look at. He was from the slums of Brooklyn and that stink was on him, and it turned out to be the stink that they were looking for . . . The blonde reminded him of Cass. And this made him realize—for the first time, it is astonishing how well the obvious can be hidden—that when he had met Cass, so many years ago, he had been terribly flattered that so high-born a lady noticed such a stinking boy.” (634-5)

Of his white mixed ethnic, working class family, Vivaldo displays conflicting feelings of disdain and love: “They should, really, all of them, still be living in stables, with horses and cows, and should not be expected to tax themselves with matters beyond their comprehension. He hated himself for the sincerity of this reflection and was baffled, as always, by the particular and dangerous nature of its injustice.” (614)

Of his mother, Vivaldo thinks after hanging up the phone too quickly on her: “Yet, he had loved her once, he loved her still, he loved them all.” (615)

Baldwin—through his characters—recognizes that Italian Americans like Vivaldo can enjoy the privileges of whiteness even if the cost is a negation of roots. That whiteness contributes mightily to the gulf that Vivaldo desperately wants to bridge between himself and his African American lover, a gulf that was presaged by his strained friendship with her brother.

The book ends on a note of tentative optimism as lovers are reunited across continents and more cautiously in the case of Vivaldo and Ida, across the racial/ethnic divide. Yet, just as in the real world, there is no easy resolution to be had. As Ida cautions:

“‘Our being together doesn’t change the world, Vivaldo.’

‘It does,’ he said, ‘for me.’

‘That,’ she said, ‘is because you’re white.’” (656)

*In the novel, *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone?* Baldwin similarly characterizes the Italian immigrant owners of a pizzeria as sympathetic to the African American main character, even as their children are becoming acclimated to American racism.

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