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## "A Perfect Labyrinth of Limitations": Confronting the Restrictions of Societal Roles in James Baldwin's Fiction

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“A Perfect Labyrinth of Limitations”:  
Confronting the Restrictions of Societal Roles in James Baldwin’s Fiction

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages & Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction: Experience as Difference

James Baldwin writes from experience. As a black gay man living in Harlem in the middle of the 20th century, his novels follow the stories of characters who share these characteristics. Thus, his fiction deals with the concept of experience, and how it is construed and misconstrued within American life. In this project I will examine three of Baldwin's novels - *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* - and how the characters in these novels attempt to find redemption from or reconciliation with their oppressed positions within intolerant societies and relationships. These efforts to overcome the limitations of societal roles are, in each novel, overthrown or debased by the resistance of the characters' environments or the mindsets of those that make up their company, and the reader's expectations are subsequently subverted when faced with anticlimactic, seemingly unprofitable results arising from pursuits of religious salvation, sexual liberation, or interracial congruity. These fruitless results, upon closer examination, can be read to reveal much more about the experience of oppression and otherness than a successfully redemptive experience would, and thus it is within the absence of expected fulfillment that Baldwin's characters are exposed to the inexorable nature of difference and "otherness."

In his book of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin examines the manifold nature of experience. "For one thing, 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. That experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair is the principle truth [...] that experience may perfectly well be meaningless" (Baldwin 91). The

differing identities of the characters in Baldwin's fiction affect the way they are perceived by others and the ways in which they perceive themselves so completely, that it is difficult, at first, to understand what Baldwin attempts to convey by claiming the "meaninglessness" of experience. Is it not, after all, the characters' inability to accept their differing experiences that contributes to the disintegration of their relationships?

The answer lies in the connection of Baldwin's claim to that of R. D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience*. Laing presents a similar claim to Baldwin's, stating that our preoccupation with our own perceptions of reality leads us to build walls between us and those who have dissimilar experiences.

The history of heresies of all kinds testifies to more than the tendency to break off communication (excommunication) with those who hold different dogmas or opinions; it bears witness to our intolerance of different *fundamental structures of experience*. We seem to need to share a communal meaning to human existence, to give with others a common sense to the world, to maintain a *consensus*. / But it seems that once certain fundamental structures of experience are shared, they come to be experienced as *objective entities* (Laing 77).

Through the juxtaposition of Baldwin and Laing, we are presented with the paradox of experience. One is apt to reject experiences that differ from one's own, yet when one discovers that another's experience is wholly similar to theirs, it sheds the term "experience" and becomes instead an objective part of the human condition. Hence, the term "experience" comes to inherently signify difference, and the idea of a "common experience" is intrinsically meaningless.

Thus, through writing about the concept of differing experiences, Baldwin is really writing about disparity, otherness, and difference itself. By focusing on the difficulties that arise within relationships between people whose experiences differ drastically, he designates disparity as the norm within these relationships. While simultaneously demonstrating that incongruity is unavoidable between two people who experience the world differently, Baldwin also collapses the very idea of disparity itself by claiming that it is, in and of itself, a *common experience*. In other words, difference, since it is unavoidable, is an objective entity.

The aspects of the characters' identities that prompt their self-scrutiny are the same aspects that make them feel isolated within society, and thus their identities are defined in terms of their divergence from the conventional. In this sense, experience and identity are related, but still separate, with the former resulting from the latter. Both encompass difference and revolve around the concept of the "other," yet identity can be defined as a means of determining how one falls into the category of the "other," while experience is the result of many different identities coming together to encounter the world in different ways. The concept of identity, like experience, comes to signify discrepancy because of the inherent notion that one's identity makes one an individual, and therefore separate from those around them. The respective identities of Baldwin's protagonists portray what it means to be the "other" within a society that values the heterosexual white man above all others, and therefore their struggles are inescapable due to their inalterable characteristics that set them apart from the expected norm and alienate them.

In Baldwin's essay "A Question of Identity," he claims that "society is never anything less than a perfect labyrinth of limitations" (99). Aside from the obvious legal and moral

limitations that citizens must learn to work around, the characters of Baldwin's novels deal with the constrictions of societies occupied by excessive social limitations, arbitrarily created by heteronormative power structures. These limitations seek to define what one's identity should resemble, while simultaneously estranging those whose identities involuntarily differ from this norm. Baldwin thus presents the question: How, then, is one expected to reconcile this uncontrolled alienation?

Baldwin's first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, tells the story of John, a fourteen year old son of a preacher who, deemed sinful by his father, attempts to find redemption in the most literal sense by entering his father's church and presenting himself before God, despite his father's opinion that he is not worthy of salvation. His attraction to Brother Elisha, his first experience with homosexual desire, acts as the driving force behind John's decision to ask for religious deliverance, and thus queers his search for salvation. His "redemptive" experience, then, does not alter the alienation he feels, and upon leaving the church, John's self-proclaimed salvation fails, too, to adjust the reality of Harlem and the structural oppression within American society.

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's second novel, David, an American man living in Paris, attempts to come to terms with his suppressed homosexuality by becoming involved with an Italian man named Giovanni. He believes that being confronted with the "other" will lead him to overcome his ingrained homophobia and simultaneously come to terms with his own identity. This relationship eventually crumbles along with his quest for self-realization, and David fails to free himself from the gaze of the "other" due to an enduring discomfort with his own identity.

Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, builds an expectation of acceptance between the interracial and homosexual relationships of several artist friends in New York. Their bohemian, free-spirited lifestyle and occupations as writers and jazz musicians builds on the assumption that they will be open-minded and able to reconcile their differences, yet almost all of the relationships disintegrate by the end of the novel. The respective interracial relationships of siblings Rufus and Ida Scott fail because of not only a fundamental misunderstanding of differing identities and experiences, but also the blinding influence of white privilege and the white characters' attempts to deny its indisputable effects upon their views of race.

These three novels track the characters' efforts to overcome the limitations of identity and contrasting experience, resulting in variations on their respective failures to find truth beyond the confines of social structures and societal roles. As Baldwin states later in "A Question of Identity," "It is really quite impossible to be affirmative about anything which one refuses to question; one is doomed to remain inarticulate about anything which one hasn't, by an act of the imagination, made one's own" (Baldwin 96). By refusing to truly question their respective roles, these characters attempt to avoid the vulnerability that results from questioning one's views and therefore fail to achieve fulfillment from their various quests for self-knowledge.



## The Subversion of Religious Salvation in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*

*“There are some things in our society and some things in our world which I’m proud to be maladjusted [to]. And I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted to these things [...] I must say to you that I never intend to adjust myself” - Martin Luther King, Jr. (Adam Curtis, The Century of the Self)*

*Go Tell it on the Mountain* by James Baldwin chronicles the maturation of fourteen year old John, living in Harlem and disapproved of by his father, the preacher Gabriel, who, through constant psychological abuse, estranges his son from his church. John, desperate to find meaning in a world in which he feels religiously alienated from the people of Harlem, enters the church despite his father’s disapproval in hopes of achieving salvation and instead undergoes an excruciating experience during which he is forced to look at himself in a way in which he has never before been seen. Baldwin subverts what at first seems to be a traditional narrative of redemption by characterizing what is expected to be an enlightening liberation as a terrifying, out-of-body exorcism, and by refusing John the reward of a powerful, transformative vision after he is returned to his body. What is broadly portrayed as a redemptive experience ends up allowing John to claim that he is “saved,” yet fails to alter his life in any tangible way, and John remains struggling against his “sin” that he has been taught is inescapable. Therefore, Baldwin establishes a parallel between the absence of actual evidence that John has sinned and the absence of reconciliation after his “salvation.”

John struggles with his conception of his own identity because of his crippling awareness of his father's fundamental distaste and disapproval of him. For the entirety of his childhood, John separates himself from the possibility of achieving expected salvation within the church because of the connection he draws between the church and his father's continual dissatisfaction. Throughout John's childhood, Gabriel instills in John the belief that he is not only a sinner, but that his mere existence is, in and of itself, a sin. John attempts to locate this sin in his actions, but Baldwin denies the reader the true reason of his father's hatred by textually withholding the source of John's sin. In an attempt to find this nonexistent "sin" and make sense of his "offense," John begins to think of his own body as the source of his sin, and his blackness becomes, in his mind, a hated source of dirtiness that he desperately hopes to eradicate.

The enduring dirtiness of John's home reflects the inescapable nature of John's blackness, which he grows to detest. "Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, burnt black on the bottom, hanging above the stove..." (Baldwin 16). The grime<sup>1</sup> of John's environment corresponds with the biblical phrase that echoes in John's mind as he is attempting to scrub away what cannot be erased: *He who is filthy, let him be filthy still*. This phrase shows that John finds evidence of his deserved dirtiness not only through the words of his father but also the words of the Bible, further elevating his father's disapproval to the level of indisputability. John's characterization of the biblical phrase as a "sword" gives the shame it instills in him a dangerous, self-destructive quality:

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin further enforces the importance of John's internalized "dirtiness" by giving him the last name of Grimes. It is important to note that this name connects him to his father, who, despite his religious "purity," is shadowed, too, by the dirtiness that the name implies.

[...] and the phrase turned against him like a two-edged sword, for was it not he, in his false pride and his evil imagination, who was filthy? Through a storm of tears that did not reach his eyes he stared at the yellow room; and the room shifted. (17)

The “false pride” and “evil imagination” that John uses to describe himself do not seem to reflect his subdued disposition, and thus, he exhibits a distortion of his sense of self. The words of the Bible are not comforting to John, and instead take on the dangerous form of a “sword” in his mind, punishing him for an imagined falseness and evilness. Religion, then, becomes simply an extension of his father’s opinions toward John. Hence, a fear of religious rejection arises from a fear of familial rejection, and builds on the expectation that a confrontation with the church will reconcile the differences between John and his father.

In addition to the unworthiness that John has conditioned himself to feel in the face of religion, the presence of Brother Elisha, whom John is strongly attracted to, within the church forces John’s repressed homosexuality to the surface, compelling him to confront these “sinful” thoughts and look upon himself shamefully as the incarnation of sin. It is ironic, then, that it is Elisha who convinces John to present himself before the Lord and ask for salvation. Elisha’s words of encouragement affect John deeply because he has never received this encouragement from his family, and thus believes that he is undeserving of this reassurance. John’s entrance into the church in hopes of salvation is hence inspired by his desire to please a man he is sexually attracted to, and is thus both queered and tainted by sin from the start. Elisha states: “‘I been on my knees many a time, weeping and wrestling before the Lord - *crying*, Johnny - and calling on Jesus’ name. That’s the only name that’s got power over Satan. That’s the way it’s been with *me* sometime, and I’m *saved*. What do you think it’s going to be like for you, boy?’” (58). While

simultaneously preparing John for the painful reality of giving oneself up to the Lord, Elisha unknowingly convinces John, who has been taught to believe that “his face is the face of Satan” (23), that the only way to escape his father’s influence is to find solace in Jesus. Elisha’s description of his own experiences with a higher power also continue to set the stage for John’s redemption, this time hinting at the painful reality of religious self-reflection.

John’s “sinful” attraction to Elisha extends his feeling of “dirtiness” into the church. Because John associates his sin with his body, the dirtiness reflects the physical characteristics of himself that exceed his control, i.e. his blackness and his homosexuality. John cannot help but wonder, though, why it is *his* blackness that is so shameful, and not the blackness of his father. His comparison of his own appearance to that of his father brings to mind memories of being confronted with his father’s nakedness. These images surface during his culminating experience within the church and haunt him due to the fact that they expose his father’s humanness, his blackness, and subsequently, his vulnerability.

Sometimes, leaning over the cracked, ‘tattle-tale gray’ bathtub, he scrubbed his father’s back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father’s hideous nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod.

Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down (232).

Gabriel, who attempts to present himself as sinless, becomes the very picture of sin to John as he looks upon his nakedness. It becomes apparent that no matter how pious and faithful his father appears to be, the truth of his blackness will never be concealed, especially not through the eyes of John. Gabriel’s nakedness is equated, in John’s description, with different manifestations of evil within the Bible: the sin of secrecy, the temptation of the serpent, and the punishment of the

rod. The physical violence of the rod (Proverb 23) illustrates that his father's body becomes, in John's eyes, the weapon used to punish John. The act of scrubbing his father's "hideous nakedness" instills in John a feeling of subservience to this tangible body of sin, and thus, the sin of his father's blackness quite literally washes off onto him and becomes the sin of his own blackness.

Gabriel's hatred of his son may lie in the characteristics of John that reflect what he has been conditioned to despise about his own body, due to racial shame inflicted by white-dominated society. This shame leads Gabriel to claim that "all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies" (34). John's father encourages John to reject the influence of the white man, yet simultaneously treats John like he does the white man - with hatred and disrespect. Since Gabriel's hatred of John is an outward displacement of his own self-hatred learned through the attitudes of the white man, his efforts to protect John from the mistreatment of the white man end up, ironically, exposing John to the psychological pain that the white man is capable of inflicting.

John, who feels the same "lowness"<sup>2</sup> that his father promises to the white people, strives to rebuke his father by seeking out the approval of white people, who he feels connected to through his father's belief in their shared "evilness." He uses their approval as his only means of achieving a sense of self-worth and individuality that is denied him by his father.

It was not only colored people who praised John, since they could not, John felt, in any case really know; but white people also said it, in fact had said it first and said it still. It

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<sup>2</sup> This metaphorical "lowness" is made palpable during John's later encounter in the church, when he feels himself being forced downward by a higher power.

was when John was five years old and in the first grade that he was first noticed; and since he was noticed by an eye altogether alien and impersonal, he began to perceive, in wild uneasiness, his individual existence (14).

John strives to form this sense of individuality by exposing himself to the thoughts and opinions of those that he has been continually taught to deem as the source of injustice. John uses white praise as a way of not only connecting with others deemed evil by his father, but also as a way of “raising” himself from the “lowness” that Gabriel has inflicted upon him. The previous equation of words to weapons (the biblical phrase used as a “sword”) is reversed in Baldwin’s description of John’s relationship to white approval, with the words of a white teacher acting, in this instance, as a form of protection:

That moment gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself; and that, perhaps, with this power he might one day win that love which he so longed for (15).

By choosing to use this white approval as a shield instead of a weapon, John uses the praise as a source of self-esteem that he may fall back on when he is emotionally manipulated. John is aware that the pleasure he derives from white approval is a powerful rebellion against the way his father desires him to be raised, and thus his own attempt to gain a level of self-worth is once again associated with defiance, and therefore sin.

Although John desires the recognition of whites, their “alien and impersonal” praise arises from an awareness, both theirs and John’s, that the other is different and wholly separate. Thus, despite the white teacher’s appreciation of John, he continues to feel estranged from the

white world and therefore becomes fully concerned with what makes him separate: his appearance, or, his blackness. John's obsession with the image he projects into the world is a means of struggling to discern why his blackness, the most striking characteristic he shares with his father, is so sinful.

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 (23).

John's most urgent question is a subjective one, and one that can only be answered through the opinions of others. He is consumed by this desire to know how he is seen through the eyes of strangers, i.e. white people, and thus disassociates from his own body in order to achieve this view of himself. This disassociation is mimicked later in his out-of-body experience in the church, during which he feels literally separated from his body and is then able to look upon himself as an outsider, observing the "sin" of his body. By attempting to step outside of himself and look upon himself as a stranger would, John demonstrates a preoccupation with achieving an objective view of how his race affects the way he is treated. John "passionately" desires to know

whether or not he is ugly - which is, in a way, an effort to discover whether or not his father's opinion of him is correct.

In *The Politics of Experience*, R. D. Laing explores the meaning of experience and how it is inherently impossible for one to fully comprehend the ways that others see the world. Those who feel alienated in their experience attempt to distance themselves from this uncomfortable state, and thus disassociate themselves from their reality, becoming cut off from the world around them and from themselves.

On top of [the defense mechanisms that one uses when in an alienated state], he has dissociated himself from his own action. The end product of this twofold violence is a person who no longer experiences himself fully as a person, but as a part of a person, invaded by destructive psychopathological 'mechanisms' in the face of which he is a relatively helpless victim (Laing 35).

Laing's description of the disassociated person as a "helpless victim" to psychic mechanisms accurately portrays John's relationship to the harmful words of his father, which he has internalized as the words of his own conscience. His disassociation becomes evident as John begins to feel cut off from the tangible world. "He moved to the table and sat down, feeling the most bewildering panic of his life, a need to touch things, the table and chairs and the walls of the room, to make certain that the room existed and that he was in the room" (Baldwin 17). This separation from his own body foreshadows what he experiences within the church later during his moment of "salvation."

John's disassociation comes to a climax in Part Three of the novel, *The Threshing Floor*. The separation of mind and body and the presence of something foreign within John is

characteristic of not a religious awakening, but instead of something resembling an exorcism. This sinister, full-body possession ends up failing to provide the redemption that he sets out to find by entering the church, and thus this portion of the novel most obviously disrupts the conventional religious experience. This malformation of the path toward salvation acts as Baldwin's way of bringing into question the concept of "redemption" and whether or not religion is capable of "saving" one from those aspects of societal injustice that cannot be reconciled by a belief in a higher power.

The separation between mind and body that John previously experienced through disassociation is underscored upon the beginning of his redemptive experience within the church. However, this painful separation also fulfills what John has desired up until now by allowing him to view himself from an outside perspective.

And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John, in the head or in the heart; and, in a moment, wholly, filling him with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle, as rocks break up; had ripped him and felled him in a moment, so that John had not felt the wound, but only the agony, had not felt the fall, but only the fear; and lay here, now, helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness (227).

John completely loses control over his body as this ambiguous "power" takes possession of him. As this power enacts violence upon John's body, his mind, separated from his physicality, only experiences the repercussions of these acts, and he is thus not aware of the wound itself, but only

the pain resulting from it. This separation of the action from its consequence reinforces the idea that John is not really John, but only the version of himself that lacks his body, the source of most of his anxiety. Thus, this spiritual element that “moves” inside of John may be a manifestation of what John would be without the burden of his body - a body that he has been taught to believe is dirty, shameful, and unwanted. The idea of an action lacking a consequence is, to John, an unfamiliar concept because of the constant policing of his actions by his father and by himself, who has, through his efforts to designate John’s every action as sinful, psychologically incarcerated his son.

John is shocked to find that instead of being “raised up,” as Elisha has promised, he is seemingly forced downward toward a Hell-like abyss. Despite his efforts to rise upward, he loses the use of his limbs and is kept low, helpless and unable to exert control over his now fragmented being. This lack of control instills in him a feeling of terror, as well as a realization that this redemption which he seeks is beyond his command, and that in order to surrender oneself to a higher power, one must learn to relinquish control.

It was at this moment, precisely, that he found he could not rise; something had happened to his arms, his legs, his feet - ah, something had happened to John! And he began to scream again in his great, bewildered terror, and felt himself, indeed, begin to move - not upward, toward the light, but down again, a sickness in his bowels, a tightening in his loin-strings; he felt himself turning, again and again, across the dusty floor, as though God’s toe had touched him lightly (228).

The “dustiness” of the floor that John thrashes about on is, like the dirtiness of his home, residual and ever-present. The metaphorical dirtiness of John’s body follows him into the church and

onto the pulpit, this time in the form of dust, a Biblical element that alludes to the cyclical nature of life and John's own mortality<sup>3</sup>. Dirt, equated with sinfulness, becomes dust, equated with religious repentance, and thus John attempts to turn the shame he associates with his sinfulness into repentance before a higher power.

John's fear of God's painful "touch" turns his search for redemption upside down - instead of attempting to become closer to God, John, experiencing the torment of this contact with a higher power, recoils from this proximity to God. Thus, the reader's expectations of what it means for John to be "redeemed" are not fulfilled - John does not feel one with God, but instead takes on the role of God's victim.

The voice inside of John, both "malicious" and "ironic," insists "that he rise - and, at once, [...] leave this temple and go out into the world" (228). This voice is never specified as having a source outside of John's own mind. The voice, resonating from somewhere within John, urges him to fight against the power that keeps him on the floor, yet the fact that it is "malicious" and "ironic" gives the impression that the voice is aware of the futility of resistance. This voice, which seems to want John to experience the agony of being held "low," is a manifestation of his father's criticism, arising within John even during his moment of attempted salvation.

The presence of John's father, watching over John as he writhes with the overwhelming power of God, in juxtaposition with the presence of Elisha, portrays two opposing influences in John's life that strive to bring him closer to God - with one of them using fear and shame as a way of luring him into the church (his father), and the other using the power of a "sinful" erotic desire (Elisha).

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<sup>3</sup> The dust of the pulpit serves as an allusion to the common function of dust within the Bible as a point of creation and destruction: *For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return* (Genesis 3:19).

Yes: there was Elisha, speaking from the floor, and his father, silent, at his back. In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and, with that authority, to confound his father. Yet this had not been the moment; it was as far back as he could go, but the secret, the turning, the abysmal drop was farther back, in darkness (229).

John's desire for "holy" (read: unattainable) Elisha remains present within John, even in the midst of his agonizing possession. In fact, part of the agony that John experiences seems to have a sexual connotation, i.e. the "tightening in his loin-strings." The fact that John experiences homosexual desire while being "saved" brings the idea of what it means to be "saved" into question, and whether or not John, consumed by "sinful" thoughts, will be able to be "saved" in the way that his father wants him to be, if he is "saved" at all. His desire is not pleasurable, though, and is described instead as "sharp and awful," connecting this erotic desire with the torturous nature of his confrontation with the spiritual world. This desire, however, is not only to possess the body of Elisha in a sexual context, but to "usurp" his body: just as the higher power takes hold of John's body and exerts control over it, John desires to wield the same power over Elisha, while also seeking to possess his body in order to feel a connection to the tangible world again.

While looking upon his father from his hypnotic state, John sees an ugliness in Gabriel yet also a power unyielding and unbreakable. The blackness of his father's appearance stands out to John as intimidating and dangerous, yet it is simultaneously the one feature of his father that he can truly identify with.

His father's face was black - like a sad, eternal night; yet in his father's face there burned a fire - a fire eternal in an eternal night. John trembled where he lay, feeling no warmth for him from this fire, trembled, and could not take his eyes away [...] And he knew that he had been thrust out of the holy, the joyful, the blood-washed community, that his father had thrust him out. His father's will was stronger than John's own. His power was greater because he belonged to God. Now, John felt no hatred, nothing, only a bitter, unbelieving despair: all prophecies were true, salvation was finished, damnation was real! (230).

Because John's image of himself is formed primarily by the influence of his father, Gabriel has only to look upon his son to communicate that, no matter the results of his salvation, he has yet to earn the full respect of his father. The ugliness that John sees in his father's face is represented by the blackness of it, thus further intertwining dirtiness, blackness and ugliness with disapproval, shame, and self-hatred.

In one of John's sporadic outbursts during his possession, he accuses Gabriel of taking advantage sexually of his step-mother, Elizabeth. He describes his father's actions not in personal terms, but instead broadly as the actions associated with the stereotype of a black man:

'And I *heard* you - all the nighttime long. I know what you do in the dark, black man, when you think the Devil's son's asleep. I heard you, spitting, and groaning, and choking - and I *seen* you, riding up and down, and going in and out. I ain't the Devil's son for nothing' (234).

This passage not only strips his father of any individuality, but also marks an instance in which John seems to accept the view of himself that his father has created and subsequently use it

against his father. The sinfulness that John has learned to associate with himself becomes, like the previously examined metaphor, his weapon against Gabriel - because he has been made to feel like the Devil's son, his father, then, is the Devil himself. During his religious experience, John's hatred for his father waxes and wanes, disappearing when he comes to associate his father with the power of God, and returning when he associates his father with the Devil. When John sees his father as an extension of the power of God, he loses his drive to resist him. However, when he later sees his father as an image of the Devil, he is able to confront and defy his father's influence by wielding the power he derives from his role as the Devil's son. John finds power within the evil self-image that his father has created for him, and not through God or his father's assumed religious piety. Thus, John achieves a level of autonomy by using his father's hatred against him. If his father's rage is looked upon as displaced self-hatred, then this can be seen as an instance of John returning the hatred to its origin.

The agony that accompanies the terrifying separation of mind and body that John undergoes is itself a way of overturning both John and the reader's expectations for redemption. Instead of being lifted easily with the power of God, John must fight internally with the belief that he is unable to withstand the pain and cannot "go through." He believes that "his strength was finished, and he could not move. He belonged to the darkness - the darkness from which he had thought to flee had claimed him. And he moaned again, weeping, and lifted up his hands" (239). John does not expect that the "lowness" he has endured during his entire life will be intensified under the power of God, and therefore feels helpless and ill-prepared. John assumes, because of his radically different expectations of redemption, that this painful experience signals that he is not worthy of being saved, and that God, along with his father, is rejecting him as well.

Because John has conditioned himself to see his own body as something to apologize for and hide, the “darkness” that he is pulled down into reflects the darkness of his own blackness. The obvious connection between the character of John and John the Baptist from the New Testament allows us to assume that the lightness and darkness in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* operate similarly to the Book of John, and that John plays the role of witness to the light, and not a manifestation of the light itself.

Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.” They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness” (John 1:19-23).

As John the Baptist denies these identities, it becomes apparent that he has no specific way to describe himself to the Jewish leaders. He does not give himself a name, and when describing what he seeks to represent, he uses not his own words, but the words of Isaiah the Prophet. Through his disassociation, Baldwin’s character shares this same lack of formed identity, and consequently, when he is on the pulpit, his lack of identity allows him to represent the collective experiences of his community. Hence, John’s painful, ineffectual salvation can be read as a stand-in for the black experience as a whole in Harlem and in America. His effort to achieve redemption is indicative of the efforts of black Americans to find a way to confront the injustice and oppression they are faced with.

Like his salvation itself, John's confrontation with his father after being "saved" is one of heightened expectation and anticipation. John and the reader are led to believe that this moment will mark a turning point in their relationship; and that Gabriel will open his heart to his son and accept him now that he is "saved." The scenario, however, contains no moment of exalted clarity. When John looks upon his father, he feels a "stiffening, and a panic, and a blind rebellion, and a hope for peace" (244). These contradictory and chaotic emotions mimic the feelings that John has always had regarding his father - a conflicting desire to be accepted while also yearning for individuality through rebellion. After being "saved," these emotions do not dissipate, and are instead stronger than ever. Gabriel's response to his son is loveless and dissatisfied. It becomes apparent that there is something more he desires from John; that being "saved" is not enough:

He did not move to touch him, did not kiss him, did not smile. They stood before each other in silence, while the saints rejoiced; and John struggled to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. But it did not come, the living word; in the silence something died in John, and something came alive. It came to him that he must testify: his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen. And he remembered, suddenly, the text of a sermon he had once heard his father preach (245).

"The living word," which represents Jesus Christ in the New Testament, is kept hidden because, if he is to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist, his salvation remains incomplete. Because John's biblical counterpart transcends the idea of the individual, he cannot simply "save" himself, but must take on the burden of testifying to others the existence of the light, so that all

may be “saved.” Gabriel, through his cold reaction to his son’s enlightenment, is attempting to communicate that John’s work, after seeing the light, is not finished - he must now follow in his father’s footsteps and spread the gospel to others to truly “live it.” Gabriel states that “it is more than a notion,” communicating to his son that he will not believe that John has been “saved” until he shows his salvation tangibly through his actions. This lack of validation from his father leads John to extend the promise that he is “going to pray God [...] to keep [him], and make [him] strong...to stand...to stand against the enemy...and against everything and everybody...that wants to cut down [his] soul” (245). John’s promise is, like the previous metaphor, a double-edged sword: he affirms that he will oppose the “enemy,” yet the “enemy” has always been his father.

In his essay “The Divided Mind of James Baldwin,” C. W. E. Bigsby argues that “salvation, paradoxically, lies in a leap from belief into skepticism” (Bigsby 328). This reversal of the conventional trajectory of salvation is clearly present in Baldwin’s description of John’s experience: instead of falling into a state of submissiveness and acceptance, John becomes hyper-aware of his role within his family and society, and therefore skeptical of the powers that he has been taught will cure psychological discontent.

As John’s family walks home from church, John is shocked to find that the world around him has not changed at all since his “redemption,” and the bleak imagery that Baldwin uses underscores the fact that internal “salvation” does not help to change the reality of one’s external environment:

Then, in silence, they came to the wide crossing where the streetcar line ran. A lean cat stalked the gutter and fled as they approached; turned to watch them, with yellow, malevolent eyes, from the ambush of a garbage can. A gray bird flew above them, above

the electric wires for the streetcar line, and perched on the metal cornice of a roof. Then, far down the avenue, they heard a siren, and the clanging of a bell, and looked up to see the ambulance speed past them on the way to the hospital that was near the church (248).

When John sees the cat and the bird, he is reminded of God's creations that do not know to seek out salvation or redemption, and are free from the knowledge of sin. Additionally, reminders of the harsh realities of life, such as the gutter and the garbage can, accentuate the fact that although John is now supposedly closer to God, he is still surrounded by the crudeness of existence. The ambulance, a symbol of mortality and the violence committed against people of color, makes the "redemption" that he seeks seem somewhat trifling. The hospital, situated near the church, juxtaposes death with spiritual rebirth, highlighting the fact that one does not arise without the other.

The silence that permeates John's interactions after his out-of-body experience comes to reflect his absence of fulfillment. His conversations with Gabriel and his aunt Florence are characterized by long periods of silence, during which John ruminates over the lack of fulfillment that he feels. Even the avenue itself is silent as it stretches "before them like some gray country of the dead" (255). The ungodliness of life continues to surround him, and is described in vivid detail:

Yet the houses were there, as they had been; the windows, like a thousand, blinded eyes, stared outward at the morning - at the morning that was the same for them as the mornings of John's innocence, and the mornings before his birth. The water ran in the gutters with a small, discontented sound; on the water traveled paper, burnt matches, sodden cigarette-ends; gobs of spittle, green-yellow, brown, and pearly; the leavings of a

dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in rubber, of one abandoned to his lust. All moved slowly to the black grating where down it rushed, to be carried to the river, which would hurl it into the sea (256).

The attention John now pays toward the filth of the city takes his focus away from his own “dirtiness,” and therefore allows for a new awareness that his feelings of dirtiness are a reflection of his environment. Baldwin points out the crude realities of human existence, such as vomit and sperm,<sup>4</sup> to further enforce the fact that although John feels changed, the world around him remains the same, and thus, the transformation he experienced does not alter the fact that he still trapped inside a body that will inevitably cause him shame and anxiety.

The presence of Elisha’s arm on John’s shoulder as they walk home stirs in him feelings of desire, and he is reminded of his attraction and the sin of his blossoming homosexuality. When Elisha claims that he is proud of John for “laying his sins on the altar,” “something shiver[s] in [John] as the word *sin* [is] spoken” because of his reluctant awareness that this sin still exists within him (258). He attempts to reconcile this sin through admitting to Elisha this internal dilemma. “John, staring at Elisha, struggled to tell him something more - struggled to say - all that could never be said” (261). Just as this sin cannot be articulated, it also cannot be simply “left on the altar.” Religion, John now realizes, is an insufficient means of leaving behind the parts of him that are “sinful” and cannot be redeemed. His body, the source of his sinful blackness and homosexuality, is inescapable, as the agony of his experience taught him, and is made of the same material that makes up the filth surrounding him on the streets of Harlem.

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<sup>4</sup> This imagery occurs again in *Another Country*, when Rufus, overcome with suicidal thoughts, sees only the aspects of the world that make it appear filthy (see page 53).

Through Baldwin's subversion of what redemptive experiences have been conventionally thought to be, he draws attention to the futility of spiritual salvation in the face of injustice and oppression. John's connection to John the Baptist elevates him to the level of a religious figure, like his father, yet even those thought to be closest to God do not hold the power to alter the bitter realities of life as a black American. John, despite his equation with the figure in the New Testament, has trouble reaching God, and is therefore no different than those struggling to find faith in the face of suffering. John learns through his unsatisfactory "redemption" that religion cannot serve as a cure for oppression - it is instead only a means of finding sense in a world in which oppression is inescapable.



## Resisting Ingrained Heteronormativity in *Giovanni's Room*

*“Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” -James Baldwin*

James Baldwin's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* chronicles the sexual awakening of David, an American who moves to Paris in an attempt to escape the company of his father and aunt while also allowing his girlfriend Hella time to decide whether or not she would like to marry him. While in Paris, David associates with a homosexual milieu, all the time struggling with a deeply ingrained homophobia, which forces him to keep a carefully measured distance from these men in order to maintain an outward image of heterosexual masculinity. Through this detachment, he protects his cultivated masculine identity which he gathers from the influence of his father, a man who believes that a masculine image is the only respectable image a man can display. He soon, however, begins a relationship with an attractive Italian bartender named Giovanni, and the two men live out the days and nights of their relationship in the confinement of Giovanni's cramped room. David undergoes profound psychological changes as he fights to come to terms with his desire to be romantically involved with another man and still maintain a heteronormative role in society. He eventually decides that the pleasure he gains from being with Giovanni does not outweigh the internal turmoil he must undergo to overcome his homophobia, and he leaves Giovanni to reunite with Hella. Shortly after their separation, David hears word that Giovanni is convicted of the murder of his boss, Guillaume, and he is later incarcerated and sentenced to death. David recounts the story of his time with Giovanni from a house in the south

of France where he grapples with the guilt he harbors for his rejection of Giovanni's love and its possible effect upon Giovanni's impending death.

David's disdainful attitude toward the lifestyles and appearances of many of the gay men exposes his homophobic tendencies, yet it soon becomes apparent that it is not sex with Giovanni that he fears, but instead a feminization that he believes will arise in him as the result of a homosexual relationship and the role he feels he must play within it. His overwhelming desire for a sense of masculinity is stronger than his fears of homosexuality, and David protects his identity through determining his actions based on an evasion of femininity. Although he is consciously aware of the distinctions he has learned to establish between what is conventionally "masculine" and "feminine," he does not become aware of the innate "queerness," which in this case refers to performativity, of heteronormative gender identities until he participates in a homosexual relationship.

This subconscious queering is evident in the ways that David's views of the women of his childhood are subliminally masculinized. He learns early in his childhood, through observing the behavior of his father, to associate masculinity with authority and to view femininity as inferior to this idea of masculinity. After the death of David's mother, his father's manhood is threatened because he is unable to assert his power over a feminine figure. His father finds it difficult to assert his dominance over his sister Ellen, who replaces the motherly figure in David's life, because of the absence of sexual dynamics and because of Ellen's refusal to play the submissive feminine role that his father needs to accentuate his own masculine autonomy. In an attempt to regain this sense of masculinity, David's father spends much of his son's childhood entertaining women and engaging in promiscuous behavior. David recounts: "Then my father

was at his best, boyish and expansive, moving about through the crowded room with a glass in his hand, [...] handling all the men as though they were his brothers, and flirting with the women. Or no, not flirting with them, strutting like a cock before them” (Baldwin 17). His father’s behavior toward women is described as a performance, characterized by a public demonstration of heterosexuality. The word “cock” alludes to the performative nature of courting rituals staged by animals, in addition to the male genitalia, which symbolizes not only dominance through penetration, but also the epitome of what distinguishes the male as wholly separate from the female. Thus, the queering of conventional gender roles comes to rely on their performativity. Butler states: “[...] the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler 23). These “socially instituted and maintained norms” urge one to base their outward identity on conventional performances of gender.

The fact that David looks upon his father’s overzealous display of masculinity while hosting cocktail parties as “his best,” conveys that he has already learned to associate masculinity with a dominance over the feminine. He learns to see his father as an image of authority that is characterized mostly by negative emotions, like anger, that are made all the more powerful through their unpredictability: “He was one of those people who, quick to laugh, are slow to anger; so that their anger, when it comes, is all the more impressive, seeming to leap from some unsuspected crevice like a fire which will bring the whole house down” (16). The fire that David equates with his father’s wrath will reoccur later in his life as a symbol of masculinity, but more specifically, the destructive, overbearing element of masculinity that David begins to fear almost as much as femininity.

Instead of allowing her brother full dominion over the formation of David's gender expression, Ellen refuses to fill a submissive role and attempts to curb her brother's determined "masculinization" of his son. He emphasizes to Ellen that masculinity, to him, lies more in what it is not than what it is: "[...] 'all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher.' 'A man,' said Ellen, shortly, 'is not the same thing as a bull'" (22). By insinuating that certain occupations and lifestyles do not fulfill the necessary qualities of "manhood," David's father shows that his idea of masculinity rests primarily on superiority to all things typically associated with femininity, such as the occupation of a Sunday school teacher.

David's model of femininity throughout his childhood is, by nature, performative. The two images that stand out as symbols of femininity are Ellen and his mother's portrait - both of which are queered through a subversion of this expected femininity. The aspects of Ellen that are "feminine" are fleeting and make little impression on David: "It seems to me that she was always carrying a great bag full of dangerous looking knitting needles, or a book, or both. [...] But I don't remember it, anymore than I remember the books she read. It might have always been the same book and she might have been working on the same scarf, or sweater, or God knows what, all the years I knew her" (17). Although she seems to be portraying what is classically feminine, it comes across as mundane and trivial to David because of its performative nature. In addition to the superficiality of her feminine qualities, her "dangerous" knitting needles allude to an undercurrent of power and dominance, and therefore masculinity that David cannot help but notice. Thus, Ellen is queered through David's subconscious awareness of this hidden "masculinity."

The portrait of his mother, similarly, gives the outward appearance of fragility and submissiveness. “She looked out of the photograph frame, a pale, blonde woman, delicately put together, dark-eyed, and straight-browed, with a nervous, gentle mouth” (18). This description is followed by David’s acknowledgement of a certain “masculine” undertone to his mother’s expression:

But something about the way the eyes were set in the head and stared straight out, something very faintly sardonic and knowing in the set of the mouth suggested that, somewhere beneath this tense fragility was a strength as various as it was unyielding and, like my father’s wrath, dangerous because it was so entirely unexpected (18).

The underlying power that David senses beneath his mother’s portrait of innocence and purity is compared to his father’s most masculine quality - his anger. This strength is especially unnerving to David primarily because it is “unexpected,” or not meant to emanate from someone so seemingly feminine. These two queered instances of femininity in David’s childhood allow him to establish the feminine figure as one of outward delicateness, but containing an internal element of impressive “masculinity.” Thus, David’s normative ideal of the feminine exists, yet it is fractured from early on in his childhood, although he does not recognize this until later in the breakdown of his learned ideas of gender.

Although David’s father does his best to establish a distance between David and Ellen in an attempt to limit her “feminine” influence, she tries to intervene by confronting her brother after he drunkenly returns home and voices her concerns for his masculinity: “‘You’ve been with that girl, Beatrice,’ said Ellen. ‘That’s where you always are and that’s where all your money goes and all your manhood and self-respect, too’” (21). Ellen’s equation of her brother’s

involvement with a woman as an act of emasculation contradicts the father's established view of women as tools used by men to boost their masculinity. Through her critique, she instead draws attention to monogamy versus promiscuity, with their difference lying in the influence that the feminine has upon the masculine. In Ellen's eyes, a monogamous relationship allows a man to exert his control and dominance by playing the role of husband and father, and thus enforces manhood; promiscuity, contrastingly, does away with established power dynamics and gives equal control to the feminine figure - thus, reducing his father's "manhood" and consequently his "self-respect." This distinction that Ellen makes establishes her again as a threat to David's father's masculinity because of her differing view of what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine."

David's father's public display of his heterosexuality through his flirtations with women establishes a link in David's mind between heterosexuality and masculinity, and subsequently femininity as something to be avoided. Therefore, David's learned obsession with masculinity results in a subsequent fear of femininity, which becomes apparent through his reaction to his first homosexual experience with a boy named Joey. He reacts to the incident with profound shock and denial, pegging Joey as a threat to his blossoming manhood, and distances himself from his fears by ignoring and occasionally ridiculing Joey. David personifies the shame he feels by metaphorizing it: "I could not even admit it to myself; and, while I never thought about it, it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse. And it changed, it thickened, it soured the atmosphere of my mind" (23). This corpse imagery is later associated with femininity, upon David's interaction with a zombie-like, queer figure in a

Parisian bar. Thus, the motif of the corpse comes to symbolize David's fear of the death of his own masculinity.

The corpse becomes a repeating manifestation throughout the novel of the uncanny, or the suspiciously familiar. In Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny*, he claims that for an object or person to be truly considered uncanny, it must produce a kind of intellectual uncertainty in which the observer is unsure as to whether or not the object or person is real. The root of the word uncanny alludes to "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 124). This questionable familiarity is brought upon by observing something that was "long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (148). This description relates to the corpse-like figure of ambiguous gender that David encounters in a Parisian bar. His depiction of the figure is so monstrous and otherworldly, that it is unclear whether or not it is real or a hallucination, adding to its uncanny nature:

It looked like a mummy or a zombie [...] something walking after it had been put to death. [...] It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. [...] the thin, black hair was violent with oil [...] the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream [...] The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix [...] the mummy might, at any moment, disappear in flame. [...] He had been eating garlic and his teeth were very bad. His hands, I noticed, with an unbelieving shock, were very large and strong (58).

David dehumanizes the figure, portraying him as a gender-less, sex-less, lifeless creature. His use of the pronoun “it” shows a stubborn refusal of the figure’s gender fluidity as well as an inability to accept that it (or he) is even a human being at all, but instead some sort of supernatural creature, belonging to neither the dead nor the living. The figure’s feminine traits stand out to David as its most repugnant aspect, and he is disconcerted by the undeniably sexual way in which the character carries himself. The “dead, horrifying lasciviousness” of his hips is simultaneously disgusting and alluring to David. The figure’s use of makeup is described as positively dangerous, with a mouth “rag[ing] with lipstick” and hair “violent with oil.” The description of the shirt as “coquettish” indicates that David recognizes an element of flirtation, and thus performativity,<sup>5</sup> in the figure’s feminine traits.

However, David’s disdain of the man’s femininity begins to ebb as he recognizes a certain power and strength, which he customarily associates with masculinity, that emanates from his feminine traits. The words he uses to describe the figure’s feminine traits (“violent” and “ragged”) convey a kind of masculine power that remind David of the slow, impressive anger of his father and also the danger of Ellen’s knitting needles. He expects the figure to “disappear in flame,” just as his father’s anger is compared to “a fire which will bring the whole house down.” Thus, the dangerous potential of fire is linked with that of masculine energy. As the description progresses, David shifts his use of pronouns from “it” to “he.” He comments on the fact that the person’s hands appear large and strong (read: manly). Through this recognition of both masculinity and femininity within the figure, David’s surreal encounter seems to mark a crucial

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<sup>5</sup> This performativity alludes to the performed masculinity of David’s father, and thus the queer figure allows him a new understanding of the arbitrary nature of gender roles.

moment in which his conventional ideas of gender roles are shattered and he begins to perceive how masculinity and femininity may not be as separate and fixed as he believed.

The man immediately comments on David's obvious attraction to Giovanni. After David angrily tells the figure to "get the hell away from [him]," he begins to speak in riddle-like prophesies: "*Il est dangereux, tu sais*. And for a boy like you – he is *very* dangerous" (59).<sup>6</sup>

Later, when David demands him to go to hell, the man turns into an almost demonic figure:

'Oh no,' he said, 'I go not to hell,' and he clutched his crucifix with one large hand. 'But you, my dear friend – I fear that you shall burn in a very hot fire.' He laughed again. 'Oh, such fire!' He touched his head. 'Here.' And he writhed, as though in torment.

'*Everywhere*.' And he touched his heart. 'And here.' And he looked at me with malice and mockery and something else; he looked at me as though I were very far away. [...]

'*T'aura du chagrin*,' he said. 'You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told you so' (59-60).

The sexuality of the figure is apparent again in the undeniably erotic quality of the person's foretellings: the writhing of his body "as though in torment" evokes a full-body sensory experience, not unlike how one might respond to sexual pleasure.<sup>7</sup> In *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, Matt Brim comments on the sexual nature of the figure's foretelling: "The zombie implies that David will burn with the flames of desire but that his denial of that desire will be [his] true torment" (Brim 65).

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<sup>6</sup> All emphasis in quotes are from original text.

<sup>7</sup> This bodily experience mimics the painful ordeal that John undergoes on the pulpit as he confronts a higher power. Religious encounters, then, take on a supernatural aspect in Baldwin's works.

After the figure “move[s], flaming, away through the crowd,” the chattering bar scene comes back into view and no one, not even David, acknowledges his previous presence. The figure is uncanny to David not only because of this ephemerality, but also because of the haunting familiarity of the corpse image, which is present not only within his mind after his shameful encounter with Joey, but subtly throughout his childhood in his perceptions of both Ellen and his deceased mother.

David’s perception of Ellen as a threatening, lurking power mimics the corpse imagery by exaggerating and distorting her feminine qualities: “There she was, dressed, as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood, dressed in something which was either the wrong color, or too tight, or too young, the cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and that voice going on and on like a razor blade on glass” (20). Through David’s exaggerated description, Ellen is shown to be more powerful and more terrifying than his father, and thus, more masculine. Her clothes lack the right amount of femininity to meet cultural standards, and her qualities that are most obviously feminine, like her lipstick and voice, are masculinized by being described as dangerous and even sinister, much like the mouth of the figure “rag[ing] with lipstick.”

The corpse-like imagery is echoed even more profoundly in David’s nightmarish visions of his dead mother, which contrasts the idyllic and superficial femininity of her portrait. This tainted perception of his mother is translated into David’s dreams and escalated into a vision of pure horror: “blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” (15). In this nightmare, David’s mother

literally rises from the dead and consumes David, attempting to murder him and possibly assault him sexually. The enormous “breach” threatening to “swallow [him] alive” perhaps evokes a subconscious terror of the female genitalia, or a desire to return to the womb, the only time and place in which femininity has served as a source of protection and security for him.

This foreboding “breach” of his mother’s body is reiterated through the vision that David has of Joey’s body and the subsequent effects that their affair has on his psyche:

The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. The sweat on my back grew cold. I was ashamed. [...] A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in me* (13).

David’s involvement with Joey marks a sexual awakening characterized by intense fear and shame. David sees Joey’s body as masculine, exhibiting the power and strength that he associates with manhood. However, the “black cavern” has, for David, a feminine connotation arising from his previous vision of the cavern of his mother’s body. Despite Joey’s apparent masculinity, David views his homosexuality as emasculating, and the cavern comes to again symbolize the female genitalia that David fears will consume him and feminize him. The cavern then reappears within David’s mind, this time filled with his fears of what others may think and say in regards

to his new feminization, made public by his homosexual act. The fact that he cannot seem to understand how “this could have happened *in*” him shows that he sees the cavern as something separate from himself, developing within him as a result of his shameful act.

This cavern is more disturbing to David because it symbolizes not his own feelings toward femininity, but instead his fears of the thoughts and opinions of those observing him. Thus, it becomes clear that the outward projection, or performativity, of his gender shows itself to be David’s chief concern.<sup>8</sup> The cavern, filled with terrifying visions of how others may perceive him, festers in his mind like the image of his mother’s rotting corpse. Thus, the corpse becomes a manifestation of David’s fears regarding the projection of his gender.

One might assume that the emasculation David undergoes after his encounter with Joey would lead him to build closer ties with the source of masculinity in his life, yet he instead chooses to do the opposite, and distances himself from his father:

I did not *want* him to know me. I did not want anyone to know me. And then, again, I was undergoing with my father what the very young inevitably undergo with their elders: I was beginning to judge him. And the very harshness of this judgment, which broke my heart, revealed, though I could not have said it then, how much I had loved him, how that love, along with my innocence, was dying (24).

Along with the death of David’s innocence comes a realization that his masculinity can no longer be protected by his father, and must be devised on his own. Desperate to regain a sense of masculine authority, David rejects the superiority of his father and attempts to build an independent identity in which he can protect and cultivate his masculinity. Their relationship, as

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<sup>8</sup> This concern for the opinions of others is also strongly present in the character of Rufus in *Another Country*.

a result, becomes one built upon evasion and secrecy. “And we got on quite well, really, for the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe” (29). The denial that consumes David after his night with Joey carries over into his relationship with his father, and thus, his self-deceptive image of himself becomes the image that his father sees as well.

David’s desperate denial of anything indicating femininity manifests itself through his contempt for *les folles* who frequent the Parisian bar he attends:

Occasionally one would swoop in, quite late in the evening, to convey the news that he – but they always called each other ‘she’ - had just spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer. Then all of the others closed in on this newcomer and they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them* (39).

The ambiguous gender of *les folles* is far more offensive to David than their homosexuality. David dehumanizes *les folles* because of their unconventional gender expression, seeing their lifestyle as animalistic. He speaks of a boy who comes “out at night wearing makeup and ear-rings and with his heavy blond hair piled high” as having a “grotesqueness [that] made [him] uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs” (40). This dehumanization shows that the way *les folles* present their gender is not only unpleasant, but also unnatural to David. He purposely ignores their choice of pronouns, and cannot imagine why anyone would ever desire them sexually. Through these

observations, he demonstrates an inability to comprehend both gender and sexual fluidity. In *Immaculate Manhood: The City and the Pillar, Giovanni's Room, and the Straight-Acting Gay Man*, Harry Thomas claims: "In David's eyes, effeminate men are either criminal (the prostitutes), pathetic (the men soliciting the prostitutes), or sub-human (*les folles*)" (Thomas 601).

Giovanni, whom David is instantly attracted to, is openly homosexual yet does not fall into any of these categories. At the same time, he is not "masculine" either, and instead represents everything that David's father, his childhood ideal of masculinity, is not. He is a dark, Italian man, disdainful of Americans, who does not seem concerned with displaying any contrived image of masculinity or femininity. As David and Giovanni converse, David worries distractedly over what their conversation must look like to the surrounding people: "They knew that they had witnessed a beginning and now they would not cease to watch until they saw the end. [...] now I was in the zoo, and they were watching" (57). Giovanni, contrastingly, seems carefree and unconcerned with the opinions of others: "'But you will come,' he teased, with a wonderful, mocking light on his face, 'more often *now*?' I stammered: 'Why?' 'Ah!' cried Giovanni. 'Don't you know when you have made a friend?'" (55). Although it is clear that Giovanni is interested in more than friendship, he does not seem to care whether or not others see their interest in each other as romantic or platonic, and thus, unlike David, is unconcerned with how others perceive the performance of his gender and sexuality.

Giovanni's lack of concern for gender norms is apparent through the way he views David: "Giovanni looked at me. And this look made me feel that no one in my life had ever looked at me directly before" (54). Giovanni's direct gaze indicates that he is not observing

David's "masculinity," or lack thereof, but instead sees beyond his public display of gender. Because of his apparent disinterest in gender performativity, Giovanni can be attracted to another man without feeling the same crippling emasculation that David once felt after waking up next to Joey. Unlike David, he does not feel that he is trapped inside a zoo, being scrutinized by judgmental eyes, ready to peg him as unmanly or feminine. These gender differences are, to Giovanni, arbitrary, and thus he is able to look past what constitutes David as either manly or womanly.

In this way, Giovanni and his lack of assumptions regarding gender exemplifies Judith Butler's theory of the primal body being inherently ungendered. This body, neither culturally "masculine" or "feminine," becomes a vessel that is inevitably labeled with accepted societal identities. Butler argues that "'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (Butler 12). She delves deeper into the culturally-imposed nature of gender by distinguishing the mind from the body, and labeling the gendered body as a performative facade of what lies within the mind. "The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism" (17). It, indeed, can be read that David's perception of "masculinity" (authority, power, control, strength) includes mainly mental characteristics, while his idea of femininity, contrastingly, is indicated by fragility, delicateness and elegance, and is thus mostly corporeal. The "superficiality" that David notices as implicit to images of femininity is also seen most evidently through a woman's physical appearance. The

corpse-like images that symbolize a fear of becoming feminine are also bodily, illustrated by lifeless flesh, dead hair and violent expressions.

David's anxiety over the breakdown, or queering, of gender stems from a conditioned belief in the heterosexualization of desire, which Butler argues to "require and institute the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (24). David has been conditioned to believe that desire is ingrained as only existing between the feminine and masculine gender, and thus feels that either Giovanni or himself will inevitably fall into the feminine role within their relationship. Because Giovanni does not expect a heterosexualization of desire, he does not worry about his own feminization, and therefore it is David who convinces himself that his homosexual relationship is emasculating him.

David's fear of being labeled as feminine by others leads him to confine most of their relationship to the privacy of Giovanni's room, a cramped, dirty space in which David feels suffocated by his shame. His efforts to clean the dirty room feel "womanly" to him through his association of domesticity with femininity. Terrified to play the role of housewife, he plans to leave Giovanni in order to preserve his manhood:

What kind of life can we have in this room? - this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about - isn't it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you [...] and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*" (208).

The emphasis on “girl” conveys the terror that David feels toward the possibility of filling the feminine role in their relationship, and his preconceived ideas of normative gender roles make a relationship between two masculine men seemingly impossible. ““But I’m a man,”” he yells desperately, “a man! What do you think can *happen* between us?” (209). David is caught in a situation which, according to his notions of masculinity, is futile: he cannot engage in homosexuality without endangering his manhood, and cannot accept a relationship between two men (the only kind of man, to David, is a masculine one). Giovanni, contrastingly, does not see David’s cleaning as feminine, and cannot understand why a homosexual relationship should emasculate either one of them: ““I am not trying to make you a little girl. If I wanted a little girl, I would be *with* a little girl. [...] You are the one who keeps talking about *what* I want. But I have only been talking about *who* I want”” (209). The accentuation Giovanni places on “what” and “who” highlights the difference in the way the two men perceive gender. David cannot move past *what* Giovanni is, while Giovanni only sees *who* David is, and remains unconcerned with David’s gender, showing a belief in desire as neither heterosexual nor homosexual.

Giovanni’s disdain for conventional gender roles is evident in his apparent hostility toward his own body for the fact that he must occupy a gender: ““Me, I want to escape,’ he had told me, ‘*je veux m’evader* – this dirty world, this dirty body”” (35). The dirtiness Giovanni speaks of can be linked throughout the novel to instances in which gender roles are queered, just as whiteness and cleanliness align with examples of conventional performances of gender.<sup>9</sup>

Dirtiness is seen most obviously in Giovanni’s room itself, which is consistently described as

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<sup>9</sup> Several critics, including Josep M. Armengol, see dirtiness as symbolizing blackness in the novel, and cleanliness alluding to whiteness. Upon release, the novel was widely criticized for lacking racial content, yet Baldwin claimed that race was implicit within the story because of the inherent intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality.

dark, grimy and suffocating.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, David feels feminized most prominently while he is in the room. Giovanni, himself, is described as a dark Italian man, in many ways the opposite of white American David, who describes his own body as dirty to show a contempt for the fact that although he does not feel that his homosexuality is shameful, he resents that society has labeled it as that, and wishes to escape these classifications. Joey, David's first homosexual experience, is also described repeatedly as darker than David.

Whiteness and cleanliness, contrastingly, are apparent in the characters who symbolize a lack of queerness, such as his girlfriend Hella. After leaving Giovanni, David attempts to regain his sense of masculinity through his reconnection with Hella, the ideal object of femininity. She is innocent, light, and white in every aspect, including her class, her appearance, her innocence, and, most importantly, her desire to fulfill the womanly role in their relationship. This femininity lies in her desire to be the source of comfort and security that David can escape to when he feels his masculinity being threatened. Therefore, the two Americans rely heavily on each other to reinforce their conventional masculinity and femininity. In order to preserve this dynamic, David keeps his recent homosexual experience hidden from Hella. When she senses the secret that David is keeping from her, Hella feels that his concealment is a sign that she is no longer a source of security for him, and she becomes afraid for her femininity.

‘David, please let me be a woman. I don’t care what you do to me. I don’t care what it costs. I’ll wear my hair long, I’ll give up cigarettes, I’ll throw away the books.’ She tried to smile, my heart turned over. ‘Just let me be a woman, take me. It’s what I want. It’s *all* I want. I don’t care about anything else’ (237).

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, this dirtiness coincides with the dirtiness that John associates with his own body in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.

Womanhood, in the eyes of Hella, rests on her ability to provide comfort and assurance to the man in her life, and therefore she holds the same ideas of femininity as David. She is willing to alter her appearance and habits, noticeably superficial characteristics that symbolized femininity, in order to please David and make him feel comfortable in her presence, and this complete dependency of the feminine upon the masculine gives David the confidence he needs to once again protect the “immaculate manhood” that Jacques, his French acquaintance, claims is his “pride and joy” (45).

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Looking back upon his time with Giovanni, David attempts to equate his engagement in a homosexual relationship and subsequent abandonment of his lover with criminality. His present-tense reflection on his time in Paris, which he claims is a form of repentance, serves as a testimony for his “immoral” actions. He claims that his “executioners are [there] with [him], walking up and down with [him], washing things, and packing, and drinking from [his] bottle. They are everywhere [he] turn[s]. Walls, windows, mirrors, water, the night outside – they are everywhere” (163). These “executioners,” clearly figments of David’s imagination, demonstrate his inherent yearning to be punished for not only his “feminine” actions, but also his overwhelming guilt for Giovanni’s death.

David imagines the scenario in which Giovanni, conversely, epitomizes literal criminality after strangling his boss Guillaume in his office:

He finds himself in Guillaume’s rooms, surrounded by Guillaume’s silks, colors, perfumes, staring at Guillaume’s bed. [...] Guillaume disappears to change his clothes and comes back in his theatrical dressing gown. [...] And perhaps at the very moment

Guillaume thought he had broken free, when he had reached the door perhaps, Giovanni lunged after him and caught him by the sash of the dressing gown and wrapped the sash around his neck (229).

David's description of this event shows his belief in Giovanni's contempt for Guillaume's performative femininity. Giovanni only feels the urge to attack Guillaume once he is in his space, which is one of extravagant, exaggerated "femininity." He puts on a "theatrical" dressing gown - a symbol of the contrived nature of both his gender and the performativity of the moment. He has been planning this moment with Giovanni, and thus performs it as though it has been rehearsed - not only planning his seduction of Giovanni, but cultivating his persona in order to take on the feminine role in their interaction. David imagines that Giovanni eventually kills Guillaume with the sash of this theatrical gown, designating Giovanni as the symbolic destroyer of gender performativity.

Despite the disdain that David imagines Giovanni to have for Guillaume's manipulated gender expression, it is his grief over David that causes him to take action and subsequently accept the repercussions, allowing him, ironically, to no longer be "trapped in [his] own dirty body, forever and forever and forever" (84). In this way, Giovanni's criminality and acceptance of his sentence parallels the honesty he exhibits in his sexuality. Contrastingly, David's guilt over Giovanni's death leaves him yearning for punishment - one that he cannot receive because he lacks a true crime. Because criminality is linked with honesty, his absence of criminality lies in his dishonesty regarding his sexuality.

After leaving Giovanni to reunite with Hella, David realizes that his sexual awakening during his time in Paris has affected him too deeply to return to his simplistic, heteronormative

relationship. As a result of his relationship with Giovanni, David learns that a woman's company is not necessarily the only source of comfort and security, and he distances himself from Hella. Dissatisfied with their relationship, and guilty that he cannot explain to her the cause of his change, he sneaks away to meet up with a sailor in order to fulfill his recently discovered sexual needs. The juxtaposition of his homosexual actions, which he would have previously believed to be "effeminate," with a sailor, a figure who typically embodies masculinity, serves as a testimony to David's new realization of the inherent queerness of sexuality and gender.

The novel concludes with not only a breakdown of David's ideas of masculinity and femininity, but also a breakdown between his distinction between the self and the other. As David looks in the mirror, "Giovanni's face swings before [him] like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night" (245). By seeing himself as Giovanni, he experiences himself taking on the qualities of Giovanni that he once lacked and did not understand: a disdain for gender performativity, and an honest acceptance of the inherent fluidity of desire. Yet, this premonition of himself and Giovanni becoming one is tainted with the guilt David feels for Giovanni's death. David cannot help but feel that he could have prevented his lover's demise by staying with him, and thus his recollection of their story is a form of repentance. Although it appears that his relationship with Giovanni altered David's views of femininity and masculinity and how they can intersect, David is still unable to commit himself to the relationship out of fear for what may happen if he gives up his comfortable role as a heterosexual man. Thus, the expectation that Baldwin creates for complete sexual liberation is subverted and David is left haunted by his rejection of Giovanni, which stems out of a selfish need to hold on to the privilege that comes with heteronormativity.



### Unmasking the White Liberal Gaze in *Another Country*

*“All roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy - in fact, it is always extremely hard - to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is” -James Baldwin*

In James Baldwin’s third novel *Another Country*, the question *Do you love me?* echoes throughout the minds of the various protagonists, a group of artist friends living in Greenwich Village, New York City. This simple question, laden with self-doubt and vulnerability, takes on a more complex meaning when expressed by the white characters of the novel whose interracial relationships expose the problematic ways in which they deal with their white privilege. Both Leona, a Southern white woman, and Vivaldo, a bisexual white man, attempt to convince their respective black lovers, siblings Rufus and Ida Scott, that their whiteness should make no difference in the way that they give and receive love. This denial of how their white privilege affects the way they love leads Rufus and Ida to suspect Leona and Vivaldo of using interracial love to prove to both themselves and others that they are not racist. Thus, when the black characters pose the question *Do you love me?*, we can read: *Are you using me to prove to yourself that you are not a bigot?* Through the dynamics of these relationships, Baldwin creates the expectation that these white “liberal” characters will find love despite their certain levels of ingrained racism, and then subverts this expectation through Rufus and Ida’s recognition and subsequent denial of this skewed and ingenuine love. This denial of love leads the white characters to believe they are being attacked for their whiteness, when really they are being criticized for the exploitative nature of the way in which they love. In this chapter, I will analyze

how in the relationships of Leona and Rufus and Vivaldo and Ida, the white characters insist on equating their wholly separate racial experiences, and hence, use their white privilege and feigned “color-blindness” as a means of denying race and its consequences.

Book One of the novel begins by delving into the nomadic and solitary life of Rufus, whose remaining days before his suicide are interspersed with flashbacks to his previous relationship with Leona. His crippling paranoia that white passersby assume certain things about him solely because of his blackness is enhanced by the memory of how others looked upon him while in the presence of Leona. When in the company of a white woman, Rufus becomes painfully aware of the scrutiny he believes he receives, and resents the fact that in their eyes, he could appear to represent the stereotype of the dangerous, predatory black man. The hypersensitivity that Rufus displays toward his race and its impact on those around him allows him to find meaning in the smallest of gestures and read implicit racism into something as small as a glance.

There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode subways all night long, why his stomach growled, why his hair was nappy, his armpits funky, his pants and shoes too thin, and why he did not dare to stop and take a leak (Baldwin 4).

Baldwin’s language presents the derogatory opinions of the young white people as fact, showing that although they do not say it or even imply it, Rufus believes there to be a wordless understanding between himself and the young people that he is a representation of all other black

men.<sup>11</sup> Rufus, by accepting these stereotypical assumptions, reduces himself to a level in which he holds no individuality.<sup>12</sup> By purposely denying himself this sense of selfhood, he allows the racist opinions of the white people to dictate his own perception of who he is.

The source of Rufus' ingrained hatred toward whites becomes explicit during a brief flashback to his days in a Southern boot camp.

He [...] felt again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth. He was in his white uniform, on the ground, against the red, dusty clay. Some of his colored buddies were holding him, were shouting in his ear, helping him to rise. The white officer, with a curse, had vanished, had gone forever beyond the reach of vengeance. His face was full of clay and tears and blood; he spat red blood into the red dust (12).

The juxtaposition of the white officer with Rufus' blackness, concealed by his white uniform, is broken down with the comparability of the red blood against the red clay and dust. The contrast of the white officer with the black man, then, yields to unity only under conditions of violence. It is important to note, then, that Rufus' first sexual encounter with Leona occurs directly after this recollection, and that the encounter is violent and possibly not consensual. The violence that Rufus inflicts upon Leona is, then, an attempt at controlling her, due to the powerlessness he feels in the face of the stereotypes she may be harboring toward him. During this encounter, Rufus angrily thinks that he wants her "to remember him the longest day she lived," and claims that "nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings" (22). He describes his penis as "his weapon," and seems pleased when Leona starts to

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<sup>11</sup> A parallel can be drawn here between Rufus' assumption of what others must think of him and John's association of his father with the common black stereotype.

<sup>12</sup> Again, Rufus and John share the similarity of stripping themselves of their own individuality.

cry. Through his attack on Leona, he attempts to place her in the same helpless position that he once was in, underneath the foot of the white officer.

By inflicting this violence upon Leona as a way of assuaging prior experiences of racism, Rufus sets the terms of their relationship, which will, whether violent or tender, always be racially charged. His obsession with their racial difference becomes obvious when he begins to associate the image of Leona not only with memories of oppressive white Southerners, but also with the idea of his black heritage itself. Rufus, thus, projects everything it means to be black in America onto the figure of Leona, and therefore strips her of her individuality just as he does to himself.

For to remember Leona was also - somehow - to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls behind the stairs and on the roofs, the white policeman who had taught him how to hate, the stickball games in the streets, the women leaning out of windows and the numbers they played daily, hoping for the hit his father never made”

(6).

These conflicting associations, one of the white officer, and one of the streets of Harlem, depict Rufus' internal struggle to imagine how a relationship with a white woman would affect his identity as a black man. By thinking of Leona as both a reminder of his blackness and as a reminder of his estrangement from whiteness, she becomes, in his mind, an indication of his own lack of self-worth, and thus sets their relationship up for failure.

The fact that Rufus' attraction to Leona is based primarily on his ability to violently dominate her testifies to the reality of the relationship: Rufus feels the need to monopolize a

white person in order to maintain a sense of selfhood in the face of white oppression. Leona remains a static, one-dimensional character due to her passive acceptance of this abuse, and her unwillingness to bring up her whiteness as a possible source of his anger toward her. She instead points out that Rufus' identity seems tentative and not fully formed. "She laughed. 'You're a funny boy' - she corrected herself - 'a funny *person*. You act like you don't know who you are.' / 'I know who I am, all right,' he said, aware of the eyes that watched them pass, the nearly inaudible murmur that came from the benches or the trees [...] 'I'm your boy'" (40). Rufus' subtle glance at those watching him indicates that it is the presence and opinions of these strangers that actively shapes his sense of self, and his self then comes to rest entirely upon external circumstances. He then describes himself as Leona's "boy," exemplifying, again, his self-induced lack of individuality. By thinking of himself as belonging to her, and by thinking of her simply as a white woman desiring a black man as a "possession," Rufus creates an image of their relationship that is sinister and disparaging.<sup>13</sup>

Rufus exemplifies this paranoia that he is only a possession to Leona, and that their relationship is a result of her fetishization of black men, by continually accusing her of "sleeping with other colored boys behind his back" (55). Leona, although distraught by his abuse, refuses to accept the situation for what it is, and come to terms with the image Rufus has created for her. Out of self-induced ignorance, she excuses his behavior when talking to Vivaldo: "He's just lost and he beats me because he can't find nothing else to hit" (59). Vivaldo responds by describing her as an "unwitting heiress of generations of bitterness," thus pegging Rufus' abuse as a backlash against the white abuse he has endured in the past. Leona and Vivaldo, then, though

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<sup>13</sup> Rufus' desire to possess Leona resembles John's similar need to "usurp," or control, the body of Elisha.

close to Rufus, cannot help but think of him as the stereotypically dangerous black man, filled with hate and a desire for revenge.

Contrastingly, Rufus generalizes white people in this same way by seeing Leona as a person instead of a symbol of white femininity, Rufus estranges himself from the possibility of giving and accepting love. He remains dubious of the love he receives because, since he strips himself of a sense of individuality, he cannot believe that another person, especially a white woman, would be able to see him as an individual. His purposeful refusal to allow himself this independence from stereotypes hinders him from ever truly knowing if the love he receives is genuine or not, and thus, the question of whether he is loved haunts him. It strikes him most prominently upon hearing the jazz that reminds him of the sense of individuality he was once able to nurture while playing the drums:

And yet the question was terrible and real; the boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past; somewhere in that past, in the gutters or gang fights or gang shags; in the acrid room, on the sperm-stiffened blanket, behind marijuana or the needle, under the smell of piss in the precinct basement, he had received the blow from which he never would recover and this no one wanted to believe. *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? (9).*

As Rufus listens to the sound of the saxophone, he hears this question, to which he feels constantly denied a coherent answer. The “blow” that Rufus alludes to refers to a feeling of unreciprocated love, which becomes apparent to him through failed sexual relationships (the sperm-stiffened blanket), the loneliness of drug abuse, and time spent in the precinct basement, punished by the police not as an individual, but as a black man. Rufus claims he will never be

able to recover from this “blow,” and hears the echo of the question follow him. His fear of the answer, however, prevents him from ever truly seeking it out.

While Rufus’ relationship with Leona is largely characterized by a refusal to see himself as separate from the black stereotype, his sister Ida, who is described as having a sense of poise and confidence that Rufus lacks, carries into her relationship with Vivaldo a strong sense of individuality. Rufus describes her as “race-conscious,” yet this term takes on a different, positive meaning when applied to Ida as opposed to himself. Ida takes pride in her appearance and identity, whereas Rufus’ awareness of his blackness causes him to suffer from a fundamental mistrust of those who do not experience the same alienation that he does. When Rufus looks upon Ida, he is in awe of her equanimity:

He had never seen the beauty of black people before. But, staring at Ida, who stood before the window of the Harlem kitchen, seeing that she was no longer merely his younger sister but a girl who would soon be a woman, she became associated with the colors of the shawl, the colors of the sun, and with a splendor incalculably older than the gray stone of the island on which they had been born (7).

The image of Ida wearing an Indian shawl, a gift from Rufus, represents to her brother a freedom so unattainable that he can only feel a twinge of sadness that Ida cannot return to this state of emancipation. In *Black Regions of the Imagination*, Eve Dunbar argues that “even as [Rufus] gazes at his sister and is taken by her beauty, he removes this beauty from their Harlem apartment and locates it in a time and place that is inaccessible to both of them: idealized Africa. The shawl ultimately allows Rufus to see what Ida might have been had she not been born in the United States, a descendant of slaves. If she had instead been born generations ago in Africa, she

would have been saved the trauma of being black in America” (Dunbar 108). Rufus looks upon Ida’s strength as a valiant attempt to reconcile an estrangement from a time and place in which she would have been even more proud and fearless. Thus, it is Rufus’ sorrow that his sister is kept from reaching her full potential that enhances his feelings of despondency and depression.

After Rufus’ death, Ida’s romantic involvement with Vivaldo exposes the differences in the ways in which Rufus and Ida look upon their own blackness in relation to their respective intimacies with white lovers. Ida’s strong sense of self and pride in her blackness makes it more difficult for Vivaldo to ignore the racial component of their relationship than it is for Leona in her relationship with Rufus. Still, Vivaldo, like Leona, attempts to push his and Ida’s racial differences to the side and deny his white privilege. His guilt regarding Rufus’ death manifests itself through a desire to prove to Ida and Rufus’ family that his privilege had nothing to do with his friend’s demise. He explains his interaction with Rufus’ family to his friend Cass with exasperation:

‘And they all looked at me as though - well, as though I had *done* it - and, oh, I wanted so bad to take that girl in my arms and kiss that look off her face and make her know that I didn’t do it, *I* wouldn’t do it, whoever was doing it was doing it to me, too.’ He was crying, silently, and he bent forward, hiding his face with one long hand. ‘I know I failed him, but I loved him, too, and nobody there wanted to know that. I kept thinking, They’re colored and I’m white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?’ (114).

Cass, who demonstrates through her response a much greater understanding of her white privilege than Vivaldo, retorts that “‘they didn’t [...] happen to you *because* you were white.

They just happened. But what happens up here [...] happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a difference” (114). The claim that Cass makes sums up the core of Vivaldo’s fundamental misunderstanding of racial differences. He is bothered by the fact that Rufus’ family looks upon him as a representation of all white people, though he has, unknowingly, looked upon Rufus in the same stereotypical way. Because he believes that he is capable of seeing beyond color, Vivaldo thinks of himself as separate from and above the societal problems that led Rufus to end his life. The fact that he claims that he does not know who “was doing it” to black people emphasizes Vivaldo’s state of denial even further. By refusing to admit that white people are the source of black oppression shows that his denial has forced him into a state of intentional ignorance toward racial injustice.

Vivaldo’s rejection of the reality of racial oppression contributes to Baldwin’s overarching critique of the white liberal mentality. By “paying particular attention to the character of Vivaldo, [Dunbar] argue[s] that Baldwin issues a highly damning critique of the white liberal gaze, ultimately suggesting that such a gaze is deadly when applied to the black subject” (Dunbar 106). The word “deadly” is used in a quite literal sense, due to the general lack of concern among the white characters for the true reasoning behind Rufus’ suicide. Vivaldo is frustrated that “the liberal, even revolutionary sentiments of which he was so proud [mean] nothing to [black people] whatever” (133). He thus victimizes himself, and asserts that it is the fault of black people for not understanding that although Vivaldo is white, he believes himself to be exempt from the problem of racism. Vivaldo’s mentality instead proves itself to be the very core of the problem: white people who consider themselves free from prejudice, deem themselves exempt from any responsibilities toward assuaging racism in America. Due to this

outlook, Vivaldo comes to resent Rufus for seeing him as a “poor white boy in trouble” (133) who needs attention and affection from black people in order to convince himself of his impartiality.

This sentiment had sometimes seemed to stare out at him from the eyes of Rufus. He had refused to see it, for he had insisted that he and Rufus were equals. They were friends, far beyond the reach of anything so banal and corny as color. They had slept together, got drunk together, balled chicks together, cursed each other out, and loaned each other money. And yet how much, as it turned out, had each kept hidden in his heart from the other! (133).

Vivaldo’s description of race as “banal and corny” exemplifies his exaggerated denial of race as a point of contention between the two friends. The irony of describing race, the most powerful and obvious difference between the two men, as something trivial shows that Vivaldo’s obsession with his self-proclaimed impartiality is actually blinding him from the truth of their relationship. Vivaldo’s subliminal romantic feelings for Rufus, made apparent through his claim that they have “kept hidden [their] heart[s]” from one another, suggests that Vivaldo’s sexual attraction to both Rufus and Ida is a way of subconsciously using interracial sex as a way of rectifying his inability to fully come to terms with his white privilege and ingrained racism.

Both Rufus and Ida distance themselves from Vivaldo at certain points for reasons which remain entirely unknown to Vivaldo, but reside in a skepticism regarding the true motives behind his sexual desires. In *Parallel Perversions*, Stefanie Dunning writes: “Rufus is worrying about the boundaries of Vivaldo’s desire. He is questioning his sexual value as a black man to a white man, whose sexuality is thought to have the most value. He wonders, in other words, if Vivaldo

wants *him* or thinks *he* is ‘easy’ because he is black. Rufus’ fear that Vivaldo’s desire for Leona is mediated by a racist assumption that she is available (and loose) because she is with a black man is his indirect way of wondering if Vivaldo considers him, a black man, a worthy sexual partner” (Dunning 106). Rufus’ suspicion of Vivaldo’s motives causes him to resist the vulnerable act of confessing his attraction, if it is indeed mutual. Thus, Vivaldo is denied affection from Rufus due to Rufus’ distrust of his intentions, and is later additionally denied a certain amount of reciprocated affection from Ida, whose similar misgivings arise from her experiences of being fetishized by white men looking to mask their intrinsic bigotry.

Rufus’ lack of selfhood and Vivaldo’s desire to prove himself contrast with Ida’s confident self-knowledge. As Ida sings in front of an audience for the first time, those watching her are taken aback by the authority and control that emanates from her despite her amateur singing skills. This power, Baldwin explains, arises from a pride in identity that is largely absent from the other black characters of the novel.

This quality involves a sense of self so profound and so powerful that it does not so much leap barriers as reduce them to atoms - while still leaving them standing, mightily, where they were; and this awful sense is private, unknowable, not to be articulated, having, literally, to do with something else; it transforms and lays waste and gives life, and kills (254).

Baldwin’s description of Ida not “leaping barriers” but instead “reducing them to atoms” refers to Ida’s strength and willpower arising not from a hyper-awareness of her position within society, like her brother, but a refusal to accept that she deserves to be treated any differently because of her race. Baldwin goes on to describe her “sense of self” as “awful,” “private,” and

“unknowable,” which seems to contradict the previous descriptions of her selfhood as “profound” and “powerful.” Thus, it can be deduced that a black woman’s ability to have clarity of self and poise is often perceived as intimidating and dangerous to others.

Ida’s “race-consciousness” allows her to recognize Vivaldo’s feigned “color-blindness” as a subliminal attempt to undermine her experience as a black woman. Because he is unable to relate to the oppression she must undergo, he seeks to equate their respective experiences, and “other” himself in order to relate to her status as a minority: But you do the same thing. You always make me feel white. Don’t you think that hurts me? You lock me out. And all I want is for you to be a part of me, for me to be a part of you. I wouldn’t give a damn if you were striped like a zebra (414). By relating the conversation back to his whiteness, Vivaldo shows that he lacks a fundamental understanding of the meaning of discrimination, and feels that being made to feel white holds the same weight that feeling black does. Despite claiming that he hardly even sees her color, Vivaldo focuses during multiple instances solely on the color of Ida’s skin. During sex, he comments on the many different shades of black her skin is, and thus fetishizes her race as something exotic and sensual. He goes on to state in exasperation: “Sweetheart, suffering doesn’t *have* a color. Does it? Can’t we step out of this nightmare?” (417). This oversimplification of suffering as colorless and ubiquitous makes sense in Vivaldo’s mind, yet there remains within him a doubt - he adds, “does it?” in an attempt for verification; for Ida to convince him that their different races indeed do not matter.

The equation he makes of their unspoken racial tensions to a “nightmare” shows, again, how painful it is for him to face these questions regarding identity, and he hopes instead to escape them and pretend they do not exist. When Ida explains that “locking him out” is an effort

to protect Vivaldo, he responds angrily: “I don’t believe you. I don’t believe that’s why. You want to protect yourself. You want to hate me because I’m white, because it’s easier for you that way” (414). Vivaldo rejects the generalization of white people, yet does not seem to realize when his denial of his own ingrained stereotypes comes in the way of a possible understanding of Ida’s experience. He claims that Ida is taking the easy way out by thinking of Vivaldo solely as white person, but he fails to realize that it is white-dominated society and men like him who have taught her to think this way.

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The physical violence of Rufus and Leona’s relationship conveys the same lack of understanding that the psychological and verbal violence of Ida and Vivaldo’s relationship does. While Rufus commits corporeal violence against Leona’s body, Vivaldo’s objectification and fetishization of Ida’s body allows him to place her in the same kind of submissive position that Rufus physically forces Leona into. In his essay “Baldwin and the Occasion of Love,” Christopher Freeburg claims that “Rufus and his friend Vivaldo use sex as a weapon to destroy, humiliate, and use people, as well as to hide their own anxieties, pain around their past, and uncertainty about the future - things they are unwilling to face or accept. Rufus’ sexual encounters are not ‘acts of love’ (53); Rufus beat and humiliated his white girlfriend Leona; he destroyed her. He used Leona in whatever ‘way would humiliate her the most’ (53). Cass [...] describes Vivaldo similarly. She says, ‘you get involved with impossible women - whores, nymphomaniacs, drunks - and I think you do it in order to protect yourself from anything serious’ (96)” (Freeburg 186). It is true that Rufus and Vivaldo’s mistreatment of their respective partners can be seen as a method of self-protection, yet we are continually reminded that both

men are struggling with a fear that they are not loved. Why, then, do they push their lovers away through violence?

In his memories, Rufus romanticizes his time with Leona, yet he does not attempt to deny the pain he inflicted upon her: “Rufus thought, [...] You can’t forget anything that hurt so badly, went so deep, and changed the world forever. It’s not possible to forget anybody you’ve destroyed” (51). Because his violence toward Leona makes it impossible for him to forget her, it becomes apparent that Rufus commits these acts of violence in order to possess her.<sup>14</sup> This possession becomes the only way in which he can conceive of bridging the gap between their wholly separate experiences, therefore the violence that allows for this possession becomes imperative.

Because Vivaldo’s violence toward Ida is more psychological than physical, it can be concealed under the guise of “color-blindness” that he assimilates into his life. Vivaldo’s refusal to admit that Ida’s race has an effect upon the way they treat each other is, through its untruthfulness, just as harmful and manipulative to Ida as Rufus’ battering is to Leona. As Vivaldo observes the way that wealthy businessman Steve Ellis interacts with Ida, he exposes his previously denied awareness of how race alters his and other white men’s ways of communicating: “When confronted with Ida, who was so visibly rejected from the only world they knew, [Ellis’ patronizing tone] was forced to become relatively personal, self-conscious, and tense. It became entangled with an effort to avoid being called into judgment; with a fear that their spiritual and social promissory notes might suddenly be called up. By being pressed into the service of an impulse that was real, the manner revealed itself as totally false and because it was

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<sup>14</sup> This possession is reminiscent of John’s bodily possession within the church and his desire to possess Elisha.

false, it was sinister” (164). The “sinister” quality of Ellis’ attitude toward Ida, whom he is clearly attracted to, is unnerving to Vivaldo not only because it is ingenuine, but because it is so familiar.<sup>15</sup> He, too, finds himself having to perform a certain way in order to convince Ida that their differing races does not concern him. To call Ida “visibly rejected” from the “only world they knew,” Vivaldo mentally lumps Ellis and himself into a common category, though they compete for her affection, and separates Ida from their “world.”

Vivaldo voices his doubts about his relationship with Ida to Eric, a gay actor recently returned from living in France, whom he believes will understand because of his previous interracial and homosexual relationship with Rufus: “Sometimes I wish she weren’t there, sometimes I wish I’d never met her, sometimes I think I’d go anywhere to get this burden off me. She never lets me forget I’m white, she never lets me forget she’s colored. And I don’t care, I don’t care - did Rufus do that to you? Did he try to make you pay?” (340). Ida’s willingness to acknowledge the implications of their differences is misconstrued by Vivaldo as a bitter attempt to make him “pay” for his privilege - and he thus exposes his fear that Ida’s interest in him stems from a desire to take out her ingrained anger at the white community.

Vivaldo, through his desperate attempts to detach himself from the responsibility associated with white privilege, comes to comprise Baldwin’s scathing critique of white liberalism. Vivaldo involves himself with Ida not because of genuine love, but through a desire to prove to both himself and others that race is meaningless to him. He uses his self-proclaimed color-blindness to turn the tables on Ida, accusing her of prejudice toward whites. Thus, the

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<sup>15</sup> This familiarity is evocative of the presence of the uncanny in *Giovanni’s Room*.

image of acceptance that Vivaldo hopes to project becomes simply a way of deflecting the responsibility and effort involved in rising above ingrained racism.

Rufus' suicide, the event of the novel that comes to cast a shadow over the relationships of the other characters, represents the violence within the relationships, both physical and psychological, turned toward the self. One of Rufus's final engagements before his death is a meal with a stranger he meets on the street. The shame that Rufus feels after coming close to prostituting himself to this unknown man is in itself a psychological violence, which he then translates into a physical violence, thus mimicking the ways in which he once dealt with his anger at Leona. The physical violence of committing suicide forces him to not only alienate himself from love, but to alienate himself from the mere possibility of being loved, and consequently Rufus' suicide becomes an attempt to avoid the terrifying answer to the reoccurring question of whether or not he is loved.

The disintegration of the relationships between Rufus and Leona and Ida and Vivaldo comes to portray Baldwin's reoccurring method of building expectations and subsequently subverting them. At the onset of the two relationships, the reader hopes for and expects an understanding to blossom between the two lovers of differing races, yet the understanding that is built is eventually shown to be superficial and arbitrary. The desire of the white characters to *appear* open to differences in identity builds on the expectation that they will not let race affect their respective relationships, but simultaneously distracts them from actually practicing this acceptance. Through their denial of their white privilege, both Leona and Vivaldo attempt to portray themselves as victims of a psychological violence against racial privilege. Within the two interracial relationships, the question *Do you love me?* becomes instead: *Do you love me despite*

*my whiteness? And: Do you love me because of my blackness?* These questions are reversed from what one might expect to be asked within the relationship; this is the result of Vivaldo's manipulation of his privilege to overturn the discrimination Ida endures. In this way, the complexities of racial differences makes it impossible to tell if the love in the novel is genuine or not, and thus the expectation for true interracial love is overthrown.

The absence of understanding within the interracial relationships of the novel resembles the absence of true redemption for John in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and the absence of sexual liberation for David in *Giovanni's Room*. Like the other two novels, Baldwin builds a narrative of expectation which is debased due to the characters' inability, or unwillingness, to see these differences as positive aspects instead of reasons to drive them apart. Baldwin thus creates characters that do not see the intertwined nature of experience and difference, and desire to rid their respective relationships of the uncomfortable reality of disparity. What these characters fail to realize is that to rid their lives of this disparity would be to rid themselves of the very core of what makes them human.

### Afterward

By choosing to write on the topic of James Baldwin's fiction, I unknowingly took on a project that would, no matter how many pages I composed, forever remain unfinished. The subject matter that Baldwin deals with is not only extensive, but all-encompassing of the human experience, and therefore no amount of pages will be able to fully capture the power and relevance of Baldwin's writing. Through the heart-wrenching stories of his characters, Baldwin explores the intricacies and realities of human relationships that remain largely untouched by many other authors, and thus his work is so pervasive that it cannot be fully examined within the confines of a single project. Despite the fact that I feel that I have only just begun to scratch the surface of Baldwin's deeply complex and intricate work, I feel rewarded with the knowledge that a twentieth century novelist was not only able to speak meaningfully to the issues of his time period, but also the issues that he knew would remain relevant for years to come, and continue to permeate our current political and social atmosphere. Through his exploration of the ways in which people of differing identities communicate and relate to one another, Baldwin presents concepts that are not only deeply pertinent, but timeless. When examined closely, the issues he addresses within his novels can help one to understand the core of the psychological processes that lead to racism, sexism and homophobia. In the wake of Donald Trump's election, bigotry and discrimination have taken the forefront in our national politics, and it is more crucial than ever to fight back against ignorance by learning from thinkers like Baldwin, whose work can help us begin to understand the roots of these pervasive problems.

Upon starting this project, I was hesitant to write about an author who deals heavily with many topics which I have no personal experience with. I do not know what it is like to be

discriminated against due to my race or sexuality. I am not religious, and therefore cannot fully relate to the importance of John's search for redemption. I am a white, cis-gendered woman who does not identify as gay, and therefore, I cannot ever truly know the actuality of both Baldwin and his characters' experiences. Yet, after examining these novels, I have found that it is more important than ever for privileged, liberal-minded Americans to expose themselves to these unfamiliar narratives and continually remind themselves of how privilege can blind one to the reality of difference. In order not to exploit one's privilege, knowingly or unknowingly, one must educate oneself thoroughly by immersing oneself into literature that can expose one to a reality that they would never experience otherwise.

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