

The Cage of Reality

Nuancing Processes of Identity in James Baldwin's Fiction

Regine Lundevall Bergersen



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Regine Lundevall Bergersen

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Abstract

This thesis explores issues and processes of identity in three pieces of James Baldwin's fiction: "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962). The point of departure is Baldwin's concept of "the cage of reality," a term used to describe the ways in which society traps the individual in a mold of assigned identity, and from which one cannot escape, but can hope to be free from through acknowledgement. The processes of acknowledging or ignoring the cage of reality is what this thesis explores in central characters in these three works, and this study finds that American society is riddled with a trait Baldwin calls "preservation of innocence," translatable to a willful ignorance of the cage of reality, which explains the persistence of harmful identity norms. The key to overcoming the cage of reality is, according to Baldwin, to take responsibility, and accept that all individuals exist in a "web of ambiguity." This thesis uses critical race theory and some psychoanalytical approaches to the short story "Going to Meet the Man," and a selection of existentialist terms in the readings of *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*.

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
1 Fear and Pleasure: Identity, Race, and Violence in “Going to Meet the Man”	11
1.1 American identity: Whiteness and binaries	14
1.2 Misnaming: Subject/object	17
1.3 Fear and pleasure: Psychoanalysis	19
1.4 Dark gods: Repression, conclusion	24
2 Innocence, Authenticity, Escape: Morality and Maturity in <i>Giovanni’s Room</i>	26
2.1 Shunning metamorphosis: Preservation of innocence	28
2.2 Giovanni’s Room	38
2.2.1 Innocence and escape	39
2.2.2 Responsibility and self-deceit	44
2.2.3 Home, America, and Americans	50
3 American Relationality and Mature Love in <i>Another Country</i>	54
3.1 Immaturity: Richard as safe and boyish	59
3.2 Struggle: Vivaldo as torn and insecure.....	66
3.3 Love: Eric as authentic and accomplished	76
Conclusion	81
Works cited	83

Introduction

*We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed.*¹

The universality of James Baldwin's talent is still being discovered by new generations today. In 2016 alone, two Baldwin-related works were released: The Academy Award-nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, compiled from Baldwin's unpublished notes and edited by director Raoul Peck, and the essay collection *The Fire This Time*, edited by author Jesmyn Ward and inspired by Baldwin's essay collection *The Fire Next Time* (1962). In addition to this, a 2015 memoir named *Between the World and Me* gained its author, Ta-Nehisi Coates, praise by none other than Nobel laureate Toni Morrison herself as the new James Baldwin.² What these three releases have in common is their focus on the black experience in U.S. society, and more specifically, the importance of James Baldwin as voice and representative for the black citizens of America. What these releases lack, however, is a sufficient acknowledgement of the almost unlimited spectrum of Baldwin's identities. As critic Robert J. Corber notes: "Baldwin's emphasis on the contradictory and refractory nature of sexuality makes his classification by critics as a gay, an African American, or even a gay African American writer deeply problematic. At the very least, such categories gloss over the complexity of his life and work" (168). Baldwin's complexity encompassed more than just race and sexuality, but Corber's point that this is problematic is, as I see it, still valid today. The fact of the matter is that Baldwin's identity was so complex and nuanced that it will always be reductive to limit a reading of him to only one or two labels.

The problematic nature of categorization touches upon my own personal experience with Baldwin: I was first exposed to Baldwin as a young and naïve student in my second year of university, reading *Giovanni's Room* for my "Homotextuality" course. I remember looking up the author only after completing the novel, and to my subsequent surprise realized that it had been written by a black man. I was immediately arrested by my reaction, and it spurred my fascination for Baldwin: Why had I been surprised of the color of the author's skin? Had I thought that an author's ethnicity would decide the characters they could and could not write?

¹ Baldwin: "Everybody's Protest Novel." p. 16.

² The quote reads: "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates." The full quote can be found on the book jacket of *Between the World and Me*, as well as in the 2015 article by Benjamin Wallace-Wells.

From that moment on, my approach to literature changed, and I began to question my assumptions which turned out to be both rewarding and productive. So, when this much beloved author became a name of renewed interest in 2016, I was thrilled, only to become slightly disappointed by the narrowness of the representation he got in mainstream media. It is a difficult line to walk, because his nonfiction, which inspired all three works above, was highly political, and highly focused on the black experience and racial tensions in U.S. society. I do not in any way wish to retract from that. I do, however, wish to examine his fiction, where I find a complex and nuanced presentation of the difficulties inherent in the processes of identity formation for all individuals, and particularly individuals in U.S. society. As my surprise stemmed from the eloquence with which Baldwin portrayed even the white characters in his fiction, I became fascinated with the idea of exploring the ways in which Baldwin diagnoses and portrays the reasons for the “white straight male’s” processes of identity formation. I will show that Baldwin’s fiction identifies a trait inherent in American individuals, called “preservation of innocence,” which can help explain the persistence of harmful identity norms. This trait stems from the concept of the “cage of reality,” a term used to describe the way all individuals are born into a society from whose rules and norms they cannot escape. This cage labels all individuals, and it is a tool of oppression meant to maintain the status quo of white supremacy and heteronormativity. Baldwin poses the conscious and authentic individual’s acknowledgement of this cage as the only way we might hope for a betterment of the cage of reality.

In this thesis, then, I have selected three pieces of fiction that I believe present a good representation of these traits in Baldwin’s white characters. For the first chapter, I have chosen the short story “Going to Meet the Man” (1965), a story that allows me to set the scene of my study. In it, I find a wide but concise coverage of what I call the “status quo” of U.S. society, as well as an example of how the cage of reality destroys not only the underprivileged categories of individuals, but also the individuals it is supposed to favor, seen in the white straight male supremacist Jesse. This status quo is then challenged by the work I examine in chapter two, *Giovanni’s Room* (1952). This novel, while published earlier than “Going to Meet the Man,” functions as a natural extension to the issues raised in “Going to Meet the Man.” Both stories focus on their one white protagonist, but *Giovanni’s Room* is more extensive, both due to its length but also its subject matter. The protagonist is David, a white male who is confronted by the struggle between a desire to stay sheltered as a white supposedly straight male, and an authentic but unsafe life as a homosexual. The third chapter then takes the collected findings of the preceding two and goes further beyond them in an

even wider array of identity issues, through the longer novel *Another Country* (1963). It is a natural successor to the two previous works, as the gallery of characters is expanded, and the issues presented in the former two chapters are presented even more complex and nuanced. The main character of this chapter is the white sexually ambiguous Vivaldo, who, like David, is torn between two conflicting directions: The status quo, represented by the white straight male Richard, and the authentic life, represented by the white homosexual (but also sexually ambiguous) Eric. This is, I find, the only place where Baldwin infuses some sense of hope, and thus it serves as the perfect ending to the thesis. Before I begin these analyses, however, I will discuss identity formation, the role of literature in this, and briefly introduce some of the central terms employed in this thesis.

Identity, theory, and terms

What defines who we are? How do we take our shape, and become our own individual? The central term in these questions is identity, and it is arguably one of the most central and important concepts for humankind. Identity is a term supposed to adequately cover what makes an individual just that, individual. However, identity is a complex concept, and it is hard to determine exactly what the term entails. Some core traits, however, are easy to agree upon: Identity is simultaneously a personal and internal aspect, as well as an external and assigned role. This is what we might call the “paradox of identity.” I wish to explore what this means for the individual’s processes of identity formation. As I will show in this thesis through Baldwin’s fiction, this paradox of identity can be difficult to come to terms with, as it brings into question everything you take for granted, but it is a struggle all individuals must go through. First, however, I will discuss my usage of the term identity, and some of the related issues relevant for my study.

On the basic level of definition, identity is fairly simple to define, as seen here from the dictionary: “the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another;” “condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that distinguish or identify a person or thing;” “the sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time and sometimes disturbed in mental illnesses, as schizophrenia” (PRH Dictionary 2015). In other words, identity is what makes us our own individual, something that makes us stand out, a specific collection of factors that make up our self and not someone else’s. These

factors are all bound together by our consciousness and experience, and this individual experience is the summation of the individual.

A crucial aspect of identity formation is the disconnection between what we think it is and what it actually is. We might think that we create our own identity or have an inherent “essence,” but the nature of society is that it will always assign us an identity, regardless of what we might say. In this way, we also exist through others’ perception of us. However, it is important to recognize the intimate nature of identity, proving that it is crucial to be aware and active in the processes of shaping and developing one’s identity. The active involvement in the processes of one’s own identity formation is central to an **inclusive** society. The paradox of identity is seen in this dualistic relationship between external and internal forces, and whereas the internal forces seem self-evident, the external forces are more difficult to define. What are these external forces, and how much do they really shape us? On the most basic level, external factors can be family, culture, and society, and more importantly, identity categories. Internal factors can be said to include personal feelings, sexual identity, gender identity, racial identity, and more. It is thus important to note the distinction between the assigned identity that is imposed on us, and the self-knowledge inherent in how we identify ourselves relating to these categories.

Furthermore, according to Baldwin, identity is a kind of cage we are forced into by society, and though we cannot escape this cage (-of reality, see the initial quote on page 1), we can become aware, and thus own it. This will in turn provide us with a better and fuller understanding both of ourselves and of others around us, as well as giving us a chance to take more charge of our identity formation. By assuming responsibility for one’s own identity formation, one effectively makes the processes of identification better for all other individuals as well. Through Baldwin’s fiction we see that if enough individuals become aware of the cage of reality and assume their individual responsibilities, the hopes of improving the oppressive nature of the cage of reality gradually become better.

Both the internal and external factors all contribute to a sense of self, and in many ways, our sense of self is the most central part of our identity. It is important to recognize the importance of a clear sense of self, and its importance to our happiness. When we feel sure of our self, we are better prepared to be productive members of society. There is a Baldwin quote in *The Devil Finds Work* which shows a good approach to the workings of identity, and how he himself related to it:

Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's

nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes. (77)

This metaphor is effective in showing the power of the sense of self. With a strong sense of self, or in Baldwin's words, the "trust in one's nakedness," we are free to shape and form our own identity – or wear different robes. Because, as he said of authors attempting to write neatly categorized characters, "...people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion" ("Preservation of Innocence" 600). This could be translated to the idea that we should "wear" an identity loosely, giving room for different ways to interpret the clothing. We know that the first impression we give others is affected by the clothes we wear, which is why those clothes should allow for our real self to be discernible beneath. As I will show, Baldwin argues that we each have a responsibility to ourselves and others to accept and explore the various aspects of our identity, even when it is scary. The loose-fitting robes can be challenging, but ultimately liberating, if we only allow ourselves to explore what lies beneath. So when we know our place we, humans being simple animals after all, are most comfortable and capable of doing good. However, as we will see in Baldwin's fiction, uncertainty is healthy for a continued self-exploration and thus a heightened awareness of how our identity evolves and affects us and others. The productivity of uncertainty, however, is to be distinguished from fear, which is a more paralyzing factor, capable of freezing us into silent submission to society's cage.

Yet, while the individual is its own person, it also longs for a sense of belonging, and community. If you follow the norm, this will usually come easy, but if you fail to follow the narrow definition set by society, you can risk becoming marginalized. While movements for the past fifty years has given much pride to being "different," it still stands as a truth that individuals seek community and like-mindedness – even while being different. A good and healthy identity will thus be a state where the individual's internal *and* external factors are aligned, giving the individual security in its own sense of self and – crucially – that this identity is accepted and supported by the external factors.

However, the matter becomes complicated as we try to determine whether for instance sexual identity is an external or an internal factor, because, as I will argue, until we become aware, we are mostly forced into a framework by external factors and the cage of reality. For instance, living in a heteronormative society will have decided that an individual born as a man should have a heterosexual identity and be attracted to women. If this does not match with the individual's internal feelings, for instance an attraction to men, this will in time

almost certainly make the individual feel like an outsider, and the position of outsider is an undesirable state.

Another obstacle is the undeniable externality of the individual's appearance, most pointedly the color of their skin. This is where internal and external factors might come at odds with each other and potentially alienate the individual from itself. Because the color of one's skin is a biological fact and an external factor, but also an external factor that might be at odds with internal feelings, it is clear just how delicate this predicament can be. This can give room for a discussion on the struggle to come to terms with it, as mentioned above, and this idea is a theme recognizable in all of Baldwin's work: The struggle with our processes of identity formation. Michele Elam has an insightful reading of Baldwin's approach to race:

Baldwin takes as a given that race is not an a priori characteristic, and therefore both his fiction and nonfiction rarely describe race in terms of physical features or innate characteristics. Instead, his writings represent how race is a phenomenon performed, enacted, and maintained not only by social structures and institutions but also through the everyday actions and interactions often invisibly informed by them. (7)

This connects well with the approach I make in this thesis, as it accentuates the ways in which Baldwin proves the performative nature of race, and as an extension of this that whiteness is not a biological factor, but a label of power. Still we must acknowledge that because of the continuous struggle between wanting to adapt and be accepted, and finding and staying true to one's "true self," the individual is under constant pressure in an oppressive society. I will explore how this struggle manifests itself differently in the different characters, as their assigned identities comes with them a different set of struggles.

So we have seen that the concept of identity is a divided thing, which is what I call the paradox of identity. On the one hand, one should be free to be oneself, to become oneself, free from all identity categories and social norms that shape society. On the other hand, this proves nearly impossible, because our identity is also thrust upon us, effectively encaging us. This concept can be further elaborated into two branches, seen in the discord between 1), the desire and/or necessity to know and acknowledge your background and by extension your identity category's history; this is what I simply call "history"; and 2), the belief in all individual's' individuality, and that there is a universal desire to let the individual be its own self; this I call the "universality of identity." By this I mean that identity is simultaneously the same and completely different for all individuals, meaning that individuality, without interference in the process of creating each owns identity, is arguably a universal desire. Thus the opposition can be summed up as a desire and/or necessity to educate oneself about one's

identity categories, and the desire to simply come into one's identity without the interference of any external factors. This is also related to the struggle I mentioned above.

The paradox of identity can thus be summated as this: We are all born without any initial identity categories, but from the very first moments of our lives, we are effectively trapped in the cage of society. We cannot escape this cage, but we can recognize it and become aware. This awareness can give us more freedom and thus a fuller and better life, not narrowed by the inevitable cage. It can be translated into Baldwin's clothes metaphor – the awareness functions like the loose-fitting robes, allowing us to “feel our nakedness beneath.” In an ideal world we would be free to grow up and form our identity without being particularly aware of or troubled by the cage. Yet there will always be a degree of the inevitable paradox of identity, and this marks the transition from innocence to maturity. This theme is central to Baldwin's writing and it will run as a red thread throughout this thesis.

The imbalance between history and universality of identity is translated into a study of privilege. The individuals in a position of power and privilege, seen through Baldwin's fiction to often be the white straight male, will feign innocence and “colorblindness” and other inherently problematic positions which allows the status quo to go on. They have the luxury of upholding the universality of identity over history, due to their privileged position. Their counterparts, i.e. the people oppressed by the same power that upholds the privileged, is in Baldwin's fiction often the black people, but also other disenfranchised characters trapped by the cage of reality. They are forced to accept more of the history and less of the universality of identity. This imbalance is what Baldwin challenges in his fiction, and as we will see, he manages to present a convincing alternative that goes a way towards solving the paradox of identity.

Finally, a diverging but important aspect is how literature can help shape our identity, as well as how it can teach us valuable lessons and provide us access to other ways of thinking about identity. The importance of (literary) community and responsibility in the ways we shape and form our identity is also significant to our identity formation. We might return, then, to the example I mentioned above, with the man born into the assigned identity of a heterosexual, but whose internal and external factors do not co-operate. In his society where heterosexuality is the norm, where can he turn in order to assess his personal feelings? One place can be literature. Literature can give us access to the processes of identity formation in other people than ourselves, and this is invaluable. We can gain knowledge of other ways of being that would otherwise be hard to find. Literature provides us with a personal and intimate way of getting to know the subject's identity, which few other media can provide. So

in the case above, reading literature about a character who does not fit in with the rules of society can help him become aware and thus provide him with insight and help form his own identity, on his terms. Literature (and other art) can thus help us take a hold of our experiences and use them to shape our identity.

Simultaneously, literature creates community. There is an important sense of community in groups who have read the same literature, because they will then share important experiences. Due to the nature of literature, both the individual and thus by extension a community/group can experience things they were previously unable to due to a lack of representation in their immediate community. Thus we might say that if your immediate community lacks representation for you to relate to, literature can provide you with that sense of security. When this representation is experienced and shared by your peers, you effectively share and help overcome that barrier. Furthermore, community is also an integral part of your identity formation, an idea seen in Freud, who says:

In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first Individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well—in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words. (Freud 69)

It is no secret that we are influenced by those around us, but as Freud contends, we will always measure against others in our formation, so that our individual formation can be extended to a larger group as well. This idea connects with the paradox of identity, where the individual is expected to familiarize themselves with their collective history, or as I phrase it, the history of their identity category. It is fair to claim that this is more or less impossible to avoid, but as we see with Freud's group psychology, this collective thinking has an enormous influence on the individual identity formation. This can be both "good" and "bad," but either way, the effects of this should be explored. As I will show in this thesis, this explains how the preservation of innocence, bad faith, and the upholding of oppressive systematic social structures is upheld, and this is what Baldwin exposes effectively in his fiction. Because literature and language both influence how we create and shape our identity, we can use them to recognize the structures that create, shape and perpetuate identity categories in society today. Literature can also give us access to the processes by which people shape their identity for themselves, through all sorts of different perspectives, and this is essential in providing us with a wide variety of perspectives that can teach us about the workings of identity in people other than ourselves. Culture and identity are fundamental concepts in literature, which is precisely why it is so rewarding to study them through literature.

In looking at identity in relation to literature, there are two ways to approach it: The ways in which literature shapes our identity, and what literature tells us about identity. I expand upon this, particularly the second point, in relation to Baldwin. The first point is that literature can give us access to the processes through which individuals form their identity, i.e. how they recognize, acknowledge, and come to terms with it – or fail to come to terms with it. The second point is how this access provides us with tools to relate to our identity, as well as how we might take control of it and become aware. What Baldwin does with his literature can be compared to what Baldwin himself said of Billie Holiday:

Billie Holiday was a poet. She gave you back your experience. ...She refined it, and you recognized it for the first time because she was in and out of it and she made it possible for you to bear it. And if you could bear it, then you could begin to change it. That's what a poet does. ...these people gave it back to you and they get you from one place to another. (The Black Scholar 155)

This idea of giving someone back their experience is important when reading Baldwin. Particularly for his black readers, but also for all individuals who experience being assigned an identity, this is a central point to what Baldwin does with his literature. This proves that Baldwin's literature can be used as a tool to shape the reader's identity, and also to help the individual become more aware of their experience – as well as the experiences of their identity categories. It is not bad to find oneself in an identity category, as long as one has made the conscious decision to accept and embrace it. Baldwin shows through his fiction that all individuals have the power and choice to explore themselves and their true place.

In summation, I wish to repeat Baldwin's quote that forms the foundation of this thesis: "We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 16). This is a perfect description of what I see as the paradox of identity. Our "shape," i.e. our identity, takes shape within and against the reality, i.e. society, we are born into. But this society, history and norms, can be a cage, and we must see it for what it truly is in order to become aware of it. We cannot escape it, but we can take the experience and own it – and to do this, we can see it filtered through the prism of literature. Becoming aware of the cage can help it become more like the loose-fitting robes, rather than a constricting straitjacket.

The paradox of identity is thus closely related to the idea of the cage of reality, showing that these two central terms belong together. Accepting the inevitability of the cage of reality, we can see that our identity is shaped by the race and ideology we are born into,

and the ruling ideas of society will give us a sense of being superior or inferior. Baldwin sees how the racial divide in America, and the American identity, is built on the clear distinction between the binary oppositions of black and white. This is what I will explore now in chapter one, using critical race theory and selected terms from psychoanalysis to determine the contributing factors to the upholding of this binary. Baldwin provides us insight into a specific moment in US history in which questions of identity were all-encompassing and formative. He expertly shows the ways in which our identity is fragmented and composited of many different factors. I wish to focus on the difficulties related to our identity formation, how this is influenced and limited by the cage of reality, and furthermore, how Baldwin's fiction presents the effects and possible solutions to this seemingly inescapable structure.

1 Fear and Pleasure: Identity, Race, and Violence in “Going to Meet the Man”

In U.S. society, racial identity is one of the most unavoidable and determining factors an individual experiences, while simultaneously being one of the factors that are undeniably unchangeable. While the permanence of the fact is hard to fight, it is important to recognize the way U.S. society has given it such enormous influence. Simply put, the racial identity category is one of the biggest contributing factors to what Baldwin called the cage of reality. We remember this central quote from the introduction: “We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed” (“EPN” 16). In this thesis, I use the cage of reality as a symbol for society’s insistence upon assigning and upholding identity categories regardless of the individual’s sense of self.

While the insistence upon the category is an issue in itself, the violence that comes as a result of it is frightening. What Baldwin manages to an impressive extent is to give his readers insight into the mentality not only of the black victims of racial violence, but also its white perpetrators – and, I will partly argue, fellow victims. As this thesis thus attempts to acknowledge and highlight Baldwin’s before-his-time approach to identity, race, and the identity politics of American society, and because of his profound insight and dualistic approach to the problem, I find that his 1965 short story “Going to Meet the Man” effectively summarizes and provides a frighteningly accurate insight into the workings of racial violence and race relations in U.S. society. It is a testament to his genius that this short story manages so effectively and comprehensively to present the issue, making it a valuable point of departure for my study of the processes of identity in U.S. society.

As my study will show, the concepts of racial violence and American identity are undeniably interconnected. In fact, I argue that dominant forms of American identity are fundamentally, structurally, and grammatically racist. As Toni Morrison stated: “In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate” (*The Guardian* 29 Jan. 1992). American identity relies heavily on the white/black binary and the constructed hierarchy between these two signifiers. I will explore this idea of binaries using multiple approaches, in order to better grasp the processes of identification and justification of these

two key concepts. Furthermore, I will show how we might productively employ “Going to Meet the Man,” and by extension literary fiction, as a basis for an investigation of the processes of race, violence, and American identity. Baldwin’s story, aided by the works of several key critics, will provide evidence for the statement that American identity is constitutively racist. I also show how Baldwin’s story highlights how problematic this structure is for both black and white people, creating an effective statement against institutionalized racism and its problematic relation to American identity. This chapter thus functions to establish how the issues in U.S. society I examine in this thesis are largely based on the way processes of identity formation function through the cage of reality.

Because language and literature both influence how we create and shape our identity, we can use them to recognize the structures that create, shape and perpetuate racial identity and violence today. Our identity is shaped by the norms of the status quo we are born into, and the ruling ideas of identity (categories) will give us a sense of being superior or inferior, subject or object. As touched upon in the introduction, identity is a difficult concept to define, and as an extension of this, so is the concept of race. This thesis relates to the term in a twofold way. There is a polarization between relating to race as either biological, or linguistic (in Spillers’ definition, expanded upon below). Omi and Winant opt to find a definition somewhere in the middle:

The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, let us propose a definition: race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called "phenotypes"), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. (Omi and Winant 123)

Thinking about race in this way accepts the physical and visual “biological differences,” while seeing that the labels being put upon said differences are always a social and historical process. This can then be well extended into critic Hortense Spillers’ point, which is that the upholding of race as an unconquerable divide is possible through language, and thus that race exists partly through language, because language is power. She also shows how language is violence, which perpetuates, validates, and functions as violence, and that this violence functions as a tool for distinguishing between the two races.

This link between language and race can appear hard to grasp, but anthropologist Samy Alim presents a new approach in the book *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race*, co-edited with John Rickford and Arnetha Ball. He explains in an

interview with Stanford News that “raciolinguistics examines how language shapes race and how race shapes language,” and that there is a need to understand “that there is a close relationship between race, racism and language and how these processes impact our lives across domains like politics and education” (Shaskevich 27 Dec. 2016). The basis for Alim’s raciolinguistics field is the current state of American society, which he sees as both “hyperracial” and “hyperracializing.” These two terms are particularly useful when one attempts to analyze the situation in American society, both in Baldwin’s time and today. Alim further sees how “when the U.S. elected its first black president eight years ago, many proclaimed the U.S. to be a “postracial” society, where race doesn’t matter” but that every social indicator proves this to be untrue. He sees that “rather than *postracial*, American society is in fact *hyperracial* or *hyperracializing*. That is, we are constantly orienting to race while at the same time denying the overwhelming evidence that shows the myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it.” This idea that U.S. society is postracial can be seen as similar to the claim of many individuals that they are “colorblind,” but this is a problematic perception, which riddles U.S. society today. However, in Baldwin’s context, this hypocrisy is connected to what I later refer to as the white denial of relationality, or the white man’s repression of the “dark gods.”

Key terms for Alim and his co-editors seem to be *transgressive* and *transracial* – both applied to a new kind of politics that “considers both the powerful ways that race is taken up by people of color in contexts of racial inequality and the ways that we challenge the very process of racial categorization itself. Race is both a social construct and an important social reality. So how do we develop a new politics around that in this current moment?” This challenge for developing a new politics is further developed in their book, but what we see in this excerpt provides sufficient coverage for the purposes of this thesis. It serves to show that efforts are made today to do something about the status quo that has reigned supreme since Baldwin’s time.

Returning to the formation of identity, we know that literature can also give us access to the processes by which people shape their identity for themselves, through all sorts of different perspectives, and this is essential in providing us with a wide variety of perspectives that can teach us about the workings of identity formation in people other than ourselves. Culture and identity are fundamental concepts in literature, which is precisely why it is so rewarding to study them through literature. In this chapter, then, I have chosen a three-way approach. As I have a closer look at the idea of American identity and the grounds on which it is built I will use critics Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Sylvia Wynter. As I explore the

binary opposition of black and white, a further investigation of the subject/object binary is necessary, and to this I apply Hortense Spillers and Wynter once more. As I arrive at the dark core of violence and psychoanalysis, the product of the aforementioned concepts, Robyn Wiegman and Spillers once again are relevant. This last section will be based in part on principles from Freudian psychoanalysis.

What this chapter attempts to answer is how and why racial violence is such an integral part of American identity and society today through the fiction of James Baldwin. What allows these atrocities to be committed, both historically and today? In what ways can we better learn and understand this situation through Baldwin's fiction? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, and "Going to Meet the Man" is the perfect material. As there are many layers to this story, reminiscent of the psychology of the mind, I shall begin on the surface level. In the end I hope to have achieved a significant insight into the mind of the white man and the workings of racial violence.

1.1 American identity: Whiteness and binaries

The processes through which we shape and are given our identity is crucial to our understanding of both American and racial identity. A central recognition is the one that James Baldwin pointedly and precisely makes in his article "On Being White... And Other Lies:" "No one was white before he/she came to America" (1984). He argues that the immigrants who came to America made a moral choice to identify themselves together as a community – though they were all from different countries originally and with vastly different cultures – to create a racial elite "because of the necessity of denying the black presence and justifying the black subjugation." This notion is still valid today, as Eula Biss observes in her aptly named article "White Debt:" "For me, whiteness is not an identity but a moral problem" (2015). The point Baldwin makes shows how whiteness is a social construct, an imaginary community, born out of a need to subdue the black population of America.

This begs the question: where does this desire for hierarchy come from? "Going to Meet the Man" provides us with a partial answer. Baldwin's immense talent as a writer is crystallized in this story, evident in how he manages to give the reader conflicting reactions in their relationship to the unsympathetic yet ambiguous protagonist, the white police officer Jesse. What Baldwin elegantly portrays are the ways in which our identity is imposed on us, making us into people we have not consciously chosen to become. As he stated: "you cannot

escape the pathology of a country in which you're born" (Meade and Baldwin 1971). Being born in America, you become a member of a nation in which your role is given to you even before you are born. This is perhaps why the reader is capable of feeling some degree of sympathy for Jesse: It was impossible for him to escape the ruling episteme, his father, and his given role as "superior white man" in the U.S., because we remember that Baldwin says we cannot escape the cage of reality. However, we can become aware – which I believe Jesse does not – but this is a point I will explore a bit further on.

The most accessible theme of the short story is how the system of identities in the US intimately affects both black and white individuals. This is clear in the opposition between Jesse and his black childhood friend Otis, with whom he used to play in the dirt and whom Jesse saw as "knowing everything" (243). When Jesse and his family are driving to the lynching, Jesse asks where Otis is and says that he has not done anything – to which his father replies: "Otis *can't* do nothing, he's too little." There is truth in this, but Jesse's father also knows the necessity of initiation and of learning one's place: "We just want to make sure Otis *don't* do nothing" (240). This section shows how he is indeed young and innocent, not yet aware that there is any difference between the "races" – and it further shows how the older generation knows the importance of teaching the children their place before they have a choice. Thus Jesse is initiated into a world of white supremacy; he is trapped in the cultural grammar, and the marrow of tradition is passed down from father to son. This is shown in the grand wording of how Jesse feels afterwards: "He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever" (248). Jesse later goes on to become a police officer like his father, and the older police officers "were his models" (236). The importance of his father and his colleagues prove the significance of tradition in passing on white supremacy. The importance of Jesse's father will be further explored later on.

The sympathy for Jesse, and thus in extension "the white man" in general, stems from Baldwin's delicate descriptions of Jesse's past and present. It is important to note the narrative point of view – Baldwin allows us to know Jesse's thoughts through a third-person narration, letting the reader get to know him but not allowing him to narrate himself. This is also effective in the way it reflects the subconscious workings of Jesse's white identity. His childhood memories haunt him to this day, which is clear in how the black people's singing – torturing him now that he is a grown man – was "the sound with which he was most familiar – though it was always the sound of which he had been least conscious – and it had always contained an obscure comfort" (235). This comfort of Jesse the child becomes a discomfort to

Jesse the adult, because he has now taken his role as superior. When he worked for the mail-order house he even used to give the black children candy, though he now wishes he had poisoned it: Those children are the ones he struggles with today (231). This coming together of the past and present shows how there is a repressed side of Jesse dormant inside, the child who did not get to choose sides in a battle he had no choice but to join. The story seems to say that this is how whiteness works – it initiates him into the culture and hierarchy, thus perpetuating the status quo.

However, while tradition and initiation explains whiteness to some degree, there is more beneath the surface. A significant foundation for my study lies in the binary opposition of black and white, stemming from structuralist principles of difference which defines a sign by what it is *not* – so white is white because it is not black. White is the signifier that all other signifiers define themselves in relation to, or as critic Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks phrases it: “The structure of racial difference is founded on a master signifier – Whiteness – that produces a logic of differential relations. Each term in the structure establishes its reference by referring back to the original signifier. ... [which] subtends the binary opposition between “people of color” and “white”” (20). White American identity thus relies heavily on its status as the master signifier, which also explains why immigrants would choose to come together in a constructed and false white community. In a world where white is the master signifier, those who have the possibility of claiming a white identity will most likely do so. This assumption, however, will be challenged in the next two chapters, where the matter is proven to be even more complex, and more a question of morality rather than inevitability.

The critic Sylvia Wynter discusses and elaborates this binary in terms of a division between master and slave. For the white man the role of master is the Place of the Norm, and all deviations from the Norm are frowned upon by society. If the white man fails at upholding his role of master, that will upset the system, and he can fall into being the Non-Norm, i.e., black, i.e. slave (152): “The certainty of the self as master can only be obtained by and through the constant cultural and emotional terrorism directed at the Non-Norm. This terrorism directed at the non-norm is only the extension of the internal terrorism directed at the self, of its psychic repression.” Wynter shows here that the upholding of this constructed distance does not only work at the expense of the black/slave, but also of the white/master. This is proven in Jesse’s repression of his childhood experiences of the black people, as well as himself. Yet it is not only his childhood Jesse represses, but also darker sexual and violent urges, as I elaborate on in the final part.

1.2 Misnaming: Subject/object

Baldwin's story explores the question of how and why the cultural grammar of race came to be. To help elaborate on this understanding I employ Hortense Spillers' 1987 article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers investigates the American racial system, attempting to find the background and reasons for the way black people – specifically the women – have been perceived and treated in the US. One of Spillers' key concepts is the 'American grammar book,' which can be described as the ways in which the ruling 'grammar'/episteme decides and constructs how we think about race and identity. This cultural grammar lays the foundation that both white and black identities are based upon, and one of the key grammatical differences lays in the treatment of white as subject, and black as object. During slavery this difference in perception was quite literal, as the Africans brought to America as slaves were legal properties of the slave owners. The American grammar started here, by white people treating – and more importantly, perceiving – them as cargo and objects to be sold. This grammar, facilitating the transformation from 'human being' to 'object' then further perpetuated the idea that the black people were objects to be acted upon. Slavery – and the violence and brutality inflicted through it – was 'justified' through this grammar. Furthermore, the grammar of objectification did not end with slavery. This grammar has lasted until today, and continues to perpetuate racial violence in contemporary American society. Wynter's article confirms this in how the Norm is white as *master* and black as *slave*.

This thesis sees a connection between Spillers' grammar book concept and Baldwin's cage of reality. The cage of reality, the ruling episteme, is bequeathed us at our birth, and it is impossible to escape it, as Baldwin proves with Jesse and which Spillers later confirms with her grammar book. However, you can become aware and acknowledge the cage/grammar, and only then can change be conceivable. Spillers further illustrates how words, language, naming, or more specifically *misnaming*, all function historically as tools for white people to oppress black people: Both by keeping language from them, and through using it against them. This is a tendency that has lived on until today, and thus language – this grammar book, or the ruling episteme – is what perpetuates racism even today. Because the US systematically insists on assigning the object position to black people there is a pathological grammar of division in the US culture.

Spillers' main point regards to how, with the power to name and misname black people, one effectively defines them as objects or possessions to be acted upon. Both black

and white American identities are seen in light of this subject/object relationship today. Seeing as language shapes our perception of the named, it follows then that when we misname black people we effectively dehumanize them and turn them into objects. The problem of racism is rooted in how black people are consigned to a passive role. Misnaming is a way of taking away someone's identity, of disrespecting and dehumanizing them by employing slurs or nicknames that they do not self-identify with. In many ways it is a form of violence. As you add the idea of black subjects as objects, in addition to the myths and misnamings that have been given/forced upon them throughout history, there is little wonder that violence will grow out of this dynamic. The historical continuity that Spillers shows us is what keeps the racism alive today. It is also important to see that history, culture, violence, slavery and racism all are interconnected, which is what I refer to as the cage of reality.

I return, then, to Jesse and "Going to Meet the Man," where there is one scene in particular that incorporates the ideas discussed above. The power to misname is inherent to the power of whiteness and violence. This is a power that Jesse has known all his life, as evident in the flashback scene where he asks for "Old Julia." He is working as a mailman, and approaching a house to make a delivery he asks the boy in front: "Old Julia home?" The boy – the same boy as the man he brutalizes in the future, a civil rights leader – refuses to acknowledge Jesse's misnaming: "Don't no Old Julia live here." In a shocking turn of events for Jesse, the boy goes on to misname Jesse right back: "white man" (234). This episode thoroughly shakes Jesse to the core. The scene is described as an extreme estrangement on Jesse's part; his lack of control and power makes him dizzy; it is described as a "nightmare." While nothing external has changed, it all becomes strange to Jesse without the symbolic order of his mastery. All he knows of the world is turned upside-down when this boy claims the power of misnaming for himself. The power of misnaming, and thus, according to Spillers, the power of violence, belongs to the master signifier/the place of the Norm, i.e. the master white man Jesse. When this black child thus refuses to acknowledge Jesse's power by not acknowledging the use of "Old Julia" and continues to reverse it by misnaming Jesse as "white man," it is a failure on Jesse's behalf to uphold his place of the Norm. This effectively places him in the Non-Norm, the place of the slave, and he feels the power of misnaming and objectification, this time on the receiving end. It appears to be the first time Jesse experiences this, and it must be a significant reminder for him since he remembers it the same day that he has abused and violated the same child, now as a man.

It is thus evident how the use of generalizing terms is a show of mastery and superiority as well as a continuing confirmation of the person being misnamed as inferior. The loss of

this power over the boy is therefore a powerful scene that heavily impacts Jesse. When this same boy is the victim of Jesse's brutality years later, his will can still not be bent: He refuses to tell the black people outside to stop singing, and he still calls Jesse "white man." The reader learns that this episode is what makes Jesse so restless as he is lying in bed, showing that he is concerned about the stability of his superior position. This concern proves that Spillers' grammar book is thoroughly incorporated in the processes through which his identity is shaped. If one becomes aware of this grammar book – how we think and act in (U.S.) society today – and the cage of reality, we might attain a broader awareness. This awareness – both of the grammar book and the cage of reality – can gain us a valuable understanding of the cultural grammar that rules how we think about race and identity. We must use our awareness to study texts for symptoms of the ruling episteme, and only *then* can we hope to achieve any change to the cage of reality that rules our society. This is what we see when we use Baldwin's story, and literature in general, to look productively at the issues of racial violence today.

1.3 Fear and pleasure: Psychoanalysis

"He began to sweat. He felt an overwhelming fear, which yet contained a curious and dreadful pleasure" (239). This is Jesse's response when his mind starts remembering the lynching scene as he is lying in bed, after his unsuccessful sexual attempts with his wife. The mix of fear and pleasure is the red thread in his memory of that scene, pervading his relationship to sexuality, his parents, black women and men, and violence. This disturbing and uncomfortable mix of feelings is the most elusive, yet also the most interesting part of the story. I argue that this aspect displays the most unsuspected and dramatic way that a person is twisted by the system of American identity and racial violence, and I believe this is Baldwin's ultimate and most effective argument in this story.

To begin to understand the background for Jesse's conflicting feelings, I use Robyn Wiegman's article "The Anatomy of Lynching," which investigates the workings behind the act of lynching. She argues that it is sexual and gendered sameness between the black and the white man that is the biggest threat to the white man. The white man thus builds up the idea of the black man as hypersexual and threatening, only to tear him down again – or rather, castrate and kill him in the most brutal way. Essentially it is an inflation of false sexuality, before ritual and literal castration. The act of lynching works in a way that gives the white

man the power of authority, evident in how he both creates and neutralizes the problem, resulting in a confirmation of his masculinity. Wiegman defines the lynching as a “psychosexual drama of masculinity that underwrites the lynching and castration of black men” (446); in other words, it is an act used to uphold white masculinity and authority, not an “appropriate” punishment for a crime. This is further supported by critic Nicholas Boggs who, reading “Going to Meet the Man,” sees that the “black victim is deprived of his masculinity by virtue of castration that is enacted through the white man’s myth of black sexuality; by castrating the black man, the white sheriff gains access to the sexual power he otherwise lacks” (149). This proves the unhealthy motivations of the lynching act and further shows the permanent damage it has done to a man’s mind and sexuality.

While race and American identity are historical, cultural, and institutional, one must accept that the psychological aspect *must* be present for the system to work. The cultural grammar does indeed have roots in history, but also in how it permeates the mind. I find that there are clear traces of Freudian ideas in Baldwin’s short story, and I believe it is rewarding to explore the psychoanalytical aspects of the subject Jesse. Yet first, a disclaimer must be made: One must be careful in relying to a high degree solely on the individual psyche, when the persistent racism and racial violence in America is cultural and institutional. However, I do believe that each case is a symptom of the bigger case, and exploring the problem on an individual level does not retract from the societal level. Particularly in reading Baldwin you must appreciate the intimacy and personal involvement with the character, and then apply the findings to society in a broader context. As previously mentioned, questions of authenticity and morality relates to and expands these aspects, and will appear in chapters two and three.

Returning, then, to the Freudian elements of the story. Granted, there are many ways to approach Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis, and this thesis is mainly involved with Freudian psychoanalysis as it has been used in relation to literature and the arts, meaning that the clinical terms are more loosely employed. Rather than diagnosing a patient, the use of Freud’s terms here can more accurately reflect the influences the author was under rather than the character’s neurosis being important itself. Critic James A. Dievler (whose essay “Sexual Exiles” will be important for chapter three in this thesis) notes that “[t]wo other components of postwar culture fed the development of rigid identity categories in the postwar period: existentialism and psychoanalysis. . . . Also, psychoanalysis became part of middle-class, mainstream experience. Baldwin’s own writing throughout this period employs the language of these schools of thought” (169). In other words, Baldwin’s writing is informed

by the trending ideas of psychoanalysis (and existentialism, which I employ in chapters two and three), but it is not reducible to it.³

It can be helpful to understand the basis for my reading of Freud in Baldwin. In Freud's early work, the terms of id/ego/superego were coined. As his work progressed, more elaborate theories were established, such as castration anxiety, father complex, penis envy, etc. For this reading, however, I find that Freud's central and most publicly claimed terms are sufficient. The concept of repression is important, both here in "Going to Meet the Man," but also partly in my next two chapters. Critic Lauren Rusk, discussing Baldwin's essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, finds that "his book diagnoses American society, especially white society, as sick with repressed knowledge and feelings about its racial relations" and that "Baldwin's psychodynamic model of his culture's pathology reflects the ideas popular at mid-century" (371). This is valid for his fiction as well, and as I find, particularly "Going to Meet the Man." The short story is also noticeably concerned with the more developed ideas of the Oedipal complex and castration. Thus we might say that even though Baldwin does not explicitly use psychoanalytical terms, their influence on the story makes them valuable to examine.

Returning, then, to the most striking detail of the story – which is how Jesse's sexuality is strangely and quite disturbingly connected with his parents, the lynched black man, and his abuse of various black people. This makes the story particularly interesting from a psychoanalytic perspective. Jesse's social, sexual, and psychological struggles are closely connected with how his identity has been shaped, and how that shape is being distorted by fear. The reader gets to know his innermost feelings, because Baldwin writes intimately, allowing the reader into the most private setting of the character, in bed with his wife. This intimacy of the setting serves to prove how thoroughly ingrained racism is. If Jesse can be said to signify the white man supported by the cage of reality, it then becomes apparent how racism has taken root in the innermost places of society – all the way into the bedroom.

³ Because the background for psychoanalysis is Victorian England with its narrow selection of patients, limited to white upper-class men and women, it seems almost absurd that this practice should and could be applied to African American people. Professor P. Sheppard says, if it should be rendered applicable for anyone else than its original demographic, it could extend to Euro-Americans at the most, and not at all to African Americans. She further criticizes the tendency to fail to acknowledge that there is no single African American identity; that African American culture itself is varied too. One psychoanalytic practice based on "African Americans" will be reductive, as there is no such thing as "one black identity." The other question one might ask is whether psychoanalysis is a desirable practice to translate and adapt at all, but arguably this is a debate that has fizzled out with the (natural) fading of psychoanalysis' popularity. What does hold some value, however, is accepting the influence of psychoanalysis on literature, particularly in the decades from 1920-1960. (82-83)

The Freudian concepts apparent in Jesse are thus both the idea of the subject's psyche (id, ego, superego), as well as the concepts of the Oedipal complex and castration anxiety. I propose a reading of the story in which the superego is represented by the father, whiteness, and the "marrow of tradition;" the ego is the ways in which Jesse embraces his superiority for his own means; and the id is the way in which he is unconsciously disturbed and twisted by the system forced upon him, i.e. the superego – the system – the American grammar book. For this final part I will focus on the id. The primal drives of the id are the strongest we feel, always repressed and sublimated by our ego and especially the superego. The two dominant drives are Eros and Thanatos, the drives for love and death. The death drive is a significant undercurrent in Jesse's psychology, as witnessed through his desire for the destruction of the black body. However, disturbingly, the distance between Eros and Thanatos appears shorter than one might assume: For Jesse, the sexual act is connected in twisted ways to black people (like when he says to his wife in bed: "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger" (249)), which is then extended to the lynching and castration of the black man he witnessed when he was young.

Furthermore, we see how the Oedipal complex and castration anxiety are reflected in Jesse and his relationship to his parents. He aspires to be like his father, in which he arguably succeeds by becoming a police officer himself as well as embracing the marrow of tradition. Yet Freudian theory sees that the Oedipal complex makes the subject simultaneously desire the mother and want to kill the father. This desire is what produces the castration anxiety, which the subject fears as punishment from the father for desiring the mother. All this fits well with Jesse, who thinks his mother "was more beautiful than he had ever seen her" (247) on the day of the lynching – indicating the Oedipal desire for the mother – which is fittingly also the day he witnesses an actual castration. This critical day of initiation into whiteness also stands for the day on which Jesse's psyche irreversibly mixes fear and pleasure together, arguably shaping and solidifying his sexuality and inner life. This connection between sexual desire and violation of the black body merges together all the main points I have gathered. The black subject is for the white man an object to be acted upon, which we also see in how he phrases that he can "pick up a black piece" (230) to satisfy his sexual needs whenever he needs it, namely when his wife is not enough "spice," as well as in the brutal beating inflicted on the civil rights leader – with a cattle prod, in itself further dehumanizing, and even more so in his thoughts: "This ain't no nigger, this is a goddamn bull" (233).

Yet this does still not fully explain why his sexual performance relies on his memories of the lynched man and the other violations he has done to black people. If the lynching and

other acts of violence upon the black body is in fact an act of confirming the masculinity and superiority of the white man, as we know from Wiegman, then I believe that the lynching scene is where we find answers. This day was a day of both fear and extreme joy for young Jesse, and his exhilaration at being initiated into the white community is rooted in this experience. Thus it goes to show that the initiation into his father's and the white people's world is undoubtedly reliant on the act of violence on the black man, both the castration act – feminize the enemy, and the murder act – defeat the enemy. Jesse relies on this memory to be able to perform sexually, and this need appears after he has remembered his earlier failure to successfully inhabit his role as master/Norm. It is apparent that he recalls the lynching scene because it signifies for him the ultimate display of white masculine power, and he draws on it to build himself up.

If we return to my statement that Jesse can signify “the white man” in general, then I further argue that the white man is in a state of crisis. Crisis is defined as “the point in the course of a serious disease at which a decisive change occurs, leading either to recovery or to death” (PRH Dictionary 2015). Arguably, this is the situation the white man has found himself in since the end of the civil war. His value and role in society had been as the protector and provider of the family, and his equilibrium was struck when his Other – the black man, his opposition – was given status as “equal man” to him. The problem then became evident in how the white man as signifier has been defined only by what he is not, and not by anything distinctly his own. The black man is known to the white man through being his lack and negation. Yet seeing the black man with the same rights as himself created a void, which within him became a psychological burden. As Wynter explains it: “But since the certainty of occupying the Place of the Norm can only be confirmed through the recognition of his mastership by the Non-Norm, the only action open to the master is to compel this recognition from the Other” (152). When this recognition was no longer bound by law, the white man, in order to hold his place as master, had to subdue and demand recognition through other means, e.g. lynching, castration, rape of black women, institutionalized incarceration, and racism. This change also demanded an even greater degree of repression and sublimation on behalf of the white man, as this was the only conceivable way for him to continue his existence as master in the Norm.

So what Baldwin eloquently presents in this short story is the difficulty the white man faces in a society that has begun to demote the white as Master signifier, and the ending of the story is arguably not a hopeful one. However, as I will explore in chapters two and three, Baldwin does have a suggestion to the problem – to acknowledge the cage of reality – but as

this story shows, it is almost impossible when it has become such a core part of one's identity. The argument can be made that Jesse is essentially a symbol of white supremacy's damage to its individuals, and as Baldwin biographer David Leeming notes:

It is important that Baldwin chose to tell "Going to Meet the Man" from the white sheriff's point of view. In all of his southern trips his novelist's instincts had gravitated to the white minds behind the racism he observed. The effects of racism on the white southerners, ... was "worse than the effect on their victims, because their souls have been "destroyed." (249)

This is a good summary of what Baldwin shows, both in this short story and in the two other works I examine in this thesis. The issue of racism does not only harm the victims of the white persecutors, but also the persecutors of racism themselves.

1.4 Dark gods: Repression, conclusion

Baldwin observes in *No Name in the Street* that what most afflicts white people is their "disastrous concept of God; they have never accepted the dark gods, and their fear of the dark gods, who live in them as surely as the white God does, causes them to distrust life. It causes them, profoundly, to be fascinated by, and more than a little frightened of the lives led by black people: it is this tension which makes them problematical" (136-7). I will take this idea further and argue that white identity demands that you continually project your id, your darkest desires and primal instincts, onto black people as a group. This enhances the distance between white and black, but comes at a price: The repression of the id drives – Baldwin's dark gods – results in bursts of racial violence, apparent in Baldwin's story and society today. It is a reaction against the pressure to uphold the Norm, and it stems from the cultural grammar – the cage of reality – that you cannot escape.

By projecting all savage and primal drives onto the black man, the white man created and upheld distance, allowing him to fashion himself as pure and noble. Yet Jesse depends on the images of the tortured black civil rights leader and the castrated and lynched black man, symbols of his white power and supremacy, to fill the void within him and thus be able to perform sexually. The implications are clear: He is nothing if not defined against his Other, and particularly against the *defeated* Other. To be able to perform he must lift a barrier in himself and incorporate "black" traits in his behavior; i.e. he must lessen the constructed distance between black and white. This proves the inconsistency and falsehood of the system:

The distance between black and white, which the American white male identity depends on, must be closed in order for him to fulfill his most primal urges.

I believe this is the moral of the story: the entangled strands of Jesse's psyche and his deep-rooted internal identity struggles is a clear example of how white American identity is constitutively racist. However, what makes the story so powerful is how Baldwin admirably manages to portray the sheer cruelty and injustices of the system not just for black people but also for white people. There must be something terribly wrong with a system that can destroy a person's moral compass to such an inhumane level, and that is the central and crucial point of "Going to Meet the Man."

Baldwin's story has now laid the foundation for this thesis by establishing the status quo and identifying the harmful identity norms that plagues the U.S. society. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, issues related to identity go way beyond the black and white binary. In the next two chapters, the characters in focus will be more ambiguous than Jesse, and I will show how Baldwin presents them as still more confronted with the morality of their identities.

2 Innocence, Authenticity, Escape: Morality and Maturity in *Giovanni's Room*

There lies a big responsibility inherent in being an individual, or perhaps more accurately, in becoming an individual. There comes a moment – or several – when the individual goes from being a child, to being a mature individual. This process of maturity is difficult, and as Simone de Beauvoir phrased it so aptly: “The child’s situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit” (1948 35). The appearance of the universe as an absolute to which one can only submit is translatable to the idea of the cage of reality, which we are familiar with from James Baldwin. The problem with this assumption is not (only) that it is wrong, but that it is an assumption each individual must consciously challenge and overcome. This choice – or non-choice, as I will explain – is an important moral component of Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room*, which I will examine in this chapter.

We remember that the previous chapter of this thesis was focused mainly on the cage of reality and how this affects all individuals. In that example, we saw the black man as the victim and the white man Jesse as both perpetrator *and* victim – victim of the cage of reality he cannot escape. However, an important detail must be mentioned regarding Jesse: He never challenges his universe. In Beauvoir’s example, he is similar to the child who submits to the “absolute” universe. This is a trait I will explore in-depth in this chapter, because the next natural step after discussing the cage of reality is how the individual could and should relate to it. We saw Jesse as the white man completely dependent upon and unquestioning of the status quo, both because it never seemed an option to question it, but also because it favored Jesse in a superior position. But what happens when the status quo/cage of reality betrays you where it previously favored you?

The main focus of this chapter is the protagonist of *Giovanni’s Room*, David. David has many of the same traits of the typical white man-figure that Jesse has, but there is one important difference: David’s sexuality. Unlike Jesse, whose dark and twisted desires is something he can keep more or less to himself, David’s true self is at odds with his assigned identity, and his attempt and failure at repressing himself has severe consequences.

Therefore, in this chapter I will build upon the findings of the last chapter, but I will expand them and note how this novel provides a more nuanced and complex approach to the issues brought up in chapter one. Despite being published before “Going to Meet the Man,” I find that *Giovanni’s Room*, when read in this succession, works as a natural extension to the issues Baldwin poses in “Going to Meet the Man.” With this structure I wish to point out how Baldwin can be read as going from the relatively simple binary of black and white, seen in “Going to Meet the Man,” onto the more complex dynamics of the two novels I discuss in this and the next chapter: *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*. In this chapter I present the argument that an inherent trait in the privileged classes of U.S. society is the idea to preserve their innocence, which here translates to a willful ignorance of the pervasive systematic structures perpetuating white straight supremacy. The conclusion to this is that no individual can accept this without being immoral, immature, and acting in bad faith, and I will show how the character of David effectively represents this trait.

The focus of this chapter, *Giovanni’s Room*, is well-known as a canonized novel in queer literature, but as always with Baldwin, there is more to it than only one label. A surprising and at the time controversial fact is that it has no black characters, a deliberate point by Baldwin, which helped him avoid the tendency to label him as only a “black writer.”⁴ However, the hetero/homo binary is not the only label challenged in *Giovanni’s Room*; every character is challenged, and especially the protagonist David, on their identity in general, and their morality specifically. By showing the different forces pulling the individual – straight, America, safe but inauthentic, vs. homosexual, Paris, authentic but unsafe – the struggle of existence becomes apparent. The struggle of the protagonist quickly becomes a striking metaphor for escape and immaturity, which are central terms in this chapter. I will show how Baldwin both explicitly in his essays and implicitly in this novel condemns the white man’s desire to “preserve his innocence” and escape his individual responsibilities, with no regard for those who are not able to make the same (non-)choices.⁵

⁴ Scholars have made many attempts at “race-ing” Baldwin’s novel, and a particularly convincing attempt is Josep M. Armengol’s 2012 article “In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*.” Armengol argues that in the novel, “race is deflected onto sexuality with the result that whiteness is transvalued as heterosexuality, just as homosexuality becomes associated with blackness” (673). This way of reading the novel is relevant, but a different approach than this thesis takes, and thus I have not included this approach in this thesis.

⁵This notion of escape, struggle, and (non-)choice is even further expanded in *Another Country*. Whereas *Giovanni’s Room* is a concise and effective message, *Another Country* is its “big brother” within which all labels fall apart. A broader gallery of characters make for a bigger web (of ambiguity), with, as we see, even fatal consequences. I believe that there is a natural progression between these three works, particularly in how the ideas and concepts develop through them.

As an appropriate bridge between the two chapters, there is Jesse, the protagonist from “Going to Meet the Man.” In chapter one I established how he embodies white supremacy, but also how his masculinity and general identity and sense of self is dependent upon the cage of reality. He is unable to acknowledge the cage, which is the only way he could have hoped to “escape” it. Instead he becomes yet another victim of the entrenched cage of reality, but by accepting the cage he also plays his part in upholding it and ensuring its continued thriving existence. Jesse comes to stand as a static character who, regretfully, neglects to fully comprehend the circumstances of his life and of society. This, as we see, destroys both him and others around him, which is what happens when one chooses to ignore the cage of reality. One could argue that the individual must not necessarily be destroyed by the cage of reality, but we can make a distinction between the immature and mature individual, which is what gives us the clearest divide. Jesse is an immature individual through his blind acceptance of the cage of reality, whereas the act of questioning one’s “universe” is a sign of maturity. This blindness can be called an attempt to preserve one’s innocence, and these terms provide a good transition to the theoretical background for this (and the next) chapter: “Preservation” of Innocence and existentialism.

2.1 Shunning metamorphosis: Preservation of innocence

To guide us into the realm of existentialism, I find that the following essay by Baldwin, which relates closely to ideas and terms which became favored by existentialism, is the perfect point of departure. “Preservation of Innocence” is an oft-overlooked essay from 1949, written by Baldwin as a companion piece to his more famous “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”⁶ This is the first time Baldwin develops the concept of innocence in his work. The essay is one part meditation on the “nature of man” and how homosexuality is perceived as unnatural, and one part a lamentation on how hypermasculinity in the US has reinforced the essentialist gender categories which makes it easy to avoid maturity – which is immoral.

The essay begins by questioning the so-called nature of man, seeing how the homosexual is perceived as unnatural, while “[b]etween nature and man there is a difference;

⁶ For an insightful analysis of the cold-war context of both “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Preservation of Innocence,” see Roderick A. Ferguson’s “The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption.” In it, Ferguson sees Baldwin’s articles as symbolic moves pointing to the “ideological and material confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the years after World War II” and that Baldwin insists on a “representational complexity that demands narrative strategies that challenge essentialist constructions of race and sexuality” (234-235).

there is, indeed, perpetual war” (594). Baldwin muses over how a natural state is “perversely indefinable” in life, and furthermore, that it is “not on the whole a state which is altogether desirable.” The essay is a strong rejection of essentialism, as well as a critique of the idea that there exists any “natural” state. As we will see, this connects Baldwin with Beauvoir’s idea that rejection of essentialism is a mark of moral maturity. Baldwin further highlights how there is a merciless paradox in the nature of the sexes; man and woman seldom function as they are supposed to, according to “their natures” (which, as he has proven, are indefinable and undesirable). This paradox can only be illuminated by experience, and the recognition of this complexity is “the signal of maturity; it marks the death of the child and the birth of the man” (597). Here we see important terms like paradox and maturity, and immediately after comes Baldwin’s main argument: One of the major American ambitions (written tongue-in-cheek by Baldwin) is to “shun this metamorphosis;” i.e.:

In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man’s estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust. (597)

What we see in this quote is the beginning of Baldwin’s idea of innocence. Here it is mentioned in relation to the relationship between man and woman; however, it can be translated and adapted to symbolize the cage of reality as well. By this I mean that the white (straight) man purposely attempts to shun the “metamorphosis,” i.e. the maturity, of seeing the true nature of things – i.e. acknowledging and becoming aware of the cage of reality. Because this maturity and knowledge does not benefit him, he tries his best to avoid this moral coming of age. What Baldwin presents here is man’s reluctance to comprehend the falsity of the gender roles assigned to men and women by society, and only by realizing that men and women transcend these narrow roles can he finally mature and be “birthed as a man.”⁷

To go back to an initial quote, it is interesting to note that a parallel can be made between human nature and the cage of reality. The cage of reality is society’s laws and norms, inescapable and all-consuming. With this other metaphor, natural versus unnatural, Baldwin poses an interesting dilemma (especially for the homosexual): That we cannot make up our minds about the nature of man and the unnatural. For the nature of man is also

⁷ One could also argue that a parallel goal of Baldwin in this essay is to prove how undesirable the union of heterosexual couples can be, in order to prove that the homosexual couple is at least no less “disturbed” than the heterosexual one.

homosexual, yet this is perceived to be unnatural. The homosexual must then spend time attempting to elude the trap (once again, a constricting imagery like the cage) – meaning, to go along with the cage of reality:

We spend vast amounts of our time and emotional energy in learning how not to be natural and in eluding the trap of our own nature and it therefore becomes very difficult to know exactly what is meant when we speak of the unnatural. (594)

It is most natural for him to be homosexual and follow his nature, yet homosexuality is seen as the most unnatural thing. This creates a tension in the individual, and we will see this tension embodied in David from *Giovanni's Room*. What Baldwin seems to say in this essay, however, is that no matter the tension, it is up to each individual to realize the falsity of the idea of “nature” and instead accept each individuals’ own nature. In this thesis I relate this acceptance to the concept of “authenticity,” which I use as a term to describe the individual that follows his own true self, and who acts in a mature and responsible way. I will return to this definition shortly.

In a paragraph that rings almost sermon-like, recalling Baldwin’s preaching background, he speaks of God and the death of innocence, taking it all the way back to the garden of Eden. He sees how we are stuck in this frame of mind until we can transcend our old morality – i.e. that the homosexual is un-Godly, and as an extension of this, reject the essentialism inherent in this way of thinking. He also uses words connected to ethics and existentialism: “Life, it is true, is a process of decisions and alternatives, the conscious awareness and acceptance of limitations” (596). The words “decisions,” “alternatives,” and “conscious awareness” show that Baldwin undeniably forges a link to existentialist ethics. Words like these also concern many of his central characters, and I will shortly provide some examples.

Having shown that there are clear links between the ideas Baldwin developed in “Preservation of Innocence” and concepts favored by existentialists, it seems appropriate to start by explaining Baldwin’s link to existentialism before engaging with it. We remember the quote from James Dievler in chapter one, showing how “[t]wo other components of postwar culture fed the development of rigid identity categories in the postwar period: existentialism and psychoanalysis” (Dievler 169). I found traces of psychoanalysis in Baldwin’s writing in my first chapter, and now I will find evidence of existentialist thoughts in *Giovanni's Room*.

Baldwin famously expatriated himself to Paris in 1948, placing him right in the middle of the trending thoughts of the time. His mentor Richard Wright (whom he later

alienated with his critique of Wright's novel *Native Son* in "Everybody's Protest Novel") was friendly with the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, inviting Baldwin to join them the moment he arrived in Paris. The existentialist crowd did not turn out to be Baldwin's favorite, and he soon found his own way around. However, critic Molly Farneth points out that while "the sources of Baldwin's new vocabulary cannot be pinned down definitively, ... there are striking similarities between the language of the expatriate Baldwin and that of the emerging ethics of French existentialism" (172). We should thus allow that "[w]hile the nature of Baldwin's conscious debt to the French existentialists is unclear, his own literary coming of age in Paris hinged on his adoption of several of the themes being developed and debated by them" (173). It is also credible to imagine that these young thinkers might have influenced each other both ways.

Returning to his specific existential influences, I will use two approaches. There are two specific thinkers relevant for the vocabulary which influenced Baldwin in this period: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Farneth writes in her 2013 article "James Baldwin, Simone de Beauvoir, and the "New Vocabulary" of Existentialist Ethics" about a striking similarity in the writings of Baldwin and Beauvoir, particularly in their use of the coming-of-age metaphor in relation to responsibility. This is especially relevant as I use these findings in my reading of *Giovanni's Room*. I will also draw a parallel between Baldwin's idea of innocence and Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith, which can provide a way of understanding and analyzing the persistence of harmful identity norms. This will connect back to the conclusion of chapter one, which is how the repression and willful ignorance of many (white) Americans is largely responsible for the tension in U.S. society.

The main subject of existentialism is the human subject, and more specifically, it is the acting, feeling, living human individual exercising its freedom (Macquarrie 4). The individual (vs. society) being one of the core subjects of this thesis further shows existentialism as a relevant theoretical background. One of the most intriguing concepts of existentialism is the idea that existence precedes essence. This is contrary to the traditional philosophical belief in a subject's essence, which holds that the nature of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its existence. This can be seen in Sartre's call for the individual to create its own values, rather than relying on the external values, because there are no inherent values – we must create our own:

The choices and actions of human individuals create identities, values, and norms; in other words, the "essences" of human individuals and of objects in the social world are produced by

the meaning-making activities of existing human individuals. Thus, Sartre famously claimed, "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself." (22) (Farneth 173)

Sartre claimed against his critics that "existentialist philosophy emphasized the freedom *and* the responsibility of human beings who make choices and take actions in the world.

According to Sartre, if identities, values, and norms are created and maintained by human beings, then the choices that individuals make are consequential indeed." So simply accepting and complying with society's pre-existing codes is, in the eyes of existentialism, a refusal to take responsibility. For Baldwin, this is translated into what he calls the preservation of innocence, which I discussed above.

The core concepts of existentialism thus prove to resonate well with Baldwin. From his refusal to accept the status quo, it is clear that he resists the idea that our identity categories are in any way *essential*, i.e. a part of us that is inherent and undeniable. It makes more sense to read Baldwin as agreeing to the idea that our existence, not our essence, shapes us. The choices we make form us – at least, they *should* be what forms us – rather than the belief that we are readily formed by our assigned identities. Thus we have now seen how an existentialist approach to Baldwin's writing is reasonable and relevant. His presence in Paris undeniably infused his ideas with existentialist notions, even if they are more implicit than explicit. Baldwin is preoccupied with the individual, but more importantly, the individual's relationality to others – which is precisely what existentialism is about. However, there are a few more specific terms that I will use both in this and the next chapter, and I will define them now before I will apply them to the focus of my study – David.

A core concept of existentialism is authenticity, which is another term that fits perfectly in the intersection between Baldwin and existentialism. Baldwin does not explicitly use this term in the novels, but the concept thoroughly permeates the stories to make it an important one when analyzing them, which becomes clear from the examples I study in this chapter. I argue that Baldwin's concluding claim, visible in the moral of his stories, is that the individual must acknowledge the cage of reality, i.e. see through society's "smoke screen," so that he can live a truer existence in accordance with his "true self," not oppressed by the cage. The idea that one must accept and explore one's own identity is precisely what authenticity is about, in the existentialist use of the term. This is one definition:

To exist as a self (or better expressed, on the way to selfhood) is to stand in the possibility of becoming at one with oneself, of fulfilling oneself (though this might be by giving up oneself) or of being divided in oneself, separated from what everyone knows how to call his 'true self.' In the language of some existentialists, the two possibilities are to exist 'authentically' or 'inauthentically.' (Macquarrie 52-53)

Thus when I use the term authenticity, it is used as a term describing an individual who is acting and being true to his true self, despite the pressures of the cage of reality to conform, and an authentic existence is marked by a continual questioning and examination of one's actions and choices. We know from Sartre that our identity is made from our choices and actions, and thus an authentic life is fulfilled through a constant conscious making of choices.

A lack of authenticity is then what we call bad faith, and I will show how Baldwin's writing implicitly shows how bad faith is a central part of (white) American identity – and how it is connected to the preservation of innocence. In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, bad faith is defined as this:

A lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them. (628)

This definition includes some terms which are beyond the scope of this thesis; however, the idea is that bad faith is a lie to oneself, and it is an attempt to escape one's responsibilities. Bad faith is not exactly interchangeable with the cage of reality, because bad faith is even more of a choice – or non-choice by lack of action – for while one is not always aware of the cage, the acting in bad faith is an adoption of false values, a disowning one's own freedom due to pressure from social forces. It could be similar to mob mentality or peer pressure in the way that it makes the individual accept and go along with actions and non-actions that uphold harmful norms in society.

Another aspect regarding acting in bad faith is that the acting in bad faith (or as I also call it, feigning innocence, in the way of Baldwin and Beauvoir) can almost only be done by the privileged class in society. The point of the issue of bad faith is that the individual takes the “easy way out” with a non-choice rather than making a conscious choice, because it is easier than going against the norm. Without this nuance, it could appear that all anyone had to do was to “make a different choice,” for instance refuse to be labelled and thus change their life. In reality, only those with the power and the means to make this choice can make it. So while the notion of freedom still rings true for all individuals, it is important to note that some aspects of life will be hard to change for the individual whose identity is defined by the privileged majority. The privileged majority, however, has the power to make authentic choices, and the privileged majority's insistence upon maintaining their innocence – i.e.

ignoring the truth – makes their choices effectively inauthentic, and in bad faith.⁸ A choice is only authentic if it also includes the betterment of freedom from all.

Thus we can summarize the concepts above as a dialectic relationship of differences: Authenticity vs. bad faith. The individual can attempt to make authentic decisions, and these decisions will be authentic when they reflect the individual's true self, and when they seem to be the best option for the advancement of the freedom of the most individuals. Decisions, or failure to make decisions (non-choice), is then what we call bad faith. This is the passive acceptance of the harmful norms of society, and this again can be translated to Baldwin's concept of preservation of innocence. One of the main arguments I find in *Giovanni's Room* (as well as the two other primary works in this thesis) is that the main character is acting in bad faith, of which the consequences are dire. However, before I go into my close reading of the novel, I wish to explore the connection between Baldwin and Simone de Beauvoir in order to finish the theoretical backdrop for the close reading of the novel.

Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that “adolescence is the moment of moral choice” (40), and this is mirrored in Baldwin's move to write in moral terms about childhood, innocence, and responsibility. Farneth's article, which I mentioned above, closely follows some key works – namely Baldwin's “Preservation of Innocence,” Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay*, and her nonfiction *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Explaining Beauvoir's philosophies, Farneth explains how Beauvoir (and Sartre) identified that

human choices and actions create the social world. When individuals refuse to acknowledge this fact, however, they cling to external authorities and inherited norms. In doing so, they become tyrants, who limit the freedom of others in order to protect these authorities and norms from critique. The ethical individual is the one who acknowledges his or her own freedom and responsibility for creating him- or herself and the social world, and who engages in concrete projects to extend this freedom to those who are oppressed. (174)

This is a clear call to all individuals, that a questioning of the status quo must constantly be done, and all have a responsibility to engage in “concrete projects” to extend freedom to the oppressed. This message is particularly relevant when directed at the privileged majority, and this can explain Baldwin's choices of white male protagonists in his novels.

In Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay* (1943), the protagonist is facing adolescence and longs for both “a definite adult existence” as well as external guarantees because she still

⁸ However, once again, there is a nuance in this situation as well. As we will see in chapter three, an individual can be of a disadvantaged social group in one situation, while in another, they might “pull rank” over another disadvantaged social group, which is in that situation even more disadvantaged. So a white straight male can pull rank on a white homosexual male, but a white homosexual male might still pull rank over a black straight male, etc.

“feels the same inside.” We remember the quote from above, about the perceived permanence of the world the child is born into. After this we know that the state of childhood ends, and adolescence descends. We might say that this is where the crucial development from object to subject happens, because the passive child, the object, transforms into the concerned adolescent, the subject. Beauvoir sees that “[h]e discovers his subjectivity; he discovers that of others. And when he arrives at the age of adolescence he begins to vacillate because he notices the contradictions among adults as well as their hesitations and weakness” (1948 39). The issue with this transformation is that while the subject begins to question and challenge the given world, and the “collapse of the “facticity” of the world is a kind of liberation, most individuals face it with fear and trepidation” (Farneth 176). This is precisely what we see in Baldwin’s characters as well, implicitly in Jesse and specifically in David. Jesse’s fear is repressed and comes out as extreme racial violence, in an attempt to maintain the safety of his position as he perceived it as a child. *Giovanni’s Room*, however, finds a character who has begun to understand that his childhood is over, but is unable to take responsibility and thus hurts not only himself, but more importantly, the people around him. This moral lesson is perhaps even more powerful in *Giovanni’s Room* because the reader is allowed to follow the internal struggle of David closely. I discuss more on the narrative choices in the next section.

The sudden freedom that adolescence entails is often experienced as a crisis. “Adolescents may recognize their freedom and responsibility for shaping themselves and the world around them, or they may reject this freedom and responsibility and cling to ready-made identities and values. . . . The adolescent must ask the question, If my identity and my world are not fixed or immutable, how shall I live?” (Farneth 176) As mentioned above, it is important to continuously question one’s choices, because there is no such thing as a choice-free life. The trap of existence is that the status quo will usually show itself as the easiest way to live, and there is a truth in this, because authentic choices might entail making a choice that is not the best choice specifically for your individual sense of safety. However, according to existentialist ethics, we would all benefit from making the choice that most guarantees the freedom of all individuals, thus each person could and should continuously seek to make the choice that is most beneficial for most. This utilitarian view might seem obvious, but as we see in Baldwin’s fiction, it cannot be taken for granted. Because the status quo/cage of reality once seemed absolute and unchangeable, the individual/adolescent and later grown-up might feign their innocence and continue to believe in the permanence of it. This is the central conflict I argue that Baldwin shows in all the three works discussed in this thesis.

Returning to Beauvoir's ethics, Farneth accentuates that she writes about two approaches through which an individual can reject their freedom; either by evading the responsibilities of freedom by remaining childlike, living under the unquestioned authority of others: "the sub-man," or actively propping up those authorities in order to guard the given world against assault: "the serious man." In attempting to maintain the preservation of the status quo/the cage of reality, the serious man "ignores the subjectivity of other human individuals and is willing to sacrifice those who threaten to upset the social order" (Farneth 176). This is a perfect example of the two inauthentic characters I study – Jesse from chapter one is the latter, the serious man, and David in this chapter is the sub-man. They both refrain from the inherent responsibility of being individuals in a community who should promote freedom for all individuals, but they are both unable to achieve this maturity, though in different ways.

Furthermore, Beauvoir finds that there are three steps to emerge from adolescence as liberated human beings. Individuals must first "recognize themselves and their world as the products of human decisions and actions" (Farneth 177). They must then "recognize that they are also capable of deciding and acting." Finally, they must "recognize their responsibility for deciding and acting in ways that create the conditions under which others will also recognize their freedom." Farneth sees how it is "this last step that generates the political and moral content of existentialism." This means that by refusing to remake the world and using your freedom, you impede others' freedom to remake the world, by guarding the inherited world from challenge. This is related to Sartre's bad faith, and it also highlights the relationality and community of freedom and the human existence. Those who refuse to recognize their freedom will always effectively do so on behalf of the freedom of others. It is therefore a moral choice to act – and even to not act – true to your freedom. In short, you act egoistically, and in the eyes of existentialism, immorally. We see this in *Giovanni's Room* to a larger degree than in "Going to Meet the Man" because we get to follow David's process of maturity, and his failure to complete this last step. As David says to his (ex-)fiancée Hella after he has been caught in his deceit: "whatever I've done to hurt you, I didn't mean to do!" (GR 154) This is an almost pathetic display of David's lack of responsibility for his actions, and I will soon show how he ends up this way.

Farneth's findings can be attempted summed up in this quote: that for both Baldwin and Beauvoir, "moral maturity entails the abandonment – or, at least, critical interrogation – of fixed or given identities, values, and authorities" (183). It is a compelling argument, and it resonates with Baldwin's writings, both the Paris-era essays and his later fiction. In

Giovanni's Room, we see a character who is struggling with his desire to maintain his innocence, while realizing that it is virtually impossible when your true self differs from the norm – and this shows how he can be deemed as both immature *and* immoral. This link will also be relevant in my third chapter, where I will study three characters who represent different aspects on the scale of authentic-bad faith. But first I will show what Baldwin presents as a solution to the problem, and how David completely misses this vital point.

In the introduction to the Penguin Classics 2001 edition of *Giovanni's Room*, Caryl Phillips highlights Baldwin's refusal to be labelled, through his belief in the universality of talent, as only a "Negro author" (Baldwin 2001 vii). Phillips recognizes that "the label 'Negro author' was one which Baldwin never warmed to. He had no desire to be thought of as just another Negro limited to writing only on 'Negro' topics. He saw his talent as universal, and he was determined that he should be free to write about anything or anybody he pleased." No doubt Baldwin was thoroughly aware of, as Phillips phrases it, the universality of his talent. I believe this can be translated into Baldwin's knowledge about the cage of reality. He understands well the instinct to categorize and assign identities which occurs in a society structured by the cage of reality, and he felt himself limited by this instinct as well. This is certainly a contributing factor to his then-controversial choice to write only white characters in *Giovanni's Room*, because it went against everybody's expectations. He would continue to create controversy through his defiant refusal to be identified, and this can be read as Baldwin taking on his individual responsibility to work for the freedom of all individuals. It should also be noted, as Phillips highlights, that for Baldwin, race and sexuality were two sides of the same struggle (/coin): "The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.' ... The themes of race and sexuality are unified, one feeding the other" (viii). This relates directly to what I believe Baldwin's main message is, namely that all assigned identities, when forced by society, act as a cage, entrapping us and our freedom. Phillips points out how Baldwin "rejected the iron collar of *assigned identity*" (ix, my emphasis) and this term, assigned identity, sums up how the cage of reality works.

Two Baldwin quotes can help show what he presented as a solution to the constricting cage of reality. One is from "Everybody's Protest Novel" where he coins the term "web of ambiguity:"

In overlooking, denying, evading [the individual's] complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (“EPN” 13)

This is almost interchangeable with the self-deceit Sartre proclaims is inherent in bad faith, where the individual deceives himself regarding his own true self. The other quote is from his later works, the 1985 essay “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood:” “. . .but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself” (1998 819). I propose to read the web of ambiguity as Baldwin’s “solution” to the cage of reality, and this insight takes the power away from the label, allowing you to define yourself. The cage constricts the individual, and we may never escape it, but accepting and knowing the web of ambiguity that all individuals are caught in might help us take control over our situation in life. I will use these ideas and terms as the foundation for the analysis of David in *Giovanni’s Room*, and they will show how Baldwin poses David as an individual torn between self-preservation and an authentic existence.

2.2 Giovanni’s Room

In this section I will perform a close reading of *Giovanni’s Room*, which can be read as a good example of the individual’s struggle to preserve innocence.⁹ The main character David is explored in-depth, and I will show how his individual struggle can be connected to the struggles of U.S. society on a larger scale. This connection will make clear a link between Jesse from “Going to Meet the Man,” and it will provide a natural transition to the characters of *Another Country*, which will be explored in the next chapter. I will explore the presence of my main terms/concepts, like innocence, escape, and maturity, and find how Baldwin positions these in the text. I will also continuously connect these to their existentialist counterparts. This will substantiate my claim, which is that David symbolizes the immoral

⁹ As I mentioned above, *Giovanni’s Room*’s significance for queer literature is important to recognize. A great many works have been produced discussing it, and they should be recognized to fully appreciate this aspect of the novel. However, this thesis, while concerning itself with identity, is not going to focus on the queer aspects specifically, but rather identity, self-deceit, community, and “innocence” more broadly. This does not mean that I do not acknowledge the importance of *Giovanni’s Room* for queer literature, but I respectfully put that aside in order to explore the other workings of this great novel. I am attempting to map out all the ways Baldwin show how identity categories can be harmful to individuals, which is why the act of labelling people’s sexualities, and not the sexualities themselves, is my focus.

trait of preservation of innocence, which is the defining tendency in the identity of white straight males in U.S. society ensuring the continued oppression of the cage of reality.

2.2.1 Innocence and escape

To begin with, I wish to explore: How, specifically, Baldwin uses the term “innocence” in *Giovanni’s Room*. There are several explicit mentions of the word, and I will start by viewing them in the text’s context. One of the most obvious uses of innocence comes when David has been talking with his friend Jacques about the garden of Eden, and how “nobody can stay there.” Here, David muses on how the garden is different for all yet equally impossible for all as well. He thinks that

...perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of denial and pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare. (GR 29)

The most apparent reading of “loss of innocence” here is the Biblical fall, which fits well given the allusion to the garden of Eden. In this scene, the garden of Eden appears to be the characters’ past, right before they were expelled and thrown into darkness. It is implied that the expulsion from the garden is when these characters realized their homosexuality, as he is thinking about his own and Jacques’ different approaches to this. But as David wonders if it is the same for all people, then apparently there must be a loss of innocence inherent in all individuals’ lives, and that begs the question: What does this loss of innocence entail? I think it is plausible to read this as the moment of adolescence or maturity, i.e. when the individual realizes that the universe is not unchangeable, as in the Beauvoir quote above. This is quite a dramatic connection, but the term is even further expanded on later.

However, the question of innocence is better revealed in the passage where David talks about his relationship to his father, where the “loss of innocence” relates to his “disillusionment” with his father as well as what he calls the “incident” with Joey.¹⁰ I find that the loss of innocence in these examples is not portrayed as a good thing, because while a loss of innocence can be good if it leads to an acknowledgement of the cage of reality, the

¹⁰ His first sexual encounter, with his best friend and neighbor Joey. The act itself is described as lovemaking, but the morning after, he is filled with “shame and terror.”

loss can also be a bad thing if it, as in this example, leads to self-deceit. These two situations form the beginning of David's immorality and escape from responsibility.

In the matter of David's relationship to his father, it is, as he recognizes himself, a process of maturity that happens to everyone: One begins to judge one's parents. It is a mark of growing up, as we saw in Beauvoir's book: The questioning of authority is an inevitable stage of adolescence. In this way, the loss of innocence is a natural part of growing up, and it is connected to the idea of how adolescence is a time to become a mature and responsible individual. Yet David does not remember this transition as a good one. What lies behind this displeasure? To understand it, we must understand what David's father represents to him.

On a surface level, David's struggle is quite straightforward. He is struggling with the feeling that he should conform to the heteronormative society's expectation of him as a man, which is to settle down, or as he envisions it: "to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed" (100). One of the major catalysts of this pressure is David's father, with whom he begins to have a strained relationship after overhearing his father arguing with David's aunt Ellen. His father tells Ellen: "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" (20). This reveals to young David what his father expects for him, and from this moment on, David recalls, his feelings towards his father became more and more strained and fiendish. This is probably due to the budding fear of the realization that he is not going to be the man his father wishes him to be.

Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between how his father thinks their relationship stands, and how David perceives it. His father believes that they are "buddies," but David wishes his father could be more of a father, which would allow David to love him. Instead, David sees how he is 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" (21). It is interesting to note here that David's disillusionment of his father is paralleled with his loss of innocence. It seems clear that for David, this innocence he is lamenting is the child's innocent belief in the permanence of his universe, his father's omnipotence, and his undisputed privileged position. Something inside David is beginning to understand that this safety can crumble – as it does.

Later on, when David is recounting his time in Paris, he tells of how his father is reluctant to send him his money because he wants him to come home and settle down, and "whenever he said that I thought of the sediment at the bottom of the stagnant pond" (26). He knows that the only way for his father to send him money is to use the "last trick up his

sleeve,” which is to tell his father that he has found a woman to marry. This proves how David’s father represents the submission to the status quo. The cage of reality, embodied by David’s father, prevails in the background of David’s mind, constantly. David feels a pull towards this solution, at least on a certain level, because it appears comfortable and easy. This is David’s inauthentic choice, and it is a choice in bad faith. However, he comes to realize that the “cavern” of homosexuality is not, after all, so different from the “mooring” of heterosexual marriage.¹¹ He expresses a desire to marry Hella in order to be grounded: “I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to” (11), and in extension this symbolizes his desire to “moor himself” in the marrow of tradition. However, his experience with Joey proves that there is something true inside him – subconsciously – and this arguably wins over his superficial desire to follow the norm.

The second loss of innocence is thus the “incident” with Joey (note the wording here). He describes how it was an act of love he never truly forgot, no matter how much he tried to repress it in his memory. But as he woke up the morning after, he was 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” (14) followed a few lines later by “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.” The description of this incident is very dramatic, but it seems that it is only seen as so traumatic because he recognizes the illegality of it. It could also be because it shows him something authentic in himself which he is not yet mature enough to embrace. This authentic part is of course his latent homosexuality, because the act itself is described as lovemaking, and a positive and safe experience, but the morning after, the aftermath, is what spirals him out of control.

David thus interprets that his loss of innocence (in the “vaguer” sense, not the physical/sexual) is this moment – this incident – where his authentic self is allowed “outside,” if only for one evening. This, however, would make the loss of innocence a good thing, because from an existentialist point of view, one must live authentically, which is to follow one’s true self. No one would argue that his sexual encounter with Joey is not authentic; what is inauthentic is David’s scramble to “regain” his lost innocence (as he perceives it) the morning after by deciding it never happened. This is, interestingly, one place

¹¹ Allusions to homosexuality is repeatedly made using constructing terms such as “cavern” or “trap,” yet the way he describes his potential marriage to Hella as “mooring” also gives a sense of entrapment. This shows that David is uncomfortable with either option.

where he manages to make a decision (more on decisions in the next section) – namely the decision to forget all about what happened, and pretend it had not occurred. This saddens both him and Joey, but whereas Joey reacts with sadness, David acts with vehemence, and he realizes retrospectively how he “began, perhaps, to be lonely that summer and began, that summer, the flight which has brought me to this darkening window” (15). Here we see the theme of escape coming into play, and the reader eventually realizes that David’s flight does not really come to an end. The incident with Joey shows how David’s “first act of homosexuality” thoroughly dislodges him, or as he phrases it himself; “The incident with Joey had shaken me profoundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel. . . . it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of my mind, as still and awful as a decomposing corpse” (20-21).¹² This dislodging sets in motion the rest of the novel’s fateful actions, but first, we must understand why he flees.

Moving, then, to another pervasive theme in *Giovanni’s Room*: Escape. We have seen how David represents a white “straight” male who refuses to accept his otherness, i.e. his homosexuality, in an attempt to cling to his supposed innocence. This can be called an escape from responsibility. As mentioned above, the notion of innocence in the novel is the state one is in before realizing that there are serious consequences to one’s actions, which David’s situation is before he goes to Paris. The optimal development from this stage is becoming mature and taking responsibility; however, many individuals refuse to take this responsibility, as seen in “Preservation of Innocence.” It is a maintaining of a false narrative, to be able to say that one does not know, which is to close one’s eyes to the reality of one’s privilege, which relies on the oppression of disadvantaged groups of people. This use of innocence means that the individual refuses to acknowledge the relationality of oneself to others, and instead upholding oneself as a distinct individual distanced from others. David falls into this category, because he can convincingly live as a white straight male, with all the privilege that entails. His continued escape from the repercussions of this, seen in his inauthenticity towards his fiancée Hella but even more importantly his lover Giovanni, has dramatic consequences, yet these are still mostly carried by his “victims.”

¹² His way of referring to his secret as a decomposing corpse is interesting, and draws a parallel to his childhood nightmares about his dead mother: “. . .she figured in my nightmares, 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” (16). The imagery here is very bodily, and it is fascinating how the embodiment of these fears is so physical. The fear of his dead mother is paralleled with his fear of his secret homosexuality, and both images are scary. It also deserves a mention how the description of his mother’s corpse can bring to mind some certain Freudian notions, re: Oedipal desire/fear.

The critic Cyraina Johnson-Roullier writes about how *Giovanni's Room* can be seen as Baldwin's flight into modernism, and that by choosing David as the protagonist Baldwin is able to write with an "unconventional modern perspective" (939-940). She writes that David's voice is the rhetoric of flight, which connects to my focus on escape. Johnson-Roullier argues that David's escape is fueled by his struggle: "Thus, although his homosexual experience with Joey perhaps provides the catalyst for David's flight, it is by no means the sole motivation for his escape into constant motion. Rather, it is this internal conflict, coupled with his own aversion to it, that propels David into flight" (944). This internal conflict is David's failure to accept his sexuality and his otherness. This self-deceit has been cultivated for years, and Johnson-Roullier notes that even though the David of the present is seemingly on the way to accept and acknowledge the full scale of his self-deceit, there is still a part of him that is seeking to evade the reality of the truth: The truth of how his self-deceit is part of the reason why Giovanni is about to be executed.

Thus David's desire to escape is central, because it shows the inner conflict in an individual torn between a wish to be accepted and a wish to be himself. This inner conflict and desire to follow the norm can go a way towards explaining why individuals still choose to make choices and non-choices in bad faith. The cage of reality is accommodating towards him as long as he conforms to the norm, and we know this through what he himself expresses several times, when he wishes he could marry and "have his manhood unquestioned." Doing this would go perfectly along with society's expectations, which **is** to continue the marrow of tradition and thus allow the cage of reality to continue. But it becomes increasingly clear that while he expresses this as a wish, it is his continued self-deceit talking, because it symbolizes the easy way out – an escape – from a situation he is not morally and emotionally equipped to deal with. The problem with David's desire to escape is, on one level, because it is not what he truly wants. There can be little doubt that he is the one who – consciously or subconsciously – sabotages his own chances of happiness with Hella, as when he disappears from her to cheat on her with a sailor and is subsequently caught by her. But other than his own personal happiness, which the reader is hard-pressed to wish him, there is a deeper and more problematic level: He is not behaving authentically, and acts against his own nature. Behaving authentically would demand that he ended his self-deceit and accepted his sexuality and his love for Giovanni, even if the label of homosexual is scary to wear.

I will explore David and Giovanni's relationship in depth in the next section, but I will mention this in relation to escape: David's inauthenticity actually transfers over to Giovanni. At the very end, David says he has reasons of his own to believe the newspaper

speculation that Giovanni robbed Guillaume because he needed money for opium. He says: "...remembering the extent of Giovanni's desperation, knowing how far this terror which was so vast that it had simply become a void had driven him. 'Me, I want to *escape*,' he had told me ..." (28, my emphasis). It might be unfair to claim that David has ruined Giovanni's life, but he certainly played his part in it. When we remember Baldwin's essay, it is clear that innocence in the eyes of white male Americans like David and Jesse is in fact the attempt to remain inauthentic but superior. If we accept this then innocence is the consensual entrapment in the cage of reality, a willing agreement to an inauthentic life, all as a way to maintain the status quo and remain in white supremacy. This is a choice in bad faith, and like Beauvoir's sub-man, not only is it inauthentic in the way you deny your true self, but it is also inauthentic in how it remains superior at the expense of others' freedom. The desire to escape the implications of this lack of responsibility shows an individual struggle to come to terms with the gravity of one's choices. And, as Baldwin subtly reminds us in the final ironic quote:

The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back to me. (159)

Arguably, this ending proves that Baldwin's final message to the reader is that David's behavior is not to be emulated. As his past blows back in his face after he has attempted to throw it to the wind, it seems clear that we can never escape our past and our responsibility. However, it is significant that David's final act in the novel is this attempt to escape responsibility once again. Therefore I will explore how David's predisposition for self-deceit is a contributing factor to his identity as a superior white male.

2.2.2 Responsibility and self-deceit

While the difficulty of David's situation is undeniable and understandable, it is not enough to elicit the reader's sympathy. This is a clever move by Baldwin, but how does he do it? I find that this is partly through how David does *not* make any decisions. I explore how his indecision, his non-choices, proves his position as unsympathetic. Remembering the existentialist backdrop, we must recognize that the individual must always be conscious and aware of its significance, and constantly attempt to make the best choice, not only for itself,

but also for the others around it. This is what David blatantly fails to do, and it deserves a closer examination.

First off, Baldwin has made some very effective narrative choices with David. Where Jesse was a static character, David is a more dynamic one, and this creates tension in the development of the plot. Also, the use of a first-person narrator gives the reader a more intimate access than in either of the other two works I discuss in this thesis. Because we are allowed inside his thought processes, we get to experience firsthand the level of self-deceit he maintains in order to function as he does. So when an individual such as the one David represents continuously lies to others and especially himself, his level of self-deceit is necessary to proclaim the upholding of innocence. For him to acknowledge his otherness would mean that he must acknowledge the cage of reality, and because the cage is supposed to fit and protect him, he tries his best to avoid looking at it. However, the cage of reality does not help anyone who does not fit comfortably in it, meaning that this compulsive refusal to acknowledge is not only damaging to David – but worst of all, for the other people in David’s life as well. In this section, I look at David’s actions, how they affect others, and how David perceives himself and these actions. I show that he is consistently selfish, afraid, and inauthentic, following bad faith, and that he only realizes this after it is too late.

David stands as a warning of how an individual should not relate itself to the cage of reality. However, what Baldwin manages to present so brilliantly, as always, is that however much damage David’s actions inflict, the true damage has been done to him by society, in making him the person he is. It is clear that through the blatantly unsympathetic character of David, Baldwin presents not only a bad and morally compromised individual, but a bad and morally compromised society, who cannot help but creating bad and morally compromised individuals. This also reminds us of Jesse’s predicament in “Going to Meet the Man.” Nevertheless, I find it important to highlight that even though David is a product of a compromised society, he is, like Jesse too, always individually responsible for his actions. There is an early quote that might be intended to elicit sympathy, even though I think it fails to do so:

I repent now – for all the good it does – one particular lie among the many lies I’ve told, told, lived, and believed. This is the lie which I told Giovanni, but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again. There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard – the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger. (11)

This is David's admission of his (belated) regret, noticeably in retrospect, but placed in such a way as to make the reader understand that he has learned from his mistakes before he goes on to recount them. Johnson-Roullier says of the same quote that "[t]he novel's opening scene, ... suggests the beginning of that painful process of increasing self-awareness from which self-acceptance may eventually develop" (941). This is true, however, I believe the promise of increasing self-awareness fails to be effective because he never manages to present a convincing reasoning for his cowardice. Also, as I have mentioned, his regret stems mostly from his non-actions, making him appear as taking the role of victim rather than perpetrator. This is also visible when I look closer at his relationship with Giovanni.

Another reason for David being unsympathetic is his consistent contempt. Contempt – both for Giovanni, Jacques, Guillaume, others, and himself – permeates all of David's feelings and actions. His attitude to women in the novel is often cruel, and many mentions of Hella and other women come across as derogative. Mentions of the "fairies" roaming the gay bars in Paris are also said in a similar fashion. It effectively shows how David, who refuses to accept himself as an outsider, becomes nasty towards these other outsiders, as a typical attempt to ascertain himself as superior – quite like how he behaved towards Joey after their "incident."¹³ This immediately recalls Jesse from chapter one, who feels the need to continually bear down on others to repeatedly accentuate his superiority. This is another parallel between Jesse and David (and later, Richard and partly Vivaldo in chapter three): Their attempts to maintain their false superiority, also known as the preservation of innocence. However, he is able in retrospect to perceive that "the contempt I felt for him [Jacques] involved my self-contempt" (27), meaning that his aversion to particularly other homosexual men was perhaps mostly grounded in his aversion to his own cowardice and failure to live out his true self. In this there is also certainly a degree of internalized homophobia, channeled through the cage of reality, like we see in this quote:

It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me so boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy; what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle, occurring everywhere, without end, forever. (62)

The voices deep within him can be seen to be the internalized cage of reality, showing how deep within the individual society's rules invade. There is also a sense of David realizing the relationality of humans when he sees how he is only one part of the "dreadful human tangle" – his problems are only a tiny part in the big misfortune of life that befalls all individuals.

¹³ He more or less bullied away Joey until he changed schools and he never saw him again.

However, these reflections do not cancel out his problematic behavior. Thus we might say that the importance of David being unsympathetic is because he embodies a trait inherent in white American society, and this novel goes a way to prove how harmful this trait is.

Yet the perhaps worst kind of contempt is the one David holds for his lover Giovanni, like when he says "...I also wondered, with an unwilling, unbelieving contempt, why I had ever thought him strong" (101). The uncomfortable realization in this is that despite the two of them being in love, David is capable of feeling these feelings for his lover. Giovanni certainly picks up on it, creating a difficult imbalance between the two, because Giovanni never shies away from his feelings. However, on the other side, Giovanni is one of the only characters able to really see David's true self. He sees David's flaws, and does not hesitate to call him out on it. It is only a shame that David refuses to respond. For instance, Giovanni mirrors Hella in how he tells David "I have never reached you" (130); when Hella says the same (152), it seems to mean that she senses that he is hiding something from her, which he is: His sexuality. But what is he hiding from Giovanni? I argue that what he is hiding is his internalized homophobia, because while a part of him loves Giovanni, a part of him foolishly clings to the idea that their relationship will end when Hella returns from Spain. This way, he imagines, he can be true to his true feelings but also get to go home to the U.S. to follow the marrow of tradition. This relates to the immorality inherent in the white American male: the idea that one can have the cake and eat it too.

However, this is predictably too good to be true, and his contempt culminates in the most dramatic scene in the novel – the scene of David and Giovanni's last goodbye. This is where the quote above is taken from, within which Giovanni formulates the central issue of their relationship, which is that he has never been able to "reach him." David has been distant, and Giovanni has picked up on the contempt that David has felt for him repeatedly. Most scathing is perhaps how Giovanni rages and calls David the most immoral man he has ever met (134), and this is straight to the point. David is immoral because Giovanni senses that he wants to be with him, but he chooses not to – or, even worse, he makes a "non-choice" by escaping responsibility and blaming the break-up on how it "was always supposed to end when Hella returned." Giovanni rightfully says that he does not break up with him over Hella, but because he is afraid of their relationship.¹⁴ It is tragic how David tells the reader that his response was that he "felt nothing at all." The hard work of upholding a false innocence, of self-deception, seems to make him numb. While he initially presents himself as

¹⁴ The notion of cowardice seen here is a theme which will be even more important in chapter three.

someone who is (or *was*, as he appropriately corrects himself) proud of his decision-making abilities (24), it quickly becomes apparent that he is still not mature enough to make decisions.

This leads us to the core trait in David: He is never really present in any of the choices he makes. Rather, he avoids making any choices, because that would mean for him to admit to his loss of innocence – which in his eyes is his loss of the title straight white male. More often than not, the choices are made for him, or taken from him - “And I also felt ... that a decision – once again! – had been taken from my hands” (106). But not only are they supposedly taken from him, he also goes along with it, like how upon Hella’s return he pretends his affair with Giovanni never happened, and when Hella catches him with the sailor he acts completely passive. It is also seen in this quote when Hella has written him that she is returning to Paris: “It seemed that the necessity for decision had been taken from my hands” (90). Here, making a decision is seen as a “necessity,” which he is not looking forward to make. However, viewed in an existentialist light, not making a choice is also a choice in itself – and also one made in bad faith. We all have a moral obligation both to make conscious choices and to make choices that are good and right. David consistently refuses to make choices, and those actions lead him to making unsupervised and unconscious choices which have bad outcomes. Interestingly, though, he himself shares some insight on this early in the novel:

For I am – or I was – one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all – a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named – but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey’s bed, came to. (25)

Again, what is so convenient about this quote is how it is placed at the end of the first chapter, possibly to elicit sympathy from the reader. Of course, the whole novel is David writing in retrospect, and even if it is arguable whether he has actually matured, it is certain that he has made some realizations along the way, especially after seeing the horrible consequences of so many of his (in)actions. It seems that he perceives himself to having been a person able to make decisions and carry them through, and he did certainly manage to stick with his decision regarding Joey, which was to act like it never happened and ignore it until Joey went away. However, this decision must have held for him something traumatic, since it

seems he abstains from making a conscious decision for the rest of his life, at least until the end of the novel. And perhaps it comes from the statement that decisions are ambiguity themselves – maybe, one might argue, David’s decision to not make decisions is, for him, a silent submission that he is “at the mercy of more things than can be named.” This, however, is a cowardly abandonment of responsibility. David’s dismissal of the individual’s power to make a change shows precisely how the harmful norms in society are allowed to persist.

Furthermore, by not behaving authentically he is not only going against his own nature, but from the existentialist perspective, he is disadvantaging others’ chances at individual freedom as well. Because of his privileged position he has more of a choice in whether or not to be true to his nature. However, one’s sexuality is not really something one can “decide on” – in other words, David’s perceived ability to choose is false, once again self-deceit. But he does so anyway, regardless of who might suffer from his (non-)choice. It is immoral and immature, but also in a bigger picture, anti-freedom. In the existentialist tradition, the person who is inauthentic and does not make good of his freedom, does so not only on behalf of his own freedom, but on behalf of all others’ freedom as well. That means that not only is it destructive for David for his own inner life, but it effectively affects all other individuals as well. In the words of Desmond Tutu, “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” (Brown 19), and this is the outcome of David’s silent submission to the idea that homosexuality is unnatural. He not only hurts his own true self, but by allowing himself to be assigned a false identity, he, who is in a more privileged position than many others, makes the persistence of the cage of reality still more firm, making it even worse for other disadvantaged individuals.

In a last resort to provide some understanding of David, to his credit it would seem that he has learnt a lot in retrospect. He corrects himself on his assumptions that he makes decisions, and he does use words such as regret. But the bad taste left in the reader’s mouth comes from the realization that nothing is permanently ruined for David, because he remains in a superior position. Unlike Giovanni, who is about to be dead, or Hella, who might struggle to find a new man after her broken engagement, David can still conceivably go back to the U.S. and begin his life over. Yet there is a possibility that the gravity of the situation has actually gotten to him, which would mean that there might be hope. This is an ambiguous ending, but there can be hope of some redemption if he is able to fully accept his indirect responsibility for Giovanni’s death and thus by extension his communal and existential responsibility as an individual. Though as I mentioned above, the symbolism in the pieces of the letter blowing back in his face seems to be Baldwin’s message that David cannot escape

his past. Furthermore, there is another thing David cannot escape, and that is his homeland. In the next section I will discuss the representations of America and Americans in the novel, and explore why these are portrayed as highly undesirable.

2.2.3 Home, America, and Americans

Thus, the last theme of the novel that I wish to mention is the notion of its “anti-Americanness.” There are repeated examples of how America and Americans are portrayed as undesirable, immoral, and infantile, and there is an interesting tension in David’s ambivalent attitude to this issue. David is criticized for his Americanness, but he does also himself criticize his countrymen. I argue that this can be translated to the argument that America is a nation obsessed with (feigned) moral innocence, and that David represents this obsession as an individual torn between a desire for the safety of the cage of reality as well as the understanding that it is impossible to live in it. I will now show some important sections that prove this tension, divided into the idea of “home,” and the representation of America and Americans as something undesirable and bad.

It is clear that “home” – the U.S. – represents an ideal of a life lived comfortably in the cage of reality. In the scene where David is at the café with Giovanni and the others, the morning after he met Giovanni for the first time, he laments that he will never understand the people of Paris. He says that Giovanni belongs there, but that he himself longs back to America. This can be read as David being afraid of himself being in Paris; he has tasted authenticity in his budding love for Giovanni, but he is too afraid to accept it. Therefore, he tries to say that he must go back home, but these mentions of “home” connote something that is false. Giovanni seems to perceive that it is not the physical home of the U.S. that David longs for, but the false safety of a life of innocence: “Why, you will go home, and then you will find that home is not home any more. Then you will really be in trouble. As long as you stay here, you can always think: One day I will go home” (111). I argue that for David, home represents a preservation of innocence, and David deceives himself throughout the novel by stating repeatedly that he will go “home” and settle down, i.e. conform to the cage of reality, even though he fails to follow through with this when Hella returns. What Giovanni says is proof that innocence lost can never be regained, because David’s eyes have been opened to the reality of the world, and through his authentic experiences of love with Giovanni he has also seen the restrictions the cage of reality entails. Therefore it is impossible for him to

return as though he is still pure and innocent, because after he has experienced authenticity, all actions denouncing authenticity will be bad faith, and also for him a denial of his true self.

However, the opposition to “home” can be read as the room, the titular Giovanni’s room, and this also represents the trap of David’s internalized homophobia, and by extension of this, the cage of reality. It seems that David escapes the room in order to do literally anything else; wander the streets, go to cafés, sit on benches. The contrast in these scenes is how it seems that what he really longs for is to escape back home. However, as Giovanni knows, there is no such thing as returning to a neatly labelled life – Giovanni’s room, e.g. the cage of reality, will always remain within David, and he can never take back the authentic experiences which he has had in Giovanni’s room. What David has come to realize in the room is the crushing truth of the cage of reality. He has become aware, but he is still too immature, still too obsessed with the preservation of his innocence, that he attempts failingly to forget this realization. This realization is apparent in David’s retrospect: “It [Giovanni’s room] became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni’s room” (82). This proves that it is not the room itself, but what it represents, that stays with him for the rest of his life. The guilt of his inauthenticity and the perseverance of the cage of reality haunts him, and Giovanni’s room will always stand as the symbol of this.

Returning to the other theme, that of America, I argue once again that Baldwin’s overarching argument is that America is an immoral nation, and that this can be seen in *Giovanni’s Room* through David’s aversion to Americans and what Americans represent. If we can agree that this American trait is an obsession with attempts at preserving one’s innocence, then it is no wonder that Americans are portrayed in such an unflattering light throughout the novel. A section that stands out is the scene where David is at the American Express bank. He is observing his fellow countrymen around him, and notes that “I was aware that they all had in common something that made them Americans but I could never put my finger on what it was” (85). He then makes some insightful observations:

And what distinguished the men was that they seemed incapable of age; they smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor; the boy he had been shone somehow, unsoiled, untouched, unchanged, through the eye of the man of sixty, booking passage, with his smiling wife, to Rome. (86)

Here David recognizes the distinctly American trait to ward off “any more intimate odor;” translatable to authenticity through real and “dirty” experiences. The boyishness¹⁵ of the man of sixty can be seen as a valid metaphor for the inherent immaturity of Americans.

The argument of the immorality of Americans is then connected to the unsympathetic portrayal of David, because these same descriptions are made about him through the other characters in the text. This is seen in the letter from David’s father, for instance, who says David is “as American as pork and beans” (87) as an argument to make him return home. This is the father, symbolizing the cage of reality, trying to make David return to his homeland and (re)assume his role as the white straight male. The other way David is categorized is through Giovanni, for when Giovanni is pleased with him, he says he is not like an American, and conversely, he calls him very American when he is displeased. Giovanni never hides his contempt for Americans; he dislikes their refusal to accept reality, like when he talks with David about “all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans don’t believe” (37), and how “Americans have no sense of doom, none whatever. They do not recognize doom when they see it” (136). It might read as slightly condescending, but it certainly reads as truth, and this makes David uncomfortable: David “resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing” (85-86). The idea that he also resents *not* being called an American can indicate that he is afraid to lose this “core identity;” for he believes that as long as he can return to America and be an American he still has the option of living a life of innocence, i.e. marry a woman, have kids, and have his “manhood unquestioned.” This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for his self-contempt, because he has begun to realize the extent of the cage of reality, and it is getting harder and harder to maintain his innocence convincingly.

This tension then reaches a climax in the scene of their last goodbye, which I mentioned above. There is one final quote from Giovanni that really seals David’s fate as an immoral and immature American:

You want to be clean. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap – and you do not want to stink, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. ... You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to kill him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you – you are immoral. You are, by far, the most immoral man I have met in all my life. (134)

¹⁵ Boyish is another term that will have a prominent position in chapter three.

Here David's own observations about Americans is thrown back at him: The obsession with soap and cleanliness, symbolizing innocence and immaturity, and a lack of responsibility, is shown to include David as well. The "stink of love," i.e. authenticity and truth, and assuming responsibility, is something David has refused to accept, and Giovanni arrests him on this. Tragically, David is still unable to overcome his fear, and this last meeting leaves him "feeling nothing." The cage of reality is so entrenched within him that hearing the truth being told to his face is still not enough to release him from the trap.

The final and effective conclusion to draw from these connections is that being American is equal to being immoral, and David is repeatedly proven to be very American, thus the novel's internal logic proves that David is immoral. This is also what I find to be the perhaps most important statement of Baldwin, because he does important work in proving that the harmful structures in society continue due to the irresponsibility and immaturity of Americans. A reason for the persistence of this trait in Americans can be said to be cowardice and fear, as well as immaturity. This is excellently portrayed in the novel I will explore in the next chapter: *Another Country*.

3 American Relationality and Mature Love in *Another Country*

While all individuals must create and decide on their own values and priorities, no man is an island (Donne 1624). The persistence of harmful identity norms in U.S. society can in part be explained by the ways in which dominant forms of white American identity rely on a denial of the relationality inherent in being an individual and thus a part of a society. This relationality includes a repression of traits deemed unfit for, in particular, the white straight male, which we have seen two different examples of in Jesse from “Going to Meet the Man” and David from *Giovanni’s Room*. As I have shown in these two examples, the protagonists seem to have little hope of redemption, as they both refuse to realize their relationality and their part in the cage of reality. However, Baldwin’s 1963 novel *Another Country* has a slightly more hopeful tone, and it thus a logical successor to the previous two works. I argue that the novel presents the difficult but necessary path of self-acknowledgement that the privileged individual must go through in order to accept his relationality and live authentically. I find that this struggle is best accessed through three central characters; Vivaldo, Richard, and Eric.

I argue that Vivaldo is the character which Baldwin assigns the most significance, because unlike Jesse and David from the previous two chapters, Vivaldo manages to successfully acknowledge and navigate the cage of reality, resulting in his making of authentic choices and a conscious understanding of his own identity. In this chapter I will perform a close reading of the significant passages which show Vivaldo’s struggle with and subsequent success over the cage of reality. To compare and contrast I will look at two characters who represent different possible ways of life for Vivaldo: Richard and Eric. The former represents the static white straight male, particularly reminiscent of Jesse from chapter one, and the latter represents an authentic way of living, which helps Vivaldo reach his potential.

The spectrum of focalizers in *Another Country* reflects the novel’s focus on the fluidity and complexity of identity. The first focalizer, the black musician Rufus Scott, gives the reader a brief and stark insight into the difficulties for and expectations of the individual struggling between roles, and furthermore, reflects the difficult social climate of the time. He

is “first and foremost” a black man, but his roles as friend, lover, and son/brother pull him in conflicting directions. Yet one of the biggest struggles is the expectations for masculinity. Colm Tóibín’s introduction to the novel accentuates the novel’s focus on masculinity, and shows how the societal expectations of the male gave little room for deviance from the norm. Rufus, along with Vivaldo and Eric, whom I will study in this chapter, has a sexuality that deviates from the strict norms that the cage of reality has in place. The consequent failure to fit in can then result in fatal consequences – exemplified in Rufus’ jumping off Washington bridge to his death. This act spurs on a crisis in the other characters’ lives, and makes them question their lives and relations. This quest of self-rediscovery is what drives the plot, and I will examine some of the remaining characters to see how they cope with this.

The most dynamic and interesting character of the novel is Vivaldo, Rufus’ best friend, struggling writer and trying (and failing) to make it with Ida, Rufus’ sister. We are introduced to Vivaldo as a focalizer in chapter three after Rufus and Cass, Richard’s wife, has had their respective chapters. I find that the first two chapters function to set the table, and that from Vivaldo’s chapter, the plot really thickens. The reason for Vivaldo’s significance is his dynamic and hard-to-define identity, and his subsequent journey from inauthentic and immature to authentic and mature – and an ultimately responsible individual.

While *Giovanni’s Room* is an escape from the U.S., both in setting and its protagonist’s existential flight, *Another Country* is a firm return to U.S. soil, with most of its setting taking place in the heart of Manhattan. The notable exception is the character Eric’s return from his exile in the south of France, which draws a parallel between both David from *Giovanni’s Room* and not to mention Baldwin’s own life. As I mentioned at the end of chapter two, the theme of Americanness is an important backdrop for David’s experiences in France, and a very significant one given David’s indirect insight regarding the preservation of innocence inherent to American citizens. This realization is, however, brought even more to the forefront in *Another Country*. Taking this emphasis on innocence as my point of departure, this chapter will explore two main subjects through an analysis of three characters: The perseverance of immaturity and innocence as a defining trait in inauthentic characters, as in Richard, the straight white male, and as a natural extension of this, the characters Baldwin poses as the possible redemption of the white American male, as in Vivaldo and Eric. In order to do this, I have chosen Vivaldo as my main focus, and I compare and contrast him with Richard and Eric to answer the question: How is it that Vivaldo manages to escape the cage of reality?

Before I can answer this, an understanding of the novel's context should first be comprehended. To better understand the social context of *Another Country*, we may look to professor Robert J. Corber, whose 1997 book "Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity," informed his review "Reassessing James Baldwin." In this he sees how Baldwin's "insistence on the tangled relations among race, class, gender, and sexuality challenged the organization of identity in cold war America, an organization that depended on the binary oppositions white/black, male/female, and straight/gay" (2001 169). Furthermore, he notes that Baldwin's insistence on the limitations of identity categories was recognized by many critics as "evidence that he thought the classification of individuals by their race, class, gender, and sexuality was dehumanizing" and thus in line with the liberal humanism that dominated cold war literary culture. However, he criticizes these claims, stating that "Baldwin's emphasis on the multiplicity of identity cannot be domesticated so easily. For it was intended precisely to counter the cold war taxonomy of identity" (167). In fact, Corber recognizes that undeniable message of Baldwin's, which is that "individuals disabled by one set of oppressions (homophobia and classism, for example) could be empowered by another (racism and sexism, for example)." This is one of Baldwin's strengths, which is apparent in subtle ways throughout his fiction; that there are many ways in which the cage of reality can both favor and disenfranchise you, and oftentimes both simultaneously. This idea is exemplified in *Vivaldo*, which I will explore a bit further on, after establishing some of the novel's context through a few key articles.

Corber calls *Another Country* Baldwin's arguably best novel, much due to the sexual complications that proliferate among the characters of the novel. Baldwin's approach to identity was complicated by his understanding of sexuality, because for Baldwin, "sexuality was a mobile, permeable terrain that could not be contained within the fixed boundaries of a stable identity" (168). Much more so than in *Giovanni's Room*, sexuality is in *Another Country* perhaps presented as the key to realizing the fluidity of identity. The various sexual constellations certainly help the characters achieve a higher sense of understanding of their identities, seen in how both *Vivaldo* and *Eric* are able to establish their identity through both hetero- and homosexual sexual encounters. Finally and most importantly, Corber underlines how "Baldwin's emphasis on the contradictory and refractory nature of sexuality makes his classification by critics as a gay, an African American, or even a gay African American writer deeply problematic. At the very least, such categories gloss over the complexity of his life and work" (168). There is a tendency, according to Corber, to assume that Baldwin believed that "issues of identity needed to be transcended or displaced" but that they rather

needed to be “complicated and reconceived” (172). This is in line with the approach this thesis takes to Baldwin, and my reading of *Another Country* finds that Baldwin does manage to complicate and reconceive identity in the novel.

We might also remember that I quoted critic James A. Dievler in the previous chapters, from the essay named “Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*.” As the title implies, Dievler explores the progressive portrayal of sexuality in *Another Country*. Dievler finds that the novel investigates the harmful impacts that come from a “categorically impoverished sexual culture” and that the immediate postwar period was marked by an incessant need for strict identity categories. Dievler also footnotes Corber’s essay on homosexuality in the postwar period, recognizing that “New York, and particularly in the Village, saw a heightened fixing of identity categories, sexual and otherwise” and that this is thus increasingly challenged in *Another Country*. Particularly in Baldwin’s essay “Here Be Dragons” (1985), Dievler recognizes the “categorical nature of American sexual culture” and that Baldwin in this essay “characterizes that culture as immature” (162). This is directly in line with the themes of his much earlier essay “Preservation of Innocence” (1949) whose terms I use in both the previous and this chapter. This proves that Baldwin’s belief in the falsity of identity categories was strong throughout his entire life, and supports the claim that that all of his fiction is colored by this approach. However, the cold war context with its obsession with masculinity and identity categories is especially central in *Another Country*, and thus a relevant background for this chapter.

It is important to note that Dievler reads Baldwin’s critique of this sexual culture as an issue “not only because he could not find his own identity within them but also because he viewed their cost as devastating – preventing Americans from ever experiencing anything approaching Baldwin’s idea of mature love” (162). This might seem surprisingly sentimental, but as Colm Toibín writes in the introduction to *Another Country*, the principle action in the book for Baldwin was “the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence” (2001 x), and this certainly follows well with what I find to be the end message of the novel: that (mature) love can lend hope to a more authentic life. In the final section I find examples to support that Baldwin’s hopeful end note is the promise of mature love.

However, it could be argued that Dievler fails slightly in his conclusion as to what Baldwin intended with his novel. Quote Dievler: “He [Baldwin] is, I believe, advocating a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call ‘postsexuality.’ And he believes it is only in such a “country” that the other categories (race, gender) will cease to exist as well” (163). Here Dievler might have proven himself to be one of the critics Corber

referred to, who believe that Baldwin wanted to transcend and displace identity issues, when in fact he (Corber) believes Baldwin is arguing for identity issues to be complicated and reconceived. I partly agree with Dievler, but we have different approaches. He is interested specifically in the sexuality and potential liberation from identity categories through love-based sex. We recognize the same results in the characters, but I argue that this is through maturity and responsibility on an existential level, with the satisfactory result of being able to find authentic love. I therefore hold with Corber, which is to say that I believe the most powerful statement of Baldwin's is that we need to complicate and reconceive what identity is, and recognize the importance in reconceiving rather than ignoring the way identity categories work. I find that Baldwin argues that the mature love Dievler mentions comes as a result of a process of taking responsibility and prioritizing authenticity, and not the other way around.

A different approach is seen in critic Ernesto Javier Martínez' article "Dying to Know: Identity and Self-knowledge in Baldwin's *Another Country*" (2009) about how "confusion and incoherence" are thematically central to Baldwin's vision in the novel. He recognizes the irony of how the characters "are rarely successful in bringing about any kind of change" despite the novel's challenge to the "racist and homophobic status quo of the American 1950s" (782). Martínez goes on to see that "*Another Country* is preoccupied with incoherence and confusion and epistemically significant states and needs to be read as an extended meditation on the peculiar difficulty of gaining self-knowledge in oppressive social contexts" (783). This fits well with Corber's argument about the postwar period in the U.S., when there was a strict regime of firm identity categories, which would in turn confuse people, for as Baldwin wrote, "people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion" ("PoI" 600). It is this confusion Martínez explores in his essay. His point of departure is what he call the novel's "suicidal sensibility" (783), which can be explained as "an attentiveness to imminent action that is deliberate, seemingly irrevocable, and self-menacing." This is visible in how the characters all face the ethical imperative "to risk their sense of self (to figuratively commit suicide) in order to better understand their lives. They need to be willing to die, as it were, to come to know it more fully" (783). I believe that this idea can be translated into the terms I use, which is that what Martínez calls "suicide," I call maturity/responsibility, and a loss of feigned innocence.

Once again questioning Baldwin's motives, we can see that Martínez does not argue for a completely post-identity category society, as Dievler does, but something more along the lines of Corber: "In the novels, identities are often depicted as impediments that one

would do best to discard. But if discarding them appears self-menacing, it is because Baldwin also understands identities as necessary for making sense of the world” (783). Martínez is insightful in how he recognizes that for Baldwin, identities entail multiple modes of knowing, and rather than thinking about identities as social constructs we would do better without, he thinks of them as “practices of interpretation and interaction for which we need to be increasingly more responsible and through which we might better understand our social world” (783). This position is relevant for my reading of *Another Country*, because, as we will see, the attempts of Vivaldo to ignore the privileges him being white gives him and which depend upon the continued oppression of the likes of Ida are unsuccessful. In order to achieve “some kind of coherence” with Ida, he must accept and acknowledge the reality of his assigned identity, and only through this responsible approach might he hope to gain maturity and a betterment of the social world around him. First, however, I will begin the close reading with comparing and contrasting Vivaldo to another relevant character: Richard.

3.1 Immaturity: Richard as safe and boyish

Baldwin’s statement, seen both in his powerful nonfiction and more subtly in his fiction, is that the U.S. is a nation of dubious moral “innocence.” As we saw in “Preservation of Innocence,” there is a parallel between the desire to remain “innocent,” and the upholding of systematic oppressive power structures. As critic Molly Farneth put it, “Baldwin casts innocence as the willful refusal to accept responsibility for oneself and one’s social world” (183). We also saw the link between Baldwin and Beauvoir in how they both see that a rejection of essentialism and what society poses as “natural” is a mark of moral maturity. One must recognize “the ambiguity and complexity of human individuals,” as it “cannot be captured by sociological categories” (Farneth 178). Thus the categorization of individuals is an immoral act, an act of bad faith, but it should also be noted that it is also bad faith to accept being assigned these identity categories. The people in positions of power, i.e. the white straight male in U.S. society, have a moral responsibility to recognize this power structure, and should they insist on maintaining their innocence and refusing to act, they engage in bad faith and behave inauthentically. In *Another Country* there are at least two characters who symbolize this type of behavior, and one who manages to escape it. The first is Richard, Vivaldo’s friend, and the second is Steve Ellis, who, while not as important, functions as both an amplifier to Richard’s example and as a contrast to Vivaldo’s. And then

there's Vivaldo, who manages to escape it, whom I will explore in the next section. In this section, however, I will explore how Richard is connected to the idea of the preservation of innocence, immaturity, and cowardice. I will then show how these themes are presented as a temptation for Vivaldo, which he thankfully manages to resist.

Richard is, at first read, one of the least interesting characters in the novel. There could be many reasons for this, but it could be partly because we are never really allowed inside his head – we only see him through the eyes of the other focalizers, and through dialogue. Another reason could be because he is also one of the most static characters, who refuses change and flees when it is forced upon him. But this stasis is what allows us to recognize his importance in the novel. Richard is essentially the antagonist, and I will show the importance behind Baldwin posing this ordinary, boring guy in such an unflattering light, proving that Richard embodies the trait of preservation of innocence. First I look at the ways in which Baldwin introduces him, before I compare and contrast him to Vivaldo.

We get to know Richard through being Cass' husband, and the two are supposed to symbolize the standard heterosexual couple. Married for thirteen years, with two kids, she is a loving housewife supporting his dream of becoming an author – which he does over the course of the novel: All seems well. In reality, though, things are not all well, and we see Cass coming to terms with the truth about her marriage – just like the other characters must also face harsh truths about their own lives. The problem is that these revelations are spurred by the upsetting suicide of their mutual friend, Rufus. Quite early in the novel, when Rufus is the subject of their discussions, we see some unflattering quotes by Richard. He responds indignantly – “Oh, well, now, is that fair?” (105) – when Ida says the police will not look for Rufus, and later on, when Rufus is known to be dead, he says to Cass: “I didn't love Rufus, not the way you did, the way all of you did. I couldn't help feeling, anyway, that one of the reasons all of you made such a kind of – *fuss* – over him was partly just because he was coloured. Which is a hell of a reason to love anybody” (110-111). First of all, his initial trust towards the police and their integrity shows his privilege in an apparent way, and his refusal to accept otherwise proves that he is completely oblivious – or willfully ignorant – to the harsh truth. The second quote shows the former in an even sharper way – it seems he never saw Rufus as a person, and that he could only recognize him through the color of his skin. So Richard is quite quickly shown to be ignorant and privileged, presented through his quotes. This ignorance connects him to both Jesse from “Going to Meet the Man” and partly David from *Giovanni's Room*, who all have a significant degree of privilege.

This privilege is an important factor to Richard's character, but it is even more important in relation to the backstory of his relationship with Cass. We learn through Cass that Richard had in fact been insecure about their different classes; he was from a Polish working class family, and she from "old blood" New England. His poverty and her privilege makes her reflect that "she had worked very hard to prove him wrong and to dissociate herself, in his mind, from those who wielded the knout of power" (286). However, this is mentioned immediately after she has reflected upon how she has never had an episode with a police officer, and how all police officers were "bright enough to know who they were working for and they were not working, anywhere in the world, for the powerless" (286). This shows that Cass is aware of her privileged position, and also that her position was(/is) initially more powerful than Richard's as well.

Furthermore, there is something reminiscent of the "false community" of white immigrants (as Baldwin discusses in "On Being White... And Other Lies" which I discussed in chapter one) seen in Richard and Cass' marriage. This is certainly an important argument Baldwin makes, because what is presented as one homogenic group of white Americans is in fact a patchwork of different European immigrants, whose only similarity is the color of their skin. Yet, as Baldwin wrote, it was better to overcome their differences and present a united front against the perceived enemy of the black people. It is not implied to be a loveless marriage, or an "untrue" one, but I believe it is important to recognize Baldwin's inclusion of their background, which, to the observant reader, proves the falsity of the white American identity.¹⁶ There are a few more important notes to the class/privilege issue as well. There can be said to be a paradox/fluidity of identity in that it is better to be white than black, but it is even better to be "old blood" than Polish/Italian (Cass-Richard-Vivaldo), and this is a class issue. Richard pulls rank over Vivaldo with his success and Rufus and Ida with his white skin, but felt/feels below Cass due to her higher class. Later we see how Vivaldo pulls rank over the black characters, but not with white male Ellis, due to Ellis' success and successful advances at Ida, but also with the musicians Ida plays with:

It was only too clear that if he had been a powerful white man, their attitudes would have been modified by the assumption that she was using him; but it was obvious that, as things

¹⁶ Vivaldo also mentions something similar: "The Italians, after all, merely wished to be accepted as decent Americans and probably could not be blamed for feeling that they might have had an easier time of it if they had not been afflicted with so many Jews and junkies and drunkards and queers and spades" (292). In other words, for Italians to be accepted as "decent Americans" they cannot be associated with any of the undesirable categories above.

were, he could do her no good whatever and, therefore, he must be using her. ... He had no function, they did: they pulled rank on him, they closed ranks against him. (314-315)

This proves the futility and fluidity of identity categories: Vivaldo's whiteness is no guarantee for respect or a "safe" position, and even Richard, a "prime white American male," is not immune to issues of class and other categories. This paradox of identity thus permeates all the characters' lives and questions their assumed identity. Baldwin's inclusion of Richard's background can thus serve to emphasize the falsity of his perceived superiority by showing that social class is no less arbitrary than other categories.

Returning to the idea of innocence and maturity, which I discussed in chapter two, I will now show how Baldwin further accentuates the point that Richard symbolizes the trait of preservation of innocence, which is a willful ignorance of the state of society and cage of reality. The first and most striking detail is how Richard's face is described as "boyish:" "Everybody's got a drink except me, I guess. And I' – he looked very boyish, very secure and happy – 'am going to have a dry martini on the rocks'" (156). This is one of *five* separate occasions where Richard's face is described as boyish. This cannot be a coincidence, and it is quickly apparent that "boyish" can be read as code for false innocence and even bad faith: There are *three* separate occasions where Steve Ellis' face is also described as "boyish."¹⁷ The pervasiveness of this description seems deliberate, and I argue that this is Baldwin's way of heavily pressing the point that these two men epitomize the problematic preservation of innocence and lack of maturity. This term also recalls the American Express bank scene from *Giovanni's Room*, where David implicitly/unknowingly draws the parallel between Americans and innocence and lack of maturity. It bears repeating:

And what distinguished the men was that they seemed incapable of age; they smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor; the boy he had been shone somehow, unsoiled, untouched, unchanged, through the eye of the man of sixty (GR 86)

That Baldwin then chooses to describe these two white straight males so repeatedly in these terms proves that the connection is made between the Americans in *Giovanni's Room* and these two static characters, and they all symbolize the workings of the cage of reality.

Returning to the quote above about Richard's face, it is interesting how Baldwin connects boyish with secure and happy. The use of the term "secure" is ambiguous in the novel, just like "escape" is ambiguous in *Giovanni's Room*. In the latter, escape could be good if the escape was from the cage of reality, but bad when it was the escape from

¹⁷ Richard: p. 82+156+237+365+367 and Ellis: p. 162+252+352.

responsibility and maturity. So it goes in *Another Country* as well. Secure is presented as good when Eric longs for Yves to join him in New York,¹⁸ because love can provide comfort and relief in a distraught world, which is one of the final messages of the novel. But secure is not good when it is connected to immaturity, as it is here with Richard. For Richard, security means his inherent trust in the safety of his privileged position. If Richard seems secure and happy, it is because he is confident that nothing will happen to risk the rigidity of the social structures that places him firmly on top. This safety, translated into a confidence in one's own privilege, draws Richard together with both Jesse from "Going to Meet the Man" and David in *Giovanni's Room*. Jesse is safe and secure in his station as a police officer, free to act out against and upon black men and women as he pleases, and David in his knowledge that at any point he needs only to return to the U.S. and settle down (with a woman), and this will leave "his manhood unquestioned" and his privilege secure.

The reason why all of these examples are so bad, however, is because the safety for these men and their privileged positions in society rely on the unsafety of others. As I discussed in chapter two, there is an inherent responsibility in all individuals to use their freedom, and a failure to do so will effectively endanger all others' freedom as well. These three men are individuals with unquestioned freedom, but as long as they settle comfortably in their assigned identity, the cage of reality will be allowed to continue unchallenged. They have the power to acknowledge and thus resist the cage, but in failing to do so, they not only undermine their own authenticity, but they limit other less privileged people's freedom. It could be argued that for an individual to realize the need to resist the cage of reality the cage must actively feel oppressive. In the cases of Jesse and Richard, the oppressiveness is probably less apparent than for David, whose sexuality makes the cage too constricting. But I as I established in chapter one, Jesse's psyche has been permanently twisted by the cage, and it is clear from following Richard that he is perhaps less aware of the reality that surrounds him than what is good for him: When Cass tells him of her affair with Eric he is shocked, indignant, and resorts to laughing at her choice due to Eric's homosexuality. It seems impossible to him that there could be anything wrong with him that could make the failure of their marriage his fault. Because when one holds the privileged position in society, the same trait that has one obsessed with innocence also frees you (in your eyes) from all responsibility. The preservation of innocence includes a willful ignorance not only of your contribution to the uneven power balances in society, but your reliance upon it. Richard's

¹⁸ "This thought exalted him and made him feel safe. He did not feel safe now, sitting here alone with Cass; he had not felt safe since stepping off the boat." (233)

sense of safety is only firm as long as it is uncontested. If women and people of color were to have the same advantages as him, it would remove his unquestioned status of superiority. So once again, we see that the immature tendency to avoid responsibility is a cause for the power imbalance among different identity categories.

Speaking of responsibility, which these three characters do not take, it is important to notice another related theme: The theme of fear and cowardice, which runs through the entire novel. One of the driving forces of many of the characters is fear, and this is seen in different shapes – from Rufus, jumping off the bridge, to Cass, numbed and paralyzed when she is in Harlem, and Vivaldo, who is too afraid to hear the truth from Ida that he rather tries to flee from it entirely. The ways of relating to this fear can be portrayed as two different branches. One branch is the inauthentic choice, which I call the “safe” choice, and the other branch is the authentic choice, which I call the “true” choice. The “safe” choice is the subscription to the belief in the permanence of the cage of reality, as we see in Richard, as well as Jesse from chapter one. Regarding the “true” choice, we see two different approaches, visible in two character: Cass and Ida.

The first example about the pervasiveness of fear can be seen in a scene with Cass. On her way home from her night out with Ida, leading up to her confession about her affair, Cass reflects on her relationship to Richard: “Eric’s entrance into her, her fall from – grace? – had left her prey to ambiguities whose power she had never glimpsed before. Richard had been her protection, not only against the evil in the world, but also against the wilderness of herself” (355). This passage accentuates the dynamic of their relationship – it is safe, but also as she says a “protection against the wilderness of herself.” This means that the “true” Cass has been repressed and subdued with Richard, and it is only now allowed to emerge. She is now “prey to ambiguities,” which is precisely what we know Baldwin wishes to highlight: the web of ambiguity, which I mentioned previously. In order to lead a more authentic life it is imperative that Cass experiences this loss of safety, because the safety has led her to repress her own wilderness, and as she phrases it herself: “...one doesn’t want to be simply another grey, shapeless monster” (395).

Cass and Richard are certainly meant to symbolize the standard heteronormative couple, if only a bit more bohemian than ordinary, and by showing that this relationship is built on a false sense of security as well as a repression of one’s deepest instincts, Baldwin effectively shows how many individuals live an inauthentic life. It is difficult to know, but it seems fair to argue that Cass – and Richard – made a “safe” choice, rather than a “true” choice, in marrying each other, thus adhering to the first branch. However, the power of the

cage of reality should not be underestimated, so rather than questioning their initial choice to marry, which was when they were young and unsure, it is more important to recognize the choices made now, after they are confronted with the truth about their lives. Now, thankfully, Cass makes a “true” choice, and decides to tell – and leave? – Richard, and subscribe to the second branch, and authenticity.

The second approach is exemplified by Ida, arguably the most perceptive and critical character of the novel. She is also limited to us, like Richard, through the descriptions of the focalizers and dialogue, but seeing as she is one of the most outspoken characters and a lot more aware of the cage of reality, there is a lot of truth to be found with her – unlike Richard. In her final showdown with Vivaldo she reflects on the state of US society. She says: “This isn’t a country at all, it’s a collection of football players and Eagle Scouts. Cowards. We think we’re happy. We’re not. We’re doomed” (398).¹⁹ The notion in this quote is indirectly connected to what I argue is one of the central arguments of the novel, which is that American society is permeated with individuals proclaiming their innocence. And as Ida says here, this is first and foremost cowardly. She says she “hasn’t met a lot of what she’d call men” (400), once again reminding us of the many times the word “boyish” has been used to describe the more static and inauthentic characters of Richard and Ellis. In the words of Ida, she has mostly experienced “a bunch of cowards who didn’t even know what they were doing” (407). Ida is not afraid to say it like it is, even though this is often portrayed as harsh, and this honesty is also a “true” choice. This is a lot more authentic than the other characters who would rather avoid confrontations and uncomfortable truths: In fact, quite like cowards. Cass and Vivaldo especially are victims of this uncomfortable questioning, both being confronted by Ida on their naïveté. However, the important message presented to us by Baldwin through their self-examinations is that the only path to an authentic life and an attempt at true happiness goes through the dark road of self-examination and -realization which can result in an acknowledgement of the cage of reality.

I have now seen how Richard is portrayed as boyish and secure, and that these words represent the inauthentic trait of preservation of innocence. Furthermore, I have shown how fear and cowardice affect the various characters, and how these traits are also presented as inauthentic and immoral because they allow the characters to avoid responsibility. With this in mind, I will now explore the character who is most morally challenged and torn between safety and authenticity: Vivaldo.

¹⁹ As a funny intertextual note, this shows that Ida proves Giovanni wrong – some Americans do sense doom.

3.2 Struggle: Vivaldo as torn and insecure

In this section I explore further about the character who arguably manages to “escape” the trap of inauthentic safety that Jesse, David, and Richard fall into: Vivaldo. We meet him as focalizer as he is struggling with a chapter of his book which is not coming along so well. In fact, the word Baldwin uses to describe his state is paralysis. This is a feeling repeated when a character is “facing the cage of reality” and their safety is in peril.²⁰ In Vivaldo’s case, at the beginning of chapter three, he is struggling to make his characters come to life. “They were waiting for him to find the key, press the nerve, tell the truth. *Then*, they seemed to be complaining, they would give him all he wished for ...” (130). The argument can be made that his struggle with his fictional characters mirrors his own struggle with real ones – and his own. They want him to tell the truth, but the truth would be to admit his own guilt, something he is not yet mature enough to do. Here we see once again the trait of preservation of innocence: The white straight American man is not mature enough to acknowledge the cage of reality, even though he sees the hints of it around him. The problem with this can be connected to existentialism, in that the person (/character) resists to accept both the relief *and* burden of freedom.

On the next page it says: “They swarmed, then, in the bottom of his mind, his cloud of witnesses, in an air as heavy as the oven heat, clustering, really, around the desired and unknown Ida. Perhaps it was she who caused them to be so silent” (131). This proves that his struggles are somehow connected to Ida. What does this mean? I find that there is a twofold approach to Vivaldo’s feelings towards Ida. One side is the issue of what we might call “white guilt,” because he has repeatedly gone up to Harlem to use black prostitutes, and this is an uncomfortable truth for him to acknowledge, which is an issue I return to in the next section. The other issue is that he knows, or feels, that Ida and he could have something profound and true together, but he seems to sense (and the characters in his head do, too) that there is an obstacle to overcome before he can reach this happiness. This is certainly true, and the rest of Vivaldo’s journey in *Another Country* is about him confronting and overcoming this obstacle, which I will examine in this section. This obstacle is his continued belief in his innocence, which is also what Ida senses, which repels her.

Returning to Dievler’s essay, we find some insight into Vivaldo’s failure to write:

²⁰ Cass is in a “strange, unnamable state” (120) and she feels like “her mind’s prisoner, as though the jaws of her mind had closed on her” (128) when she is confronted with her white privilege on a trip to Harlem for Rufus’ funeral.

Vivaldo's condition of not fitting in is established clearly in the novel as a direct result of his sexuality. His failure to overcome identity categories in his love life leaves him lonely and unable to write. ... sexuality and language are linked, in the sense of language's role in enabling people to truly know each other in the sense of creative writing – Vivaldo and Baldwin's craft. Writing is also the vehicle, then, for overcoming the state of exile that can manifest itself between two people in the same bed. (176-177)

While Dievler presents some convincing arguments here, I argue that he lacks something in his analysis of Vivaldo. He writes that writing can be the vehicle to overcome the state of exile, yet the issue for Vivaldo is his inability to produce writing due to his standstill with Ida. As I argue, this standstill comes from Vivaldo's lack of maturity, due to his subconscious attempts to preserve his innocence. Once he does, however, accept the harsh reality of the cage of reality, he is able to take responsibility, and it is only then that he finds that the final pieces of his writing falls in place. Dievler does acknowledge that at the end, Ida and Vivaldo's relationship "achieves a new level of maturity and reality" and that Vivaldo "finally becomes a writer when he is able to participate in a mature relationship" (178). Once again, I agree with this reading, but I argue that in order to achieve this mature relationship, the individual – Vivaldo – must shed himself of the false innocence inherent in his American identity and only through accepting the cage of reality can he be prepared for maturity.

However, first we must return to the idea of the web of ambiguity, where we remember that Baldwin said: "In overlooking, denying, evading [the individual's] complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" ("EPN" 13). Much like we saw in existentialist ethics, the inherent reduction of freedom and complexity in the categorization of individuals is the "death" of the authentic and free self. Only through acknowledging the cage of reality and accepting that we all exist in a web of ambiguity can we hope to be free of the chains and be able to live authentic and good lives. It will surely always be a struggle, but it will be a truer struggle than engaging in bad faith through inauthentic behavior. Vivaldo must accept the ambiguity and relationality inherent in being an individual in society, and he cannot avoid the truths of his assigned identity – which is his white privilege. Only when he embraces and takes responsibility for this role as well as realizing his relationality can he achieve authenticity.

An important identity for Vivaldo is his status as a writer, and Baldwin has written of the significance of the novelist: "It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other

claims” (“EPN” 13). This is highly relevant for our reading of Vivaldo, because in this first meeting, we see him struggling with his characters who won’t tell him their secrets. As this is the scene with which Baldwin chooses to introduce us to Vivaldo, it must clearly hold great significance. Will Vivaldo’s characters confide in him? If so, why? Is the reason he struggles with his book because he has not been honest with himself, is he acting in bad faith? I argue, yes. However, before I explore the significance and resolution of his issues with his novel I must draw an important parallel between Vivaldo and Richard.

A central plot point is that Richard publishes a novel during the course of the story, and Vivaldo only struggles with his, at least until the very end. However, there are important and significant implications in the presentation of the two men’s novels that can be translated into descriptions of their persons. For instance, there is one significant quote from Vivaldo: “In the place in Vivaldo’s mind in which books lived, whether they were great, mangled, mutilated, or mad, Richard’s book did not exist” (150). This says something more profound than just describing what makes books good; it shows that a book does not have to be beautiful, i.e. a person does not have to be “perfect,” but it must be authentic. The presentation of Vivaldo as someone able to recognize authenticity is a sign in his favor.

In describing Richard’s novel, Vivaldo could just as easily have been describing Richard: an “able, intelligent, mildly perceptive *tour de force* and it would never mean anything to anyone” (159). Of course, the reader recognizes that this is said through Vivaldo, who has no small amount of jealousy over Richard’s success. Vivaldo is obviously jealous of both Richard and Ellis’ success, and there is an appeal for him in their money and potential for a glamorous lifestyle. The power Richard holds for Vivaldo is probably moored in the fact that Richard was Vivaldo’s high school English teacher, which could have made him into something of a mentor for young Vivaldo, as well as a symbolic father figure, passing down the traditions. However, Vivaldo eventually realizes that “[h]e had envied Richard’s prowess, and had imagined that this envy was love” (296). And why does Vivaldo not love Richard? I argue that this is because it becomes increasingly clear, especially after Richard’s novel is released, that Richard is inauthentic. The importance of recognizing the dynamic of Vivaldo and Richard’s relationship lies in the way the marrow of tradition is not successfully passed down. Vivaldo could have done as Richard, his symbolic father figure, did, but due to his gradual realization about Richard’s inauthenticity he understands that he must rather be true to his authentic self and follow the harder but truer path. This shows the reader that Vivaldo holds potential for an authentic life, but he does still have a way to go.

Through Vivaldo and symbolized through Richard's inauthentic novel we have thus confirmed that Richard is an inauthentic and static character, and the symbol of white straight male (supremacy) that one might expect. He has "sold out" by writing a cheap thriller book meant to earn him lots of money but remain relatively unproblematic and bad. It is uncomfortable to see Richard scrambling to defend his inauthenticity and his "selling out;" Vivaldo points out to Richard that he "didn't think much of [crime novels] when you were teaching me English in high school," to which Richard replies; "Well, I was younger then than you are now. We change, boy, we grow -!" (82) Rather than admitting to the truth he maintains the illusion that it is a conscious choice he has made, and not a cop out because he has no authentic talent. It might sound elitist, but that is the way it is presented in the novel. There is no doubt that this development – the two men's respective novels – is supposed to mirror their individual identities as well as their similarities, and more importantly, differences. Vivaldo struggles because he wants to write a thoroughly good novel, but an authentic novel can only come from an authentic author. As Vivaldo at the point where we meet him is still in denial, an authentic novel must wait. It only makes itself possible when he has accepted "reality" at the end of the novel: "Smoke poured from his nostrils and a detail that he needed for his novel, which he had been searching for for months, fell, neatly and vividly, like the tumblers of a lock, into place in his mind. It seemed impossible that he should not have thought of it before: it illuminated, justified, clarified everything" (417). This comes right after his fight with Ida is over and she has left the table. He looks around him and notices that all the items around him are "real" – it is a strange, but important passage. The air between him and Ida has finally been cleared – but how did that come to pass?

This passage allows me to return to the obstacle I mentioned above: Vivaldo must overcome certain obstacles in order to be able to love Ida authentically. One big obstacle for him is his cowardice. This cowardice is one of his similarities with Richard, and both Ida and Cass are perceptive in recognizing this trait in their respective men. Cass perceives that Richard is not interested in knowing the dirty parts of existence, and that makes him inauthentic and thus his novel uninteresting. In the taxi with Vivaldo on their way to Rufus' funeral, Cass observes:

Perhaps such secrets, the secrets of everyone, were only expressed when the person laboriously dragged them into the light of the world, imposed them on the world, and made them a part of the world's experience. Without this effort, the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished; without this effort, indeed, the entire world would be an uninhabitable darkness; and she saw, with a dreadful reluctance, why this effort was so rare. Reluctantly, because she then realised that Richard had bitterly disappointed her by

writing a book in which she did not believe. In that moment she knew, and she knew that Richard would never face it, that the book he had written to make money represented the absolute limit of his talent. It had not really been written to make money – if only it had been! It had been written because he was afraid, afraid of things dark, strange, dangerous, difficult and deep. (116)

This reverie is spurred on by Vivaldo's admission of a horrific teenage gang beating he participated in as an adolescent, which Cass notices he holds a romantic and fascinated horror for. She observes how he creates a distance between himself and his past self, and this is a classic case of cowardice and abdication of responsibility. This quote also shows how Cass connects what Vivaldo is saying to the way Richard lives his life. That Richard would never face anything because he is afraid of all things dark and strange is directly linked to his preservation of innocence. Vivaldo could be said to be a bit more advanced, especially since he tells Cass this story, but she rightly senses that he has a strange relationship to it and fails to take responsibility. Vivaldo has yet to mature properly, but that is one thing that his experiences with Ida and eventually Eric helps him with.

In summation, it is important to note that the launch of Richard's inauthentic novel effectively ends their friendship. There is a sense of spiteful sarcasm in how Vivaldo thinks to himself that the paragraph on the simple book jacket of Richard's novel "summed up Richard's life, from his birth to the present: *Mr Silenski is married and is the father of two sons, Paul (11) and Michael (8). He makes his home in New York City*" (154).²¹ It tells the reader that perhaps Vivaldo is beginning to see that there is not much depth to Richard; the launch of his inauthentic novel reflects and finally exposes how empty Richard truly is. By struggling to preserve his innocence, Richard has destroyed any chance of having an authentic inner life – and this begins to shine through. The end of their friendship is then further pushed by Richard telling Vivaldo: "I just think that maybe it's time you straightened out – settled down – time you figured out what you want to do and started doing it instead of bouncing around like a kid. You're not a kid" (158). This can be seen as Richard's final attempt to uphold the marrow of tradition, to help Vivaldo see the value of his privilege. This reminds us both of Jesse's father, who takes him to the lynching, and David's father, who begs him to come home and settle down. It is also a cowardly attempt to stop Vivaldo from outgrowing him: Richard possibly feels threatened by Vivaldo's capacity for authenticity,

²¹ It is also interesting to note, as critic Mikko Tukhanen does, that "...in the dedication Richard himself has "miswritten" his wife's name through a gesture of heterosexual proprietorship. He has dedicated the novel not to "Cass" but to "Clarissa, my wife." Clarissa is indeed her given name, but she hates it, and even her closest friends do not recognize it as hers (154). (556) This further accentuates Richard's sexist and generally unsympathetic nature.

discerned in his hurt when he says to Vivaldo: ““You didn’t really like my book much, did you?”” (158) This shows that Cass was right, that Richard is afraid of all things dark, and just like the good books that Vivaldo picture in his mind, authentic books and authentic people are not only beautiful, but also damaged, disturbed, and mangled. By showing us the extent of Richard’s inauthenticity while simultaneously showing how he can represent the traditional white American male, Baldwin makes Richard into an effective symbol for the immaturity that is wrong with U.S. society.

Returning, then, to the obstacles that Ida and Eric help Vivaldo overcome. We know that there is a parallel between Vivaldo’s desire to finish his novel, and his desire for Ida to love him. My argument is that Vivaldo suffers from writer’s block because he is still engaging in bad faith and being inauthentic, and is thus immature. For this same reason, Ida, who is mature, cannot love him, and their relationship suffers from this. The goal for Vivaldo should be to acknowledge the cage of reality, which would allow him to accept the web of ambiguity and also to love Ida authentically. However, he is attempting to maintain his superiority, which we know is both bad faith and inauthentic. For instance, he refuses to listen to Ida’s repeated critiques of how he is unable to understand what life is like for black people, how he failed to help Rufus who was struggling, and how he acts cowardly in refusing to acknowledge the harsh truths of reality. An issue in their relationship has been that Vivaldo feels that Ida continuously blames him for being white, and he repeatedly begs her, “You stop that It’s not my fault I’m white. It’s not my fault you’re black” (319). However, there is an authentic side to Ida’s anger, justified in Vivaldo’s unconscious unwillingness to approach the uncomfortable and real reality. She tells him, “I know you’re older than I am – I always think of you as being much younger. I always think of you as being a very nice boy who doesn’t know what the score is, who’ll maybe never find out. And I don’t want to be the one to teach you” (403). This is exactly what the preservation of innocence is about. Ida’s frustration with Vivaldo stems from the reluctance he shows regarding reality. He is not as outspokenly racist, sexist, and homophobic as Richard is, which is why there seems to be hope for him in the end, but the reader understands Ida’s anger well. His immaturity and subsequent cowardice becomes his primary obstacle. As Ida tells Cass in frustration; ““Maybe nothing can be stopped, or changed, but you’ve got to *know*, you’ve got to know what’s happening”” (342).

In fact, in an earlier scene, his willful ignorance is addressed even more directly. Ida and Vivaldo are discussing Cass and Eric’s affair, and Ida is relentless in her contempt. In discussing Eric she goes as far as calling him a “poor-white faggot from Alabama” who

“wanted to make [her] brother as sick as he is” (317-318). Vivaldo is not understanding of this; Ida once again perceives Vivaldo’s feigned innocence and arrests him: “*If anything happened [between Rufus and Eric]. You’re a damn liar, and a coward, too. ... Because you know damn well what happened. It’s only that you don’t want to know –*” (318). This frustration ends in the dramatic statement that for Vivaldo, their being together changes the world, to which Ida replies “That is because you’re white” (319). At this point, Vivaldo is upset that she can think this of him, but avoids the topic of his willful ignorance. Why does he do this? I think he is afraid of confronting this issue because he carries a heavy burden of guilt, that would demand a thorough self-examination. This is the issue regarding his “white guilt,” by which I mean his cowardly avoiding of the issue of race.

This is exemplified early on. For instance, on the way to Rufus’ funeral in Harlem, Vivaldo laments: “‘They’re coloured and I’m white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?’” to which Cass perceptively replies, “‘But they didn’t,’ she said ‘happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened. But what happens up here ... happens *because* they are coloured. And that makes a difference’” (117). On the way back again, the final scene with Vivaldo and Ida is foreshadowed – Vivaldo says about Ida, “‘I’d like to make her know that the world’s not as black as she thinks it is.’ To which Cass replies ‘Or, as white.’ (128). However, Vivaldo’s ignorance and attempt to equal his experiences to that of a black person goes deeper than his supposed “romantic approach” in speaking about his “colorless” love for Ida. We know that there is something murkier in Vivaldo which can be interpreted from his trips to Harlem.

Vivaldo’s feigned innocence is disputed in his complicated desire to go up to Harlem to have sex with prostitutes. He recognizes how he had fancied that he “belonged in those dark streets uptown precisely because the history written in the colour of his skin contested his right to be there” – and that “uptown, his alienation had been made visible and therefore, almost bearable. It had been his fancy that danger, there, was more real, more open, than danger was downtown and that he, having chosen to run these dangers, was snatching his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire” (135). He has managed realized that this has been a false fancy, and that his “adventures” uptown were in fact a form of escapism: “He had merely been taking refuge in the outward adventure in order to avoid the clash and tension of the adventure proceeding inexorably within” (136). Thus in retrospect he has come to understand that there was something unhealthy and dark in his desire to go uptown, and this is probably because as he observes, his position as an outsider is much more apparent up there than downtown. Yet this does not explain his specific desire to

have sex with black women. There is something murky in his motivation, and it draws some very clear parallels to Jesse in “Going to Meet the Man.” I think that this can be argued to be the internalized cage of reality making him an embodiment of white supremacy through the need to dominate black women, as Jesse did.

This context is also accurate for its time. Dievler notes in his essay that “...in the postwar period whites were particularly drawn to black sexual culture (a fact embodied by Vivaldo in *Another Country*), and once again, this culture was used by whites – despite their attraction to it – as a definition of sexual immorality: “Black founds themselves again labeled as promiscuous and dangerous, their sexual mores categorized as symbols of immorality” (*Intimate Matters* 295)” (Dievler 166). This shows that Vivaldo represents a tendency prevalent at the time. However, there follows a strange admission from Vivaldo. In talking about meeting a nice black girl during a trip he says: “[h]e could not fail to disapprove of her situation If he did not like her, then he despised her and it was very painful for him to despise a coloured girl, it increased his self-contempt” (135). This also seems connected with the characters of his novel and his struggle to write: He is lying in bed thinking about Ida, and then “... the people in his novel massed against him. They seemed to watch him with a kind of despairing, beseeching reproach. His typewriter, a dark shapeless presence, accused him, reminding him of the days and nights, the weeks, the months, the years by now, that he had spent without sleep, pursuing easier and less honourable seductions” (144). Here he is haunted by his guilt for his twisted psychological needs, shown through how his self-contempt is increased when he despises a black woman. There is an undeniable connection to the white man’s repression of the “dark gods” – which I discussed in chapter one. The duality of Vivaldo being moralizing about the girls’ situation when he is the one buying sex from them is a fascinating one, and shows how eschewed his morality has been. The fact that he finds it painful to despise black women is also strange in how he makes it about him. I find that the characters in his novel reproach him for not confronting the hypocrisy in his desires, and this is not resolved until he has been able to come to an understanding with Ida and her position as a black woman.

Furthermore, there is also something disturbing about Vivaldo’s thoughts as to why he fell in love with Ida: “Perhaps it was only because she was not white that he dared to bring her the offering of himself. Perhaps he had felt, somewhere, at the very bottom of himself, that she would not dare despise him” (292). This proved to be false, as Ida is one of the characters most critical of Vivaldo. But where does her contempt stem from? The always perceptive Ida recognizes that there is something about white people which draws them to

black people. According to her, it is the knowledge that black people know how to be “dirty” – only that, as she says, “the polite ones didn’t say dirty. They said real. I used to wonder what in the world they did in bed, white people I mean, between themselves, to get them so sick” (409). This once again reminds us of Jesse, who must think about raping black women (and lynching and castrating a black man) in order to perform sexually with his wife. It is also one of the reasons why Ida is resentful towards white people, and also partly the reason she decided to go out with Vivaldo. Only, as she realizes in the end, “I sort of had you where I wanted you. I’d got my revenge. Only, it wasn’t *you* I was after” (412). She probably recognized this dark trait in Vivaldo, and wanted to punish him for it. However, it is impossible to extend this punishment to cover the whole population of white males, which is who she feels are responsible for Rufus’ suicide. The notion that black people can give white men access to something more “real” is the root of a lot of murky repressions and actions, and I believe Baldwin gives Vivaldo this trait in order to prove exactly how much the cage of reality is internalized in him before he manages to acknowledge it at the end of the novel.

Surprisingly, though, Vivaldo is refreshingly unrepressed regarding other parts of his sexuality. He seems to be quite open regarding his “homosexual tendencies,” both in the revelatory talk with Eric towards the end, which I will explore in-depth in the next section, but also, interestingly, with Rufus: “‘Have you ever wished you were queer?’ Rufus asked suddenly. Vivaldo smiled, looked into his glass. ‘I used to think maybe I was. Hell, I think I even *wished* I was.’ He laughed. ‘But I’m not. So I’m stuck’” (59). This shows that Vivaldo has perhaps come further in absolving himself of strict identity categories than one might expect. This is also what allows him to go home with Eric towards the end of the novel, in the scene that is arguably the novel’s most revelatory. Eric is an important component in helping Vivaldo overcome his obstacles, but first I will comment the final scene between Ida and Vivaldo.

After his profound experience at Eric’s, Vivaldo comes home with a newly opened mind, ready to face Ida. All of Ida and Vivaldo’s issues have come down to this moment, and this is where Ida comes clean about her hatred towards white men, her initial motivations for dating Vivaldo, and the affair with Ellis. Ida accuses him of “knowing without knowing” – willful ignorance – about her and Ellis. He is angry with her for this, because he says that she made it seem like his skepticism would have caused her to leave him. But as Ida says, “‘...if you had faced it, I would have had to face it – as long as you were pretending, I had to pretend. I’m not blaming you. I’m just telling it to you like it is’” (412). This time he seems

to understand the damage he has done, and this openness has been made possible by his transformative experience with Eric.

The issue has been that by not confronting her about it as soon as he had the suspicion, and especially as time went by, he effectively made an inauthentic non-choice. Of course, Ida was perhaps also inauthentic in not telling him about the affair until now, but it seemed unlikely that he would ever have brought it up – because he was afraid, and a coward. It is also noteworthy how Vivaldo seems paralyzed rather than raging with anger. This time he actually opens himself up to the horrible truth, and by going through the agonizing tale of Ida's reality, he finds it in him to “purge” himself as well. Baldwin deliberately uses many conflicting terms in these descriptions – love and hate; “a wilderness of anger, pity, love, and contempt and lust all raged together in him” (420). This is also clear in the quote where Vivaldo notices that “black coffee was not black, but deep brown” and that “[n]ot many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hints of its origins, in fire” (419-420). Vivaldo is beginning to realize what is real, and what the cage of reality does, and all of the conflicting terms help accentuate the importance of the web of ambiguity.

Lastly, in the final exchange between Vivaldo and Ida there is a significant passage. Ida tells Vivaldo:

‘I don’t want you to be understanding. I don’t want you to be kind, okay?’ She looked directly at him, and an unnameable heat and tension flashed violently alive between them, as close to hatred as it was to love. ... ‘I promise you that,’ he said. And then furiously, ‘You seem to forget that I love you.’ ... Suddenly, he reached out and pulled her to him, trembling, with tears starting up behind his eyes, burning and blinding, and covered her face with kisses, which seemed to freeze as they fell. ... Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him. (420)

I argue that the innocence being stroked out of Vivaldo is all his accumulated preserved feigned innocence; he has reached the point of acknowledgement, and is ready to pay his dues. What is significant is Ida's fierce statement that she does not want him to be kind and understanding, because this can be translated to inaction and cowardice. The situation with Ellis and Vivaldo's knowing without knowing shows that Vivaldo has, until this point, resorted to cowardice and an escape from the real. With this statement, however, the reader can hope that he will be able to maintain a more authentic and direct approach, both to Ida and his life in general.

As Martínez points out, a point of the novel's messy structure and chaotic and unresolved ending is that *life* is messy and chaotic, and not to mention unresolved. (783) So

while there is not exactly a happy ending for Vivaldo and Ida, there is a tone of acceptance, and that is infinitely more valuable than a false pretense – which so many other inauthentic couples have, as we see with Richard and Cass. Also, as Colm Toibín quotes in the introduction, the principle action in the book for Baldwin was “the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence,” which means that love, with all the difficult and horrible emotions that follows it, is the driving force of the novel. Vivaldo wonders earlier in the novel if it is he who is incapable of love, since “[l]ove was a country he knew nothing about” (291). However, I find that the novel’s internal logic is meant to prove that he has arrived at some level of maturity, since the conflict with which he is introduced to us – the discontented characters of his novel – resolves itself in the same moment his fight with Ida ends. As the innocence is stroked out of him and he begins to accept his responsibility to be authentic, he opens himself up to the possibility of mature love, and the characters of his novel follow suit.

3.3 Love: Eric as authentic and accomplished

The final point I wish to make is regarding Eric. Eric does not only function as an instrument for Vivaldo’s salvation; he is in fact presented as one of the most accomplished characters in the novel. Not because of his career or love life, but because he is the most advanced regarding his sense of self and his own identity. Most of all, Eric is authentic because he has made a conscious decision regarding his identity, claiming his identity as homosexual, even though he has sex with Cass and is partly sexually ambiguous. He understands and accepts that people, and by extension the cage of reality, will always assign you an identity, but he also knows that he has a responsibility to act on this and that he can claim it and thus hold some power over people’s perception of him.

This decision is explored in the most clarifying and revelatory section of the novel, namely the one where Vivaldo is at Eric’s apartment and they discuss identity, decisions, and their difficulties in life. At first they discuss their relationships. They accept that both Ida and Eric are quite unpredictable, to which Vivaldo says that “we’re all unpredictable.” Eric responds to this with the insight that “[i]t’s very hard to live with that. I mean, with the sense that one is never what one seems – never – and yet, what one seems to be is probably, in some sense, almost exactly what one *is*” (327). It is clear that Eric understands the paradox of identity, with his confusing statement on how one is and is not exactly and exactly not what

one seems. This then develops into a reflection on love and sexuality. Vivaldo says he envies Eric and wishes he could “make it” with both men and women, and Eric responds that he wishes he could not. Which brings Eric to touch upon a central theme I discussed in chapter two: Decisions. Eric says: “I’ve really got to accept – or decide – some very strange things,” showing that he recognizes the need to both accept and decide his sexuality. Vivaldo diplomatically replies that nobody can ever be sure of anything, maybe a boy waits in his future, or a girl in Eric’s. But Eric is clear:

‘Indeed. I can’t be sure. And yet I must decide. ... I mean, I think you’ve got to be truthful about the life you have. Otherwise, there’s no possibility of achieving the life you want.’ He paused. ‘Or think you want.’ ‘Or,’ said Vivaldo, after a moment, ‘the life you think you should want.’ ‘The life you think you should want,’ said Eric, ‘is always the life that looks safest. (330)

This is the clearest example of an individual taking responsibility, and I believe that Baldwin poses Eric in such a way as to show that happiness comes to those who are able to manage the difficult task of deciding upon their identity. As we see in Eric, the realization about his homosexuality was difficult to accept, but he understood the importance for him and others around him to embrace that identity. This leads him to the situation he is in, which is in a happy relationship with his lover Yves, and also gives him a position as a “guide” for both Cass and Vivaldo to reach their authentic potential. This means that one must follow the frightening *but* true and authentic path, even if it is less safe.

Eric is also insightful in his reflections on how he has perhaps not been quite so authentic regarding his attitude to his sexuality: “‘Maybe it was easier to call myself a faggot and blame my sorrow on that.’ The silence filled the room, like a chill. Eric and Vivaldo stared at each other with an oddly belligerent intensity. There was a great question in Eric’s eyes and Vivaldo turned away as though he were turning from a mirror and walked to the kitchen door” (331). In this quote we see Eric allowing himself to mirror Vivaldo’s inauthenticity; Vivaldo feels uncomfortable, realizing that Eric can symbolize a way out from his inauthenticity, but he must go through the processes of accept and acknowledgement first, the same way Eric describes that he did. Vivaldo struggles with Eric’s direct and open approach, because he still cannot let go of his innocence; it is almost as though the internalized cage of reality makes Vivaldo physically ill when he is beginning to confront it: “And now Vivaldo felt, at the very bottom of his heart, a certain reluctant hatred rising, against which he struggled as he would have struggled against vomiting” (331). However, the visit with Eric proves to be transformative after they have sex.

The transformation is possible through sex, but the greatest victory comes when Vivaldo the morning after manages to accept what has happened between them. At first, Vivaldo “thought to keep his eyes closed in order to take no responsibility for what was happening. This thought made him ashamed.” But then he realizes that Eric loves him, and then “Vivaldo seemed to have fallen through a great hole in time, back to his innocence, he felt clear, washed, and empty, waiting to be filled” (378). Vivaldo is transformed and cleansed through his love with, from, and for Eric, and it seems that he is rid of his inherent guilt and ready for a new and authentic life. It seems almost too easy, and Dievler notes the following:

Interestingly, Eric’s affair with Vivaldo seems to operate on an exclusively symbolic level. ... Later that night, when Vivaldo rejects Harold’s advances on a rooftop, he is still symbolically defining himself categorically and denying that part of him which could find sexual pleasure with a man. In other words, he is not there yet (fully human), and it will take the affair with Eric to achieve that. (180)

So what Dievler argues is that what is achieved through an acceptance of his sexual fluidity is that he becomes “fully human” through his affair with Eric. This is a different terminology from the one I use in this thesis, but Dievler’s term seems to agree with what I argue, which is that Vivaldo manages to accept the web of ambiguity and his sexual fluidity through his love for, from, and with Eric. The full process of acknowledging the cage of reality is not complete until he has cleared the air with Ida, but Eric has helped him open the door to make the complete transformation possible.

It is easy to agree with Dievler when he argues that “... the affair can only be seen as a metaphorical rendering of Vivaldo’s transcendence beyond a categorical approach to identity” (180-181). Vivaldo, unlike Ida, does not have to confess his affair to her, and it seems that his affair is entirely different from hers. This is a bit hypocritical, but in the context of the novel, the logic of the affair as a metaphor is valid. I read the affair as Eric helping and guiding Vivaldo to the same understanding of love and authenticity that he himself has achieved, and his success with this, as Dievler calls it, transcendence, is what allows Vivaldo to be open for a new chance with Ida. However, I extend Eric’s symbolic function further than Dievler. Particularly in relation to Vivaldo, but also in his own right, he is more a symbolic representation of the way one can decide on an authentic way of life, than an interesting character on his own. I will therefore present some examples of the ways in which Eric is presented as the “most advanced” character, and attempting to show that what makes him so authentic is the realization of one crucial thing: love.

We are introduced to Eric as a focalizer in book three, chapter one, when he is nearing the end of his stay in France with his lover Yves. On the final evening of their “exile” in the country house, Eric has a flashback to his childhood and teen years growing up in the South, and specifically the moment he calls the “revelation” about his true self:

Many years were to pass before he could begin to accept what he, that day, in those arms, with the stream whispering in his ear, discovered; and yet that day was the beginning of his life as a man For the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true, and must be borne. (205)

This is from the day of his unconventional sexual debut, which Eric, the red-haired, pale white, only son of a rich Southern merchant, has with LeRoy, a black poor boy from the poor neighborhood. He is very innocent – the honest kind of innocent – when he tells LeRoy: “you’re not a nigger, not for me, you’re LeRoy, you’re my friend, and I love you” (203).²² The revelation he has that day is that he loves this boy, and even though everything is wrong about it – both his maleness and his blackness – the truth “was the beginning of his life as a man.” In other words, Eric realizing his true and honest love for LeRoy was a turning point for him, even though, as he says, it took many years to accept the truth. This shows that Eric experienced something authentic, but was too immature to resist the cage of reality for many years. However, when we meet him, it is clear that he has matured, and that is mostly due to his authentic love with Yves, and it is this type of love that Baldwin presents as the salvation for the individual in the novel. Dievler says of Eric and Yves:

The nature of the love that Eric has with Yves is redemptive. Baldwin is not suggesting that love between two men is the highest form (cf. Plato) but rather that because Eric and Yves are free of race, gender, and sexual orientation constraints (there is no point in conflict between them – they are the same in each category), they are able to transcend these culturally based categories. (180)

This seems to be true, and especially the part of their love being redemptive. What is apparent from both Eric and Vivaldo’s affair and Eric and Yves’ love is that a transcendence beyond the culturally based categories, assigned and imposed on us by the cage of reality, is the best way for an individual to be, and by extension, to make a relationship work. I find that a part of what Eric gives to Vivaldo is a sense of security, because Vivaldo realizes that Eric will always love him no matter what. This love does not have to manifest itself physically any more than their one night together, proving that it is a truer, more ideal love. It seems perhaps surprisingly sentimental, but accepting that Baldwin also intended Vivaldo and Ida’s

²² This is similar to Vivaldo pleading for Ida to forgive him for being white, because it is not his fault. The difference in these two presentations is that Eric is young, and Vivaldo should know better.

coherence as the main goal of the novel proves that there is something hopeful in the inter-human relations that proves our relationality and our community.

Finally, an existential and central trait of Eric's personality is his sense of honor and subsequently his success at taking responsibility. On the same evening as above, the night of his return to the U.S., he is reflecting upon the ways in which his sexuality is a "disease in the eyes of the world," and his passions are "crimes in the eyes of his countrymen." Thus he concludes that "[t]here were no standards for him except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age" (211). This goes perfectly along with Sartre's quote that I mentioned in chapter two: that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself." Eric has understood that he must make his own standards, and his own place in the world, even though it seems impossible at times. Through this act of self-definition, authentic happiness and mature love can arise.

Regarding love as Baldwin's final message, we might look to critic Bruce Lapenson who comes to the following conclusion about love in Baldwin: "Love makes most evident those existentialist dilemmas of our inescapable connectedness and fear of ineluctable choosing, our responsibility to choose well" (207). The inescapable connectedness and our responsibility to choose well, and I think, to choose love, is the final statement Baldwin gives the reader in *Another Country*, both in the coupling of Ida and Vivaldo, and in the true love of Eric and Yves. And in *The Fire Next Time*, there is one final, perfect quote, which represents the connectedness of existentialism, responsibility, maturity, and love, all in one:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. (95)

This sentiment is what I believe Baldwin wants the reader to keep with them, both despite and in addition to the difficulties and struggles we also know from both his fiction and nonfiction. And maybe, if we all read something of Baldwin, this message might help change the cage of reality.

Conclusion

It can be daunting to write a single-author thesis, and especially about one that is so beloved and important as James Baldwin. As I stated in the introduction, the choice was more or less made for me when I had the revelatory experience after reading *Giovanni's Room*. When I later encountered Baldwin again in the course “Racial Violence and American Identity,” I got to see the “other side” of Baldwin – the side that has made him the figurehead for the cause of black people in the U.S., both in his time, and perhaps even more so today. His position as figurehead has cemented with time, and he is still gaining attention from new audiences and generations of young people of all identities. In addition to his strong presence in the works I mentioned initially – *I Am Not Your Negro*, *The Fire This Time*, and *Between the World and Me* – he is also appearing as a symbol in many popular channels, on everything from TV shows to tote bags. It seems that Baldwin’s universal talent only continues to gain recognition, and this proves how relevant and valuable it is to continue the discussion of his work.

However, the risk with addressing issues of identity in a popular author can also seem reductive as soon as one takes a different approach than what the main tendency is at the moment. I find that all of these recent representations of Baldwin are made with the fact of his blackness as the main factor. This is by no means wrong, yet I personally find that the perhaps most important moral from his fiction is the argument for the harmful nature of identity categories. There is no doubt that his nonfiction is both political and racial, and I am not attempting to remove or redact any of the significance of those writings. However, I have read his fiction in a different light, because I find that the issues presented there are dealt with in a more nuanced and complex way.

A different aspect of this thesis that I came to realize over the course of writing it, is the way the “white straight male” might come across as the “root of all evil.” This was directly against the type of approach I was attempting, because it seems to follow the same narrow path I was arguing that Baldwin was so good at avoiding. However, I have come to the conclusion that what Baldwin does, convincingly, in his fiction, is to identify a trait in the individual that can explain the persistence of harmful identity norms. The fact that the individual in these works turns out to be the white “straight” man, is both one of the strengths of Baldwin’s authorship – the ability to write so convincingly about “something he was not” – and also a product of the focus and scope of my thesis, which was specifically these three

main characters as they represent the different ways an individual can evolve when entrapped in the cage of reality.

The conclusion of this thesis is that there are some very clear processes behind the way harmful identity norms persist in society today. First, we are all born into the cage of reality, and quickly assigned an identity. This identity relies upon and is given in accordance with the systems of white supremacy and heteronormativity, as I explored in chapter one. Baldwin presents this as inevitable, but shows a “way out,” which is to acknowledge and become aware of these processes, in order to hope for a possibility of change. The way out is by realizing and accepting that all individuals exist in a web of ambiguity, which gives room for one’s own self-identification, even though a certain presumption of one’s identity will – thus far – always come from external forces. I apply existentialist terms to these processes, which connect well with Baldwin’s own idea about the preservation of innocence. He argues that American society is obsessed with its “innocence,” a word which in this context means a lack of responsibility and realization regarding the individual’s contribution to the upholding of harmful identity norms. This connects well with the existentialist concepts of authenticity, which is to live a life according to the sense of one’s true self, immaturity, seen in the lack of responsibility and realization, and bad faith, which is the way of acting inauthentically and with self-deceit.

Of course, it is not by complete chance that the inauthentic characters presented in these works by Baldwin are mostly white (straight) males. It is important to know Baldwin’s context, and the particular reason why it is important to recognize this trait in this group specifically is because it is the group with the most power to motivate change. The issue, of course, is that it is difficult to desire change if it implies a change in one’s privilege. However, Baldwin’s universal talent manages to make this call for change nuanced and convincing, because he is so perceptive in noting that the cage of reality is not only harmful to the oppressed, it is also harmful for the oppressors.

I can only say that it has been exciting and insightful to read his fiction in this light, and had the scope of this thesis allowed it, I would have explored the abovementioned recent works, perhaps to examine the ways in which identity is presented in them, or how Baldwin is represented. This can be an area for further research.

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