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## "Mirrors Can Only Lie:" The Search for Masked Self-Knowledge in the Work of James Baldwin

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“Mirrors Can Only Lie:”  
The Search for *Masked* Self-Knowledge in the Work of James Baldwin

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages & Literature  
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by  
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## Introduction

### Lies, Limitations and Love

*Because I am an American writer my subject and my material inevitably has to be a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country. And I don't mean incoherent in any light sense. . . . It's a kind of incoherence that occurs, let us say, when I am frightened, I am absolutely frightened to death, and there's something which is happening or about to happen that I don't want to face.*  
—James Baldwin, “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel”

In July of 1962, James Baldwin arrived in Dakar, Senegal on his first trip to Africa. On his second day there, Baldwin visited an elementary school and participated in one of the classes. The children were reading from a history textbook, reciting the words aloud in unison. This textbook was written and published in France, the country that colonized Senegal in 1659. The book was meant to depict the history of Senegal and its citizens—however, after bearing witness to the words echoing through the classroom, it became clear to Baldwin that the “history” depicted in this book had little to do with the voices that read its words aloud. His experience in this classroom frightened Baldwin—these children were being taught from a very young age that their histories and their experiences were essentially reproductions of their white colonizers—and by extension, that their pasts mattered less than their French ancestors (Leeming [212]). The resentment and fear that he felt in this Senegalese elementary school inspired the letter Baldwin wrote to his nephew on the hundredth anniversary of emancipation, a piece he later titled, “My Dungeon Shook.” The “history” told in that textbook denied those children of a past that was *theirs*. Baldwin’s experience in that classroom in Dakar, Senegal, and the fraught relationship these children had to the narrative of their history textbook, reminded him of an analogous dynamic between white Americans’ continual disavowal of the pasts and the experiences of black Americans. Throughout his essays and novels, Baldwin presents the reason for this disavowal as white Americans’ inability to see themselves clearly, to access their innermost

“private selves,” and to “accept” the harm that events in their pasts have inflicted onto their black countrymen—and thus, the state of America as a nation. Four thousand miles away from Harlem, New York, his birthplace and the nucleus of much of his writing, James Baldwin was reminded of what he saw as the central problem and paradoxical feature of American life.

On August 2nd 1924, James Arthur Baldwin was born at Harlem Hospital in New York City. Growing up in Harlem to an impoverished black family, Baldwin cultivated a severe resentment for America because of how unwelcome he felt in a place he, often said, was supposed to be able to call “home.” He referred to himself a stranger to America because of the “shifting sands of status” he felt that he was perpetually trying to find his balance on (*Collected Essays*, “The Fire Next Time” [331]).<sup>1</sup> At 24, the struggle to reconcile an identity of being black and American became unlivable—with forty dollars in his pocket and no grasp of the language, Baldwin bought a one way ticket to Paris, where he would go on to live for nearly a decade. As he reveals in his essays and through the quasi-autobiographical characters in his fiction, the root of Baldwin’s problem on his merciless search for identity was a product of there being “too many things [Americans] do not wish to know about [themselves] (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [337]).” Baldwin depicts an almost ethnographic-like study of American culture in his writing that led him to this discovery—a discovery of American life concerned with its psychology and its culture and where these intersect. The approach Baldwin takes to study the nation that he feels betrayed him, but that he simultaneously “loves,” is through an investigation of how America has “trapped” itself and how it can be “released” from this state of imprisonment. Through the lens of his own experience and the complex experiences of the characters he creates, Baldwin deconstructs and critiques the American atmosphere that he existed in as a strangled artifact. He

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<sup>1</sup> Here after cited internally as: *Collected Essays*, “FNT”

does this through a series of metaphors of obstruction, traps, and warped perceptions of the self and “the other” that the self seeks to disavow.

My first chapter focuses on the act of reflection and Baldwin’s metaphor of “the mirror.” “The mirror” is a “trap” that confuses Americans’ perceptions of themselves. This confusion is projected onto black Americans, making them a “disagreeable mirror” for white Americans’ image of themselves. The result of this confusion is the disavowal of black Americans’ past and present narrative—denying them of a truthful and accurate account of their history like the textbook in Dakar and the children in that classroom. I include W.E.B. Du Bois’s discussion of “double-consciousness” to illuminate the societal and psychological stakes of Baldwin’s use of “the mirror” and the act of reflection. Baldwin’s powerful rhetorical ability to translate political and public problems into those concerned with selfhood and the human condition is demonstrated through his discussion of reflection and “the mirror.” I draw from Baldwin’s essays as well as his first and second novels, Go Tell it On The Mountain and Giovanni’s Room, to show how Baldwin connects “the political” with the self’s harrowing inner anxieties using the act of reflection and the metaphor of “the mirror.”

My second chapter proceeds to dissect the *content* of what reflection and the “mirror” hide. The “private” material that the distorted images of “the mirror” work to construct the self’s “innocence.” Baldwin uses “innocence” ironically, subverting the way the word is typically interpreted. The irony that Baldwin attaches to innocence creates a distinction between inexperienced innocence and a culpable innocence. Through his subversion of *ignorant innocence*, Baldwin presents a problem about American identity as it is seen through his understanding of history and experience. The way white Americans can discard their innocence

is through a process that Baldwin labels “acceptance:” a revisiting of the self’s past, the events that transpired there, and an acknowledgment of the self’s “mirrors.”

Baldwin’s capacious account of love is a combination of the themes and metaphors analyzed in my first two chapters. Thus, my third and final chapter analyzes Baldwin’s meaning of love and reveal its crucial importance in his work. Unlike his use of innocence, Baldwin does not subvert the traditional, affectionate meaning of love—instead, he develops it further. Much of my investigation of “love” centers on Baldwin’s claim that “love takes off the mask.” “The mask” symbolizes a barrier that hinders the self from embarking on a journey of self-discovery or acquiring any “truthful” self-knowledge. Baldwin uses “the mask” as a metaphor to represent what Americans hide from themselves because of its suggestion of disguise and camouflage. We think of masks as a way to conceal our appearance from the world us; Baldwin uses the concept of the mask slightly differently by employing it as an internal, self-constructed barrier. The metaphor of “the mask” is used to depict the lies and consequential “destruction” that will befall white Americans if they continue to live by what their “mirrors” tell them. The metaphors of “the mirror,” of “the mask,” the act of reflecting, and the concept of innocence all exist and function within a framework of untruth. The reason why love “is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided” is because love reveals the truth and the freedom of its object. Baldwin believes that the absence of love is America’s most dangerous and fundamental problem that divides communities and promotes injustice.

In my project I attempt to reveal the psychological and political burdens that Baldwin’s metaphors of self-limitation present, how these metaphors blur the line between “public” and “private.” Baldwin’s most ubiquitous example of this is innocent white Americans relying on their fictitious social “hierarchy” to ignore what exists beneath their “masks”—thus, disavowing

the past and present experiences and histories of black Americans. Baldwin emphasizes the desperate need of “community” within the historically fraught dynamic between black and white Americans. What the self’s “mirrors,” “masks,” and innocence symbolize (and how these concepts manifest) prevents a communion of black and white Americans because of what they hide of white America’s private self. Baldwin’s meaning of love is a prophetic, desperate, and symbolic plea for justice. In both his fiction and his essays, James Baldwin explores the American psyche by means of what it hides from itself and what it needs in order to recognize these concealed features.

## Chapter 1

### The Social and Psychological Burdens of Self Reflection

The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under the sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching for. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*<sup>2</sup> [178])

How can an image of one's own reflection induce such enigmatic and anxiety laden emotions? What David, the protagonist, sees projected in his reflection, juxtaposed with his "real" self that exists outside of the mirror, are at odds with each other. David describes his reflection as something that *forces him, an incarnation of mystery*, and, as *a trap*. His reflection has a power over him that David seeks desperately to be "released" from. Within his image in the mirror, David is confronted with a painful road of self-discovery that has thus far remained unscathed. David intertwines the description of his body with greater, existentially driven ideas of *search, time, and revelation*. The inclusion of these larger tropes juxtaposed with David's attempt to examine his physical body exposes how David's confusion with the reflected image of himself exists on both aesthetic and existential planes. Baldwin's suggestion that the image we see of ourselves through the act of reflecting is incapable of showing more than the self's material features addressed David's double confusion. The picture of himself that David sees is so elusive, in part, because of the combination of his vessel-like body with what is "trapped" within it. His body is the incomprehensible container for the even more "mysterious" conditions that exist inside of it. David recognizes this relationship when he says he "[does] not know what moves *in* [his] body, what [his] body is searching for." He simultaneously separates *and* links his physicality with what exists within it, producing an even more tangled image of himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Here after cited internally as: "G.R."

Within these confused thoughts that conclude Baldwin's second novel, Giovanni's Room, reflection functions as a symbol that taunts its viewer by showing them a half-formed and mysterious image of themselves. This image confronts David with aspects of himself that he either does not understand, or that he wishes to remain oblivious to. The way David describes his reflection and his relationship *to* it is representative of Baldwin's larger claims about the experience of reflecting, as well as the representation of the self that it generates.

In his writing, Baldwin utilizes the act of reflection, as well as the physical image that reflection produces as a symbol. Reflection motivates people to question their relationship with themselves on both an external and moral level. The concept of reflection is discussed through frameworks of race, sexuality, and projected personal guilt. The act of reflecting is a destructive tool because it affirms misleading features of the self—features that the self wishes to remain ignorant to in order to remain “safe.” Baldwin manipulates the act of reflection and the image it produces with his metaphor of “the mirror.” The images that “the mirror” produces and the ideas embedded in those images contribute to Baldwin's belief that reflection is toxic when accompanied by the “the mirror.” The manifestations of “the mirror” confront the self with facets of its “innocence,” disavowal, and personal anxiety. It is a mode of self regard that distorts. The metaphor of “the mirror” can be represented by a myriad of physical objects—of nearly anything that seeks to confront the self with things that “lie”—with distortions of reality. Whether it presents itself as a literal mirror or the paralyzing gaze of a stranger, Baldwin's “mirror” is a “disagreeable (*Collected Essays*, “White Man's Guilt” [722])<sup>3</sup> ingredient in our constant search for self-knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Here after cited internally: *Collected Essays*, “WMG”

According to Baldwin, “All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there (*Collected Essays*, FNT [341]).” This claim, along with its context, illuminates the connection between the political and the psychological—as well as how Baldwin connects these themes by using the metaphor of “the mirror.” He makes this powerful statement in a discussion about white people and their paralyzing fear of “not [being] judged by those who are not white, not [being] seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).” Here, “the mirror” references a dueling conflict of self recognition. Thus, a politically charged idea about racial tensions is imbued with the psychological dilemma of “the mirror.”

“The mirror” functions as a deceptive mode of self regard because it only shows the white man’s fear about the way he wants to be perceived. “The mirror” is a psychological representation of the white American’s conflicting desires that have yet to be reconciled—desires concerning self representation. Baldwin asks his reader to imagine ideas of moral distortion that affect the white man’s public life through Baldwin’s use of the metaphor of “the mirror.” When “the mirror” is used to symbolize the white man’s confused self-perception, the white man is confronted with a product of his disavowal of the black American experience, and thus, “America’s central problem (Baldwin).” The lies that “the mirror” represent are artifacts of avoidance and denial—the white man is constantly wrestling between wanting and not wanting to be “seen as he is” because of his inability to accept the experiences of his past and present. “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do (Baldwin, “Price of the Ticket” [49]).” This refusal to acknowledge the past is analogous to lying about one’s self



in the present. *This* is the trap and the tyranny of “the mirror,” as well as the reason behind the lies that it projects. “The mirror” thus constructs a sensation of fake safety—it *protects* the self from what it refuses to acknowledge, while simultaneously subjecting it to a warped view of reality. It is *because* of this deceptive safety that the presence of the white man’s “mirror” is prolonged and sustained: “It is astonishing the lengths to which a person, or a people, will go in order to avoid a truthful mirror (*Collected Essays*, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” [871]) White people’s inner “tyranny” is a reflection of the events of his past.

In both his essays and novels, Baldwin translates “the political” and “the public” into psychological and existential claims. He uses the act of reflection and the metaphor of “the mirror” to transcend traditional molds, making concepts that are traditionally thought of as political<sup>4</sup>, about psychological questions and selfhood. The concept of reflection along with the metaphor of “the mirror” aid Baldwin’s merging of politics with the self’s deepest anxieties.

### *Double Consciousness*

W.E.B Du Bois, a black author, scholar, and activist, first published his writing on “double-consciousness” in 1903. Born just three years after the end of The Civil War and five years after the issuing of The Emancipation Proclamation, Du Bois devoted his life to establishing equality for black Americans, and devoted his authorship to the exploration of their alienation. The dual vision that “double-consciousness” enacts is an exposition of racial injustice through the eyes of black Americans. It is concerned with sight and the effect that perception has on the psychological mind. In his collection of essays, The Souls Of Black Folk, Du Bois discusses double-consciousness as something he is still coming to terms with for himself: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through

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<sup>4</sup> Such as, racial injustice and social hierarchies.

the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Du Bois [2]).” Here, Du Bois describes the two lenses that black Americans are perpetually at war with. The first, is how *they* see themselves and the second, is how the white world sees them. Baldwin’s use of reflection and the metaphor of “the mirror” to intertwine the self’s psychological anxieties with its political conditions, is similarly addressed within the conflicting gazes of double-consciousness.

Double-consciousness presents a “mirror” that combines psychological and public facets of black American selfhood. It is a mode of reflection because black Americans see themselves as an image reflected off of an unconventional kind of “mirror.” Politics and inner-self worry are connected through the application of “the mirror.” “The mirror” is the refracted gaze of the white world within double-consciousness. Therefore, the metaphor combines the societal consequences of racism with the emotional toll it has on the self.

The coalescence of public and private spheres of life is shown within the two separate relationships that make up the dual vision of double-consciousness. The first conflicting relationship is concerned with the reconciliation of being both black *and* American: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois [2]).” Du Bois defines “his twoness” as “second sight.” This irreconcilable existence is “an inherent duality of identity and vision,” revealing a significant connection between sight and self-knowledge.

“Second sight” illuminates a tension between selfhood and the political environment the self exists within. This tension pertains to the ways that the color of one’s skin is an essential aspect of the “self,” as well as the alienating environment white America has cultivated to black

people. As Baldwin said in a debate with William F. Buckley in 1965, “It comes as a great shock, around the age of five, six, or seven, to discover the flag to which you have pledged allegiance has not pledged allegiance to you.” As both Du Bois and Baldwin describe, it is the position that the black self holds in American society, culture and politics that creates “two warring ideals in one dark body.” This “two-ness” exists within the reflection that the black world sees of themselves in the eyes of the white world. Du Bois claims that the white world “only lets [the black American] see himself through the revelation of the other world,” aka, the white world. Therefore, the black American is “trapped” in a similar “mirror” that David is. David is trapped within a skewed and confused image he has of himself; Du Bois suggests that black Americans are trapped within the perception that white America has of them.

Baldwin’s “mirror” and his ideas about reflection intersect at Du Bois’s account of “the veil.” An existence “behind the veil” is the other half of double-consciousness and presents yet another obstacle for the black American to overcome and exist undivided. Du Bois believes that black Americans are “born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in [the] American world (Du Bois [2]).” “The veil” is a metaphor for the gap that exists between white and black America. It is a social, political and personal barrier and a crucial component of double-consciousness. “The veil” interferes with the way black Americans are seen from the outside, as well as how they perceive themselves.

“The veil” does *not* represent the inhibition of self-knowledge. Instead, it obstructs one’s view and understanding when they attempt to look out, past themselves. Du Bois explains that he was “shut out from [the white world] by a vast veil-- as being shut out by “the veil,” not shut in. Baldwin’s metaphor of “the mask” represents an internal condition that obstructs procurement of self-knowledge by acting as a barrier between the exterior self with the “tyrannical,” inner

features that it has not yet acknowledged. Baldwin refers to “the mask” in the same context that he introduces “the mirror:” concerning the “tyranny” of self perception that white Americans live within. In this case, “the mask” conceals the white man’s “wilful blindness (Shulman [119])” to racial injustice. This is why Baldwin believes that, “A vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s” *tyranny of his own mirror* (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]). The white man’s affliction of his “mirror” subverts his ability to abandon his “innocence” surrounding his crimes against black Americans. In order for white America’s “mask” of innocence to be removed, he must “become part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).” This is the distinction between the metaphors of “the mask” and “the veil:” “the veil” is a barrier between the self and its external conditions, while “the mask” is concerned with the self’s hidden, inner anxieties. However, the exterior nature of “the veil” does not minimize the psychological burdens of double-consciousness.

The psychological complications of “the veil” are evident in Du Bois’s autobiographical account of becoming aware of the dual vision of double-consciousness. He describes a memory from when he was a young boy in elementary school and a white girl does not accept a card that Du Bois made: “The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil (Du Bois [3]).” Within this realization of his conflicting double-consciousness, Du Bois was also witness to the psychological and existential trauma of realizing the stigma that the color of his skin held in American culture. The ways Baldwin’s “mirror” and Du Bois’s “veil” manifest within the self and society similar, in part, because of the destructive

images of moral inferiority that produce. The white girl who refused his card acted as Du Bois's "mirror" because her gaze reflected his alienation. She also inflicted the dual perception of double-consciousness onto Du Bois—he was left to consider whether the girl's perception of him was accurate or truthful. The moment "the veil" became visible to Du Bois, he was forced to reconcile with what the white girl thought of him and with what he thought of himself.

Du Bois describes the ways reflection functions within double-consciousness in a similar way that David narrates the disconnection he feels with his. The aesthetic dimension is made up of the harmful stigma surrounding *blackness*. Whereas, when Du Bois compares double-consciousness to, "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," he exposes his reader to a deeper aspect of this dual sight. Double-consciousness emphasizes the repercussions of self-reflection as well as the ways in which reflection is an emotional battle within the self. It impedes true self-representation because it is filtered through the reflected image of someone else's eyes. The state of double-consciousness is similar to Baldwin's metaphor of "the mirror" because the images it produces compels the black self to adopt its reflection as seen by the white world. "The mirror" that is present in double-consciousness is a combination of America's racism and the reconciliation of two conflicting gazes.

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"A vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white." Baldwin presents a politically driven claim that shows his understanding of the consequences of how the self's inner anxieties impact its social conditions. The white man's "mirror" has a significant impression on the "Negro problem," which Baldwin defined as an "abstract" way of approaching

“millions of human beings’ lives (Baldwin and Bondy [82]).” This presents a dilution of public and private, showing that the even self’s psychological worries bleed into its external conditions. “The mask” and “the mirror” that the self is “trapped” within combine the self’s psychological and public burdens. Within his discussion of double consciousness, Du Bois describes a “merging” of the dual sights that has a similar effect to Baldwin’s notion of removing our “masks.”

“Self consciousness” is a reconciled double consciousness. Du Bois idealizes the idea of self consciousness because of the freedom it signifies: “The history of the American Negro is the history of his strife, this longing to attain self conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (Du Bois [3]).” Du Bois describes the reconciliation of black American’s perception of themselves as more honest and generally improved. From his discussion of self consciousness, Du Bois explains that the opposite of applying two sets of eyes to oneself is only being concerned with one’s opinion of one’s self. Self consciousness is not only a merging of two sights, it is also an elimination of a psychological and social burden of wrestling with reflection. The self-illuminating effects of self consciousness are similar to what life without our “masks” is like.

Baldwin depicts life without the barriers that “the mask” presents as one of “universal quest and daring and growth (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).” Utilizing his consistent language of being “trapped” and longing to be “released,” Baldwin defines the removal of the mask in the context of the white man’s “tyrannical mirror” as something that “will release him from his confusion and place him once again in the fruitful communion in the depths of his own being.” Within the description of what exists beneath “the mask,” Baldwin presents ideas of deep self-insight, similar to Du Bois’s description of self consciousness. “Fruitful communion” suggests a

kind of *profitable bond* or *sharing*. The use of “communion” can be connected to self consciousness—even though “communion” implies an ongoing “twoness.” This connection is made through the implication of a *bond*, referring to multiple things uniting, similar to the “merging of the double self.” This concept of “merging” contributes to the greater question of selfhood because of its interconnectedness to racial politics. In the example of the white man’s despotic image of himself in relation to black Americans, as well as in Du Bois’s concept of self consciousness, the self and its affiliation to its social environment is paramount. Baldwin relies on reflection to reveal the web of “the personal” and “the political.”

Baldwin’s language emits a similar tone of morality as Du Bois’s “better and truer self” when he describes the self, and its freedom, without “the mask.” The ethical implications of “the mask” are presented with Baldwin’s discussion of *respect*: “How can one respect, let alone adopt, the values of a people who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they should (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [330]).”<sup>5</sup> Du Bois’s “longing to attain self-conscious manhood” is analogous to Baldwin’s elusive search for “a fruitful communion in the depths of his own being.” Both authors’ ideas are linked to the act of reflecting through double consciousness, “the mask,” and “the mirror.”

### *John Grimes and The Dirty Mirror*

In Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, manifestations of racial politics and racial identity are exposed through reflection. Representations of “the mirror” are inserted into the protagonist’s encounter with his reflection to accentuate the association of John’s internal warfare juxtaposed his material features. In an encounter with his reflection, John Grimes wrestles with his double consciousness and attempts to adopt the view of an outsider to better

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<sup>5</sup> Moral good versus bad will return in the examination of Martin Luther King Jr.’s concept of *loving our enemies*

understand what he sees. His struggle to recognize his reflection is a product of the alienation he feels because of his race, as well as a psychologically driven religious anxiety.

Through his effort to grasp the image of himself in front of him, manifestations of “the mirror” complicates John’s efforts further by confronting him through the eyes of “a stranger:”

He attacked the mirror with the cloth, watching his face appear as out of a cloud. With a shock he saw that his face had not changed, that the hand of Satan was as yet invisible. His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan—and was there not something—in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father’s words? He stared at his face as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know. And, having thought of it as the face of a stranger, he tried to look at it as a stranger might, and tried to discover what other people saw. But he saw only details: two great eyes, and a broad, low forehead, and the triangle of his nose, and his enormous mouth, and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the Devil’s little finger. These details did not help him, for the principle of their unity was undiscoverable, and he could not tell what he most passionately desired to know: whether his face was ugly or not (Baldwin [54]).

Baldwin’s tendency to connect political ideas to those of selfhood is shown in John’s inability to reconcile the gaze of the white world with his father’s claim that “his face was the face of Satan.” John’s act of looking at his reflection is connected to David’s by the suggestion of “the stranger” and of “secrets.” While David describes his reflection as a “mystery,” John attempts to look at his reflection as a stranger, hoping this estranged gaze will aid him in his quest for self-knowledge. His decision to approach his reflection this way forces John to reconcile the gaze of both *the other*<sup>6</sup> and himself. He wanted to “discover what other people saw” when they looked at him. When his efforts fail, the distinction between aesthetic and moral reflection becomes relevant again. These two perspectives are fused together by John’s father comment that his “cleft in his chin” is “the mark of the Devil’s little finger.” Here, John’s “masked” questions of religious identity are fused with the stranger’s perception of his facial features.

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<sup>6</sup> By *other*, I am referencing Du Bois’s language for the white world.



The stranger's gaze only allows John access to his material features, blocking faculties of religious and moral "goodness" from his reach. In Baldwin's third novel, Another Country, the omniscient narrator says that, "Strangers' faces hold no secrets because the imagination does not invest them with any (Baldwin [305])." This sentiment bleeds into John's attempt to rid himself of an untruthful "mirror" and to take up the gaze of "strangers' face."

John's desire to understand his father's claim is barred by the metaphor of "the mask" and Du Bois's of "the veil." The barrier that "the mask" constructs on the self's journey toward self-knowledge is displayed in John's act of reflecting by his inability to transcend "the secrets" of himself. His father's comment, associating John with Satan, pervades John with questions about his inner, ethical self. The answers to these questions are out of John's reach because of "the mask."

While "the mask" inhibits John from inwardly reflecting, the obstruction that "the veil" creates is the reason why John is unable to take up the sight of a stranger. "The veil's" external position as an alienating barrier between white and black Americans represents the social complications that are implicit within John's blackness. John's attempt to break through both "the veil" and "the mask" simultaneously are hindered by the psychological and political complications that arise as a result of double consciousness. He seeks to reconcile the dual perceptions that the white world has of him with what he has of himself, but he is unable to infiltrate further than recognizing his facial features. He is "shut out from their world by a vast veil." John's conflict with his image projected in the dirty church mirror demonstrates the way Baldwin uses reflection as a way to connect questions about selfhood with how the self acts, and is perceived publicly.

*Giovanni's Room and David's Windowpane Reflection*

Baldwin's second novel, Giovanni's Room is, itself, one long reflection. David narrates his story confronted with his reflection, as the novel begins and ends with him looking at himself in a windowpane. David's encounters with his reflection reveal his disabling fears of unexplored parts of himself and how these fears affect his public perception. The confusion David feels when faced with his reflection is linked to the "death by drowning" that awaits those that believe the lies of "the mirror."

Giovanni's Room depicts David's simultaneous quest and avoidance of self-discovery. Approaching middle age and engaged to an American woman, David finds himself still running from a brief affair he had as a thirteen year old boy with another boy. The significance of this relationship exists in David's repression of it and his lifelong denial of his homosexuality. Unhappy and lost, David abruptly flies to Paris where falls in love with a young Italian man named Giovanni. After a passionate relationship, Giovanni is wrongly convicted of murder and is put on death row. David tells his story as a memory as he watches his reflection on the eve of Giovanni's wrongful execution.

The disconnection that David feels with the image in the windowpane is a product of his refusal to accept his sexuality and his American identity. David begins his story with a description of his reflection—a description imbued with American guilt: "I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is a like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faded away from Europe into a darker past (Baldwin [3])." This description becomes a contemplation of America's past. He begins by illuminating his aryan features and their ordinary

nature. Within the image of himself in the window, David encounters visions of his colonizing ancestors. David feels guilty in regards to his ancestors when he underscores the fatal outcome of their “conquering.” The trouble David has in articulating anything more than his material features is partly a result of this century old guilt he is confronted with when he sees his own face. The importance of David’s American and masculine identity is impressed upon him by his father in the letters he sends to David throughout the novel. His father refers to David as “Butch” and repeatedly informs him that he is “as American as pork and beans.” These are a culmination of David’s embarrassment about his sexuality, as well as his confusion about his American-ness that he sees in his reflection.

Like John when he is analyzing his reflection in the church mirror, David only describes what is made aware to him on the surface. David does not transcend the nature of physical features because he does not wish to acknowledge his homosexuality. Baldwin intertwines notions of David’s social conditions with his inner anxiety, through David’s confrontation with his reflection.

David’s discomfort with his sexual orientation began when he was a young boy in Brooklyn, New York. David’s embarrassment about his homosexuality is evident when he discusses “one particular lie:” “This is the lie which I told Giovanni but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again. There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard (Baldwin, *G.R.* [91]).” There are myriad things in this passage that show David’s shame surrounding his homosexuality. To begin with, David admits that he lied to Giovanni about ever having slept with a man before. It is also revealed that after his first

relationship with a boy, David decided that he it would be his last. After divulging his lie, David's narration becomes increasingly less specific when he begins to discuss his reasons for leaving America. David describes his travel to Europe as an evasion of parts of himself that he wished to remain concealed and removed from his conscious mind. David alludes to his adolescent love affair being the catalyst for his departure from the U.S., when he comments on "find[ing] [himself] brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard." This cryptic comment refers to David running away from the memory of sleeping with a man, only to find himself in a relationship with another as he tries to escape and forget this part of himself. Thus, David spends the greater part of the novel running in circles. David's avoidance of his sexuality combines psychological anxiety with social anxiety. David is unable to reconcile how being labelled as "gay" will make outsiders look at him differently, as well as how he will look at himself differently. Both of his relationships with men illuminate aspects of David that he is unable to confront. He wishes to remain "innocent" to homosexuality and stay hidden behind his "mask."

David's reluctance to acknowledge his homosexuality is made explicit when he describes his motivations for a one-night-stand with a woman, Sue: "What we were about to do would not be pretty. But I was thinking that what I did with Giovanni could not be more immoral than what I was about to do with Sue (Baldwin, *G.R.* [100])." Here, being gay is directly associated with something "immoral." David seems to have a moment of clarity and freedom from his "mirror" when he suggests that something that feels so unnatural to him (sex with a woman) could be more unethical than sex with a man. However, this lucidity does not last long and David goes through with the affair, hoping that this will quell his anxieties about his sexual identity. Not surprisingly, the affair has no effect on his inability to accept this part of himself. Within his

accounts of his reflection, a dynamic exists between David's body outside of his reflection, and the body that he attempts to recognize in the windowpane. This division is a comment on his inability to accept his sexuality. David grapples with the physical aspects of his sexuality when he spends one night with Sue only to show himself that his body can perform for a woman the same way it can for a man. This experience separates David just enough from being considered gay so he does not have to face the consequences of what he thinks this means about himself, both politically and existentially. Until David is able to reconcile what he sees in the mirror, others people's perception of him and the way he feels about himself both materially and morally, he will forever be "trapped" in his reflection.

David's inner anxieties transcend those which he can control when he finds himself susceptible to the gaze of a gay sailor:

We came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing. And in another second, had our contact lasted, I was certain that there would erupt into speech, out of all that light and beauty, some brutal variation of *Look, baby, I know you*. I felt my face flame, I felt my heart harden and shake as I turned past him, trying to look stonily beyond him (Baldwin, *G.R.* [92]).

David "panics" when he senses that a stranger might be able to understand more about him than he is able to understand about himself. David fears that the sailor has gone beneath his mask that David is powerless to confront. Here, the image of David's reflection is produced by the glance of the sailor. David feels as though the sailor has ruptured his deeply set anxieties surrounding his homosexual identity. David "panics" when he is face to face with the sailor— his panic is "all-revealing," and the way the sailor looks at him is "lewd and knowing." David's irrational projection of how much this stranger knows about him just by glancing at his face embodies David's angst about his homosexuality. "Lewd" hints at something sexually crude, implying that the sailor knows the intricacies of David's sex life. All of the suggestions of the sailor knowing

more about David than he wishes to know about himself culminate with David's claim that if any words had been spoken between them, they would have been *Look, baby, I know you*.<sup>7</sup> David thinks that the glance he returns to the sailor is "all-revealing" because he is certain that the sailor "knows" of his relationships with men. The sailor's gaze presented David with what he is unable to see when he stares at his reflection in the windowpane. David believes that the sailor "knows" him—something David is unable to say about himself.

Giovanni's Room ends by connecting David's anxiety about his sexuality, to what he is unable to see in his reflection: "I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed. Yet the key to my salvation is hidden in my flesh (Baldwin [168])." Wanting to "crack" the mirror that presents David's reflection emulates Baldwin's "mirror" because of the harm it causes him. David wants to destroy this object because by looking at his reflection, he is confronted with everything he does not want to unveil about himself. He refers to his "sex" as "troubling" as he contemplates how it "can be redeemed." David's embarrassment is accentuated with the notion that he has to compensate for being gay because it is "troubling" to him. The subtext of this passage is David's moral desire for redemption, for being saved, and for being set "free" from his self constructed "tyranny." David is aware of the restrictions that embody his reflection in the windowpane—he is "longing" to escape his mirror. David's inability to reconcile his homosexuality is a representation of Baldwin's idea that the self is unable to "love" when it is not free. In his essay, "The Cross of Redemption, Baldwin wrote, "There is not salvation without love—(Baldwin, [165])." This illuminates the parallel relationship between love and being saved. David's narration explicitly draws from Corinthians 13 within which "salvation" is integral: "Now we see but a poor

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<sup>7</sup> The "lewdness" also suggests that exposing the inner-self can be dangerous—that true psychological knowledge can also be violent.

reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face (Corinthians 13:12).” This verse from Corinthians refers to deceptive images of reflection as well as accurate reflection. The relevance that this biblical anecdote has to David is revealed when love and salvation are said to be what allows for “seeing face to face.”

Baldwin summarized Giovanni’s Room as being “about what happens to you when you can’t love anybody (Baldwin).” “Love” is David’s omnipresent thought in the concluding lines of Giovanni’s Room. His incapacity to see beyond the limitations of his reflection are a product of David’s denial of his homosexuality and therefore, his denial of love.<sup>8</sup> David’s moral confusion is, in part, exposed in terms like “wonder” and “hidden”—this confusion reflects the complexity of Baldwin’s use of love as well as David’s inability to identify what hinders him from being set free.

David’s body is “trapped” in his reflection, emphasizing the disconnect that he feels with the projected image and his actual self. A rhetoric of being “trapped” and being “released” is one that Baldwin uses often in his writing. The self’s relationship to this dichotomy is crucial to Baldwin’s understanding of knowledge about ourselves that we prefer to remain unexplored. David’s refusal to accept his sexuality hinders his search for self-knowledge. He is unable to describe anything more than his physical features when he stares at his reflection because of the shame he carries about being gay. This is another example of Baldwin rendering psychological anxieties into socially conscious questions.

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“The mirror” is unreliable because it reflects back what the self seeks to be perceived as, instead of a realistic depiction. We would run far and long from an accurate image of ourselves

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<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 3 when Baldwin’s understanding of love is explored in greater detail, the implications of this dynamic about love will be further analyzed.

in order to remain blissfully ignorant. The self looks to its “mirror” when its moral “cleanliness” needs to be affirmed. This is how the self becomes “blinded”—a concept that is just as politically detrimental as it is psychologically damaging.



## Chapter 2

### Deconstructing “Innocence” Through History and Experience

“Innocence” is the content of the deception that “the mirror” establishes, the lie that it reflects, and the distortion that it depicts. “Innocence” embodies a fantasy—an illusory phenomenon that denies the acquisition of growth.

“Innocence” presents a diagnosis of a systemic problem in American society. Within his deconstruction and saturated analysis of “innocence,” Baldwin critiques American life as a whole. In “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin’s prescient letter to his nephew written on the one hundredth anniversary of emancipation, Baldwin reveals a caustic reality of the American Dream: “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [293]).” Innocence is nothing less than a national phenomena. Baldwin connects American ideals with the lie of innocence to communicate that innocence does not only exist on a personal level—“innocence” is a political and societal condition that is present throughout every tier of American life.

Baldwin applies the tag of innocence ironically; innocence is tainted with a culpable guilt. “Americans have condemned themselves to an unforgivable innocence (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [293]).” Typically the use of “innocence” implies a lack of experience or a lack of knowledge, eliminating the possibility of assigning blame. For example, an infant is not punished when they do something “bad” out of lack of experience or lack of knowledge—they simply do not know any better. Baldwin’s “innocence” refers to the childlike and inexperienced *character* of the white world. This character camouflages a moral culpability. The disavowal of this moral

culpability is why “innocence” enrages and depresses Baldwin to the extent that it does. His anger is made especially evident through his rhetoric of accusation, blame, and the looming threat of death that resides over every black American. Innocence is “the crime for which [Baldwin] accuse[s] [his] country and [his] country men, and for which neither [Baldwin] nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [292]).” The concept of innocence is analogous to a *crime* because of it is something “wilful” that is being knowingly ignored—and because of its ironic subtext. The crime of innocence is responsible for the “destruction” that Baldwin speaks so passionately and indignantly about. “Death,” both metaphorically and literally, manipulates the way “innocence” infects the lives of both white and black Americans because “drowning (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341])” is what awaits those who fall victim to their innocence.

A child is innocent because they have not experienced enough to know any better. A white adult is innocent even though “at the bottom of their hearts (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341])” they know better. But, they chose to renounce this knowledge and thus, renounce an important aspect of reality. White Americans behave like inexperienced children but they do not have the veil of inexperience to hide behind. Within its application to white Americans, innocence refers to their denial to recognize the suffering and alienation that they inflict onto black Americans. “In their blind rejection of tragedy,” innocence is a product of white America’s repudiation of their own personal anxieties combined with a failure to acknowledge their dehumanizing acts in the past.

The pervasiveness of innocence is underscored within Baldwin's accounts of history and experience. A large component of white America's continuing innocence is a product of their never ending pasts. Because of the crucial role of time, white people "accepting" their history is an integral feature of their abandonment of innocence. "For these innocent people have no other hope. [White Americans] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [294])." Within the metaphor of white Americans being trapped and needing to be released, "understanding" the past is equated with being "released." Notions of understanding, recognition, acknowledgment, and appreciation all contribute to "acceptance"—the painstaking process of revisiting one's past and acknowledging the harm the self has inflicted.

The state of "innocence" is a state of specious childishness—thus, innocence is akin to an inability to grow up. Black Americans are "waiting for [white] Americans to grow up enough to realize (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [329])" their innocence. What eliminates innocence is a "universal sense of quest and daring a growth (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [341])." The parallel nature between innocence and an inability to grow up points to the connection between white Americans and naive children. Baldwin refers to white Americans as his nephew's "lost, younger brothers," as a way to address their "innocent" behavior instead of their age. Despite the fact that his nephew is fifteen years old, he who is more grown up than his innocent white elders.

In the essay "Stranger in the Village," American innocence is left at the door when Baldwin finds himself wrestling with the difference between innocence and ignorance in the small Swiss village of Leukerbad. During his flee from America, Baldwin spent a few months in Leukerbad—a village with a population fewer than six hundred that, "from all available evidence

no black man had ever set foot.” The features of Baldwin’s his race that menaced and oppressed him in America, made him stand out in an entirely different way in this tiny Swiss suburb.

In all of this, in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human. I was simply a living wonder. I knew that they did not mean to be unkind, and I know it now; it is necessary, nevertheless, for me to repeat this to myself each time that I walk out of the chalet. The children who shout *Neger!* have no way of knowing the echoes this sounds raises in me. They are brimming with good humor and the more daring swell with pride when I stop to speak with them. Just the same, there are days when I cannot pause and smile, when I have no heart to play with them; when, indeed, I mutter sourly to myself, exactly as I muttered on the streets of a city these children have never seen, when I was no bigger than these children are now. *Your mother was a nigger.* Joyce is right about history being a nightmare-- but it may be the nightmare from which no one can awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them (*Collected Essays* [123]).

The case study of the Swiss locals merge ideas of ignorant children and wilfully innocent white Americans. The Swiss locals are “excusabl[y] ignoran[t] (Shulman [110]).” Baldwin is able to recognize the lack of intentionality in their actions, however, their behavior triggers Baldwin’s memories of culpably innocent white America. Swiss civilian’s exclamations and their fascination with him is something that he could not admonish them for—he is hesitant to blame the Swiss people because like naive children, they do not understand the consequences of their actions because they have not had experience to educate them to behave otherwise. Despite the fact that Leukerbad’s locals could hide behind veil of inexperience, their attitude toward Baldwin was nevertheless alienating. The alienation that Baldwin felt was a product of the Swiss locals sentiment of curiosity and their lack of exposure to black people. However, the difference in sentiment with the Swiss’s dehumanization of black people as opposed to America’s, was not enough to make Baldwin feel less oppressed. Instead of the anger that he expresses in the letter to his nephew, Baldwin’s reaction to this unfamiliar innocence is imbued with profound melancholy.

Baldwin's time in Switzerland is significant, in part, because it exposes the differences in Baldwin's experiences both in America and abroad. By the end of this passage, Baldwin is trapped in the history of his black American ancestors. This is the reason he is sometimes unable to bring himself to play with the Swiss children who marvel at him because of the color of his skin. Just as white Americans are trapped in history, black Americans are trapped in a history that follows them around like a ghost. His use of "people" unites black and white Americans to show that no one is free from the trap of history. Here, Baldwin borrows from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake (Joyce [22])."

Baldwin's experience within a culture that had scarcely been in the presence of black people introduces the significance of history and reveals the power of experience. Baldwin's response to this personally and socially difficult situation causes his reader to struggle with the distinction between ironic innocence and ignorant innocence. The reverberation of the specific sound that "Neger" makes transports Baldwin back to Harlem—the place he was escaping. Baldwin traveled to Europe to leave behind the stigma that the color of his skin held in American society—as well as his resentment towards American culture that cultivated this alienating environment. The behavior of the Swiss is not ignorance—it is innocence because of Baldwin's experiences in America and his history there. The sound that "Neger" makes symbolizes the status that Baldwin held in American public life. Baldwin's experiences in New York are linked to his experiences in Leukerbad through his "muttering" of the same words when the Swiss children ask to him to play with them, and when he was stigmatized on the streets of Harlem.

The irony that Baldwin attaches to innocence gives his application of the word greater rhetorical effect. The irony compels his reader wrestle with the distinction between an inexperienced innocence and a culpable innocence. Innocence is traditionally juxtaposed with

guilt, eliminating blame from its definition. Baldwin subverts this denotation to make a claim about American identity as it is understood through the power of history and the significance of experience.

### *The Trap of History*

“The history of white people has led them to a fearful, baffling place where they have begun to lose touch with reality-- to lose touch, that is, with themselves-- and where they certainly are not truly happy, for they know they are not truly safe (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [724]).”

To come to terms with the past, white Americans must to “accept” their history. It is through this acceptance, that white innocence can be erased from the prophecy of American lives and America’s national image. Acceptance is the psychological, moral and social process of understanding the significance of the self’s “destructive,” “tragic,” and “monstrous” pasts. Acceptance represents the constant wrestling of individual experience with shared history. Similarly to “love,” “acceptance” is emboldened by ideas that define the process from innocence to an America released from the “trap” of its “mirror.” Acceptance is a truthful and redemptive struggle that is both privately and publicly urgent: “If we could accept ourselves as we are, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them... White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [340]).” Through their unwillingness to accept both their own pasts and black Americans’ pasts, white people are responsible for trapping both themselves and black Americans. Baldwin explains why acceptance is necessary for the psychological and social constitution of white and black Americans through a discussion of destruction, tragedy, drowning, and “cracks and crumbles.”

“History” has a similar temporal effect as innocence because of Baldwin’s manipulation of the way “history” is typically thought of. Like Faulker, Baldwin insists that history does not stay in the past. In *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulker writes, “The past is never dead. Its not even past (Faulkner [73])”—reflecting the idea that the past is inescapable. “History” transcends time and follows generations of Americans into their presents, acting as yet another thing they hide from themselves in their “mirrors.” Baldwin describes the lie of history and the lie of “the mirror” using almost identical language: “[White Americans] are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed to themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [723]).” This resemblance exhibits the extent to which white Americans “mask” the truth. The nature of this disguise is a “personal incoherence”—a phrase that is applicable to both David and John when they are confronted with their reflection. “Incoherence” denotes the lack of clarity that white Americans have when it comes to their “personal” selves; it is a product of a “history” flooded with lies that white Americans “have fed themselves.” In “Baldwin, Prophecy and Politics,” George Shulman states that Baldwin “imposes an interpretation of history as a truth whites must accept or, he insists, they live in self-denial (Shulman [115]).” Shulman suggests a transcendence of selfhood into a more universal tier with his simultaneous use of “whites” and “self-denial.” His language also draws from connotations of Baldwin’s metaphor of “the mirror” and white Americans’ inability “of seeing or changing themselves (Shulman [106]).” Within his subversion of ignorant innocence, Baldwin poses larger questions about American society status through the guilt that exists in innocence.

White Americans rely on their distance from their histories as a means to disavow them and renounce their importance. Baldwin labels this rhetoric of denial a “stammering and terrified

dialogue” that “can be reduced to plea: do not blame me, I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [724]).” Baldwin’s testament about white innocence in the letter to his nephew is reflected in his response to this harmful dialogue: “In the most private chamber of his heart, the white American remains proud of that history for which he does not wish to pay, and from which, materially, he has profited so much (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [724]).” The stakes of this exist deeper than the denial of history—within the white Americans’ innocent perceptions of their pasts, their innocence subsequently flows into the disavowal of experience. The self is a “historical creation” and the version of the self that exist in the present is a product of its history. Baldwin critiques American’s renunciation of the past because it affirms the social status that black and white Americans hold today: black Americans lived through the slave trade and subjugation; white Americans were slave masters and participated in systemic dehumanization. White Americans inflict this reality because they refuse to acknowledge it. Until they acknowledge it, “they cannot be released from it.” Their inability “to face their history, to change their lives-- hideously menaces this country (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [722]).” The transcendent nature of history reinforces the ironic denotation of innocence. The culpability involved in the renunciation of history presents an allegation of American identity. Baldwin deconstructs white American social norms through analyzing their pasts, and recognizing the pasts position in the present.

The histories of white Americans are “appallingly oppressive and bloody (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [722])” – a description that is not confined to events of the past because history is an integral feature of the present.

History is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we



do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [722]). History’s ability to surpass temporal markers bleeds into the way it blurs lines of personal and national identity. In other words, because history is not stuck in the past, “we carry it within us”—making history a part of the self that white Americans cannot see an accurate depiction of. Baldwin draws this, in part, from Faulkner and Joyce. The relationship between white racial innocence and acquiring self-knowledge is inseparable from the effect that it has on the overarching status American identity. Innocent *America* and innocent *Americans* are connected through time and history.

History is a crucially formative ingredient of self-knowledge. To be innocent to our history is to be innocent to the present form of ourselves. Baldwin is intentionally not specific with his use of “identity;” it could be interpreted in a *micro* or *macro* sense. This is done purposely to expose how innocence connects the past to the present, history to the self, and national identity to self identity. Understanding the self’s innocence and understanding the social innocence of the self’s environment are inextricable. Because of its ingrained and historic position in American society, innocence becomes a “built in” aspect of existence. Shulman addresses Baldwin’s “trap of history:”

Deconstruction and domination are commonplace in history; rendering others invisible is an injustice built into human life by hierarchy and power. But innocence is a refusal not only to recognize these others but to acknowledge that we enact this denial. Innocence is disowning social facts we in some sense know. It is disavowing the exercise of power, the practice of inequality, and their benefits (Shulman [110]).

Innocence is an innate feature of the self and society. Shulman says that white people’s disavowal of black people’s past, and therefore their present, “is an injustice built into human life.” Believing that there are “built in” aspects of society is a harmful idea when it is concerned with threats of injustice. Baldwin addresses this discussion through “tradition:” “It is absolutely inevitable that when a tradition has been evolved, whatever the tradition is, that the people, in

general, will suppose it to have existed from before the beginning of time and will be most unwilling and indeed unable to conceive of any changes in it (*Collected Essays*, “The Creative Process” [670]).” Baldwin does not specify nor contextualize his use of “tradition.” The concept of tradition is present in Shulman’s discussion of “inbuilt injustices”—both Shulman and Baldwin signify the difficulty of undoing deeply ingrained practices. By assuming innocence to be an intrinsic facet of Americanism and American society, white people are pushed further away from acknowledging their pasts. Through thinking about innocence as an inborn aspect of society and of the self, innocence becomes more ingrained in the national psyche, and the recognition of historical events becomes more of a fantasy than an attainable reality.

White Americans must “accept their pasts”—it is “in great pain and terror [that] one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is (*Collected Essays*, “The Creative Process” [670]).” Shulman isolates how white Americans can rectify the continued denial of the events of their pasts: “[Baldwin] narrates a tragic story in which a disavowed past generates barren repetition. Is there some other way forward, except by coming to terms with the past? Baldwin denies it (Shulman [121]).” He addresses Baldwin’s idea that the past does not exist within temporal limits, as well as the significance the past holds in American innocence. Shulman goes on to define the origin of white America’s century old innocence: “American history is shaped by domination and miscegenation (Shulman [113]).” By indirectly referencing historical facts such as the slave trade, slavery, Jim Crow, subjugation, etc, and by utilizing the action of “shaping,” Shulman asserts his agreement with Baldwin that America’s history is implicated in its present. Shulman states that until white Americans come to “accept” this “inescapable” chapter in America’s history, only then “can we initiate a democratic nation-building never yet attempted.” Shulman draws from Baldwin’s connection of personal ideals

with national ones in order to underscore the psychological and societal effects of disavowed history.

The white world can abandon their innocence and acknowledge their history with an existential examination of themselves, and with “pain” and “suffering.” Concepts of freedom and self-knowledge expose the connection between the disavowal of American history and individuals’ presents. Baldwin says: “In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating: one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [723]).” Acceptance of the past is equivalent to a “freedom” and a “liberation.” It is a liberation for white people from denying their private selves, as well as a liberation for black people from carrying oppression from their pasts into their presents. The juxtaposition of growing up and being freed exhibits the childlike and imprisoned state that innocence inflicts. The self’s ability to grow up and be released from the confines that “the mirror” and “the mask” present, negates the harmful power that history has on the present. Shulman outlines the way that Baldwin thinks that white Americans can accept and, therefore, renounce their innocence. “[White Americans] cannot escape [their] past or what went wrong in it, as if to change it. Only by accepting his historical constitution can he, paradoxically, make a future different from the one the past seems to dictate (*Collected Essays*, “WMG” [723]).” “Escape” is not an option for the white Americans if they wish to be released from the confines of innocence. *Coherent* acceptance, as in a meaningful and cogent reflection of one’s past, is the only way out of this harmful historical trap.

Our pasts are integral to the construction of the metaphor of “the mask.” Baldwin’s discussion of history is often juxtaposed with a description of understanding and of acceptance. The histories and experiences of white Americans are utilized as a kind of tool—one that can materialize to be utterly destructive, or, a revelatory key to self-knowledge: “To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [340]).” “Acceptance” illustrates a life without “the mask” and without false and harmful conceptions of ourselves and the conditions around us. “Acceptance” depicts a process in which white people recognize the harm that they and their ancestors cause, while also realizing that the past is not dead. Baldwin underscores the “uselessness” of an “invented past” that is grounded in innocence and in “mirrors.” It is a past that symbolizes the refusal to acknowledge and to understand the truth, because of the pain and self reflective process that comes with it. Baldwin’s most prevalent example of this is of white people’s refusal to acknowledge the present day relevance of injustices committed against black people dating back centuries. Amidst the uselessness of this deceitful version of the past exists its inability to maintain the fallacy it depicts over the course of time. The pasts that we choose to disregard and alienate from who we want to think we are in the *present* functions as another layer of “the masks” that white Americans wear to confront their “mirrors.

The white world’s inability to stop denying responsibility and acknowledge the facts of its past has an effect not only on itself, but on American identity as a whole. Baldwin asks: “How can the American Negroes’ past be used? The unprecedented price demanded is the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of alters (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [340]).” Here, we are confronted with a different approach to thinking about the past and its

place in the present. In previous examples, white Americans' pasts and the harm these pasts inflict on the present, have been discussed in the context of white people's inability to accept. However, in this instance, Baldwin asks a rhetorical question about black Americans' histories and past experiences in order to outline both *how* they can be "used" as well as to make a statement about America's deeply ingrained innocence. Baldwin brings up a different idea and approach to the discussion of accepting the past—directly before asking this question about "Negroes' pasts," Baldwin writes: "The American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [333])." Not only do white Americans need to accept the brutalities they inflicted in their pasts, black Americans need to accept the dehumanized status of theirs. Thus, we return to the importance community, the communion of black and white Americans, when tackling the injustice of America's psyche and politics. Both black and white people need to accept their pasts—one without the other does not change what needs to be changed.

The language of "color, nations, and alters" addresses not only the conflation of individual innocence and American innocence, but, history's ability to cross lines of ideological and universal innocence. White Americans are also described being unable to perceive a truthful image of themselves: "White men do not want their lives, or their self image threatened (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [321])." The disavowal of history is an aspect of "innocence" that crosses temporal borders, as well as social thresholds. The facts of history are an inescapable aspect of our lives—however, because of its prevailing lack of acceptance, the denial of history has become a part of the American identity.

*"No One Can Take My Experiences Away From Me (Jay[7])"*

While depicting “the American student colony in Paris,” Baldwin becomes aware of a “social phenomenon” that exposes a distinction between the self’s private and public spheres: “It becomes impossible, the moment one thinks about it, to predicate the existence of a *common* experience. The moment one thinks about it, it becomes apparent that there is no such thing. Experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair (*Collected Essays*, “A Question of Identity” [91]).” While history portrays both public and private facets of American life, *experience* is depicted as a separate and specifically *personal* possession. Baldwin’s doubt concerning the possibility of having “common experience” illuminates the stakes of individual, or “private,” experience that he presents in his discussion of innocence.

Personal experience often hides behind history in Baldwin’s discussion of innocence. Experience can be easily conjoined with events of the past, blurring the line between history and experience. However, because of the ironic tone of “innocence,” experience materializes as the unsung, yet crucial, aspect to understanding the ironic subtext of “innocence” because of the role that “experience” plays in determining culpability. “Experience destroys innocence” because it portrays personal truths that history does not. Experience acts as a counterpart to innocence— a counter part that exposes the truth of itself, as well as the lies of innocence. Experience and knowledge largely distinguish the guilty from the non-ironically-innocent. The effect of this distinction is made evident within the comparison of ignorant children with innocent Americans—a distinction that exists between a *lack* of experience with a *denial* of experience.

In *Just Above My Head*, one of Baldwin’s later novels, a character is hesitant to use the term “experience” because he is skeptical of its exact meaning: “In my experience - and this is a very awkward way to put it, since I don't really know what the word experience means (Baldwin, [387]).” Not only does this character express confusion surrounding the application of

experience, he hints at the usefulness of applying experience in a personal context, as he begins, “In my experience.” In the context of innocence, the primary distinguishing factor between experience and history centers around individuality. Experience is personal— it is less useful when put in the context of national identity than history. The significance of personal experience is exhibited amidst Baldwin’s prophetic claims to his nephew: “[White people] do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one’s word for anything, including mine-- but trust your experience. Know whence you came (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [293]).” Truth is, in large part, exhibited through experience because of its personal nature—Baldwin tells his nephew to “trust” *his* experiences.

The significance of experience lies within its privacy. The individual nature of experience is what makes it both honest and impenetrable. In *Songs of Experience*, Martin Jay outlines the concept of “experience:” “[The word experience] is frequently employed as a marker for what is so ineffable and individual (or specific to a particular group) that it cannot be rendered in conventionally communicative terms to those who lack it. Although we may try to share or represent what we experience, the argument goes, only the subject really knows what he or she has experienced (Jay [5-6]).” This is where concepts of history and experience diverge—history is public and can be shared, while experience is sequestered in the privacy of the self. Jay claims that another important feature of experience is its uniqueness. He also argues that, “An experience cannot simply duplicate the prior reality of the one who undergoes it, leaving him or her precisely as before-- ‘experience’ cannot leave you where you began (Jay [7]).”

The truth of personal experience that Baldwin tells his nephew to “trust” over the word of anyone else is a result of its pertainency to one’s privacy. In an interview from 1963 during a discussion about Malcolm X, Baldwin says that Malcolm tells the black population of America

to be proud of being black, despite what the ethos of the country tells them. Baldwin agrees with Malcolm's sentiment while simultaneously addressing a central problem within it. When Malcolm relays this sentiment to black Americans he is "destroying a truth and inventing a history." "Experience" is "an articulation of suffering." The emotional distress that is implicated in "suffering" is relevant to personal experience in the context of innocence. The truth imbedded within experience is a product of the fact that it is self contained. Although, Americans are not able to access their experience because of what their "masks" and our "mirrors" conceal from them. "In their blind rejection of tragedy, in their fear of that dreadful genre that tells us the truth of our failures as individuals and as a people, in that lack of knowledge that our public lives are doomed to destruction because our private lives are warped, Americans have condemned themselves to an unforgivable innocence (*Collected Essays*, "FNT" [292])." "Blindness" references Americans' "mirrors" and "masks" and the content of their deception, aka, innocence. Innocence is the state that prevents people from seeing the truth, or reality, of "tragedy." Tragedy is synonymous with being alive, with being human. The emphasis here is on the need for all people to recognize that life as such is tragic. Tragedy is nothing less than a fact of human existence: "Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets (*Collected Essays* "FNT" [339])." Tragedy is inescapable because it is the reason behind even the most fundamental facts of life—like the sun rising and the earth turning. "Life is tragic" because people have made it that way; life is tragic, in part, because of the white innocence and "mirrors" but these are not the only things that provoke tragedy. Tragedy exists on a larger and more existential plane. "Acceptance" won't get rid of the tragic elements of life because tragedy is not a product of racial disavowal and, because tragedy is not an inherently negative thing in Baldwin's eyes. "Reality" is tragic—*true* reality that is free from "mirrors," "masks," and



innocence. The earth turning and the sun rising is not an inherently negative idea, it is a fundamental one. It is not tragedy that people should be running away from—instead, they need to be able to acknowledge that life is tragic.

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Innocence makes the self unable to have a “private” life because of the structurally fraught foundation of lies that stabilizes it. In an interview from 1968 with television host Dick Cavett, Baldwin said that Americans are struck by an

emotional poverty so bottomless and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life. This failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct and on black-white relations. If [white] Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have become so dependent on what they call the Negro Problem (Baldwin).

Similarly to Baldwin’s translation of psychological and political themes through self reflection and “the mirror,” he identifies a dangerous phenomenon in American life. Public and private features of selfhood are linked to self-reflection because white Americans are unable to see themselves clearly, in part, because of discontinuity that exists between their private and public selves.

In Giovanni’s Room, David recognizes this exact symptom of his American innocence. In order to remain innocent, he must ignore the truth about himself and the world around him: “I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well—by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion (Baldwin 20).” As if directly responding to David, Baldwin tells his nephew what happens when people *do not look at themselves, or at the universe*: “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state on innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.”

It is the private self's responsibility to detach itself from the state of innocence that it lives within and have thus projected externally. *Shutting our eyes* is no different to living within our "mask," our "mirrors", or our innocence. All that awaits those who live perpetually within a state of innocence, is "their own destruction" and the evolution into a "monster."

This dividing problem amongst Americans puts "history" and "experience" in conversation with one another. History's portrayal of both public and private themes combined with experience's very personal emphasis, illuminates Americans' inability to find a connection between themselves and their public arena. This ineptitude of American conduct shows the blame that Baldwin places on American private life, revealing the truth of personal experience as opposed to the deniable facts of history. In other words, it is because of the critical role of the private self that Baldwin does not attribute blame to both private and public facets. Americans' inability to find a connection between their self and what exists outside of the self is a result of their innocence. If Americans can learn acceptance, a bridge between the private and the public can be built. However, until then, American identity remains in a state of crisis and confusion because of their divided lives.

White America's innocence and inability to connect their private and public selves gives Baldwin the platform to address race relations through the larger lense of American identity. White Americans rely on the "subservient (Rich)" status of black Americans to construct their identity. If this frame of reference was taken away from white Americans, "the very foundations of their private and public worlds were being destroyed (Rich)." White Americans need to think of themselves as personally and socially *higher* than black Americans to secure the false sense of safety that their "masks" and "mirrors" enact. This desire of the white world, this feature of their blinding innocence, is a result of their inability to see a true depiction of themselves.

### Chapter 3

#### The Pain of Baldwin's Capacious Love

On November 21st 1962, Hannah Arendt wrote a letter to James Baldwin. The letter expresses Arendt's disagreement with Baldwin's pervasive application of love to "the political" in his essay *Letter From a Region of My Mind*, later published as *Down at the Cross*-- Baldwin's work that was published in the *New Yorker* magazine earlier that same year. Arendt's letter reads:

Dear Mr. Baldwin:

Your article in the *New Yorker* is a political event of a very high order, I think; it certainly is an event in my understanding of what is involved in the Negro question. And since this is a question which concerns us all, I feel I am entitled to raise objections.

What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.

Arendt's skepticism of Baldwin's meaning of love in "Down at the Cross" focussed on her opinion that love is a solely personal and sentimental feature of the self. Love was a largely debated topic in the arena of racial politics between two of the Civil Rights Movement's most prominent figures: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.. Malcolm and King publicly presented their disagreements regarding the possibilities of love as well as its boundaries. Arendt's critique of Baldwin's "love" is grounded in its capaciousness. Love is a private, public, emotional, and political aspect of American life in Baldwin's eyes. It is within this all-encompassing analysis of love that Baldwin's claims overlap with Dr. King's. King, like Baldwin, defended the political capacities of love. King elaborates on the necessity of love in politics within a discussion of black-white relations, "power," and "justice:" "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and

love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love (King [200]).” King identifies the intimacy between love and politics—he makes this connection through ideas of power, the dangers of power when *not* coupled with love, and the feebleness of love when unaccompanied by power. Finally, King intertwines concepts of love, power, and justice when he suggests that love is capable of performing acts of political justice. King’s discussion on love and power included the controversial idea of “loving your enemies,” or loving the oppressor. It is here that the discord between King and X most clearly presented itself.

Malcolm X, like Arendt, did not appreciate how love’s affectionate features played a role in our political realities. In an interview conducted by Kenneth Clark with Dr. King and Malcolm X from the summer of 1963, the antagonism surrounding King and X’s disagreements about love place in the public sphere took center stage. X claims that within his ideology of love and non-violence, Reverend King is teaching black people to be “defenseless in the face of one of the most cruel beasts that has ever taken the people into captivity, that is the American white man (Malcolm X and King).” Malcolm X suggests that King is a “20th century Uncle Tom,” in that his rhetoric of nonviolence and love keeps black people “defenseless.” To which MLK responded: “Well, I don’t think of love as, in this context, as emotional bosh, but I think of love as something strong that organizes itself into the powerful direct action.” This disagreement is a product of the different frameworks from which love is approached. X said that the weight with which King places in love makes black Americans defenseless because love is not powerful enough. King displays the flaws in Malcolm’s understanding of love when he claims that love “organizes itself into powerful direct action,” and that those who do not think love is as powerful as violence, “confuse non-resistance with non-violent resistance.” X does not perceive love to be

something that is forceful enough to tackle something as grave as racial injustice; King suggests that X grasps love in the wrong way, and does not understand how love can “resist in a very strong, and powerful way.” The divergence of King and X’s philosophies can be attributed to a discord in the *way* they perceive love, one as solely a private concern, and the other as private and public.

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“Love” takes on a selfless meaning in the context of black people loving their white oppressor. Black Americans must “love” their white compatriots in order to construct a future of America that lives unbridled by its past and its innocence. On the one hundredth anniversary of emancipation, Baldwin told his nephew that he must accept his white oppressor with love: “The terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [293]).” The pronouns “you” and “them” are italicized to illuminate a paradox. The painful irony within this exchange of love embodies what white Americans have robbed black Americans of by means of their innocence and disavowal of the past. Ideas of suffering and of freedom are attached to both “acceptance” and “love.” By telling his nephew that he must “accept them with love,” the effects that love and acceptance have on the American psyche are intertwined with each other.

Shulman argues that Baldwin’s “love” is responsible for the evolution from a state of white innocence to a state of white acceptance—separating love and acceptance by what they symbolize: “‘Love’ names an engagement to move whites not from ignorance to knowledge, but from innocence to acknowledgment, and so from sterile repetition into the freedom of the unknown (Shulman [119]).” While Baldwin never explicitly illustrates the specificities of how

love and acceptance function together, he does intertwine the two themes: “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [340]).” “Accepting them with love” is for the salvation of the white man—thus exhibiting the selfless nature of “love.”

“Love’s” presence in the letter to his nephew is used to introduce an innovative definition of “integration.” “If the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [340]).” Similarly as he does with his ironic denotation of innocence, Baldwin radicalizes the meaning of integration. Over the course of Baldwin’s life, but especially when he wrote *The Fire Next Time*, 1963, “integration” was a “buzzword.” Integration typically refers to undoing the acts of segregation—to deconstructing societal restrictions that barred black and white people to sit, eat, travel, and simply exist together. But, Baldwin changes the way his reader conceptualizes the act and concept of integration by attaching a paradoxical meaning to it. This is part of his immense rhetorical and authorial skill: the ability to take such an overused and stigmatized word like “integration” and attach it with new and different themes. In this use of integration, love is the driving force. “Love” taking off the mask is hinted at when Baldwin says that it is “with love” that black Americans will “force” their white countrymen, “to see themselves as they are.” Not only is Baldwin’s statement to his nephew about love and acceptance for the oppressor now complicated, we, as Baldwin’s reader, are given a specific lens to read Baldwin’s meaning “love” in “love takes off the mask.”

The selfless characteristics of Baldwin’s “love” is similar to Martin Luther King’s use of the Greco-Christian term, *agape*. In his book, *Agape Love*, John Templeton explains *agape*’s

traditional religious definition: “Agape love is not directed toward a single person or a small group of friends, but toward all humanity, even all of creation. Agape love is not based on how we are treated by others. Rather, it is unconditional and unlimited in its expression. Agape love is pure love, unlimited in its possibilities. It is altruistic love, love that is given for its own sake, without expecting anything in return (Templeton [3-4]).” Agape is not dependant on aesthetic beauty or even the good will of its desired object. As Templeton states, agape is not exclusive to or dependant on anything except humanity. King attaches a similar degree of morality and virtue in his definition of agape: “Agape is more than romantic love. *Agape* is more than friendship. *Agape* is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men. *Agape* is an overflowing love, a spontaneous love, which seeks nothing in return. When you rise to love on this level you love all men, not because you like them, not because their ways appeal to you, not because they are worthful to you, but you love all men because God loves all men (Templeton [6]).” King’s agape and Baldwin’s “love” are similar because they both denote ideas of salvation and selflessness. In his religiously saturated essay, “To Crush The Serpent,” Baldwin writes that “there is absolutely no salvation without love (*The Cross of Redemption*, [196]).” Love has the ability to *save*. This is specifically pertinent when Baldwin tells his nephew that “the only hope” for his innocent, white compatriots is “accepting them with love .” The psychological and social destruction of white America is, in part, a result of black people *not* “accept[ing] them with love.” King’s crucial addition of “all men” in reference to agape’s ability to redeem, is seen in salvation for the white oppressor. The idea of altruistic saving illuminates the similarities between King and Baldwin’s uses of selflessness. One of the reasons that Baldwin tells his nephew to accept his white countrymen is for their psychological salvation. King goes on to say that, “agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action... Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore

community (King [200]).” The activeness that King lends to agape reflects Baldwin’s “love” as a struggle and a process. “The restoration of community” that King mentions is also a fundamental feature of “love” for Baldwin. He often names love as *the* way to unite black and white Americans, and to unite America as a nation: “If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.-- and this is a wedding (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).” The unification of black and white Americans is a crucial factor in “removing our masks” and accepting our innocence— this “coming together” is a “wedding,” a process that “lovers” embark on together. “Love” names the struggle from innocence to acceptance, from lies to truth, and from life behind “the mask” to a life with love. Thus, “love” also defines the relationship between black and white Americans.

Both Baldwin and King think about and write about love as something more capacious than just its typical affectionate meaning. Placing Baldwin’s interdisciplinary concept of love into conversation with King and agape shows the prescient and meaningful role it plays with American racial identity.

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Arendt believes that the “private” contaminates the “public”—that features of private and public life, have no business being intertwined with one another. Much of Arendt’s explanation of why love has no place in politics is seen within the crucial separation she makes between private and public facets of life. Her disagreements with Baldwin’s philosophies are exhibited within the similarities to Baldwin’s discussion of “private lives” and “public stances” in the



interview with Dick Cavett. This disagreement (of the role and distinction between public and private) between Arendt and Baldwin encompasses their respective beliefs on love and politics.

Arendt believes that politics should be pure, i.e., should remain free from contamination by things that exist in “the private.” In “Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political,” Shin Chiba contextualizes the “danger” of love within politics:

Arendt made a consistent attempt to fend off any *external* political factor, whether it be truth, goodness, or love, from encroaching upon the discourse of proper to the public realm. Arendt had often cautioned us of the basically *unworldly* and even *political* nature of love. Arendt kept a certain distance from love, because she thought that love, since it is a sentiment or an emotion, tends to form an inner circle of lovers by love’s inherently private, closely knit, and homogeneous features. Love is basically regarded by her as an *unpolitical* entity because of its inherent inclination to exclude the outside world which constitutes the essence of the political (Shiba [506]).

Chiba describes Arendt’s view of politics as something that must not be tainted by anything that does not fall within its “public” sphere. The realm of politics is susceptible to “threats” like love or any other “unpolitical entity.” Since Arendt understands “love” as a private emotional state, it holds no place in her understanding of politics. The sentimentality that Arendt attributes to love and the relationships it fosters, corrupts the world of politics with its “unworldly features.” In “The Human Condition,” Arendt builds on the concept of “the unworldly” by labelling love “the most powerful of all anti political forces.” She states, “Love, for reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.-- Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all anti political forces (Arendt [243]).” Arendt’s concept of the “unworldly” embodies all things private. It is even clear in her choice of language with the term “unworldly” that Arendt holds private facets of life to a lower standard than “worldly” and political facets-- “Unworldly” implies a lack of connection, knowledge, and integration to anything that exists outside of the self. Its rhetorical negation of “the world”

isolates-- while Baldwin attempts to unify through love. This is what Arendt's considers as "destructive" in Baldwin's, "Down at the Cross." For Baldwin, love is both a private and public concern because of the "truths" it discloses. For King, like Baldwin, agape love is public because of its attachment to justice and power.

"Love" was not intended to be constrained by binaries such as private and public, nor by limitations of any kind. Thus, through her assertion that "love cannot be afforded in the private," Arendt complicates Baldwin's belief that Americans separate their public and private selves, and goes against the greater ethos of Baldwin's practice of love. Susan McWilliams states that, "Baldwin turns to love as a practice for the masses"-- showing, broadly, that Baldwin's conceptualization of love rebels against restriction, while also suggesting that love is something that everyone *needs*. The liberation implicit in Baldwin's "love" cures the self that is encumbered by "mirrors," "masks," and innocence. This liberation also shows how love acts as the reverses the conditions described through these metaphors.

By means of the power ascribed to love, a web of pain, of freedom, of growth, and of self-knowledge is constructed, and love's faculties are expanded beyond the merely affectionate or emotional. Baldwin often juxtaposes the confines of the self with a discussion of "love's" importance. He does this because "the mask," "the mirror," and innocence are completely antithetical to love in what they symbolize. His persistent rhetoric of the self being trapped and searching to be released, culminates within his understanding of the effect that love has on the self. Love is the "release" from the confines of our internal states of mind—as well as the release from our public anxieties. Love allows the white man to accept his past and his private self, while it also forces him to accept the history, the experience, and the pain of black Americans. Love can free David from the skewed image of himself that he sees in the windowpane and love can

release the white man from the “tyranny of his mirror.” Love’s pervasiveness transforms the solely romantic denotation of love into a revelatory feature of selfhood and “acceptance.”

I end my project with this discussion of “love” because, up until this point, I have sought to analyze how Baldwin explores themes of obstructed self-knowledge. “Love” is a process—a state of perpetual growth and evolution. This process of love depicts the self, and the other, at its most pure, honest, unthreatened and sincere state. Thus, love reveals the truth of its object, and the truth of the self.

The capacious nature of Baldwin’s practice of love is seen through its exposure of truth, as well as its ability rebuild America’s racial and societal reputation. “Love” is the larger theme that embodies the painful, self-reflective, and “social and psychological” journey that and Americans will embark on once their innocence has been is gone. Baldwin relies on “love” to generate a “tragic” and “painful” freedom throughout his discussion of America’s innumerable “social and psychological problems (Baldwin [7]).” Thus, love releases the self from a self-imposed oppression-- “oppression that leads to a kind of psychological warfare (Baldwin [7])” within which, the self “perishes.” “The psychological warfare” that Baldwin mentions is the effect of “the masks” and “the mirrors” that conceal the self from itself, as well as from others that exist outside of it. Just as love takes off the mask, it also releases the self from its “mirror” and its innocence. Baldwin compels his reader to wrestle with ideas of love as safety and love as pain—a dynamic that can be perceived as contradictory. He exposes the discrepancy between safety and truth by presenting “the mask” as deceptive safety, and love as the truth that can dismantle it. as.

Arendt rejects Baldwin’s political hopes for love, in part, because she does not believe that love should take up any space outside of our innermost emotions—she is holding on to an

idea of love as a purely sentimental or passionate feature of the self. It isn't that Baldwin subverts the typical sentimental denotation of love—it is that he expands it. The meaning attributed to “love” is a culmination of a myriad of values. The multitude of meanings that make up Baldwin's “love” borrow from different experiences of the “human condition.” It is for this reason that “love” is complicated, but crucial. It is because of its capacious nature, that love supports the magnitude and consequence that it does in Baldwin's visionary essays, and his highly psychological novels. Baldwin's rhetorical, artistic, and political choice to write about love in such a theoretical manner is partly what makes his writing so impactful.

“Love takes off the mask,” and the racially charged context that it refers to, imbues “love” with a plethora of outside themes<sup>9</sup>-- Baldwin makes the consequences of love's presence of paramount importance. “Love” is a ubiquitous feature within Baldwin's discussion of America's racial nightmare. While discussing of the “tyrannical mirror” that “only” presents white Americans with “lies,” “love” moves beyond referring only to white America—to referencing an abstract and all encompassing sense of humanity. It is within this framework that love is constructed as a tool that is capable of inspiring the acquisition of self-knowledge. After stating that “death by drowning is all that awaits” those white Americans who choose to trust their mirrors, Baldwin expands on this claim:

It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).

“Love” is philosophical and something capable of deconstructing the limitations that people place in front themselves in order to remain “safe.” Love also acts as a kind of salvation—a mode of self reclamation. He presents this idea within the argument that love is so “desperately”

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<sup>9</sup> Outside themes: ideas that would not traditionally adhere to the idea of love outside of Baldwin's concept of it.

needed *because* of the eventual destruction that our “mirrors” inflict. The stakes that are implicated in the claim “love takes off the mask” are high—“love” is able to reconcile the destruction that happens when “people shut their eyes to reality.” The stakes of love are through the use of “destruction”—destruction is also infused into the metaphor of “the mask.” One of things “the mask” is a symbol for is the self’s mode of staying ignorant to the psychological consequences of the destruction it has caused. The most explicit example is white innocence. White people wear a mask that veils the truths of their history, experience and innocence, in order to remain in a state of safety. Safety is not equivalent to truth-- it is the opposite. What hides behind the “white man’s” mask is his “unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [341]).”

In an interview from 1962, Baldwin was asked to give his opinions on the relationship between the “fate of the nation and the fate of the Negro.” The interviewer began by stating his own opinion: that the future of America and the future of black Americans are “linked.” Baldwin responded with a serious gaze and a furtive nod, expressing his complete agreement with the interviewer’s claim. The inextricable relationship between black people and America is a product of the mask that white America wears. In the same interview, Baldwin labels the white world’s inability to access their “private selves” as a “moral bankruptcy”—a bankruptcy within which the white world has also decided the fate of America and all of its residents. The closely knit relationship between the fates of America and black Americans shows the importance of love because of “love’s” ability to take off the mask. If the future of America is inseparable from the future of the black man, the future of America is thus reliant on the white man’s ability to acknowledge the private side of himself that he has drawn a veil over.

The Negro came to the white man for a roof or for five dollars or for a letter to the judge; the white man came to the Negro for love. But he was not often able to give what he

came seeking. The price was too high; he had too much to lose. And the Negro knew this, too. When one knows this about a man, it is impossible for one to hate him, but unless he becomes a man—becomes equal—it is also impossible for one to love him (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [338])

The love that the white man seeks from black Americans is buried in his private self. Baldwin identifies a phenomenon within the fraught dynamic between black and white Americans that is concealed by the mask. This exchange of love has been going on privately, beneath the white man’s “mask”—but this exchange has not been acknowledged because of his inability to accept of this love.

In this example, as well as others, it is useful to think love as both a concept and a vessel—a vessel for other ideas that contribute to Baldwin’s meaning of love. Introducing an already highly theoretical and elusive statement, “love” takes on the power of truthfully acknowledging the destruction caused by racial injustice in America, and love simultaneously acts as a prophecy for America’s national image. “Love” is imbued with tropes of liberation, suffering, truth, process and self-knowledge through: “love takes off the mask.”

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Despite the truth love emits, it is also responsible for feelings of great torment. This is something that agape love doesn’t address. Baldwin breaks down love outside of its affectionate meaning. It is through the unlikely emotions and tropes attached to “love” (like pain, like freedom, like truth), that Baldwin reimagines how we think about love and how its relevance to America’s political psyche. Baldwin intertwines notions of “process” and suffering within his abstract concept of love when he explores the nature of the fraught relationship between white and black Americans:

Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up. No one in the world-- in the entire world-- knows more-- knows Americans better or, odd as this may sound, love them more than the American

Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here, that is, since both of us, black and white, got here-- and this is a wedding. -- I am suggesting that these walls-- these artificial walls-- which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear, must come down (*Collected Essays*, "In Search of a Majority" [221]).

Baldwin notices a defect in Americans' understanding of love. People misconceive love—his vision goes beyond the traditional views of love. "Love" is bold because of the myriad of emotions that are intrinsic to its meaning and its effect. The use of "begin" and "end" suggests an unexplored realm of love that exists outside of the romantic sphere that it generally exists in. Through Baldwin recognition of how his employment of love differs from the popular dialogue surrounding it, "love" is described as a fundamental aspect of our existences that affects our political and psychological realities. Baldwin accomplishes this by placing love in the context of black-white relations and reimagining this historically fraught dynamic with the addition of love. This freed state would be home a unification of black and white Americans, and the ability to *honestly* self-reflect and accept.

Baldwin links love to conflict and struggle—a connection that is revealed through the relationship between black and white Americans. Black Americans "know" and "love" white Americans because of the way black Americans have had to survive under the oppression from white Americans. Love is the product of a relationship filled with trauma, pain and injustice. However, the controversial nature and significance of this statement stems from the external images attached to love in this instance. Baldwin is not referring to a conventional, affectionate love—he is referring to a continuing, and harrowing "war." His explanation for why black Americans must love white Americans more than *anyone*, is the suffering, persecution as well as social navigation that black Americans have lived under and within. It is also because black Americans know the truth of the pasts that white Americans disavow because it is *their* past, and *their* experiences. It is for this reason that black Americans know the stakes of love, and why it is

so crucial. This pain is the reason that love is necessary. However, it is the direction that the love is originating from that radicalizes the form it takes. It is the black American who loves his white oppressor, an idiosyncratic and antithetical approach to racial injustice. The pain that Baldwin describes within love is a necessary pain to move forward—while Malcolm X might perceive this claim that submissive or teaching black Americans to be “defenseless,” Baldwin sees it differently. It is the innate pain, suffering and struggle of black people loving their oppressors that makes his concept of love what it is—it is what separates it from a typical discussion about love. It is Baldwin’s emphasis on the acceptance and revisiting of the past that makes his “love” acutely painful. Black and white Americans need to struggle *together*, they both need to be liberated for themselves and for the future of America at large.

Love is saturated with themes of liberation. However, within the freedom that love is capable of, Baldwin goes against the traditional definition of “freedom” by emphasizing elements of destabilization and risk.” “The universe, which is not merely the stars and the moon and the planets, flowers, grass, and trees, but *other people*, has evolved no terms for your existence, has made no room for you, and if love will not swing wide the gates, no other power will or can (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [304]).” Addressing his nephew, Baldwin explains ‘love’ as the ultimate form of freedom. With the metaphor of “swinging wide the gates,” Baldwin depicts a tangle image of liberation. Love is presented in the form of a gust of wind that has the power to “make room” for his nephew in America’s national image. By describing love as a “power” that has the ability alter the status of the “universe” in some way, love is given even more power than the “universe.” The freedom attached to “love” is embodied by the “release” from the “trap” that all Americans are victims of because of the destructive story they have written of American identity. The liberation attached to love is not solely in reference to black



Americans and their “release” from the confines of American innocence. White Americans are equally in need of a political and psychological liberation-- a liberation from themselves and how they project an image of themselves externally. Baldwin presents this paradox in the form of the “mirror” that not only obstructs white Americans from seeing themselves truthfully, but simultaneously impacts American society and racial injustice. America needs “love” because it needs freedom.

The crucial role that suffering plays in “love” is seen through its connection to innocence and self-knowledge. A paradox is presented when Baldwin labels suffering as “something very beautiful,” as well as something “enough is as good as a feast.” Suffering is the opposite of innocence, and the key to seeing one’s self without obstruction: “people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [339]).” Baldwin implies the differences between suffering and innocence when he equates the process of suffering with “growing up.” The “masks” and “mirrors” of white Americans are alluded to by means of Baldwin’s suggestion of innocence. Suffering is linked to love because both facilitate self-knowledge. Suffering is not solely tagged by a tone with negative connotations—Baldwin subverts the way that suffering is primarily applied to unfortunate circumstances. Suffering is capable of releasing the white man from his mirror, and taking off the mask.

“Love takes off the mask.” We see now that love’s agency makes self-discovery possible. However, the direct correlation between love and the acquisition of self-knowledge is made through the exploration of “suffering.” Those “who cannot suffer, can never discover who they are:” suffering is the framework for which grounds self-discovery.

The “most important thing a human being can do for another ” is to help remove whatever blocks them from realizing their *truths*. Baldwin addresses the fundamental role that love plays in American life:

And therefore when the country speaks of a “new” Negro, which it has been doing every hour on the hour for decades, it is not really referring to a change in the Negro, which, in any case, it is quite incapable of assessing, but only to a new difficulty in keeping him in his place, to the fact that it encounters him (again! again!) barring yet another door to its spiritual and social ease. This is probably, hard and odd as it may sound, the most important thing that one human being can do for another—it is certainly *one* of the most important things; hence the torment and necessity of love—and this is the enormous contribution that the Negro has made to this otherwise shapeless and undiscovered country (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [338]).

Black Americana are presented as a feature of American life that inhibits a private and public “ease.” This “ease” refers to the state of white Americans’ existence within their “mirrors” and behind their “masks.” Just as these metaphors symbolize a kind of deceptive safety, they also present the representation of “ease” because of what they conceal from the self. “Barring” addresses the invaluable nature of love. Metaphors of obstructed self-knowledge and the pivotal positionality of love are seen in the description of black people’s status in American society. The phrase “love takes off the mask” is built into this passage through the discussion of of love removing the social and psychological barriers that black people are faced with. “Torment” is a feature of love—it is of equal significance to the “necessity” of love. “Love” is a vessel for morally fraudulent and complicated themes that address larger issues of American life.

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In February of 1968, five years after the publication of his third novel, Another Country, Baldwin received a handwritten letter from James Meyers, a newly appointed professor at Montana State University. In the letter, Meyers explained how he had been chastised for wanting to teach the Another Country in one of his classes. The young teacher explained that he was

banned from teaching the novel. In his letter, Meyers asks Baldwin “what he had intended” in his authorship of his third novel. Baldwin responded to Meyers less than two weeks after receiving his letter, explaining that the characters and the events of the novel were meant to reflect the social atmosphere in America at the time (Leeming, [200]). As we have seen through an investigation of his essays, Baldwin’s most prevalent critique of American culture is its absence of love. Another Country reflects how Baldwin perceived American life, through the characters’ constant searches for love. Americans “desperately seek” love whilst simultaneously avoiding it. This paradoxical claim manifests itself with Another Country as the subtext of the novel’s narrative.

Another Country explores the lives of five central characters living in various neighborhoods of New York City, all of whom are either acquaintances of one another or good friends. Each of these characters are burdened with manifestations of Baldwin’s metaphors of “the mask” and “the mirror.” The narrative arch of Another Country thus depicts these characters’ quest for self-knowledge, the removal of their masks, and the subconscious search for love.

Cass and Vivaldo, two of the novel’s five central characters, begin the novel as friends and end the novel having recently ended their extra marital affair. Cass is married to a successful novelist and Vivaldo’s french male lover is arriving from Paris imminently. The scene in which Cass and Vivaldo decide that their time as lovers must come to an end depicts the pain involved in the recognition of love. Paradoxically, the end of their romantic relationship is the catalyst for both of their journeys on the road to real “love.”

After a terrible encounter with her husband, Vivaldo attempts to console Cass: “What’s happening right now is unspeakable, I know, but it can’t defeat you. You can’t go under, you’ve

come too far.” To which Cass responds, “I think I know what I *won’t* be. But what I’m going to become—that I don’t see at all. And I’m afraid (Baldwin, [405]).” Cass’s cryptic and melancholy response hints towards the origin of the new beginning that she is about to embark on. This new beginning is a product of her acknowledgment of “love.” This is seen in Cass’s claim that she is sure who she “won’t” be going forward, but she is utterly confused and scared about who she will be. Who Cass will not be is the old version of herself—the version of herself that lived constrained and blinded by innocence and “masks.” Who Cass is “going to become” fills her with anxiety and thoughts of the unknown, because the “safety” and “ease” that the mask emits have been removed. Cass suggests a new beginning for herself by constructing this binary of who she was with what she will be. This is a product of her acquisition of love and the shedding of her innocence. Cass knows who she won’t become because she has experienced it—a half formed identity and a half formed perception of the world around her.

Vivaldo’s concerned and empathetic claims that prompt Cass’s verbal recognition of her freedom, echo Baldwin’s rhetoric of what happens to the self when it has not found “love.” Vivaldo warns Cass against “defeat” and “going under,” almost exactly mirroring Baldwin’s descriptions of falling victim to what “the mirror” enacts, and the “invented past” that comes out of a disavowal of history. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin states that “death by drowning” is what awaits white Americans who believe the lie of their “mirror,” and that “drowning in one’s past” is the opposite of accepting one’s past. Baldwin supports his claim about the deadly outcome of being trapped by the “mirror:” “It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided.” Here, Baldwin characterizes love as a lifeboat—as the only means of rescue from the “tyranny of the mirror.” Vivaldo is concerned about Cass “going under” and Baldwin uses “drowning” as a metaphor to describe the destruction that “the mirror” and

innocence brings. Thus, Vivaldo is warning Cass not to succumb to the deceptive and destruction of her “mask,” her “mirror,” or her innocence. He tells her not to let the meeting her husband close herself off to “love” and acceptance. However, the meeting with her husband acts as the liberation and “release” that removes “chimeras” from Cass’s perception. Within this short exchange between Cass and Vivaldo, Baldwin’s “love” is the underlying interlocutor that embodies the liberation of who Cass is “going to become.” “Love’s” presence is suggested before Cass speaks hesitantly of her new beginning—with Vivaldo’s concerned exhort about Cass’s wellbeing, he employs the metaphor of “the mask” and his concept of innocence to serve as symbols for the ultimate destruction that she must avoid at all costs.

Walking the streets of New York City, contemplating the depths of and the reasons for their human conditions, Vivaldo presents his delayed response to Cass’s claim: “You said once that you wanted to grow. Isn’t that always frightening? Doesn’t it always hurt (Baldwin 405)?” Within his reaction to Cass, Vivaldo names three defining features of “love.” “Growing” is integral to “love:” “[Baldwin] mean[s] in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” Vivaldo then asks Cass if this process of “growth” is “frightening” and painful. The growth of “love” is in large part defined by fear, pain and suffering. These features of “love” are inspired by “change”—growth and change are very similar processes in Baldwin’s work. Truth and change are inextricable: “In order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is (*Collected Essays*, “FNT” [330]).” However, there are “risks” of change: “to change that fate, and at no matter what risk—eviction, imprisonment, torture, death.” Through the suffering, the struggle of growth, change, and love, Vivaldo’s questions are used as prompts for Cass to explore the nature of her procurement of “love.”

Cass responds to Vivaldo's questions about the nature of love with an existential monologue that reflects Baldwin's ethos of love, as well as the effects on the self when it is blinded to the truth:

I'm beginning to think that growing just means learning more and more about anguish. That poison becomes your diet-- you drink a little of it everyday. Once you've seen it, you can't stop seeing it-- that's the trouble. And it can, it can drive you mad. You begin to see that you yourself, innocent, upright you, have contributed and do contribute to the misery of the world. Which will never end because we're what we are... It doesn't do any good to blame the people or the time-- one is oneself all those people. We *are* the time... This isn't a country at all, it's a collection of Eagle Scouts. Cowards. We think we're happy. We're not. We're doomed (Baldwin [405-6]).

This speech is Cass's elucidation of what it looks like and feels like to be witness to the truth.

The truth is often given an optimistic connotation—Baldwin subverts this meaning in both his essays and fiction. Cass touches on the horrors of the truth similarly to the painful, private truths that white people will have to reconcile when they accept their pasts. Excluding Baldwin's prevalent references to the injustices that white Americans have inflicted onto black Americans, Cass, a white woman, addresses her “innocence” and her suffering when the truth was revealed to her about the past and present “miseries” she has been responsible for. The significance of what Cass has done in the past, as well as her experiences in the present are linked— she suggests her past existing in her present when she says, “have contributed and do contribute.” Her monologue ends simultaneously with the end of her relationship with Vivaldo. She closes with a statement about the false happiness that Americans live within because of the realities that their masks and mirrors shield them from.

America or, the *other* country, is the incubator for the harmful metaphors of self-limitation, the disavowal of history, and the blindness to the realities of what goes on around us. This conversation between Cass and Vivaldo, within which the word “love” is never once mentioned, is exemplary of the larger story that encompasses Another Country. Thus, it is

exemplary of the greater narrative of the American consciousness-- a consciousness that "desperately" seeks love, but, "cunningly avoids" it.

## Conclusion

I first read James Baldwin's work in the middle of my senior year of high school when my teacher assigned Giovanni's Room. I had never encountered anything like it before.

Baldwin's incomparable, emotional and poetic prose combined with his creative ideas left me wanting more. After becoming familiar with the world of his fiction, I was not surprised to discover that even his nonfiction work read like a novel you never wanted to end.

I am utterly intrigued and fascinated by the connections between Baldwin's essays with his fiction, himself with his characters, and *real-life* America with the America depicted in his novels. Baldwin is, in part, an existentialist author; he writes prophetically, philosophically, and sincerely about the human condition and the self's place within the world it exists in. Baldwin explores American life through a web of politics, culture, psychology, and privacy—leaving no aspect of life unexplored. Within this complex web of American existence, Baldwin constructs metaphors as well as new and expanded meanings of terms and concepts to further corroborate his claims—or, in order to illuminate a specific phenomenon. Baldwin explores the American psyche through a discussion of what Americans don't understand or don't want to know about themselves. He does this because it is not until we have identified what we don't understand, that we can start to build something that we do.

I was intimidated by the thought of this project for many reasons. However, the one that made me most hesitant to embark on this journey with Baldwin was the nature of my positionality in relation to his. I am not in a position to talk about Baldwin's experiences like I know what he has felt, endured, or lived through. I am not here to insert myself *into* his narrative in any other way but to analyze it—analyze it as an outsider looking in. What I set out to do in this project was unpack a collection of Baldwin's ideas and concepts in a way that would expose



the larger questions at stake. I approach these aspects of his writing from a literary perspective—close reading Baldwin’s words and using them as a framework to formulate my argument. I wanted Baldwin’s words to shine through and for my voice to act as guide for a way to read his words, and think about them.

This project, this conversation will never be entirely complete. The exploration of Baldwin’s metaphors for self-knowledge and the greater threat of innocence that menaces American identity is a life long investigation. My project is a contribution to this exploration and this conversation. I set out to show that Baldwin is a political psychologist who seeks to understand the self through what it does not want to acknowledge.

James Baldwin was dedicated to people, to community, to justice, and to the art of writing. His philosophy is one to live by—one that is *desperately sought* in the world we find ourselves in today.

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