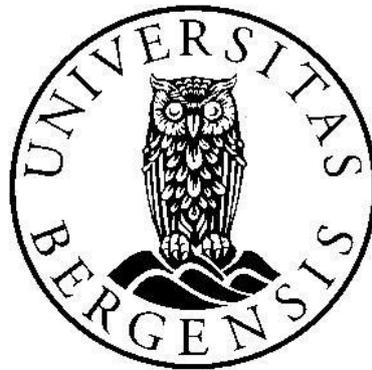


“Unravelling the web of lust and fury”

Innocence, love, and the future of America in James
Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*

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Abstract

Denne oppgaven undersøker hvordan James Baldwins romaner *Giovanni's Room* (1956) og *Another Country* (1962) kan leses som allegoriske fremstillinger av Baldwins håp for en fremtid hvor svarte og hvite amerikanere kunne danne grunnlaget for en ny, helbredet nasjon sammen. Oppgaven viser hvordan forholdene i to av tilfellene feiler som følge av hvit uskyld/ignoranse, og i et av tilfellene lykkes, med å finne sammen gjennom kjærlighet med håp om en bedre fremtid.

Første kapittel vil foreta en grundig definering av begrepene love og innocence som forstått i Baldwins tekster, basert på nærlesning av hans essay og intervjuer, og deretter brukt som en nøkkel til å lese forholdene og karakterene fra de to romanene som representanter for henholdsvis svarte og hvite amerikanere.

Kapittel to vil gå nærmere inn på hvordan begrepet innocence finnes i *Giovanni's Room*, med særlig fokus på karakteren David og hans forhold til Giovanni. David leses her som representant for hvite amerikanere, Giovanni som representant for svarte amerikanere. Kapittelet legger særlig vekt på hvordan innocence, slik det er definert i denne oppgaven, hindrer David i å akseptere sin identitet, og i tillegg umuliggjør både Davids selvrealisering og hans forhold til Giovanni. Davids fornektelse av sin egen homoseksuelle draging blir sett i lys av et destruktivt mannsideal, som igjen henger sammen med innocence som del av det *amerikanske* ideal knyttet til hvit og seksuell uskyld.

Kapittel tre fortsetter å undersøke begrepet innocence, denne gangen om hvordan det forekommer som en ødeleggende faktor i forholdene mellom Rufus og Leona, og forholdet mellom Ida og Vivaldo. Det trekkes linjer fra karakterene Bigger Thomas i *Native Son* og Giovanni i *Giovanni's Room* til Rufus, som eksempler på tragiske, svarte mannsfigurer som forgår i et ødelagt selvbilde som følge av rasisme og maskulinitetsidealet fremmet av hvit innocence. Kapittel fire viser hvordan love virker som en forsonende kraft i forholdet mellom Ida og Vivaldo, og lar dem slik bli et bilde på en mulig forsoning mellom det svarte og hvite Amerika.

I konklusjonen vises det til verdien av å lese Baldwin i dag, og å bruke hans tekster slik som denne oppgaven: som verktøy for å finne en måte å forene en befolkning som står ovenfor svært vanskelige utfordringer om å finne sammen som én nasjon, på bakgrunn av slaveriets blodige historie.

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Introduction

I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every man should be free¹

“The fires, this time, are in Baltimore”. These words start the essay “Baltimore Is Still Burning: the rising Relevance of James Baldwin” by Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride and Douglas Field. It was written for the first edition of the *James Baldwin Review*, an annual publication by Manchester University that “brings together a wide array of peer-reviewed critical essays and creative non-fiction on the life, writings, and legacy of James Baldwin.”² The quote is, of course, an echo of the closing words from one of Baldwin’s most famous writings, “Down At The Cross”: “*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*”³. This essay, which paired with “My Dungeon Shook” makes up the book *The Fire Next Time*, was published in 1963 and is considered to be one of the most influential writings of race relations in America in the 1960s.⁴ “Baltimore Is Still Burning”, as well as the foundation of the *James Baldwin Review* in 2015, is evidence of the continued and growing interest in and relevance of the work of writer James Baldwin.

As the American society continues to struggle with issues of racial divide and unrest, Baldwin’s work, written in a period from the late 1940s until his death in 1987, continues to resonate with its eloquence, intelligence and most of all its unwavering willingness to try to view people as people, to try and understand them and to try and find a way of healing the

¹ Taylor and Lamb, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*. Performed by Nina Simone.

² “James Baldwin Review.”

³ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”, p 347.

⁴ Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature*. p. 267

great wounds which the history of slavery and racial discrimination has left upon American society. As Joyce, McBride and Field write, “In the face of a riotous upheaval, then, Baldwin’s fiery rhetoric surely lends itself to being marshalled as evidence, explanation, or even as witness to the historical breadth of the problems being suffered in the ever-present American “now”.⁵ In 2015, when the *James Baldwin Review* was first published, America as a nation was still reeling from the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson in August 2014 and Freddie Gray in Baltimore in April 2015 at the hands of white police officers, as well as the massive protests that rose up in the wake of these incidents. Movies like *The Hate U Give* (2018), *Get Out* (2017) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) are all about black experiences in America, and how racial injustice is being perpetrated by the American society. The latter movie, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, is based on the Baldwin novel by the same name. Like the 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, based on an unfinished manuscript, these are two recent films that have helped bring renewed focus to Baldwin as both a writer and as a public figure and intellectual. All these works are a testament to the continued relevance and importance of Baldwin’s legacy both as a writer and a public speaker, but also as a unique voice in the discussion on trying to find a way forward in a society increasingly difficult to manoeuvre. As the interest in Baldwin grows, it is as important as ever to continue to analyse his work and view it in a critical context, as Joyce et. al says: that to “call upon his critical voice in moments of tragedy testifies to our need for an artist whose searing words can so uniquely lay bare the demands of a time, people or nation.”⁶ His continued striving to not use simple rhetoric and calls to violence as a way of overcoming problems, but rather to try and heal the wounds and injustices of the past through acknowledging each other and ourselves as who we truly are, is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s and 60s.

Historical context

How can America as a country reconcile itself with the atrocities and horrors that its history of slavery and racism contains? How can it try to find a way of dealing with its own past and a way of moving forward as a nation, to heal its people? These questions are a prevalent theme in James Baldwin’s writing, especially in his sizeable output of essays and lectures, as well as in interviews and debates. As a young black man, he was finding it increasingly

⁵ Joyce, Field, and McBride, “Baltimore Is Still Burning.”

⁶ Joyce, Field, and McBride.

difficult to continue his work as a writer in America, and he left the United States in 1948, following “a multitude of African-American writers, musicians and painters who had fled the reality of America and its broken promises of freedom and equality”⁷ for Paris, France. Like other American expatriates like Richard Wright and Henry James, to whom he has been frequently compared⁸, Baldwin needed to put a distance between himself and his home country to be able to write about its specific culture and problems, and also to find his own voice as a writer. “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer.”⁹ Already at this early stage, it seemed that Baldwin was beginning to buck against the limitations of categorization that he has since been so hard to define by. By putting physical distance between himself and America, he found himself finally able to confront and understand himself and his identity in a way that had seemed impossible for as long as he stayed at home.

Baldwin arguably felt more at home in Europe, and that the distance to his home country made him evolve as a writer. However, as the Civil Rights movement in the United States started to gain traction, Baldwin felt the need to go back to his home country and take part in it. He wrote in his unfinished notes for *Remember This House* about seeing pictures of Dorothy Counts, the fifteen-year old black girl admitted to the all-white Harry Harding High School in 1957, in the newspapers:

“Facing us, on every newspaper kiosk
on that wide, tree-shaded boulevard in Paris
were photographs of fifteen-year old Dorothy Counts
being reviled and spat upon by the mob
as she was making her way to school [...]
But it was on that bright afternoon
That I knew I was leaving France.
I could, simply, no longer sit around
in Paris discussing the Algerian
and the black American problem.
Everybody else was paying their dues,

⁷ Leeming, “James Baldwin.”

⁸ Tóibín, “The Unsparing Confessions of “Giovanni’s Room.””

⁹ Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American.” p.137.

and it was time I went home and paid mine.¹⁰

The pictures of Dorothy Counts, as well as other stark images from the often brutal and violent clashes of the civil rights movement made Baldwin feel that he had to be present in his homeland to take part in the cause. He would go on to travel across the Atlantic at least six times between 1956 and 1961.¹¹ When arriving back in America, he was not, however, necessarily met with universal acceptance from his community. As a black man and a homosexual man, he found himself marginalized both with regards to race and to sexuality, something that put him in a unique position amongst his contemporaries. This is a position that to a certain degree still makes Baldwin's work perhaps less acknowledged than it should be today: it does not fit neatly into a category, much like its author. Because of his homosexuality, Baldwin was regarded with ambivalence or even hostility in circles of established African American persons of note. He was famously the target of scathing homophobic attacks by the Black Panther Party's minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, in his essay collection *Soul On Ice* (1968), who wrote that "There is in James Baldwin's work the most gruelling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time."¹² While Cleaver's assessment was not necessarily representative for most critics of the time, Baldwin's work after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* made him hard to categorize in his contemporary literary climate.

The publication of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), had, as observed by Jerry Ward jr., "created a new kind of African American novel, one that invited not sympathy, but pangs of complicit, national guilt"¹³. The novel was chosen for the Book-of-the-Month club in 1940 as the first novel by a black writer, and it went on to become a national bestseller. Wright would be defined by critics of the African American novel in the time before the Civil Rights Movement as being the main voice of one direction: the social realist or "protest novel". The other direction was that of impressionism or "high modernism" as defined by Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1962). "For some, the choice was between Wright's pathological sense of black life in America and Ellison's inventive, regenerative

¹⁰ Baldwin and Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

¹¹ Tóibín, "Introduction.", p.vi.

¹² Eldridge Cleaver quoted in Williams, "Breaking Into James Baldwin's House."

¹³ Ward jr., "Everybody's Protest Novel: The Era of Richard Wright." p.177

vision of black culture.”¹⁴ Baldwin himself was however neither one nor the other, but rather one of the “many black American novelists of the late 1940s and 50s expatriated to Europe, where they found greater acceptance.”¹⁵ Baldwin’s refusal to adhere to categorization as a black American writer, as well as his call for others to do so as well, are perhaps no more evident than in his critique of his previous friend and mentor, Richard Wright, in the essays “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone”. “Everybody’s Protest Novel” was published as early as 1949, when Baldwin was still a very young man, but still seems to contain somewhat of an essence of what he sought to express was the main purpose of the writer: to try and capture something of the complexity and difficulties of being human, regardless of color (or even sexuality or gender). Part of Baldwin’s critique of Wright was what he viewed as the failure on Wright’s part of making the character of Bigger Thomas fully human. Instead, Baldwin saw Bigger as a character that was “perpetuating a tradition of the African American representation in which the humanity and diversity of the ‘Negro’ is sacrificed to antislavery or antiracist discourse.”¹⁶ From Baldwin’s perspective it was impossible to change the way black people were seen and the way they saw themselves as long as the they were still portrayed as what he viewed as stereotypes:

For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth.¹⁷

In many ways, *Everybody’s Protest Novel* can be, however, read just as much as a future roadmap for Baldwin’s philosophical view of the purpose of writing novels as it is an attack on Richard Wright:

In overlooking, denying, evading this 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. It is this power of revelation which is the business of

¹⁴ Graham, “Introduction.” p.2

¹⁵ Graham.

¹⁶ Wright, “‘Alas, Poor Richard!’: Transatlantic Baldwin, the Politics of Forgetting, and the Project of Modernity.”, p. 209

¹⁷ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p.18

the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.¹⁸

Here Baldwin quite explicitly lays out what he sees as the task of the novel, and that of the writers of novels: to portray the world not as a black- and white divide between right and wrong, moral and amoral, but as the complex, multifaceted and difficult place that it is. Baldwin's assessment warns against the dangers of ignoring this aspect, saying that this complexity is the complexity of the human condition, and that only through acknowledging it can we grow as a society and a people. As a writer himself, it is then fair to assume that his own novels were attempts to do just that, which is what this thesis aims to prove.

Thesis statement

In this thesis I want to show that love and innocence are to be understood as key concepts to James Baldwin's writing, and that these two themes can be used to unpack two of his earliest novels, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) as allegorical to Baldwin's vision for the future of America. I want to examine how these concepts are expressed by Baldwin through a selected group of essays, primarily but not exclusively "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation", "Preservation of Innocence" and "Everybody's Protest Novel", as well as in excerpts from interviews. As a supplement to Baldwin's own writings I will draw upon secondary sources that are concerned with the concepts of love and innocence, either in general or in relation to Baldwin specifically. I will then apply this understanding to unpack how these themes are expressed in the two novels *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. Through this examination I also want to argue for a race-related reading of both these two novels, which in critical studies have traditionally been regarded as Baldwin's "race-less" novels.¹⁹ Though the concept of love, and perhaps somewhat less so the concept of innocence, have been previously studied with regards to Baldwin's essays, to my knowledge there has not been an extensive discussion of these concepts, taken from his essays and non-fiction, which have then been applied to *Giovanni's Room* or *Another Country*. These novels both deal with themes of sexuality, race, identity, and love, and both raise the question of what makes one able to love and be loved in return, and what keeps people from being able to do so. Baldwin

¹⁸ Baldwin., p.13.

¹⁹ Robert Bone in Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire.", p. 16

stated in an interview about *Giovanni's Room* that the book was “not so much about homosexuality, it is what happens if you are so afraid that you finally cannot love anybody.”

²⁰ The idea of *love*, in Baldwin's writing, was not just the traditional idea of love in interpersonal relationships, but also key to creating a new society where the labels of “black” and “white” were no longer necessary.²¹ What kept Americans from coming together in love, however, was how white Americans purposefully failed to acknowledge their own history of racism, slavery, institutional oppression and atrocious crimes committed against black Americans. This failure to accept and confront their own guilt would be expressed in what Baldwin called *innocence*, which is to be understood as a willed ignorance of own complicity in America's history of racial abuse and segregation.

By way of applying the idea of love and innocence as expressed in the essays to the relationships from the novels, I want to examine how they contribute to either a failure or a hope for a better future for the characters. I consequently want to show how this reading can be used allegorically for Baldwin's vision for American society. I will argue that the concept of innocence plays out as an obstacle for these characters to overcome their troubles and to find themselves as fully realised people, and that for as long as they are unable to overcome innocence, they are unable to come together in understanding, acceptance and love. The relationships between the characters David and Giovanni from *Giovanni's Room* and Rufus and Leona from *Another Country* are all victims of a failure on the part of the white-coded characters to confront or realise their own innocence. White-coded is used here because while both David and Giovanni are technically white, this thesis argues for reading David as white and Giovanni as black, something which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. They end in tragedy, causing harm to all characters, but in particular to the black or black-coded characters of Rufus and Giovanni. These relationships will be read as Baldwin's warnings of what will become of the relationship between black and white Americans unless what his definition of innocence is confronted and overcome. The relationship between Ida and Vivaldo from *Another Country* will then be presented as the one that gives hope for a different future of understanding and reconciliation, using love as a way of overcoming innocence. To argue this point of view I will make use of the more explicitly stated rhetoric of the essays on the themes of race and sexuality to unpack how the concepts of innocence and love are defined by Baldwin. I will in particular be looking at the essays “My Dungeon

²⁰ Tóibín, “The Unsparing Confessions of “Giovanni's Room.””

²¹ Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*. p. 34-35.

Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, and “Preservation of Innocence”, as well as additional material from interviews and other essays. Additionally, I will draw upon previous critical studies of Baldwin that relate to the concepts of innocence and love to define and understand what they mean in his writing.

Notes from a Native Son: Understanding Baldwin’s America through his essays

Baldwin’s literary output includes a vast number of essays. They range from the deeply personal to the more overtly political, with themes ranging from race, politics, popular culture, sex and love. In 2013, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an essay for *The Atlantic* titled “Is James Baldwin America’s Greatest Essayist?”²², adding his voice to the growing acknowledgement of Baldwin as an important voice in the American literary history. From his earliest efforts in the late 1940s up to his death in 1988, Baldwin continued to write essays for a number of different publications, on a wide array of topics. In his novels, Baldwin would be conscious of not judging his characters or turning them into stereotypes, but rather try to present them and the world they inhabited as free of judgement as possible. Baldwin the essay-writer, however, was writing from a different perspective than Baldwin the novelist. In his essays he addresses the problems of the American society directly, as well as what he sees as the actions necessary to try and overcome them – that of self-acceptance, forgiveness, and love. Despite the sizable output of critical studies done on Baldwin’s sizable collection of essays, there have not been done a lot of studies that directly compare the essays to his fiction writing. In Chapter One, I find that unpacking his essays are key to understand his novels with regards to themes of racial injustice, acceptance, innocence, and love.

Because of the sheer size of Baldwin’s collection of essays, I have found it necessary to limit my study of his essay to a select few. The ones selected are chosen because of their relevance to the concepts of love and innocence. Firstly, the essay “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” from *The Fire Next Time* addresses the idea of the “crime of innocence”, how many white people in America either consciously or unconsciously use their lack of knowledge with regards to the situation of black people and the situation of their country as a whole. Written in an intimate, personal manner, the essay is addressed simultaneously to Baldwin’s own nephew James, at the same time as it addresses its reader directly as one reads it. While never making excuses for racial prejudice

²² Coates, “Is James Baldwin America’s Greatest Essayist?”

and the failure to recognise the horrible history of racial oppression by the white American population, the essay also presents the idea of healing and reparations through love, an idea that forms the backbone of this thesis.

Secondly, I have selected the essay “Preservation of Innocence”, first printed in *Zero* magazine in 1949, later published in *Collected Essays*, as it gives an interesting take on what Baldwin sees as the idealization of “innocence” in American consciousness. It discusses the idea that innocence is something that people hold onto as a shield to protect them from having to acknowledge the reality of the world, and the reality of things they do not want to acknowledge. This relates it directly to my examination of what innocence means in Baldwin’s writing and gives an understanding of how this idea is expressed in his novels. “Preservation of Innocence” also offers an insight of innocence as related to sexuality and ideals of masculinity, something that will come into play in my analysis of how the characters relate to one another, and how racialized themes are connected to sexuality.

I have also chosen to examine “Everybody’s Protest Novel” from *Notes of a Native Son*, the essay that, according to Lawrie Balfour, “announced his presence as a literary figure to be reckoned with”²³ as I find this essay important in examining Baldwin’s wish for literature to be a tool for change, but not by “aim[ing] for social improvement by galvanizing opposition to some moral outrage”²⁴. While “Everybody’s Protest Novel” is mainly concerned with criticizing what Baldwin saw as the failed genre of protest novels, it also contains a particularly eloquent passage of writing that will be critical to my argument in how Baldwin viewed the fraught relationship between black and white Americans, as well as how this is reflected in the characters of *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*. It is also relevant to the idea of fiction as a tool for creating change in society, which is important to the reading of the novels as allegorical to Baldwin’s vision for future American society. These three essays will form the main foundation for the definitions of love and innocence but will be supplied by some others as well as previous studies on Baldwin which are relevant to the concepts of love and innocence.

Baldwin’s America in *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*

The background for this thesis is the seeming lack of critical texts that work to connect Baldwin’s essays on race relations, blackness and whiteness and the structure of American

²³ Balfour, “Finding the Words: Baldwin, Race Consciousness, and Democratic Theory.”, p. 75.

²⁴ Balfour.

society with his novels, in particular *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962). This is, as mentioned, especially with regards to the idea of love and innocence as a concept in Baldwin's writing. There have been arguments for the representation of blackness in *Giovanni's Room* such as Josep M. Armengol's "In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in *Giovanni's Room*". There is also Joel Alden Schlosser's "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America" which looks into "the Socratic practice of self-examination and social criticism" and "argues that Baldwin's Socratic practice inflects not only his essays [...] but also his fictions"²⁵. However, none of these are directly comparing *Giovanni's Room* to *Another Country* in examining Baldwin's view on race relations in America, or how his wish to use fiction writing as a tool to urge for reparation, relate to the relationships and characters in these novels.

As mentioned earlier, neither *Giovanni's Room* nor *Another Country* have traditionally been much discussed with regards to the themes of race and racism in America. Baldwin wrote *Giovanni's Room* in France after having had some success with his debut, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), a novel that had established him as a promising young black writer. Where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was a bildungsroman about a young boy growing up in Harlem, to a large degree based on Baldwin's own upbringing, *Giovanni's Room* was a marked departure from his debut. *Giovanni's Room* tells the story of David, a young white American, who leaves America for Paris and engages in an affair with Italian Giovanni, an affair which ultimately ends with Giovanni's death and David's loss of self.

When Baldwin came back to New York and tried to have *Giovanni's Room* published, he was met with revulsion and confusion from the publishers, who "looked on the book with horror and loathing, refused to touch it, saying that I was a young *Negro* writer, who, if he published this book, would alienate his audience and ruin his career."²⁶ The thought of a young black writer publishing a book about homosexual desire seemed unthinkable to an almost unimaginable degree in 1956. Although *Giovanni's Room* did get published after all, and was met with "cautiously positive" reviews, it was still viewed as "a curious little detour, which is how it is still frequently treated."²⁷ The focus on the sexuality and the perceived all-whiteness of the novel's main characters seem to have overshadowed any other reading of the book than

²⁵ Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key."

²⁶ Baldwin, "Preface to the 1984 Edition.", p.xviii-xix

²⁷ Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire." p.15

the one related to same-sex desire. There is, however, an argument to be made that *Giovanni's Room* can indeed be read as a critique of America, and an allegory for black and white Americans failing to create a new and better society by their refusal to accept both each other and themselves. David is obsessed with preserving his own perceived innocence, which in turn makes him unable to love anyone. The failure on David's part to accept his love for Giovanni, as well as his failure to accept and in turn love himself, leads to the destruction of himself, of Giovanni, as well as their relationship.

If *Giovanni's Room* failed to succeed for Baldwin as a novelist, then his third book *Another Country* was met with far more positive feedback. More of a sprawling epic than *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country* intertwines the stories of several characters, black and white, placed in New York at the end of the 1950s. The story starts with Rufus, a young black musician in New York, and follows what is an ultimately doomed romance with a white woman from the South, Leona. The relationship between Rufus and Leona is in some instances an echo to the one between David and Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room*. Like that one, it ends up with one of them, Leona, having lost herself to madness and the other, Rufus, dead, in this instance by suicide. However, the end of Rufus and Leona is the end of the book but rather a catalyst for bringing all the other characters of the novel together, as they try to deal with the loss of Rufus and their relationship to him while he was still alive. We meet Ida, Rufus' sister, Vivaldo, his friend, and Eric, his friend and previous lover, all of whom serve to create a complex and multifaceted tangle of history, relationships, love and hate.

Where *Giovanni's Room* is more contained and introspective, *Another Country* openly discusses racial problems and the way racial tension contributes to strain the relationships between its characters. In particular, the character of Ida voices the issue of race quite vocally, both with regards to her own sense of identity as well as how the others respond to her. Still, the novel has been grouped together with *Giovanni's Room* as what Robert Bone calls Baldwin's "raceless novels"²⁸ But where *Giovanni's Room* end with all characters in a state of despair, loss, or both, *Another Country* seems to offer more of a tentatively optimistic outcome. While there are no easy solutions offered, there is a sense of hope at the end for some of characters, namely the ones who are willing to let go of their perceived notions of self and to accept the love of others and of themselves. Both the "failure" in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* and the "hope" of *Another Country* are however realised through the idea of love - in

²⁸ Robert Bone in Ross., p.16

Giovanni's Room it is through the lack of it or the inability to feel or accept it, whereas in *Another Country* it is precisely through love that the characters are able to at least see the ability to somehow free themselves from the confines of identity placed upon them by society.

Thesis outline

Chapter One will give a explore and define the concepts innocence and love as understood in this thesis. The definitions will be made by closely examining selected essays by Baldwin, as well as drawing upon previous scholarship. Chapter Two will be a detailed examination of how the concept of innocence appears in *Giovanni's Room*, by a close reading of the characters David and Giovanni and their relationship. As a part of this examination the chapter will also offer a take on how this novel is relevant to the theme of race and sexuality. Chapter Three will be a similarly detailed examination of how the concept of innocence appears in *Another Country* through the characters Rufus, Leona, Ida and Vivaldo and their relationships. Chapter Four will look at the concept of love and how it appears in both novels. The discussion of the concept of love will be shorter than that on innocence for two reasons. Firstly, the concept of innocence as specifically related to Baldwin is more complex than that of love, and thus needs more detailed unpacking in the novels. Secondly, this thesis conceptualize love as a causality of innocence. Finally, the conclusion will give a brief discussion on how this thesis is a contribution to the continued relevance and importance of James Baldwin today, especially with regards to American society today.

Chapter One: Defining love and innocence in James Baldwin's literary works

James Baldwin was convinced of the ability of fiction “as an inventive force to avert the violence that systemic racial discrimination often incurs”²⁹ In other words, he felt that as a writer, he had the ability to use his craft as a tool to make change in a society divided by a horrific racial history that divided the nation between its black and white population. In Baldwin's essays, as well as in his interviews, the concepts of love and innocence were central, and crucial to how he saw American society. This was because they were intrinsically linked to how he perceived the American identity, both black and white. For as long as these identities continued to exist in opposition to each other, the way to truth and reconciliation would, to Baldwin, be unachievable. As a writer, he used his essays to define these terms and to directly address the problems in America caused by racism and white supremacy. As I will suggest in this thesis, it is through his fiction, however, that he would try to show how these concepts would play out when applied to imagined lives, as a way of showing how America as a society could both fail or succeed in overcoming its generational traumas of racism. Through his novels, Baldwin, as the introductory quote shows, wanted to challenge the American population to examine themselves through the concepts of “love” and “innocence”, in order to grow and evolve as human beings. I will argue for how this is especially evident in two of his novels least discussed with regards to race: *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, and show that they can be read as allegorical to Baldwin's vision for the future of black and white Americans.

To understand how *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* can be read as allegories for Baldwin's vision of America it is necessary to understand how these concepts, love and innocence, appear and play out in the novels. This chapter will present a specific definition of these terms as specifically related to this thesis. What is the definition of love and innocence in Baldwin's works, how are these concepts related to American racial identities, and how are

²⁹ James Baldwin in James, “Making Love, Making Friends.”

these concepts used as Baldwin's way of understanding the American society? The centrality of these concepts is evident in both his non-fiction and his fiction, but they are not explicitly laid out in the novels like they are in the essays. In the novels they figure more as underlying themes. To understand how they work in the fiction, it is necessary with a clear definition of what these themes or concepts are as pertaining to Baldwin's whole body of work as a writer. These definitions will be used to illustrate how race and racial divide in America as a nation is understood through the themes of love and innocence, as well as how the central relationships in the novels can be read as allegorical representations of the relationship between black and white Americans.

The themes of love and innocence unify the two novels, as well as argue for a different reading of *Giovanni's Room*, which has been mainly the focus of critical study with regards to its depiction of homosexuality rather than race. In his essay "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality" Marlon B. Ross argues that while "[*Giovanni's Room*] has gained a central place in (white) gay culture and is often a focus of attention in (white) gay studies, in the context of African American literary and cultural studies, historically it has been alternately dismissed or ignored altogether, stumbingly acknowledged or viciously attacked."³⁰ Both *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country's* depiction of same-sex relations have in some way made these books less discussed with regards to issues of race. Ross argues that *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* have been described as Baldwin's "raceless novels"³¹, and also points to how the concern of same-sex desire in these books have "by implication [...] become[...] concern with non-black desire."³² In other words, the existence of complicated same-sex desires and actions that take place in these books have traditionally not made them subject to critical study with regards to issues of race and racial divide in America, but rather have made them *less* relevant to these subjects. I will argue that the different sexual relationships portrayed in the novels do not make the novels less relevant to the issues of race and racial divide, but rather tie them to these through the themes of love and innocence. Perceived notions of sexual innocence, as well as love as a way of achieving interracial acceptance, are all, in Baldwin's essays as well as his fiction, related to one another. To Baldwin, race and sexuality were all important aspects of understanding the American ideal, an ideal which he saw as destructive and as an obstacle for

³⁰ Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire.", p. 16

³¹ Robert Bone in Ross., p.16

³² Ross., p. 16

a more evolved and mature society, where the issue of America's bloody history could be dealt with properly. To understand these aspects, then, would be key to understanding how Baldwin thought reparations were to be achieved.

I will use Baldwin's own essays to define what these concepts, love and innocence, stand for, as well as previous scholarship on love and innocence in Baldwin's writing, to show how they can be used as tools for unpacking the novels *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. With regards to the concept innocence I will, in particular, be using Elizabeth Wolgast's article "Innocence" and Joel Alden Schlosser's "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America", as supplements to Baldwin's essays to define innocence and how it appears in the novels. The concept of love will be defined mainly through Baldwin's essays from *The Fire Next Time*: "My Dungeon Shook: A letter to my Nephew James on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross". In addition to these, I will look at Grant Farred's "Love is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*", as well as Sean Kim Butorac's "Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin and the Politics of Love" to get an understanding of how love is defined in Baldwin's writing.

Innocence

Innocence is a word that on its surface can be attributed to something positive, like childhood, newness, or lack of guilt. The Oxford English dictionary defines innocence as "freedom from sin, guilt or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with, evil; moral purity."³³ Those who are innocent or claim innocence are exempt from wrongdoings and responsibility. It is often associated with children, or people who are in some way screened from or unaware of the world around them and all the bad things that happen there. In religion, innocence is often related to the lack of sin; someone who is innocent is someone who has not committed any sinful acts. To lose one's innocence would mean to lose one's purity in the eyes of God. In her article "Innocence" American philosopher Elizabeth Wolgast discusses innocence as a moral condition, the one that "seems easily the best and most desirable, for it means the complete absence of error and regret and all the anxieties that go with these – anxieties about avoiding guilt and making amends for instance".³⁴ To be innocent of a misdeed or crime is to be exempt from moral criticism.

³³ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/96292?redirectedFrom=innocence&>

³⁴ Wolgast, "Innocence."

However, “innocence of an action *need not* be commendable: one may be innocent from laziness or carelessness or sheer accident”³⁵. Wolgast also makes a distinction between innocence as an action and *an* innocent, a person who embodies the traits of innocence. She describes *an* innocent as someone who “is free of a variety of unpleasant tendencies: envy, pride, malice, suspicion are a few; and is free of the actions that often express these.”³⁶ What is especially interesting with regards to the theme of innocence in Baldwin’s writing is Wolgast’s definition of innocence as a condition that “falls outside morality and is irrelevant to the stuff of ordinary moral discourse.”³⁷ What Wolgast argues is that to be able to achieve moral understanding and growth one must be able to experience guilt and regret, so as to change patterns of thought and behaviour to the better. The innocent, on the other hand, is unable to understand and grow because they lack awareness and involvement with “those whose world is more complicated”, and thus are not able to see the human condition for what it really is. There are still those who would hold up the innocent as an ideal worthy of aspiring to. Wolgast rejects this notion, however, arguing that while the innocent can be viewed as beautiful and attractive because of their state of being unspoiled by the harsh truths of life, “[b]eing an innocent disqualifies one for moral understanding, and as understanding is a condition of virtue, being an innocent is a disqualification for virtue.”³⁸ Thus, the beauty of the innocent is a hollow one, because it is one that exists outside the real human reality. To be an innocent is to be one unable to learn moral responsibility, as well as seeing the world from another’s perspective. The innocent is neither moral nor virtuous, because of their incapability to learn from their mistakes. They continue to exist in an unaltered state, remaining static and unchangeable.

This view of innocence as a condition *not* morally superior relates directly to Baldwin and his view of innocence, namely not as something positive, but rather a mechanism for avoidance of reality used by the white population in America, as well as a primary aspect of the American identity Baldwin saw it as important to dismantle. According to Lawrie Balfour, “Baldwin's attack on American racial innocence focuses on a kind of ignorance, a refusal to deal deeply with racial injustice by protecting beliefs about the character of American society from the countervailing evidence of American history”.³⁹ There is a construct of an American

³⁵ Wolgast.

³⁶ Wolgast.

³⁷ Wolgast.

³⁸ Wolgast.

³⁹ Balfour, “The Appeal of Innocence.”

identity built around ideas of equality, opportunity and possibility that does not take into account the ways in which American society is built upon generations of racial discrimination and trauma. Writing about how Baldwin defined “innocence”, Dagwami Woubshet explains how it “masks America’s violent racial past and present record, enabling white Americans to shirk responsibility and to reproduce an idea of themselves and of the United States based on the republic’s noble ideas rather than its ignoble history”.⁴⁰ The history of America was being told by the oppressors, who willingly chose to ignore or forget the violent crimes of the past to feign their own innocence. In his essay “Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America”, Joel Alden Schlosser compares “Baldwin’s work as a practice akin to Socrates’s”, where the practice of examination is “the interrogation of self and world to recognize the delusions and blindness that contribute to persist the structures of oppression”⁴¹. Defining Socrates’s model as one “of the questioning philosopher or social critic dedicated to improving his or her fellow citizens through the collective pursuit of knowledge”⁴², Schlosser argues that “Baldwin takes up this Socrates in his original key by articulating and undertaking a practice of *examination*: the interrogation of self and world to recognize the delusions and blindness that contribute to persist structures of oppression.”⁴³ Those who are unable to let go of delusions and blindness are unable to evolve. These delusions are wrapped up in what historian Daniel Robert McClure calls “the recurring trope of innocence” which is “crucial for defining the American self, as its very identity is wrapped in the bloodied layers of crimes against humanity related to settler colonialism and slavery”⁴⁴. To Baldwin, the delusion of white Americans is that they are living in an innocent, idealistic society, and they themselves are innocents. He described this as an incoherence:

People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.

This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled.

They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but

⁴⁰ Woubshet, “How James Baldwin’s Writings About Love Evolved.”

⁴¹ Schlosser, “Socrates in a Different Key.”

⁴² Schlosser.

⁴³ Schlosser.

⁴⁴ McClure, “Possessing History and American Innocence.”

they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.⁴⁵

The reality that they are blind to, is that the world and society they view as one, where everyone has the same opportunities, and all people are equal, is simply not true. Being a black person in America does not offer the same opportunity or treatment as being white. But to Baldwin, white Americans are unwilling to let go of the view of history in which they themselves are free of guilt. They remain innocents who cannot take on moral responsibility, and the ability to see the world from a different perspective than their own. Thus, they cannot become released from neither their history nor themselves.

An example of how this white American innocence manifested itself could be observed during the 1965 debate at Cambridge University between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr., where they met to discuss the question: “Has the American Dream been achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?”. In an essay covering this debate with particular focus on “Possessing History and American Innocence”⁴⁶ Daniel McClure describes how Buckley spoke as a representative of the New Right who were forming a “new language amidst the changing political landscape of the civil rights era [that was] necessary to keep alive the sentiments of anti-blackness through colour-blind assertions via culture and ethos.”⁴⁷ Buckley and the rest of the New Right were, in other words, trying to reclaim “a rhetoric buttressing a sense of white innocence that obscured the active racial antagonism defining American identity”⁴⁸. This New Right championed a libertarian view of the world focused on ‘individualism’, where citizens should be free from intervention from the government. They embraced what they called ‘colorblindness’, imagining “a new world where people saw, not race, but only people – or individuals”⁴⁹, but did not consider how white supremacy had been upheld by governmental institutions for centuries. McClure argues that Buckley’s view “helped shape our own contemporary world, defined through the socio-economic system of neo-liberalism and its racial ideology of colorblindness”.⁵⁰ Baldwin, on the other hand, argued against this stance in an “approach foregrounded in the Black Radical Tradition’s subaltern position of the enslaved, the oppressed peoples written out of history.”⁵¹ Baldwin was

⁴⁵ Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt.”, p. 723

⁴⁶ McClure, “Possessing History and American Innocence.”

⁴⁷ McClure.

⁴⁸ McClure.

⁴⁹ McClure.

⁵⁰ McClure.

⁵¹ McClure.

concerned with how America seemed to lack an understanding of its own history, but rather believed in “that legend created about the Far West, and cowboys and Indians, and cops and robbers, and black and white, and good and evil.... If the Europeans are afflicted by history, Americans are afflicted by innocence.”⁵² Baldwin here pointed to the fact that what Americans had was not a real history, but one constructed out of mythos and legend, based on assumptions of what was viewed as ideal. Instead of acknowledging the fact that their nation was built upon the sufferings of generations of slaves and a history of oppression, white America’s identity was based upon unrealistic, childish ideas of heroes and legends, and this kept them from acknowledging any guilt on their own part.

Innocence in Baldwin is consequently more closely related to ignorance - in particular, a wilful ignorance on the part of white America its own history and of the crimes of the past. The topic was raised in debates such as the one with Buckley, as well in several interviews. Additionally, the concept of innocence as related to white America figured in several of essays. I will now examine more closely how the theme of innocence appears in some of them, namely “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” and “Preservation of Innocence”, as well as “Everybody’s Protest Novel”. In the famous opening essay from *The Fire Next Time*, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”, Baldwin writes that white Americans are:

[...] trapped in a history which they do not understand, and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men, Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.⁵³

What Baldwin says here, is that the assumption on the part of white Americans that black men are inferior to white men is something that many of them know is wrong, yet they continue to cling on to this idea out of self-preservation. Historically, “they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. [...] But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”⁵⁴ In this, Baldwin turns the definition of innocence on its head: from being the essential anti-thesis to guilt, it turns into *guilt itself*. Innocence must

⁵² Baldwin, *Conversations with James Baldwin.*, p. 192.

⁵³ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 294

⁵⁴ Baldwin.

then not be understood as the *lack of guilt* but rather as the *lack of acknowledgement of guilt*. Being innocent does not exempt one from partaking in the crime, innocence *becomes* the crime. Innocence is not the lack of guilt, but *the guilt in itself*.

This preoccupation with innocence, Baldwin argues, springs out from what he describes in his 1949 essay “Preservation of Innocence” as the “perpetual war” between man and nature. He continues to explain how humanity “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”⁵⁵. We are, in other words, making a distinction between our nature and our society, by checking our own behaviour to conform to what others expect. We suppress our instinctive urges, feelings and behaviour because we feel that they are unacceptable to the people around us. On the surface, “Preservation of Innocence” is mainly concerned with the rejection of homosexuality and homosexual behaviour by the “innocent” heterosexual population. I will, however, argue that it can also be read in relation to race, as the ideas of sexual innocence and white innocence are, in Baldwin, not separate but related themes. The argument of the rejection of the perceived dangerous aspects of human nature can also be attributed to the way white Americans view black Americans as more “dangerous” or uncivilized. In the U.S., racist discourse has historically presented black and brown people as more savage and “natural” than the presumed more civilized white people. Baldwin commented upon this himself in a dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, where he said that “the reason people think it’s important to be white is that they think it’s important not to be black. They think it’s important to be white because it means you are civilized and being black means you are not civilized...”⁵⁶ I will also argue that the fear of the homosexual as a “natural” creature, unfettered by the innocence of organised society can be compared to the fear of black people by white people as someone more “natural” and thus less civilized in their behaviour. From this comparison it is possible to read “Preservation of Innocence” not only as relating to sexuality but also to race. The preoccupation with innocence as an ideal is not related to one of them, but both, because both sexuality, especially non-hetero sexuality, and race are something that is perceived as dangerous and unfitting for the white American identity. Josep M. Armengol has argued for the possibility of reading sexuality as related to colour with regards to Baldwin:

⁵⁵ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 594

⁵⁶ Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue.*, p. 17

In Baldwin's second novel, sexuality, both homosexual and heterosexual, does indeed seem to be inextricably bound to color, particularly the white-versus-black dichotomy, whose occurrence is both physical and symbolic. As we shall see, *Giovanni's Room* suggests a parallel between the heterosexual and white (with its metaphorical associations with light, cleanness, purity, rationality, transparency, goodness, *innocence*, etc.), on the one hand, and the homosexual and black (with its symbolic meanings of darkness, dirt, sin, emotionality, obscurity, evil, guilt, and so on), on the other, a parallel that Baldwin simultaneously re-inscribes and problematizes.⁵⁷

Baldwin writes that to recognize the complexity of the experience of being human "is the signal of maturity; it marks the death of the child and the birth of the man."⁵⁸ He continues to write that "it is one of the major American ambitions to shun this metamorphosis"⁵⁹, and that this shunning has produced the stereotype of the "tough guy", who cannot love but who can only desire, and who can only desire women. The tough guy, who Baldwin exemplifies as "any Cain or Chandler hero", referring to the "hard-boiled" detective archetype from the novels of James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler, is the ultimate expression of American masculinity but also a failed attempt at humanity. The tough guy has not matured; he has not achieved any understanding of what it is to be human. When the tough guy and his girl come together they are not, according to Baldwin, coming together out of love or passion or a want for understanding;

what [the tough guy] seems to want is revenge; what they bring to each other is not even passion or sexuality but an unbelievably barren and wrathful grinding. They are surrounded by blood and treachery; and their bitter coupling, which has the urgency and precision of machine gun fire, is heralded and punctuated by the mysterious and astounded corpse.⁶⁰

Baldwin's prose evokes images of warfare and death, which again can be taken as a metaphor for the violent history of America itself, with the "bitter coupling" of black and white Americans. The language of lust, death and hatred is astonishingly similar to the conclusion of Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel", where he in a piece of literary crescendo brings together Richard Wright and Harriet Beecher Stowe in a furious imagined coupling:

...it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other

⁵⁷ Armengol, "In the Dark Room.", my emphasis.

⁵⁸ Baldwin, "Preservation of Innocence.", p. 597

⁵⁹ Baldwin.

⁶⁰ Baldwin., p.598

shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier the cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down in the pit together.⁶¹

The “web of lust and fury” that Baldwin describes compares to the “bitter coupling” “surrounded by blood and treachery” in “Preservation of Innocence”. “Everybody’s Protest Novel” was written as a result of Baldwin’s frustration with the protest novel genre, as represented by perhaps its most famous examples: the novels *Native Son* (1939) by Richard Wright and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. It is an essay concerning what Baldwin viewed as the failings of the protest novel as a literary genre. Still, I would argue that the text can also be read relation to the concepts of innocence and love, like “Preservation of Innocence”. Both descriptions are of failed attempts to connect, failing as a result of the societal restrictions they those involved – the tough guy and his girl, “the contemporary Negro novelist” and “the dead New England woman” - find themselves in. These figures become representatives for the American population, failing to connect to each other as a result of a history steeped in violence. Instead of reaching understanding, there is blindness, suffocation and death, and no one has evolved or reached any maturity. Baldwin’s exasperated challenge of both the protest novel as a genre, as well as *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as novels, relates back to his strong conviction that novels had the power to change the world. These books, to Baldwin, were failures in their “rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in [their] insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”⁶² By failing to truly portray life and humans in their “beauty, dread, power” they would not change anything, but continue to let white American’s innocence go untested.

The idea of innocence as related to sexuality as well as race is further discussed in “The Preservation of Innocence”. In this essay Baldwin describes how it is “the man, who, for all his tommy-guns and rhetoric, is the innocent”⁶³. Using the novels of James M. Cain as example, Baldwin argues that the American male hero longs for a non-existent female who is “not yet guilty of the shedding of blood”⁶⁴ to fulfil the American dream of love. The implication here, of course, is that the only woman, or indeed the only *person* worthy of the

⁶¹ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p. 18

⁶² Baldwin.

⁶³ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p.598

⁶⁴ Baldwin.

American male hero is one who has not yet reached sexual maturity, and thus is still maintaining her assumed “innocence”. With this statement Baldwin underlines the American society’s unwillingness to engage with the real, physical, bodily aspects of the world, to the point where the ideal woman is not a woman, but a child – an ideal of prudent, sexual innocence. The problem is that this dream is based on something that does not exist, a world in which no one can be fully realized, grown up human beings. The people presented by the American dream as Baldwin describes it, the “tough guy” and his female “not yet guilty of shedding blood,” are unable to understand the world as well as other people. Through the lens of sexuality Baldwin presses the point that, for as long as people are presented as stereotypes and labels, we learn nothing about ourselves. The American society, however, is unwilling to shed the self-imposed innocence, and as such is unable to grow up, unable to evolve, and unable to love.

Where “Preservation of Innocence” is directly concerned with sexuality and more indirectly concerned with race, Baldwin’s essay “My Dungeon Shook” is explicitly about race, American identity, and the idea of innocence. It is written as a letter to Baldwin’s nephew James, and it opens with describing the generational trauma that black Americans face, left by centuries of crimes carried out by white people. Baldwin goes on to refer to them as “innocents”, while still stressing the fact that they are guilty, guilty of “the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives *and do not know it and do not want to know it*”.⁶⁵ This is the core of what Baldwin sees as “the innocence that constitutes the crime”⁶⁶ – the ignorance of history and reality as it is, and the refusal to let go of that ignorance and face the truth. This ignorance also constitutes the complete lack of knowledge of the experience of black Americans living in the same society as white Americans, but under very different conditions – “conditions not very far removed from those described by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago”⁶⁷ The unwillingness of white America to assume responsibility for its own history is linked to the insistence upon retaining their innocence. This unwillingness makes it necessary for another force to do the work of reconciliation – in Baldwin’s view, that force is love.

⁶⁵ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 292, italics mine

⁶⁶ Baldwin.

⁶⁷ Baldwin.

Love

What makes love so important to Baldwin with regards to reparations, is that black and white Americans have such a long, horrible and complicated history, a history that, for better or for worse, has made these two groups of people intrinsically bound to one another. As he said in “Many Thousands Gone”:

It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred: it is also, literally and morally, a *blood* relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains the force and anguish and terror of love.⁶⁸

Black and white are connected to one another, as he says, by blood, and thus they must deal with one another, and do so through “the force and anguish and terror of love”. But what, exactly, is love in Baldwin’s understanding, and what makes it the instrument with which innocence could be shed?

Love as a concept in literature, philosophy or indeed any field of academics, is both one of the most covered as well as one of the most difficult to pin down. In ancient Greek there were four words for love: *philia* or “brotherly love”, relating to friendship and affection; *storge*, familiar love; *eros*, romantic love; and *agape*, the love of man for God and of God for man. Grant Farred’s article “Love is asymmetrical: James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*” considers James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* as a philosophical contemplation on love. Farred argues for a reading of Baldwin’s philosophy of love that is closely related to the traditional Christian understanding of *agape* as “the type of self-giving and self-sacrificial love God has for humans”⁶⁹. He understands Baldwin’s concept of love in the philosophical tradition he ascribes to Jacques Derrida – that of an “asymmetrical love”. Rooted in Christian tradition, this notion of love is understood as one where either the Self or the Other loves more than the Other or the Self. All love is rooted in the love God showed humanity by sacrificing his Son, a sacrifice that, according to Farred, it is impossible for any human to approximate.⁷⁰ It is a completely selfless love, a love that expects nothing in return. To Farred, Baldwin’s conception of love “has everything to do with the Scriptures”⁷¹. Baldwin had

⁶⁸ Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone.”, p.32, italics in original

⁶⁹ Denis deRougemont in Drexler-Dreis, “James Baldwin’s Decolonial Love as Religious Orientation.”

⁷⁰ Farred, “Love Is Asymmetrical.”

⁷¹ Farred.

himself been a preacher as a teenager, and his experiences in the church influenced his life and writing, even if the lack of acceptance of his homosexuality made him distanced from organized religion in later years.

In Farred's philosophical reading of Baldwin's concept of love, it must be understood as a sacrificial undertaking. Likening it to the sacrificial nature of Christian love, Farred argues that Baldwin views the task of changing America as hinging on the ability of black America loving white America unconditionally, regardless of reciprocity. For America to move forward as a nation, "[t]he 'burden of salvation' requires that the (black) Self restore the (white) Other to itself by 'releasing' the Other from 'his confusion' so that the Other might achieve a 'fruitful communion with the depths of his own being'⁷². This understanding of love is asymmetrical because it insists that one loves more than the other. If the (black) Self is unwilling to offer up this self-sacrifice in the name of salvation, the outcome will be tragedy, or, one could argue, has already resulted in tragedy. Love for Baldwin, Farred argues, is difficult but it is also non-negotiable. It is "the one commandment that Baldwin kept sacred for his entire life"⁷³, that no matter how badly you were treated or hated by the Other, you should love them in return.

Farred's take, while interesting, is heavily rooted in Christianity by describing Baldwin's commitment to love as the saint-like undertaking of a martyr. It paints the sacrificial aspect of love as the most important and gives less focus to Baldwin's insistence on holding white America accountable for their history, and to let go of their own innocence. Furthermore, Farred does not take account of the sensual and sexual aspects of love that feature prominently in Baldwin's writing. It is featured in his novels, but also in his essays, where he connects the sensual, bodily, and sensory experiences to part of growing up and becoming fully realised human beings. This is important, because the acceptance of sensuality and sexuality that plays as a part of love is just as important to Baldwin as the more philosophical part of it. To fully be able to embrace love, shed innocence and grow as human beings, one must accept that love is both a mental and physical act.

In that regard, a more relevant reading of Baldwin's understanding of love can be found in Sean Kim Butorac's take on Baldwin and the politics of love. In his article "Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin and the Politics of Love", he compares the definition of love in Hannah Arendt's writing to that of James Baldwin, as well as how these definitions can be useful when trying to

⁷² Farred.

⁷³ Farred.

find new ways of relationality in a modern society. Butorac examines how love as understood by Baldwin can “have a place in the inherently conflictual realm of democratic politics, particularly in a democracy wrought with the public resurgence of a white supremacist order”⁷⁴. In this reading, love is a way of achieving self-transformation, as well as a way for society to heal and grow. What Baldwin would have American society do, Butorac claims, is to “act ‘like lovers’ by working to transform the consciousness of their fellow citizens.” It is not just black Americans who are called upon to do so, like Farred claims, but everyone. *All* of American society are responsible for taking it upon themselves to act “like lovers”. However, both white and black Americans are trapped in what Butorac calls “lovelessness”. White Americans are trapped in a state of lovelessness which “arises from the unexamined lives of those who profess their racial innocence, and this historical detachment produces an embodied, sensual disconnect.”⁷⁵ This sensual disconnect is in turn related to the idea of innocence as described above. White Americans have become incapable of loving or receiving love because they are still claiming the innocence that keeps them from recognising their own history of oppression and mistreatment of black Americans. Furthermore, this idea of innocence has also rendered them incapable of experiencing physical intimacy without resorting to violence, because to retain sexual purity and innocence they need to be removed from the sensual experience of sexuality. In “Down at the Cross” Baldwin writes that sensuality has been lost for white Americans, and now they are “terrified of sensuality and [they] do not any longer understand it.”⁷⁶ White Americans would think of sensuality as something dangerous and purely sexual, which to Baldwin would seem to be connected to an oversexualization of black bodies: “[t]he word ‘sensual’ is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs”⁷⁷. He goes on to explain that “[t]o be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”⁷⁸ To Baldwin, the loss of sensuality means that white Americans are unable to truly take part in life and to truly be able to love and to “break bread”, the universal offering of peace and community. All this comes together in the “sensual sterility of white people”⁷⁹ who are not able to truly sense and experience the world and people around them. Butorac writes that

⁷⁴ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

⁷⁵ Butorac.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”, p. 311.

⁷⁷ Baldwin.

⁷⁸ Baldwin.

⁷⁹ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

For Baldwin, who conceives of love as an embodied, erotic experience, this progressive loss of sensuality renders white Americans increasingly loveless creatures who misunderstand not only themselves but their history, nation, and fellow citizens. Thus, it is not just the psychological and historical disconnect, but the *senselessness* of racial innocence that makes it so enduring and insidious.⁸⁰

Furthermore, this senselessness is maintained by white America by forcing a narrative upon black America constructed in such a way as to keep them subjugated out of self-hatred and lack of self-love. In “My Dungeon Shook” Baldwin tells his nephew James that “[t]his innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish[...] You were born where you were born and faced the future that you face because you were black *and for no other reason*.[...] You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.”⁸¹ These conditions given by white America to black Americans, designed to uphold the racist status quo, serve to create a “lovelessness among black people – the inability to love that arises from the self-destructive tendencies of hatred”⁸². Baldwin recognizes the understandable hatred that arise in black Americans towards white Americans, but he also recognizes that hatred only results in the destruction of the self. He does not intend to overlook or forgive white America for their crimes, “for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”⁸³ What is important here is that while he is not saying that his nephew James, and other black Americans, should offer to accept white America with forgiveness, they should offer to “accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it they cannot be released from it.”⁸⁴ As human beings living in the same society, both black and white America are locked in a standstill of hatred, repression and misunderstanding, as long as none are willing to accept each other and act towards each other “like lovers”. Instead, they come together in “a web of lust and fury”, “an unbelievably barren and wrathful grinding.”⁸⁵ To “accept each other with love” is the only way for American society to move forward beyond its historical crimes and trauma. Butorac writes that “[f]or Baldwin [...] loving another person alters our perception of

⁸⁰ Butorac., italics in original.

⁸¹ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 293

⁸² Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

⁸³ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 292

⁸⁴ Baldwin.

⁸⁵ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p. 18

and relationship to the world in ways that opens us to the possibility of change.” By letting go of hatred and opening oneself up to “accept with love”, real change is possible. To make America start healing as a nation and to become one of not black and white but of one people, love had to be the starting point, because “if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and to begin to change it.”⁸⁶ It is through love that true growth can be experienced, the veil of innocence cast aside and the journey towards becoming fully realized people begins. To achieve this, to start to act like lovers, Butorac explains that “Baldwin begins from the sensual and embodied – it is the physical intimacy, that sense of place each of us finds in another’s arms, that liberates us.”⁸⁷ Experiencing love as a sensual, bodily experience will open up an ability to truly try to see and understand the other person. Physical intimacy and closeness, to Baldwin, are key to reach emotional maturity, which again is essential to dispose of innocence and create the path for a new and different future.

While Butorac writes about Baldwin and love as a political theory, I want to focus on this reading of love as a concept realised in Baldwin’s fiction. The emphasis on not only the emotional and philosophical aspects of love as a concept in Baldwin’s writing, but also the embodied, physical, and sensual one will become important in my reading of the novels *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*. In both novels the physical intimacy between characters play a big part in how their relationships towards another either fail or succeed. To understand how love and innocence works as concepts in these novels, and how they play out as commentary of the American society, one needs to understand how these concepts are understood both emotionally, philosophically, bodily and sexually by the characters who feature in them. We now come back to the start of this chapter, where I pointed out Baldwin’s belief in the ability of fiction to be “an inventive force to avert the violence that systemic racial discrimination often incurs”.⁸⁸ As the next chapters will show, by reading his novels through these concepts; love and innocence, one is able to unpack Baldwin’s vision of the future of American society, as well as how this vision could be useful to Americans today.

⁸⁶ Baldwin.

⁸⁷ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

⁸⁸ James Baldwin in James, “Making Love, Making Friends.”

Chapter summary

This chapter has defined the concept of love and innocence in Baldwin, based on his essays and excerpts from some of his interviews. The concept of innocence has been defined as a *lack of acknowledgement of guilt*, an unwillingness to partake in the world around oneself and to understand the world as it is. It shows that this innocence has become a part of white American identity, an identity that has created a history in which white Americans can imagine themselves as heroes, and what Baldwin calls an American ideal of “cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white”⁸⁹. This American ideal negatively affects both black and white Americans, both by way of making white Americans ignorant to the sufferings of black Americans caused by racism, as well as through a toxic masculinity and ideal of sexual prudence. For as long as this innocence remains unchallenged, there is no hope for maturity and reconciliation, because nobody becomes fully realized people, and black and white Americans will continue to co-exist in American society while not being able to understand and sympathize with each other. If they do not deal with this innocence, Baldwin asserts, it will result in tragedy, both on personal as well as national levels. Baldwin’s solution to the problem of innocence is love – not a self-sacrificing love or a Christian love, but an accepting love that, through sensual experience and understanding, allows for seeing the other from their perspective. Only by allowing oneself to love, and be loved in returned, innocence would have the possibility of being overcome.

⁸⁹ Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood.” p. 815

Chapter Two: innocence in *Giovanni's Room*

In the previous chapter, “innocence” as a concept in James Baldwin’s writing was defined as a kind of ignorance, a refusal to acknowledge reality as it is. Innocence was defined as not *lack of guilt* but as *lack of acknowledgement of guilt*, or as a wilful ignorance or rejection of reality. While mainly concerned with innocence or ignorance with regards to the history of racial oppression, it can also relate to innocence with regards to sexual behaviour that deviates from the accepted norm. A character would read as “innocent” if they are either ignorant of or refuse to acknowledge the complexity of human nature. This especially regards racist behaviour, racist history, sexual fluidity and sexual relationships. This chapter will discuss the role of innocence in *Giovanni's Room* through the character of David and his relationships, most notably that with Giovanni, as well as the loss of this innocence. Both the racial and sexual aspects of each relationship will be discussed, analysing how Baldwin’s idea of innocence informs the way they play out and how they can be viewed as allegorical to his view of American society. I want to show how this innocence is portrayed as ultimately destroying the possibility of functional, progressive relationships, which again ultimately results in tragedy. I will also argue for reading the character of Giovanni as a representative for black Americans in *Giovanni's Room*, and for reading David’s crisis of sexuality to also be related to a crisis of identity linked to white innocence.

David: an American ideal of innocence

In *Giovanni's Room*, David is the character who most exemplifies the destructive effect Baldwin’s concept of innocence can have on both a person him/herself and on that person’s ability to relate to other people. I will argue that in *Giovanni's Room*, David can be read as Baldwin’s idea of white innocence personified. David is a character who, despite his somewhat unstable upbringing with his father and aunt, enjoys every bit of privilege that a young white man in 1950s America can enjoy. David is constantly trying to escape his own urges and desires, instead desperately trying to maintain an image as a “normal”, heterosexual white male. His struggling can be largely described as an obsession with keeping his

“innocence”, because it is a struggle against acknowledging himself, as well as a rejection of those parts of human behaviour that he views as deviant from the norm. He insists on clinging to the idea of himself as someone upholding the American masculine ideal, and this makes him unable to relate to himself and others. In doing so, he not only hurts himself, but also others around him. He expresses contempt and disgust towards those who challenge his worldview, especially those who exhibit some of the same inclinations as himself. He partakes in behaviour which he condemns, yet he does not seem to accept responsibility for his actions. David’s insistence on maintaining his image and innocence ultimately destroys all his meaningful relationships, and this leaves him an empty shell of a human being, with little hope of redemption. He is unable to evolve and become a more fully realised person. He is afraid to act upon his desire, precisely because “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.”⁹⁰ David is afraid to commit, so he always keeps a distance between himself and others. His interactions become steeped in hatred and disgust, and eventually causes immense pain both to himself and his lovers. David’s concern is related to his fear of acknowledging his homosexuality, and the subject of race is never explicitly brought up in the text. However, I will argue that it is possible to read David’s lack of acknowledgement of his sexuality, and his conflict with those who challenge his view of himself, as allegorical to the relationship between black and white Americans. David’s fear of acknowledgement of his sexuality can be viewed as a parallel to Baldwin’s view of white Americans’ fear of acknowledging a past wrought with racial violence. The failure of David’s self-realization and the resulting destruction of his relationships then acts as a warning of how America as a society will fail unless it confronts its own idea of innocence.

Already on the first page of the novel David is presented in the image of the *innocent* as described by Elizabeth Wolgast, as a figure “of such particular and unspoiled beauty”⁹¹. In an oft-quoted passage, David is introduced standing by the window in his rented house in France, looking at his own reflection in the window:

“I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faded away from Europe into a darker past”⁹²

⁹⁰ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 294

⁹¹ Wolgast, “Innocence.”

⁹² Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room.*, p. 3.

David is tall, blond and beautiful, the very image of pure American masculinity. Yet his image is without depth. When he looks out of the window, he sees nothing but his own reflected image, revealing the surface-like quality of his character. David is the face of white America – he is presented here as indistinguishable from others by design (“my face is a face you have seen many times”). This is our first impression of David – and he is described not as an individual, but rather as a result of history, of his ancestors. David represents the surface, the blank canvas, onto which, as Baldwin puts it, the American dream of “cowboys and Indians, and cops and robbers, and black and white, and good and evil”⁹³ can be projected. Throughout the novel, David continually resists change and growth by refusing to partake in what he considers “dirty” or shameful. He is unaware of his own privilege as a white man, feeling entitled to money and favour from his rich friends without feeling the need to offer up anything in return. While he engages in what he perceives as shameful acts of homosexuality, he feels somehow removed from them, while others who express similar behaviour disgust him. His feelings of disgust and shame are often expressed through an obsession with the idea of cleanliness – he does not want to become soiled or dirty, metaphorically or literally. David’s preoccupation with keeping himself ‘clean’ is a way of making sure he does not become affiliated with an undesirable identity – that of homosexuality, but also that of blackness. Josep Armengol writes that “[b]ecause of the association of whiteness with cleanliness, and its metaphorical connotations of chastity and purity, sexual desire has traditionally been defined as itself dark” and “[i]f heterosexuality is thus related to whiteness, with all its symbolic connotations of purity and virtue, homosexuality is linked to blackness and darkness”⁹⁴. In other words, David’s insistence upon perceived sexual purity can be seen as linked to his identity as white and his feeling of superiority as a white male. His refusal to truly engage emotionally with others is tied up in his American idea of masculinity, where the American male remains unspoiled and idealistic, clean and unspoiled by sexual or emotional involvement.

Innocence as American identity

David’s feeling of innocence is, as shown above, connected to his identity as an American. The connection between newness, youth and America is made several times throughout the novel. America is subtly portrayed as a place which does not seem to offer room for growth and understanding, a country where childish notions of innocence and rigid moral keeps

⁹³ Baldwin, *Conversations with James Baldwin.*, p. 192

⁹⁴ Armengol, “In the Dark Room.”

people from growing. David leaves America for Europe after a series of “totally meaningless friendships” where he “wearied of wandering through the forests of desperate women”⁹⁵, reflecting on the seeming emptiness of the people and relationships he finds there. When he comes to Paris, however, his view of America seems to become more optimistic as he views it from afar. In his first meeting with Giovanni, David explains what he sees as the difference between New York and Paris:

‘Paris is *old*, is many centuries. You feel, in Paris, all the time gone by. That isn’t what you feel in New York’ – He was smiling. I stopped.

‘What do you feel in New York?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps you feel’, I told him, ‘all the time to come. There’s such power there, everything is such movement. You can’t help wondering – *I* can’t help wondering – what it will all be like – many years from now.’

‘Many years from now? When we are dead and New York is old?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘When everyone is tired, when the world – for Americans – is not so new.’⁹⁶

He sees New York as a place that is still creating its own identity and that is full of opportunity. He still believes in the making of the legend of America, in a New York which unlike Paris is not feeling the weight of its own past. Here David embodies Baldwin’s view of white America’s lack of feeling of its own history, as discussed in the previous chapter. David’s American identity is one of an almost childlike nature, one of hope for a bright and optimistic future where there are no bad consequences. His feeling of newness and opportunity with regards to his homeland seems to have no regard for the long and bloody history of slavery which has enabled the economy that made cities like New York what they are today. Giovanni further elaborates on this when speaking on how he perceives the American people:

“‘The Americans are funny. You have a funny sense of time – or perhaps you have no sense of time at all [...] Time always sounds like a parade *chez vous* [...] as though with enough time and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place. And when I say everything,’ he added, grimly, ‘I mean all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe.’”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room.*, p. 18

⁹⁶Baldwin., p. 29

⁹⁷Baldwin., p. 30

Giovanni's description of Americans ties in with Baldwin's view of white Americans as a people "without history", a people who do not want to believe in or face the aspects of life they perceive as difficult. White Americans, here represented by David, are people who believe in a shiny new world where "everything will be settled, solved, put in its place." There is no room for "pain and death and love", all of which are a part of America's history but parts that people like David choose to ignore. As the novel unfolds, however, David's conviction that "everything will be settled" is lost, and he must face the outcome of his own actions.

Joey and Hella: the darkness and the light

Throughout the novel, three different relationships illustrate David's view of himself, on his sexuality, and how he relates to others. These are: his teenage friend Joey, with whom he has his first sexual encounter, his girlfriend Hella who he asks to marry him, and most importantly Giovanni, who he meets in Paris while Hella is in Spain. While the three are very different from each other, also in how they relate to David, what unifies them is the way all relationships are shaped by David's lies and denial. Hella represents the safe, heterosexual option. With her, David can engage in "clean" lovemaking which does not cause any soul-searching on his own part. The relationship with Hella is an opportunity for David to dream of the American ideal of marriage and children, and when he thinks of her he connects her with light: "I can see her, very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by the light which fills the salon of the ocean liner".⁹⁸ Hella represents hope and opportunity to David, the light of the "right path". In opposition to Hella there is the dangerous darkness, the "wrong path", represented by Joey and Giovanni. Armengol makes the argument that "both Joey and Giovanni are [...] portrayed as dark"⁹⁹ in *Giovanni's Room*. Joey is described as "a very nice boy, too, very quick and dark, and always laughing"¹⁰⁰, with "dark eyes" and "curly hair"¹⁰¹. Giovanni's Italian roots identifies him as "dark, leonine"¹⁰² and he is emotional and free-spirited unlike the repressed David. He says he does not understand the French, who "measure themselves before they permit themselves any act whatever,"¹⁰³ and tells David: "In Italy, we

⁹⁸ Baldwin., p. 4

⁹⁹ Armengol, "In the Dark Room."

¹⁰⁰ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room.*, p. 5

¹⁰¹ Baldwin., p. 7

¹⁰² Baldwin., p. 25

¹⁰³ Baldwin., p. 32

are friendly, we dance and sing and make love”¹⁰⁴. This characterization evokes comparison to traditional semi-racist portrayals of black- and brown-skinned, “darker” people as more uninhibited, emotional and “free-spirited” than whites. The danger represented to David by Joey and Giovanni can then be taken as danger represented by black Americans to white Americans and their idea of innocence.

David describes being with Hella, his female fiancé, as nights of “peculiar innocence and confidence which will never come again which had made those nights so delightful, so unrelated to past, present, or anything to come, so unrelated, finally, to my life since it was not necessary for me to take any but the most mechanical responsibility for them.”¹⁰⁵. This describes a lovemaking that is pleasant enough, but not the sensual and bodily experience that Baldwin argues for in his essays as a means for growing as a person. It is described as delightful *because* it is so removed from anything real, anything that would have a real impact on the lives of those participating in it. It is also marked as “innocen[t] and confiden[t]”, linking innocence with safety and reassurance in the self. In contrast, David remembers his experience with Joey as “[g]reat thirsty heat, and trembling, and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst. But out of this astounding intolerable pain came joy, we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love.”¹⁰⁶. The sexual encounter with Joey took on a much more real, sensual aspect than his lovemaking with Hella. What Joey represented was an experience of something real and true, which would have had the ability to make David grow as a person. However, because of David’s self-image as a “tough guy”, the American male ideal, he “did not know and did not want to know”. What he has experienced with Joey scares him to the core:

*But Joey is a boy, I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood.*¹⁰⁷

The mere sight of Joey’s naked body is enough to spiral David into an abyss of fear. He compares Joey to a “black opening of a cavern”, fearing something dark that will swallow

¹⁰⁴ Baldwin., p. 32

¹⁰⁵ Baldwin., p. 4

¹⁰⁶ Baldwin., p. 7

¹⁰⁷ Baldwin., p. 8

him whole and torture him. He is frightened to his core, all because he thinks he will “lose his manhood”, once again showing his fear of not living up to the ideal of masculinity. To protect himself from this loss of identity, he rejects Joey with malice: “when school began I picked up with a rougher, older crowd and was very nasty to Joey. And the sadder this made him, the nastier I became.”¹⁰⁸ He reacts with anger and perhaps violence as a means of maintaining his sense of self – of maintaining his innocence.

Joey is signified by darkness, blackness, and fear in David’s mind, as the corrupting element that threatens David’s self-image as a “tough guy” upholding the masculine ideal of America. Again, David’s innocence is manifested as his projecting of guilt onto Joey’s body. By describing it as holding “the power and the promise and the mystery” David is able to, as Woubshet puts it, “shirk responsibility and to reproduce an idea of [him]sel[f]”¹⁰⁹ as an innocent, in the way Baldwin saw white America shirking responsibility for the United States “ignoble history”¹¹⁰. It is also notable that David views Joey’s body as holding “power and mystery”, echoing how the black body has historically been viewed as both a sexual threat and fascination by whites, or, as Marlon B. Ross puts it; “to be black in America is to become the target of fantastical racial-sexual projections and denials.”¹¹¹ The encounter with Joey, which is the first one to happen in the timeline and also the first one that David talks about in the book, he pretends to have forgotten: “I have not thought of that boy – Joey – for many years; but I see him quite clearly tonight. [...] For a while he was my best friend. Later, the idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me. So, I forgot him.”¹¹² Judging by his detailed and emotional retelling of his experience with him, however, it seems more likely that David never truly forgot Joey; rather, he chose to push aside the memory of him because he stood for everything that David refuses to acknowledge about himself. Even though he and Joey made love to *each other*, he remembered *Joey* as the one who was “wrong”. He thinks of him as “such a person”, someone who is not like David, even though there is no clear distinction between them that marks David as different than Joey, other than his own feeling that he is. David is refusing *responsibility* for his actions, and he is not *acknowledging* his own participation in them. It is easier for him to accept a version of events where he has no responsibility or guilt, where

¹⁰⁸ Baldwin., p. 9

¹⁰⁹ Woubshet, “How James Baldwin’s Writings About Love Evolved.”

¹¹⁰ Woubshet.

¹¹¹ Ross, “White Fantasies of Desire.”, p. 17

¹¹² Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room.*, p. 5

everything that happened, happened because of Joey. He is, in other words, displaying innocence in his *lack of acknowledgement of guilt*.

David in Giovanni's room: a trip into darkness

David and Joey's relationship is a precursor to the central relationship of the novel, which is that between David and Giovanni. They meet in Paris, where David finds himself after fleeing America, in an echo of Baldwin's own relocation to France. However, David is not trying to flee racial oppression like Baldwin did, but rather his own personal demons. He meets Giovanni in a club for gay and queer men, which he attends although he feels contempt for the other patrons, some of whom he regards with outright disgust. He especially dislikes the young man who comes dressed in women's clothes, with makeup, earrings and his hair "piled high" like a woman: "I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings."¹¹³ David's disregard for this open defiance of masculine ideals reveals his own uneasiness with anything that challenges the rigid norms of behaviour he himself feels that he is beholden to. His disgust and unease with those who do dare to display openly their difference is as much disgust with these same impulses in himself, however, he refuses to acknowledge that he has anything in common with them. David's internal disgust and distance is a way for him to maintain his self-image as the untainted "innocent", what Wolgast describes as one of "an enviable condition of character, one for others to wonder at, even revere, to wish for and protect"¹¹⁴. David views himself as someone that the others in the bar admire and secretly desire. He admits that he spends most of his time in the gay subculture of Paris, and seems to take a certain pride in being attractive to its members, but still views himself as somewhat above them: "Most of the people I knew in Paris were, as Parisians sometimes put it, of *le milieu*, and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and to myself, that I was not of their company."¹¹⁵ Going to a gay bar, he thinks that "[his] face was known and I had the feeling that people were taking bets about [him]"¹¹⁶, yet he views himself as above such interest and

¹¹³ Baldwin., p. 24

¹¹⁴ Wolgast, "Innocence."

¹¹⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room.*, p. 20

¹¹⁶ Baldwin., p. 24

merely spends time in the bar to appease his friend/benefactor Jacques after loaning money from him.

Jacques acts as a figure of premonition to David, several times asking questions that makes David doubt himself or his choices. David introduces him as “an aging, Belgian-born, American businessman” who “had a big, comfortable apartment and lots of things to drink and lots of money.”¹¹⁷ David looks down on Jacques, yet feels discomforted by the way Jacques seems to subtly indicate that David will eventually end up the same way himself. The night David meets Giovanni, Jacques urges David to “love [Giovanni] and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters?”¹¹⁸, and to not become trapped in a prison of his own making: “You play it safe long enough”, he said, in a different tone, “and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever – like me.” Jacques is trying to break David out of his self-imposed shell, to close the distance between himself and true feeling. He sees that David’s current state keeps him from truly and honestly engaging with people, which, if he continues it, will eventually leave him unable to form meaningful relationships. He also warns David that he does not have all the time in the world to figure out what he really wants: “Confusion is a luxury which only the very, very young can possibly afford and you are not that young any more.”¹¹⁹ Jacques represents everything that David hates and rejects about himself: “I understand now that the contempt I felt for him involved my own self-contempt.”¹²⁰ Throughout the novel, Jacques’ words and actions continually make David uneasy and unsure of himself, but he is unable to take heed of his warnings before it’s too late. I will suggest that Jacques’ warnings can be read as Baldwin’s own voice in the narrative, echoing Baldwin’s insistence that a novel “demands the presence and passion of human beings, who cannot ever be labeled.”¹²¹ Jacques is trying to help or scare David into becoming a fully realised human being, but David, the product of American wilful innocence, resists. He wants Giovanni, but he does not want to acknowledge his own want. David’s refusal to commit will eventually destroy both himself and Giovanni. He does, however, truly desire Giovanni, who is presented more sensually and seductively than any other character in the book. Giovanni’s sensuality presents both a contrast to David’s refusal

¹¹⁷ Baldwin., p. 20

¹¹⁸ Baldwin., p. 50

¹¹⁹ Baldwin., p. 36

¹²⁰ Baldwin., p. 21

¹²¹ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 600

of bodily engagement, as well as an opportunity and, to David, a threat to end this very refusal.

As mentioned earlier, Giovanni is introduced as the barman in the gay bar Jacques and David go to. Even before David sees him, Giovanni seems to draw him in, “it was like moving into the field of a magnet or like approaching a small circle of heat”¹²². David notes that “Jacques was immediately attracted”, comically ignoring his own self-same attraction, and thinks smugly that Jacques has no chance with Giovanni: “I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on an auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques.”¹²³ It is notable here how the language uses terms of sale and the auction block. Giovanni is presented as sexualized, dangerous and perhaps available for sale. These are terms that clearly evoke slavery, which again codes the “dark” Giovanni as the black representative in the text. Both David and Jacques are looking at Giovanni as an object of desire, but there is a clear disparity in both their social and economic positions. While David and Jacques can come to the bar as patrons, Giovanni has to work there to earn a living. Though David and Giovanni are both young and attractive, there is a divide between them as a result of difference in class and privilege. David goes to Jacques to borrow money because his own funds are frozen: “My father had money in his account which belonged to me but he was very reluctant to send it because he wanted me to come home – to come home, as he said, and settle down”¹²⁴. The only reason David is broke is because he does not want to come home, or he does not want to argue with his father about getting money. Borrowing money from Jacques is done more out of convenience for David rather than actual destitution, and he seem to feel that his company should serve as more than enough payback, because Jacques will then be seen with a young man he finds attractive. In contrast, Giovanni seems to feel that he is indebted to Guillaume, his employer. Giovanni tells David that he started working for Guillaume because

‘[he] knew he owned a bar and was a French citizen. I am not and I had no job and no *carte de travail*. So I saw that he could be useful if I could only find some way to make him keep his hands off me. I did not, I must say’ – this with that look at me – ‘altogether succeed in remaining untouched by him, he has more hands than an octopus, and no dignity whatever, *but*’ – grimly

¹²² Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room.*, p. 24-25

¹²³ Baldwin., p. 25

¹²⁴ Baldwin., p. 20

throwing down another oyster and refilling our glasses of wine – ‘I *do* now have a *carte de travail* and I have a job.’¹²⁵

Unlike David, who easily accepts Jacques’ money without really feeling the need to give anything substantial back, Giovanni, desperate because he has no job or no work permit, admits he has been forced to accept unwanted sexual attention from Guillaume just to get by. Despite his distaste for Guillaume, Giovanni still wants his approval:

Guillaume said, from his corner of the cab: ‘Tell him who rescued you.’ ‘Ah, yes,’ said Giovanni, ‘behold my saviour, my *patron*.’ He was silent a moment. Then: ‘You do not regret it, do you? I have not done you any harm? You are pleased with my work?’¹²⁶

It seems that it’s important for Giovanni to feel that he is doing well, and that he is legitimately putting in good work in the bar for Guillaume. David himself notes that “under [Giovanni’s] beauty and his bravado [David has seen] terror, and a terrible desire to please”.¹²⁷ The reassurance that he is a good worker functions as a way for him to hold on to his independence, and to feel less like a prostitute. Still, the degree to which Giovanni’s life balances precariously close to complete destitution is alluded to by his observances to David when they pass the river and see a man who lives under a bridge:

Mist clung to the river, softening that army of trees, softening those stones, hiding the city’s dreadful corkscrew alleys and dead-end streets, clinging like a curse to the men who slept beneath the bridges – one of whom flashed by beneath us, very black and lone, walking along the river.

‘Some rats have gone in’, said Giovanni, ‘and now other rats come out.’ He smiled bleakly and looked at me; to my surprise, he took my hand and held it. ‘Have you ever slept under a bridge?’ he asked. ‘Or perhaps they have soft beds with warm blankets under the bridges in your country?’

I did not know what to do about my hand; it seemed better to do nothing. ‘Not yet’, I said, ‘But I may. My hotel wants to throw me out.’¹²⁸

The mist softens the bleak reality of society’s underside; the people who are homeless and alone, forced to live underneath bridges. Giovanni, poor, working-class and “dark” seems to be indicating that once he, too, was forced to spend his nights in this way. He asks David if the

¹²⁵ Baldwin., p.54

¹²⁶ Baldwin., p. 43

¹²⁷ Baldwin., p. 53

¹²⁸ Baldwin., p. 40

bridges in America have “soft beds with warm blankets” under them, perhaps as some attempt at dark humour. David, however, from his position of privilege, is of course all too unaware of the life on the underside of America’s bridges – or indeed, the lives of that part of America which does not live in the same prosperity he himself has been offered. Reading Giovanni as a representative for black America and David as a representative for white America, this exchange highlights how white America choose to ignore the conditions under which many black Americans have to live, “conditions”, as Baldwin notes in his essay, “not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago.”¹²⁹ Though David feels somewhat uneasy about his own lack of knowledge about the kind of life Giovanni has lived, he seems unable to see the moment as an opportunity to try to understand Giovanni, or to offer him any comfort. When Giovanni takes David’s hand, he is actively reaching out for him, and trying to create a connection. David, however, is incapable of understanding Giovanni’s need for comfort, and “did not know what to do with [his] hand; it seemed better to do nothing.” Rather, holding Giovanni’s hand makes David feel “unutterably helpless and soft and coy”¹³⁰ The important thing for David is to continue to feel ‘manly’, not to make Giovanni feel better. He finds it better to “do nothing” than to act and to offer sympathy.

Despite his efforts and his internal protests, David is unable to not act on his attraction to Giovanni. He gradually falls deeper and deeper into their flirtation until he ends up going home to Giovanni’s room with him. But their night and morning together have a continuous tinge of something nightmarish, a touch of madness and inevitable tragedy. It seems to David that he is caught up in a maelstrom of something which he cannot escape, or does not want to escape, and it makes him long for the simplicity of his homeland, and I quote this passage at length:

I ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home; not to that hotel, in one of the alleys of Paris, where the concierge barred the door with my unpaid bill; but home, home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood; to those things, those places, those people which I would always helplessly, and in whatever bitterness of spirit, love above all else. I had never realized such a sentiment in myself before, and it frightened me. I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored. I looked at Giovanni’s face, which did not help me. He belonged to this strange city, which did not belong to me. I began to

¹²⁹ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p.292

¹³⁰ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room.*, p. 40

see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me 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.¹³¹

David seems to realise that embarking on an affair with Giovanni will possibly change him forever, and while it terrifies him, he is unable to stop it from happening. The city of Paris, the people around him, and especially Giovanni, are unlike what David sees as the uncomplicated society and people of America. He does not understand them and so he longs to go home, longs for a reality where he can navigate without fear. His language becomes rambling, almost unfocused, he repeats himself in an almost prayer-like way in his confusion. Thinking of life as “a dreadful human tangle, occurring everywhere, without end, forever”, he feels like he is standing on the end of a precipice, where if he falls off, he will lose his innocence, his sense of American identity, forever. But it scares him to the core, and so it makes him so fearful it is almost maddening. As he and Giovanni travel towards their coming together, in Giovanni’s room, it is a trip downward, into the darkness:

His room was in the back, on the ground floor of the last building on this street. We passed the vestibule and the elevator into a short, dark corridor which led to his room. The room was small, I only made out the outlines of clutter and disorder, there was the smell of the alcohol he burned in his stove. He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other -¹³²

Giovanni’s room is in the back, on the ground, in the last building and behind a dark corridor. It is small and cluttered, smelling of homemade alcohol. David has physically been drawn into an existence and a place he has previously had no knowledge of. The dankness and confines of Giovanni’s room becomes both an indicator of the differences of David and Giovanni’s economic disparity, as well as a representative of David’s confused and scared state of mind. It is also another indicator of Giovanni’s perceived “darkness”, as opposed to David’s own feeling of unspoiled whiteness. But the room is also symbolic as an attempt of bringing the two of them together, to create a place and a state that can have the power of transforming them into something new:

¹³¹ Baldwin., p. 54-55

¹³² Baldwin., p. 56

But it was not the room's disorder which was frightening [...] For this was not a matter of habit or circumstances or temperament; it was a matter of punishment and grief. [...] Under this blunted arrow, this smashed flower of light lay the terrors which encompassed Giovanni's soul. [...] I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room.¹³³

The room's disorder and dirtiness is a result of punishment and grief, a "blunted arrow", a "smashed flower of light" which hides the terrors of Giovanni's soul. All the grief and sadness and terror which the room speaks of is Giovanni's history, a past wrought with tragedy and which has left Giovanni broken on the inside. If we are to read Giovanni as a representative of black America, then the grief and terror of his past can be read as the dark and horrible past of white Americans treatment of black Americans. For David, the representative of white America, in order to reach reconciliation and to give Giovanni "a new and better life" he must seek to truly understand this past, to "become a part of Giovanni's room". What he needs to do is, as Baldwin put it, to "act on what [he] know[s]," because "To act is to be committed". The only way for David to transform Giovanni's life and make it better, make it similar to his own, is for him to actively involve himself with Giovanni's history. Unfortunately, David fears committing, because "to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."¹³⁴ If David truly engages with Giovanni, commit to him and tries to make his life better, he fears he will lose himself.

Giovanni, who is more in touch with his emotions and accepting of himself, tries to force David into acknowledging their relationship for what it is. He initially acts reassuring towards David, working to convince him that they are different from people like Jacques and Guillaume: "Giovanni leaned back against the taxi window, allowing his arm to press against my shoulder lightly, seeming to say that we should soon be rid of these old men and should not be distressed that their dirty water splashed – we would have no trouble washing it away."¹³⁵ Again, David uses the word dirty to describe his fear of engaging with another man – in this case, a fear that he will somehow be "contaminated" by Jacques and Guillaume's identity and behaviour. Despite Giovanni's confidence and reassurances, David insists on holding on to his pre-set notions about what they are doing. When Giovanni asks David about Hella, David insists

¹³³ Baldwin., p. 78

¹³⁴ Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook.", p.284

¹³⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room.*, p. 39

that he will not tell her about them, and that if she had been in Paris, David would not have been with Giovanni at all:

‘If she were in Paris right now,’ I said, abruptly, ‘then I would not be in this room with you.’

‘You would possibly not be living here,’ he conceded, ‘but we would certainly be seeing each other, why not?’

‘Why *not*? Suppose she found out?’

‘Found *out*? Found out what?’

‘Oh stop it,’ I said. ‘You know what there is to find out.’¹³⁶

David does not want to acknowledge the relationship between himself and Giovanni, at the same time as he does not want Hella to know about it. When Giovanni presses him to say out loud what it is exactly that goes on between them, David cannot bring himself to do it. Instead he tries to explain his reluctance to commit to Giovanni out of his concern for Hella:

‘It’s just that she’ll be terribly hurt if she does find out, that’s all. People have very dirty words for – for this situation.’ I stopped. His face suggested that my reasoning was flimsy. I added, defensively ‘Besides, it *is* a crime – in my country, and after all, I didn’t grow up here, I grew up *there*.’¹³⁷

David initially uses Hella as an excuse, but then gives an explanation that is more connected to the real reason he does not want to acknowledge his relationship with Giovanni: that other people will call it by “dirty words”. When he senses that Giovanni is not convinced by his reasoning, he comes up with yet another explanation: that homosexuality is illegal. He is constantly coming up with new answers to Giovanni so that he will not have to give him the real one: that he is unable to face and accept the truth about himself, the fact that he wants and engages in homosexual relationships. David is semi-consciously postponing his own growth as a human being. This postponing of acknowledgement is allegorical to the larger concept of innocence as lack of acknowledgement of guilt. David “does not know and does not want to know”¹³⁸ about what he is, and the way it is hurting others. He becomes an allegorical figure of white America and their refusal to acknowledge the past and its wrongdoings. David insists upon his own heterosexuality because without it he would feel a complete loss of his only sense of identity – that of an American male, a “tough guy”. Clinging to this image of a masculine

¹³⁶ Baldwin., p. 72

¹³⁷ Baldwin.

¹³⁸ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 292

identity is to cling to what Baldwin elsewhere presents as the false, stereotypical ideals that the American society uses instead of facing their own realities. David refuses to undergo the metamorphosis into a fully realised human being, because of his fear of the parts of himself that he will not acknowledge.

When considering Schlosser's suggestion, that "themes of examination and questioning pervade [Baldwin's] work"¹³⁹, especially with regards to changing society and "finding better ways to live together"¹⁴⁰, the fact of David's deferral becomes important. By rejecting self-examination, David is unable to "overcome [his] delusions about [himself] and thereby realize [his] full promise and potential, or, in Baldwin's words, to 'achieve his identity'"¹⁴¹. Baldwin uses the character of David as a tool to portray how lack of examination and self-questioning ultimately leads to a loss of identity. David's fate parallels Baldwin's warning of how white Americans are "trapped in a history which they do not understand". They refuse to commit to acting, because "to be committed is to be in danger". In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.¹⁴² This is explicitly laid out by David when reflecting over his avoidance of dealing with his feelings for Joey:

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.¹⁴³

The self-deception that David is talking about is the opposite of moral understanding – the avoidance of self-examination. He rejects Joey and later Giovanni and refuses the love they are offering him. His continually refusing to accept love and to allow himself to love others prevents him from growing as a person. But David's refusal to engage and commit does not only harm himself – it prevents him from helping others and even makes him harm them. David rejects Joey harshly, devastating the other boy. He pretends that he is sincerely interested in marrying Hella, and does not become honest with her before she more or less catches him "in the act" with another man. Most damningly, he refuses to help Giovanni when

¹³⁹ Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key."

¹⁴⁰ Schlosser.

¹⁴¹ Schlosser.

¹⁴² Schlosser.

¹⁴³ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 18

Giovanni loses his job, but rather pushes him away which eventually leads Giovanni into destitution and murder.

David, Hella and the death of the “American Dream”

After being rejected by David, Giovanni sinks into despair and eventually commits a crime for which he will be hanged. David himself is no longer able to find solace in his forced heterosexual relationship with Hella, his American fiancé, who is becoming equally disillusioned with her life. She pleads with him to go home with her, to fulfil their promise of the American dream: ““What are we staying here for? How long do you want to sit in this house, eating your heart out? And what do you think it’s doing to me? [...] Please, I want to go home. I want to get married. I want to start having kids.””¹⁴⁴ Hella, who has previously shown herself to be uninterested in the regular trappings of married life and defied feminine expectations of propriety in her self-presentation, even offers to change herself into a standardized American female ideal to please David: ““David, please let me be a woman. I don’t care what you do to me. I don’t care what it costs. I’ll wear my hair long, I’ll give up cigarettes, I’ll throw away the books.’ She tried to smile; my heart turned over. ‘Just let me be a woman, take me. It’s what I want. It’s *all* I want. I don’t care about anything else.””¹⁴⁵ While Hella does not yet know the full extent of David’s actions and how they have broken both him and Giovanni, she perceives the gloom and doom they are both facing. Desperately trying to save them, she blindly reaches for the unrealistic and ‘innocent’ ideals of America: masculine men and feminine women creating a family in an idyllic homeland. David, however, is already too far lost in his own tragedy and perhaps Hella is as well. When David and Hella depart from one another for the last time, she laments: “‘Americans should never come to Europe,’ she said, and tried to laugh and began to cry, ‘it means they can never be happy again. What’s the good of an American who isn’t happy? Happiness was all we had.””¹⁴⁶ Hella longs for the time when she still believed in the surface ideal of American life, one in indisputable happiness. It was, however, an ideal based upon a life lived without truly acknowledging themselves, and so it was never to be. What is different now, is that both she and David know it can never be. David, having tried to live out the trope of the “tough guy”, has left his relationship with Giovanni “surrounded by blood and treachery”, while himself

¹⁴⁴ Baldwin., p. 142

¹⁴⁵ Baldwin., p. 143

¹⁴⁶ Baldwin., p. 146

and Hella are reduced to “a bitter coupling” unable to find happiness in each other.¹⁴⁷ This “tough guy” stereotype was by Baldwin identified as typical of America, as it was born out of a need to shun the “metamorphosis” needed to mark “the signal of maturity [that] marks the death of the child and the birth of the man.”¹⁴⁸ For all his efforts, David is unable to live up to the tough guy image he so desperately wants to project. While living with Hella in the south of France, David leaves her and goes to Nice where he meets a male sailor who he presumably has sex with. Hella goes after him and confronts him in a bar where she realizes David’s situation: “In the mirror, suddenly, I saw Hella’s face. [...] I felt the sailor staring at both of us. ‘Hasn’t she got the wrong bar’, he asked me, finally. Hella looked at him. She smiled. ‘It’s not the only thing I got wrong’, she said.”¹⁴⁹ Now Hella can no longer ignore the reality of her relationship with David: that he prefers men, and that they will never get married and have children and live out the American dream together. She reacts with anger and resentment over his failure to live up to the ideal: “If I stay here much longer,’ she said, later that same morning, as she packed her bag, ‘I’ll forget what it’s like to be a woman.’[...] ‘There are women who have forgotten that to be a woman doesn’t simply mean humiliation, doesn’t simply mean bitterness. I haven’t forgotten it yet,’ she added, ‘in spite of you’¹⁵⁰. Hella, rather than try to understand David, blames him for making her “forget how to be a woman” because of his failure to live up to what she perceives as being a man. Yet she still can’t help trying to blame Giovanni – the “dark”, foreign character, for David’s homosexuality and for the failure of hers and David’s relationship: “I’ll never understand it,’ she said at last, and she raised her eyes to mine as though I could help her to understand. ‘That sordid little gangster has wrecked your life. I think he’s wrecked mine, too.’¹⁵¹. For all that she has learned of David, Hella still seeks to place the blame of their failed dream on someone else, because she is clinging to the idea of innocence ingrained in her as an American. But Baldwin implies she is changed by what has happened: “She ran her fingers through her hair, brushing it back from her forehead, and now, with the lipstick, and in the heavy, black coat, she looked, again, cold, brilliant, and bitterly helpless, a terrifying woman.”¹⁵²: Hella has become both physically and emotionally closed off; armed in lipstick and a heavy coat she is “cold”, “helpless” and “terrifying”. She seems unable to grow and evolve, like David. She is

¹⁴⁷ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p.598

¹⁴⁸ Baldwin., p. 597

¹⁴⁹ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*. p. 143

¹⁵⁰ Baldwin., p. 144

¹⁵¹ Baldwin., p. 145-146

¹⁵² Baldwin., p. 146.

rejecting reality and grasping onto ignorance at the cost of her humanity – in other words, clinging to her white innocence.

Giovanni's downfall comes as a result of a mounting conflict between him and his employer, Guillaume. He gets fired from his job and quickly spirals into desperation, for money but also for David's love and reassurance. But the more he clings to David, the more David pushes him away. When Hella returns from Spain, David leaves Giovanni for her. Despite feeling sorry for Giovanni, he does not help him or return to him and his room. Desperate for money, Giovanni goes to Guillaume to ask for money, but they argue, and Giovanni ends up killing Guillaume. Now wanted for murder, Giovanni is forced into hiding. David's thoughts go back to the bridge they observed the night they first met: "As I watched, from Hella's window, each night creeping over Paris, I thought of Giovanni somewhere outside, perhaps under one of these bridges, frightened and cold and not knowing where to go."¹⁵³ When Giovanni is eventually found by the police, it is indeed "in a barge tied up along the river"¹⁵⁴. He has ended up back where he began, on the underside of society. David observes that the papers write about his crime "in delicious detail, *how* he had done it: but not why. Why was too *black* for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell"¹⁵⁵. The *why* of Giovanni's fate is quite literally described as too black for the newspapers to tell. His fate, however, foreshadows and links him to another character whose blackness results in tragedy: Rufus from *Another Country*.

Chapter summary

This chapter explored the concept of innocence in *Giovanni's Room*, by examination of the character David, his crisis of sexuality, identity, and his failure to create meaningful relationships because of his crisis. David has been read as the representative for white Americans, while his lover, Giovanni, while not explicitly a black character in the text, has been read as a representative for black Americans. Giovanni is perceived as a dark, sensual threat by David, reflecting both his sexualization of dark-skinned bodies and the loss of sensuality by white Americans. David's fear of losing his identity to the "threat" of homosexuality is also a fear of what is dark and sensual, something he cannot connect to

¹⁵³ Baldwin., p. 134

¹⁵⁴ Baldwin., p. 135

¹⁵⁵ Baldwin., p. 135, second emphasis mine.

because he does not understand it. David's lack of acknowledgment of guilt, his insistence on maintaining his innocence, has been identified as central to the destruction of his relationship with Giovanni, Giovanni's death, as well as David's own loss of self. His crisis thusly becomes not only related to homosexuality, but to a deeper crisis of American masculinity and identity, which again is connected to the idea of white innocence and sexual innocence as a destructive element of the American ideal of identity.

Chapter Three: Innocence in Another Country

Giovanni's Room and *Another Country* are quite different novels. Most of *Giovanni's Room* takes place in Paris, with a relatively small cast of only white characters. *Another Country* is set in New York, and it has a much bigger and more diverse cast of characters. There are, however, clear thematic links between the two novels, as well as clear parallels between characters. The previous chapter showed how the concept of innocence appeared and played out in *Giovanni's Room*. This chapter seeks to do the same with *Another Country*. I will start by making a comparison between the characters of Giovanni from *Giovanni's Room* and Rufus from *Another Country*, as well as how these characters are linked with Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas from *Native Son*. I will then go into an analysis of the relationship between Rufus and Leona. Here I will continue the comparison to other literary characters by showing how Leona and her child-like innocence can be viewed as a mid-Century "little Eva" from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Further on I will argue for the reading of Vivaldo as a "liberal white bastard"¹⁵⁶, showing how this character is Baldwin's critique of a particular brand of white innocence: that of the white liberal. Vivaldo's displays of innocence will then be examined through his relationship with Ida, Rufus' sister. Throughout these examinations of the characters Rufus, Leona, Vivaldo and Ida I will then be going into a more detailed analysis of how the concept of innocence appear in *Another Country* as well as how it differs from the way it appears in *Giovanni's Room*.

Rufus and Giovanni, and the ghost of *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas

Throughout *Another Country*, the concept of innocence is portrayed mainly through two different relationships: the relationship between Rufus and Leona, and between Rufus' sister Ida and his friend Vivaldo. In both relationships the tension of being a mixed-race couple in

¹⁵⁶ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 33

the 1950s threaten to destroy not only the love between them, but also the people themselves. Leona and Vivaldo, the two white characters, are unable to understand the strain felt by Rufus and Ida because of their lack of knowledge of the realities of being a black person in America. In both relationships, there is an element of sexual tension or conflict based in both sexualisation of black bodies, as well as ideals of masculinity. There is, however, a difference in the way Leona and Vivaldo display their innocence, which is also somewhat different from the way innocence was displayed by David.

Rufus is the first character we meet in *Another Country*, a recently down-on-his-luck jazz musician who, like Giovanni, finds himself jobless, penniless and as good as friendless after a tumultuous romantic relationship has ended. Rufus has met a white southern girl, Leona, some months earlier, and their volatile and destructive life together eventually lose them both their jobs and drive their friends away. Both Rufus and Giovanni meet their ends underneath a bridge - Giovanni is found in a barge beneath a bridge over the Seine before his execution, while Rufus takes his own life in the Hudson river by jumping from the George Washington bridge. Throughout the texts, there other similarities between Rufus and Giovanni. At his lowest point, Rufus accepts an offer of food and drink from an older white man who passes him on the street, with the implication that Rufus will need to repay him in sexual favours later. But the food does not help Rufus, it makes him sick: “Rufus tried to turn his mind away from what was happening to him. He wolfed down his sandwich. But the heavy bread, the tepid meat, made him begin to feel nauseous”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Giovanni feels he needs to offer his body to Guillaume, because he “was weak from hunger and had trouble not to vomit.”¹⁵⁸ Both Rufus and Giovanni are driven to the depths of despair – prostitution, and hunger so intense it makes them sick. Their low social and economic position in society contribute to their downfall. Both end up separated from their lover and their friends, and they both end up dead.

As this paper purposes to read both novels as allegorical of the relationship between Baldwin’s perspective on the black and white population of America, the clear parallels between Rufus and Giovanni are important because this further allows for a reading of Giovanni as a representative of black America in *Giovanni’s Room*. Rufus, the sole black male character from the books, is as much a representative for black America as one can get; Joel Alden Schlosser even argues that “while Rufus does not explicitly become Baldwin’s

¹⁵⁷ Baldwin., p. 50

¹⁵⁸ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room.*, p. 96

version of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, that is, as Baldwin describes him, one whose life is 'controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear' – Rufus comes horribly close."¹⁵⁹ In the chapter where the concepts of innocence and love were defined, I discussed Baldwin's frustration with the protest novel genre, exemplified by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Bigger Thomas, the antihero from *Native Son* is, of course, the very representation of black characters that Baldwin sought to change. While he is presented as a product of the way society has treated him, Bigger Thomas is a brute and a rapist, unable to control his rage and his anger. Baldwin was critical of such characters, as he saw them as stereotypical and symbolic rather than real instruments of change, or as he put it, "[an attempt] to redeem a symbolical monster in social terms"¹⁶⁰. Baldwin argued that with Bigger Thomas, Wright was supporting the idea

that Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished as our theology claims, and further, that the use to which Wright puts this idea can only proceed from the assumption – not entirely unsound – that Americans, who evade, so far as possible, all genuine experience, have therefore no way of assessing the experience of others and no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own.¹⁶¹

Baldwin here again puts forward the idea that Americans, or more specifically white Americans, evade "genuine experience", in other words, cling to their innocence rather than try to learn something about a life "which is not their own". His critique of Bigger Thomas was that he was only understood as a character because he confirmed everything that white Americans assumed about young black men: that they were angry, violent and brutish. But it also seems that while Baldwin found Bigger Thomas a failed attempt of writing a black character, he wanted to better this attempt by creating his own characters, Rufus and Giovanni, in Bigger's image. While they share similarities with Bigger, I will argue that Baldwin sought to make them not monsters, but real people who are failed by society. Rufus beats his girlfriend Leona and Giovanni kills his former employer, yet they are not presented as monsters or wholly unsympathetic characters. They are flawed people who react to the circumstances life has given them, circumstances that the white characters seem unable or unwilling to fully recognize and comprehend. This lack of realization is related to the way the

¹⁵⁹ Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key."

¹⁶⁰ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone.", p. 26

¹⁶¹ Baldwin., p. 31-32

white characters in different ways are or claim to be, innocents. In the case of Rufus, this white innocent character is Leona.

Leona, a mid-century “Little Eva”

The relationship between Rufus and Leona in *Another Country* offers a take on the tragic aspects of doomed love as a result of a wrought racial history as well as a complicated sexual dynamic, which in some ways offers a mirror of the relationship between David and Giovanni from *Giovanni’s Room*. Rufus starts a relationship with Leona, a white woman who is considerably older than him. They gradually spiral down into doom and tragedy as both their own demons as well as society’s judgement destroy them.

James A. Dievler describes Leona as one who “embodies the stereotypical white liberal” in her “sentiment of ‘being nice’ to the black person.”¹⁶² While I agree somewhat with his assessment that she “treats Rufus with the surface pity and charity that is akin to the stereotypical way in which white liberals are viewed as treating blacks”¹⁶³, I don’t think Leona should be read as a white liberal type of figure. Instead, Leona, a tragic, white woman, in many ways fills the role of “*the innocent*” as described by Wolgast: one who “lacks the experience of guilt”, and also one who is “[missing] an understanding of those whose world is more complicated”¹⁶⁴. Leona does not live a charmed existence; she is poor and comes from an abusive marriage, with a man who beat her and took her child away from her. However, despite her backstory, Leona seems unable to understand why Rufus is so angry and resentful.

The night they meet, in a club after Rufus has played with his band, his interest in her is cemented the moment he hears that she is from the South: “She had said enough. She was from the South. And something leaped in Rufus as he stared at her damp, colourless face, the face of the Southern poor white”¹⁶⁵. Leona’s Southern identity immediately heightens Rufus’ interest in her, although he does not seem to be consciously aware at first why this is. But as they make their way to a party together, he is reminded of incidents of violent racism that have been inflicted on him in the past: “He remembered, suddenly, his days in the boot camp in the South and felt again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth”¹⁶⁶. Nothing in his and Leona’s conversation seems like it should be evoking these memories, except for the fact that

¹⁶² Dievler, “Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*.”, p. 173

¹⁶³ Dievler.

¹⁶⁴ Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone.”, p. 31-32

¹⁶⁵ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 19

¹⁶⁶ Baldwin., p. 22

she is from the South. But the simple fact that Leona is white and from the South is enough to bring up feelings of worthlessness and resentment in Rufus, because of what she represents. Already before they have gotten to know each other, he sees in her cause for his anger and his shame. As they arrive at the party, Leona's identity as a representation of the South is further cemented as the host dubs her "Little Eva" in reference to the angelic white "saviour" child character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹⁶⁷ The link between Leona and Little Eva deepens the characterization of Leona as an "innocent", one who is child-like, with a "view of the world which is that of a sheltered child."¹⁶⁸ Even though Leona has a troubled past behind her, she is consistently described as "shy", with a "sweet smile"; "a tired child" and "a sweet girl".¹⁶⁹ The juvenile comparisons underscores Leona's innocence as well as her relation to the character of Little Eva, a child.

Throughout the evening of their meeting, Rufus switches between recalling racist encounters of his past and seducing Leona. This duality of resentment and desire continues to define their relationship as it progresses further. Every interaction Rufus has with Leona becomes intrinsic to his feelings about white superiority and racial oppression. By exerting his power over her he can have his revenge on those who have treated him unfairly in the past, as well as on racist American society as a whole. Eventually, Rufus becomes unable to contain his inner anger and resentment and he begins taking it out on Leona through vicious beatings and hateful accusations. Leona, in her innocence, cannot understand why he is so angry with her. Although she comes from the South, where racist attitudes and discrimination are far more prominent than in the North, she can only despair when Rufus lashes out at her. She fails to connect his anger and accusations of the institutional and societal racism that Rufus experiences all the more vividly when he is seen with her. Walking through the park, he observes that "Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm. [...] Leona gleamed before him and seemed to be oblivious of everything and everyone but him."¹⁷⁰ Rufus feels like a slave on display, while Leona happily exists in her own world devoid of looks and judgement from others. Again, Leona displays her role as the innocent when she acts like a child – she is entirely focused on herself and Rufus and is unable to register anything else around her. She even "gleams", underscoring her connection to the angelical, untouched by the rest of the world. In relation to

¹⁶⁷ Baldwin., p. 26

¹⁶⁸ Wolgast, "Innocence."

¹⁶⁹ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 33, 36

¹⁷⁰ Baldwin., p. 38

Wolgast's description of innocence, she acts "without moral doubt, without hesitation or fear of error. From [her] charmed existence, error and guilt do not exist."¹⁷¹ While not doing so consciously, Leona, like David, act like the innocents described by Baldwin in "My Dungeon Shook": they "do[...] not know [...] and do not want to know"¹⁷² about racial injustice and discrimination. Unlike David, though, Leona seems to be happily innocent of the world around her. But this is exactly why Rufus becomes so angry and disillusioned with her, because, as Baldwin notes in his essay, "[I]t is the innocence which constitutes the crime."¹⁷³ The fact that Leona can ignore the world around them makes her, in Rufus' eyes, complicit in the crime of ignoring the racial atrocities of America's past.

From this point, Rufus and Leona are headed into a downward spiral, facilitated by his anger, fear and resentment. Like David in *Giovanni's Room*, Rufus also feels that his masculinity and manhood are under threat because of his relationship, a relationship which is not condoned by American society. While David felt that his "tough guy"-image was threatened by his same-sex relation, Rufus constantly feels threatened in his relationship with Leona because he is black, and she is white. He insults and shames her, indicating that she is sexually insatiable:

-'it was her husband ruined this bitch, Your husband and all them funky niggers screwed you in the Georgia bushes. That's why your husband threw you out. Why don't you tell the truth? I wouldn't have to beat you if you didn't tell the truth.' He grinned at Vivaldo. 'Man, this chick can't get enough' – and he broke off, staring at Leona.¹⁷⁴

Rufus seems to be accusing Leona of having been sexually promiscuous before she met him, and that she has been with other black men before, possibly because of a fetishization of black men. This characterization seems to stem more from Rufus' own anger because of the different way Leona would be treated if she had been with a white man, than from how Leona actually behaves. He cannot perceive why she would withstand the discrimination that they face as an interracial couple, thus he reasons she is only with him out of sexual objectification of his black body. He tells Vivaldo:

'She loves the coloured folks *so much*,' said Rufus, 'sometimes I just can't stand it. You know all that chick knows about me? The *only* thing she knows? He put his hand on his sex,

¹⁷¹ Wolgast, "Innocence."

¹⁷² Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook.", p. 292

¹⁷³ Baldwin.

¹⁷⁴ Baldwin, *Another Country.*, p.64

brutally, as though he would tear it out, and seemed pleased to see Vivaldo wince. He sat down on the bed again. ‘That’s all.’¹⁷⁵

He feels threatened both because he is black and because he is a man. Leona betrays his masculinity by being, in his eyes, sexually promiscuous and by using him for his body. She becomes, as Baldwin puts it in his “Preservation of Innocence”, “the incarnation of sexual evil, the smiler with the knife”¹⁷⁶ while Rufus feels like “the man, who, for all his tommy-guns and rhetoric, is the innocent, inexplicably, compulsively and perpetually betrayed.”¹⁷⁷ Like with David and Giovanni, the idea of sexual innocence, the way it twists the way people are able to see and fully understand and accept each other, also contributes to destruction and chaos. Because, as further explained by Baldwin in “Preservation of Innocence”

[What happens] when this boy, this girl, discover[...] that the knife which preserved them for each other has unfitted them for experience? [...] violence: that brutality which rages unchecked in our literature is part of the harvest of this unfulfillment, strident and dreadful testimony to our renowned and cherished innocence.¹⁷⁸

The mistreatment from Rufus does not make Leona leave him, however. Instead, she assumes a somewhat martyr-like role, further strengthening her link to little Eva. After leaving her apartment with Vivaldo, Leona stands crying, with a trembling “little-girl’s mouth”¹⁷⁹. Vivaldo asks her why she endures the beatings and mistreatment, and she answers “ ‘Why [...] do people take anything?’ [...] I know he’s sick and I keep hoping he’ll get well and I can’t make him see a doctor. He knows I’m not doing none of those things he says, he knows it!’ ”¹⁸⁰ Leona “sacrifices” herself, taking on a saviour-role, because she is ‘too good for this world’, like Little Eva. But her sacrifice and innocence make her unable to understand Rufus. This resonates with Wolgast’s idea that “the purity of an innocent is of no help where wisdom and insight are required, where what is needed is a rich acquaintance with the world and an understanding of the way guilt and regret affect our lives”¹⁸¹. Leona is unable to experience the guilt and regret of what history has done to make Rufus the way he is, and thus she cannot grow herself or truly understand Rufus.

¹⁷⁵ Baldwin., p.75

¹⁷⁶ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 598.

¹⁷⁷ Baldwin.

¹⁷⁸ Baldwin., p. 599

¹⁷⁹ Baldwin, *Another Country.*, p.66

¹⁸⁰ Baldwin., p. 65

¹⁸¹ Wolgast, “Innocence.”

Later, when discussing Leona with Vivaldo, Vivaldo pleads with Rufus to forget her, to forget their relationship. But to Rufus it is not that easy. He thinks that: “[y]ou can’t forget anything that hurt so badly, went so deep, and changed the world forever. It’s not possible to forget anybody you’ve destroyed.”¹⁸². While Rufus is thinking of himself and Leona specifically, the phrase can just as well be applied to David and Giovanni, as well as the fraught and troubled relationship between black and white Americans. If Rufus is a continuation of the character of Bigger Thomas and Leona is a mid-Century Little Eva, then their coupling indeed mirrors that which Baldwin described in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” between Bigger Thomas and Harriet Beecher Stowe: a “web of lust and fury”, within which “black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other’s slow, exquisite death”¹⁸³. Similarly, Rufus and Leona’s relationship takes on the form of a “web of lust and fury”:

Sometimes, when she said that there was nothing wrong in being coloured he answered. ‘Not if you a hard-up white lady.’ The first time he said this, she winced and said nothing. The second time she slapped him. And he slapped her. They fought all the time. They fought each other with their hands and their voices and then with their bodies: and the one storm was like the other.¹⁸⁴

What lies between Rufus and Leona is the whole of America’s fraught past; and as they cannot overcome it, they cannot exist together without hurting each other. As Schlosser writes, Rufus goes under, because although “he recognizes his hatred and his fear, [...] he can never fully accept the fate of his character – his masculinity, his color, his ambivalent sexuality, his being an American.”¹⁸⁵ As long as Leona keeps holding on to her innocence - that is, to her ignorance of what Rufus has experienced and continue to experience – he cannot forgive her. As long as she keeps her child-like “little-girl”-innocence identity, she will never fully be able to understand him, and to acknowledge what keeps them apart. Coming back to the comparison between Rufus and Bigger Thomas, Rufus becomes, like Bigger, the victim of a tragedy, which

is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human

¹⁸² Baldwin, *Another Country*, p. 58

¹⁸³ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p. 18

¹⁸⁴ Baldwin, *Another Country*, p. 60

¹⁸⁵ Schlosser, “Socrates in a Different Key.”

and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth.¹⁸⁶

However, the tragedy concerns not only Rufus, but Leona as well. In perhaps her one moment of some insight, Leona voices that she perceives this feeling of being “sub-human” to Rufus: “‘No’, said Leona, and both men turned to watch her, ‘ain’t neither of you got it right, Rufus don’t think he’s good enough for *me*.’[...] ‘It’s the way you was raised’, she said, ‘and I guess you just can’t help it.’”¹⁸⁷ Leona is aware of the way Rufus treats her is born out of a feeling of worthlessness, which has been imposed upon him by the way he was brought up. But her insight has come too late:

Leona pressed her lips together and her eyes filled with tears. She seemed to wish to call the words back, to call time back, and begin everything over again. But she could not think of anything to say and the silence stretched.¹⁸⁸

This is a moment of tragic realization for Leona: she has finally gotten a grasp on why Rufus is the way he is, but her realization has come too late and now there is nothing more to say. She wants to “call time back, and begin everything over again.” But just like white America, Leona cannot undo the wrongs of the past. She cannot call back the words that have been said, or the actions that have been done, just as white Americans cannot undo all the atrocities committed against black Americans throughout history. As Baldwin’s representatives for black and white America, Rufus and Leona become, like David and Giovanni, a tragic mirror of a co-existence that cannot function if the innocence of the white Americans is not confronted or dealt with.

Vivaldo, the “liberal white bastard”

Rufus’ white best friend, Vivaldo offers a different representation of innocence than Leona, as well as a different representation of innocence than the one offered by David in *Giovanni’s Room*. David is denying his own innocence, and is refusing to acknowledge or address it. Leona is presented as more of *an* innocent, someone child-like and sheltered from reality. Vivaldo, on the other hand, views himself as a progressive person who has black friends and does not treat people differently because of their race. He is, to some degree, aware of how he

¹⁸⁶ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p. 22-23

¹⁸⁷ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 64

¹⁸⁸ Baldwin., p. 65

is in a different position than the black characters of Rufus and Ida. However, he does not seem to be grasping the full weight of this situation, nor acknowledging his own privilege when it is pointed out to him. He feels lonely and removed from the rest of the world, and out of place in company with other working-class white men. Still, he seeks out black prostitutes rather than white, in a clear racialized sexualization which links black women with a more shameful, transgressive form of sexual activity not suitable for white women. Vivaldo is behaving like those Josep Armengol describes as “White men [who] have traditionally identified white women with the model of the Virgin Mary, whose purity is unsullied by the dark drives of sexuality, [while] they have also projected their sexuality onto dark races as a means of representing their own desires while keeping those desires at a distance.”¹⁸⁹ Vivaldo’s later relationship with Ida, though formed through love, is marred by his racialized sexualization of Ida’s black body, something that will be further discussed later in the chapter. Vivaldo’s character also mirrors that of David, as well as Rufus, with regards to how all of them have their sense of self bound up in traditional, and, to Baldwin, destructive masculine values.

In the text, Vivaldo is described as a white liberal, an identification that Baldwin himself felt was problematic, or as he put it: “There is no role for the white liberal, he is our affliction”.¹⁹⁰ Baldwin elaborated on this by describing how white liberals assumed that Baldwin’s position in life was much worse than their own, and that they, through what he viewed as a “missionary complex”, felt compelled to help him “into the light”.¹⁹¹ This view, in Baldwin’s opinion, were more of hindrance than of help. Rebecca Aanerud links Baldwin’s less than enthusiastic opinion of white liberalism to pre-WWII “programs specifically designed to improve conditions and opportunities for African Americans [that] carried with them paternalistic attitudes.”¹⁹² The role of innocence in the white liberal to Baldwin, then, can be understood as one that acknowledges the racial injustices of the past while seeking to excuse the white liberal’s personal responsibility. As Aanerud writes, “the conflict between white guilt and the need to construct an innocent white self does more to efface history than it does to face it.”¹⁹³ I will argue that Vivaldo as a character is both an example of Baldwin’s critique of the white liberal as well as an attempt to show how there was a possibility to

¹⁸⁹ Armengol, “In the Dark Room.”

¹⁹⁰ James Baldwin in Aanerud, “Now More Than Ever: James Baldwin and the Critique of White Liberalism.”

¹⁹¹ Aanerud., p. 61.

¹⁹² Aanerud.

¹⁹³ Aanerud., p. 64

redeem oneself from such a position. This redemption will first be achieved after an arduous journey, taking place over the course of events in *Another Country*.

Our first introduction to Vivaldo as the white liberal is when he shows up at Rufus' place the morning after Rufus and Leona go home together. Rufus enjoys Vivaldo's somewhat shocked reaction to seeing him with Leona:

Rufus watched with delight the slow shock on Vivaldo's face as he looked from Leona, muffled in Rufus' bathrobe, to Rufus, sitting up in bed, and naked except for the blankets. Let the *liberal white bastard* squirm, he thought.¹⁹⁴

Rufus senses that Vivaldo, despite his liberal leanings and progressive identity, is somewhat shocked and confused when confronted with Rufus and Leona's relationship. He takes joy from visually confronting Vivaldo with his own prejudices and his white innocence. In Vivaldo's case, this innocence must be understood as one of white Americans from Baldwin's "Many Thousands Gone." Writing from the perspective of a collective "we", the white Americans, Baldwin describes how

Today, to be sure, we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior; there is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality [...] Yet, in our most recent war, his blood was segregated as was, for the most part, his person. Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters[...]¹⁹⁵

What Baldwin says here is that while some portion of white America have intellectually acknowledged that there is not really anything to fear from black Americans, they will still balk at the thought of interracial relationships. White liberals like Vivaldo will be friends with Rufus and feel that they are racially conscious, but when visually confronted with the reality of a black man like Rufus having a sexual relationship with a white woman like Leona, they will "squirm". Vivaldo himself has been visiting black prostitutes: "In Harlem, however, he had merely dropped his load and marked the spot with silver"¹⁹⁶, The image betrays his own sexualization of black bodies, as well as him having had interracial relations of his own. It seems that to Vivaldo, interracial sex is only okay as long as it occurs between a white man and a black woman. This double standard of Vivaldo in particular, and white liberals in

¹⁹⁴ Baldwin, *Another Country*, p. 33, my emphasis.

¹⁹⁵ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone.", p. 20

¹⁹⁶ Baldwin, *Another Country*. p. 135

general, is in its self-satisfied and condescending attitude, perhaps just as problematic as outright racism.

Vivaldo goes on to express concern about Rufus' and Leona's relationship. Without explicitly addressing the reason he is worried about them, he subtly tries to warn Rufus that this might not be a good idea: "I hope you know what you're doing, baby. I know it's none of my business, but –[...] 'Trouble is, I feel too paternal toward you, you son of a bitch.' 'That's the trouble with all you white bastards.'"¹⁹⁷. Aanerud notes that paternalism had by the 1960s "a well-established history in the interactions between white and blacks"¹⁹⁸. By making Vivaldo quite literally declaring himself "feeling paternal" towards Rufus, he is clearly identified in the text as an example of a white liberal.

At the end of the relationship between Rufus and Leona, Vivaldo starts to reflect more about how differently people treat him and Rufus: "A policeman passed them, giving them a look. Vivaldo felt a chill go through Leona's body. [...] He felt what the policeman might say and do if he had been Rufus, walking here with his arm around Leona."¹⁹⁹ He starts to realise that his relationship with Rufus was driven out of the same need that had sent him to Harlem in his youth, to "snatch his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire"²⁰⁰. Later he reflects that this need was just driven out of "liberal, even revolutionary sentiments", and that Rufus knew this, but Vivaldo "had refused to see it, for he had insisted that he and Rufus were equals."²⁰¹ But this insistence, he comes to realize, was not true, because "Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black."²⁰² However, although Vivaldo becomes more consciously aware of the privilege he enjoys, at least more so than David and Leona, he still expects to be given credit for this awareness, while not really confronting his own prejudice or how he is complicit in white innocence. It is not until Vivaldo starts a relationship with Rufus' sister, Ida, that he is forced to truly confront and address his own privilege and white innocence.

¹⁹⁷ Baldwin., p. 36

¹⁹⁸ Aanerud, "Now More Than Ever: James Baldwin and the Critique of White Liberalism.", p.61

¹⁹⁹ Baldwin, *Another Country.*, p. 66

²⁰⁰ Baldwin. p. 135

²⁰¹ Baldwin., p. 136

²⁰² Baldwin.

Ida Scott, challenging the stereotype of the “angry black woman”

Ida Scott is a unique character with regards to the two novels *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*: she is one of only two black characters, and the only black woman. Her perspective is quite different from most of the other characters, and she is not afraid of letting her feelings get known or to express her disdain for how others behave. In relation to Baldwin's fiction, Schlosser writes that he “takes up [...] Socrates in his original key by articulating and undertaking a practice of examination, the interrogation of self and world to recognize the delusions and blindness that contribute to persist structures of oppression”²⁰³ While Schlosser is referring to Baldwin the author, I will argue that it is the character of Ida who takes on this “Socratic” role of *Another Country*: the character who forces other to recognize their own delusions and blindness.

Ida is introduced in the text briefly by Vivaldo, when he tells Rufus he has spoken with her, and that she is worried about him. We first meet her in person when she shows up at the apartment of Richard and Cass, Vivaldo and Rufus's upper middle-class white friends. She has agreed to meet Vivaldo there as they all try to find out where Rufus might be. As soon as she enters the apartment, the atmosphere thickens, “in a silence that began to stiffen like the beaten white of an egg.”²⁰⁴ Although the others might feel uncomfortable because Rufus is missing, and Ida is worried about him, there are several layers here: Ida is very visibly the only black person in the room. Her brother is missing, after a failed relationship with a white woman, and his supposed friends, gathered in this room, all failed to help him. Vivaldo, in particular, seems to feel somewhat guilty over not having done more for Rufus, sounding “helpless and close to tears”²⁰⁵, but none of them are actively taking any responsibility for the hopeless situation Rufus ended up in. Richard asks her if she has contacted the police, which Ida confirms but goes on to say she was met with racial prejudice:

‘They said it happens all the time – coloured men running off from their families. They said they’d try to find him. But they don’t care. They don’t care what happens – to a black man!’
‘Oh, well, now,’ cried Richard, his face red, ‘is that fair? I mean, hell, I’m sure they’ll look for him just like they look for any other citizen of this city.’ She looked at him. ‘How would you

²⁰³ Schlosser, “Socrates in a Different Key.”

²⁰⁴ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 103

²⁰⁵ Baldwin., p. 105

know? I *do* know – know what I’m talking about. I say they don’t care – and they *don’t* care.’
‘I don’t think you should look at it like that.’²⁰⁶

Richard voices the typical white innocence of believing there is no such thing as differential racial treatment by the police, and he tries to dismiss Ida’s concerns as unfounded because they make him uncomfortable. Ida is outspoken and she holds the white characters around her responsible for their prejudices, which might cause them to be thinking of her in the way of the negative stereotype of an “angry black woman”. J. Celeste Walley-Jean argues that the “angry black woman” stereotype has its roots in the “sapphire”-stereotype, which “originated with the character Sapphire on the 1940s and 1950s Amos ’n’ Andy radio and television shows (West 2008). This character was depicted as hostile and nagging, and her primary goal was to castigate her African American husband”²⁰⁷, and created an image which later evolved into the “angry black woman”-stereotype. This stereotype, Walley-Jean argues, “arises from this foundation of negative images and the position of subordination of African American women that seeks to restrain their expression of anger by negatively labelling it.”²⁰⁸ By reducing outspoken or angry African American women to stereotypes, a centuries-long system of oppression is being upheld. It also takes away the agency of the woman in question, allowing others not to take her seriously and to wave away what she is saying as irrelevant or unimportant. Nevertheless, Ida is the one character who seems the most perceptive and honest about both others and herself.

In his relationship with Ida, Vivaldo continuously shows his liberal white innocence when she confronts him with realities of racial injustices and differential treatment. She continues to be angry about Rufus’ death, blaming both Leona and Vivaldo for what happened to him:

‘You’re never going to forgive me, are you? For your brother’s death.’ [...] ‘I never said he was a saint. But I’m black too, and I know how white people treat black boys and girls. They think you’re something for them to wipe their pricks on.’²⁰⁹

Ida points out how black bodies have been reduced to objects for the sexual gratification of white Americans like Vivaldo, who indeed previously in the novel have admitted to visiting black prostitutes. For all his insistence that he loves her, Vivaldo still thinks of Ida in terms of

²⁰⁶ Baldwin., p. 105

²⁰⁷ Walley-Jean, “Debunking the Myth of the ‘Angry Black Woman.’”

²⁰⁸ Walley-Jean.

²⁰⁹ Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 318

exotification, describing making love to her in correspondingly exoticizing images, as “travelling up a savage, jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous, dripping foliage.”²¹⁰ These images, conjuring the words “black” and “dangerous” into Vivaldo’s mind, echo his earlier sentiment that “Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black”. He continuously comes back to thoughts of her being with other men, and of his own visits to black prostitutes, seemingly unable to separate his love for her with his ingrained attitude towards black women as sexually promiscuous and available. He, too, fears that Ida is a woman like those in Baldwin’s “Preservation of Innocence” described as “the incarnation of sexual evil, the smiler with the knife”²¹¹ who is going to betray his masculine innocence. In his case, this masculine innocence is intertwined with a racial prejudice which is the result of his own white innocence, which views black women as different and less “sexually pure” than white women, not taking into account the historical reasons for why it is black women are viewed this way.

Despite Vivaldo’s shortcomings, he does try to enter an honest relationship with Ida. He makes attempts at trying to unearth the truth of what she is saying to him, even if he does not always succeed. He thinks back on a fight they had, where Ida told him: “*Oh. All you white boys make me sick. You want to find out what’s happening, baby, all you go to do is pay your dues! Was there, in all that rage, a plea?*”²¹² Vivaldo grasps that there is more to what Ida says than just anger. They come to care deeply for each other, but they both become weary of how they are perceived by the world around them, as well as the fighting that occurs when they are not able to find common ground. Rather than constantly addressing their differences and the obstacles between them, Vivaldo comes to find that they “buried their disputes in silence, in the mined field. It seemed better than finding themselves hoarse, embittered, gasping, and more than ever alone.”²¹³ Rather than be caught up in the destructive “web of lust and fury” that claimed both Rufus and Leona, David and Giovanni, Ida and Vivaldo choose to stay together in a forced silence. It is, after all, better than the alternative – to go under, and to end up alone. Unfortunately, Ida and Vivaldo cannot escape the reality of their hindrances. They are living in a world where they are “surrounded by blood and treachery”²¹⁴. They cannot escape being black and being white, and Ida does not really believe in their

²¹⁰ Baldwin., p. 177

²¹¹ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 598

²¹² Baldwin, *Another Country.*, p. 273, italics in original

²¹³ Baldwin., p. 315

²¹⁴ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 598

power to overcome this, which finally sends Vivaldo into a rage when his innocence is questioned:

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

‘It does,’ he said, ‘for me.’

‘That,’ she said ‘is because you’re white.’

He felt, suddenly, that he was going to scream, right there in the crowded streets, or close his heavy fingers around her neck. The lights of the movie theatre wavered around him, and the sidewalk seemed to tilt. ‘You stop that,’ he said, in a voice which he did not recognize. ‘You stop that. You stop trying to kill me. It’s not my fault I’m white. It’s not my fault you’re black. It’s not my fault he’s dead.’

Over and over, Vivaldo denies his own guilt. He is so angry and frustrated with Ida that he nearly acts out in murderous violence towards her. He cannot see that his focus is entirely on himself; that his momentous frustration stems not from the discrimination and racism that Rufus and Ida experience, but from what he feels are wrongful accusations against himself. If he were to really listen to what Ida is saying, to really understand her, he would have to let go of his innocence – innocence of racial guilt, of not being there for Rufus. But doing so would be “the loss of [his] identity”²¹⁵. Vivaldo, the white liberal, will not accept any feeling of guilt of his own part, because he is, like Baldwin described in “My Dungeon Shook”, “trapped in a history which he does not understand”, even if he knows better, because, as Baldwin writes further in the same essay, “people find it very difficult to act on what they know.”²¹⁶

After the fight, Vivaldo is apologetic, but still seems to feel tired of her constant addressing of the way their skin colour affects their relationship. His responses to her echo the accusations made by the innocents of white America that Baldwin describe in “My Dungeon Shook”:

Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how* you could do it) and where could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, “You exaggerate.”

²¹⁵ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p.295

²¹⁶ Baldwin.

In Vivaldo's mind, Ida exaggerates. He is not able to comprehend her situation, and he does not seem willing to fully accept the reality of what she is telling him. Instead, he feels slighted that she is constantly addressing what he does not understand. What's more, is that he continues to view Ida as sexually promiscuous, accusing her of having an affair with a wealthy producer who promises to further her career as a singer. Both his sexual and racial feeling of innocence is holding him back from really seeing Ida, from really being able to grasp what she is saying. David and Giovanni, Rufus and Leona all had their relationships and lives destroyed as a consequence of not confronting and properly deal with the concept of innocence. Vivaldo's innocence threatens to do the same to him and Ida. The white characters are all either refusing to or not acknowledging their own ignorance, which creates a chasm between them and those that they try to live with. Reading all of these characters as Baldwin's allegories for white and black America, it shows that unless the concept innocence is properly confronted, there is, to Baldwin, no future for reparations. If there is a future to be achieved, America must shed its innocence and instead "accept [each other] with love"²¹⁷. How this is portrayed in the novels, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored the concept of innocence in *Another Country*, pointing out similarities and differences from *Giovanni's Room*. I have compared the character of Rufus to Giovanni from *Giovanni's room*, and both of them to Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas from *Native Son*, who Baldwin criticized as a caricature of black men in "Everybody's Protest Novel". I have also positioned Leona as a mid-century Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, thus further showing the link from Baldwin's critique of these previous important works of race-related literature in America to *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. Rufus and Leona have been shown as another example of a relationship failed – both as a result of Rufus' self-hatred as well as Leona's lack of awareness of the racism and discrimination Rufus experiences. Vivaldo has been presented as a fictional expression of Baldwin's critique of "the white liberal", a white person who identifies as progressive while still not acknowledging his own privilege and complicity of institutional racism. Ida, Vivaldo's lover as well as Rufus' sister, has then been positioned as a Socratic figure in *Another Country*, the character who confronts the other's sense of (white) innocence, as well

²¹⁷ Baldwin.

as a more nuanced presentation of a type of character often dismissed as an “angry black woman”. The discussion related to American masculinity and sexual innocence from the previous chapter has been continued in this chapter, as Vivaldo’s anger and suspicions towards Ida mirrored those of Rufus towards Leona. There has also been a discussion on how white innocence leads to an oversexualized view of black bodies, expressed both in the relationship between Rufus and Leona, as well as the one between Ida and Vivaldo.

Chapter Four: Love in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*

This thesis argues that the two central concepts in Baldwin's writing are *love* and *innocence*, and that the way these plays out in his novels, especially *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, can be read as allegorical for Baldwin's vision of a future America. The two previous chapters discussed how the concept of innocence, derived and defined from Baldwin's essay writing, played out in his novels *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. These analyses showed how the innocence of the white characters David, Leona, and Vivaldo destroyed or threatened to destroy their relationships with the black or black-coded characters Giovanni, Rufus, and Ida. By reading these characters as stand-ins for America's white and black population, respectively, it showed that innocence not only threatened to destroy the lives of these characters but was, to Baldwin, the main obstacle for achieving a united America.

The present chapter discusses love in relation to both novels, and does so by conceptualizing love as a causality of innocence: either it does not appear/succeed as Baldwin envisioned it, and the relationship fails, or it *does* appear, and the relationship is given a hope of reconciliation. Love is "the key"²¹⁸ which will dispense of innocence, and the way it functions is to dispel innocence's negative effects. Innocence has been thoroughly covered in chapters two and three, and a too extensive covering of the concept of love would result in much repetition from these previous chapters.

The following discussion will look at why love's reconciliatory power fails in David and Giovanni's, as well as Rufus and Leona's relationships. It will then examine how love creates a hope for a better future in the case of Ida and Vivaldo. This hope for a better future becomes not only the hope for Ida and Vivaldo, but is Baldwin's way of showing how "we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, [to] make America what America must become."²¹⁹, in other words: a hope for a new America with a more conciliatory relationship between black and white

²¹⁸ Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue.*, p. 35

²¹⁹ Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook.", p. 294

Americans. David and Giovanni, Rufus and Leona are all “trapped in the web of lust and fury”, a racially divided America. They become warnings against the danger of what happens when innocence makes one unable to love. It is Ida and Vivaldo who, through love, have a chance of being able to create “America what America must become” – to create, indeed, another country.

“Lovelessness” and sensual disconnect

Baldwin’s understanding of love is discussed in more detail in chapter one, but the main point of argument is that love is the force through which real growth and understanding can be achieved. The concept of white innocence in Baldwin is informed both by the refusal to acknowledge historical white supremacy and oppression of black Americans, as well as the misinformed notion of sexual purity and “the toxic ideal of American masculinity”²²⁰ described in his “Preservation of Innocence” as “that mindless monster, the tough guy [...] whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals”.²²¹ This toxic masculinity we saw expressed in David’s refusal to acknowledge himself as who he truly is, in Rufus’ violence towards Leona and in Vivaldo’s objectification of black women. Their skewed view of their own identity as well as their struggles with sexuality spring out of a white innocence that demands sexual purity and bodily disconnection from sensual experience.

Sean Kim Butorac’s article “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love” describes how a racist American society has created a “lovelessness among black people – the inability to love that arises from the self-destructive tendencies of hatred”²²², as well as a white lovelessness that “arises from the unexamined lives of those who profess their racial innocence, and this historical detachment produces an embodied, sensual disconnect”²²³. Baldwin himself felt that sensuality was something that white Americans had lost, because “[White Americans] are terrified of sensuality and do not any longer understand it. The word ‘sensual’ is not intended to bring to mind dusky maidens or priapic black studs.”²²⁴ Baldwin here draws a link between white notions of sexual innocence and fear of as well as objectification of black bodies as

²²⁰ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

²²¹ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence.”, p. 597.

²²² Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

²²³ Butorac.

²²⁴ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”, p. 311

perceived dangerous sexual stereotypes. But this, he argues, is not what true sensuality is, but rather that “[t]o be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”²²⁵ Black Americans have been able to maintain their sense of sensuality *because* of all the terrible suffering caused by generations of slavery. What Baldwin found important was that this sensuality, this “force of life” has to be felt and known by everybody if the divide between black and white Americans is to be overcome. As he put it in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni,

Just because white people say they’re white, we’re not obliged to believe it. [...] We have to make our own definitions and begin to rule the world that way because kids white and black cannot use what they have been given. [...] And we [black Americans] have, out of a terrifying suffering, a certain sense of life, which everybody needs. And that’s morality for me. [...] Anyways, it’s a very mysterious endeavor, isn’t it. And the key is love.²²⁶

Self-examination and the reclaiming of sensual, bodily connections, then, becomes central to dispel America’s white innocence and move towards reparations in Baldwin’s writing, and the key to achieving this is love. Butorac says that “Love prepares white Americans to accept their responsibility for America’s racial nightmare, and to sacrifice privileges that were never their rightful inheritance.”²²⁷ This must be done through a combination of acceptance, forgiveness and sensual experience, as well as self-examination, to overcome the complexity and difficulty that is human life, and to overcome the wounds and horrors of the past. Baldwin writes in his essay “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” that black Americans should not have to offer to accept white Americans with forgiveness, but that they should offer to “accept them with love”.²²⁸ Unless both black and white Americans are willing to act “like lovers” towards each other, they will all be trapped in the “web of lust and fury”²²⁹ described in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” – a picture of a hopeless future for American society. Instead, Butorac says, it is important to “act like lovers” because “loving another person alters our perception of and relationship to the world in ways that opens us to the possibility of change.”²³⁰ Only by experiencing love as both a sensual, bodily experience, as well as an emotional one, the

²²⁵ Baldwin., italics in original.

²²⁶ Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue.*, p. 34-35

²²⁷ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

²²⁸ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p.293.

²²⁹ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”, p. 18.

²³⁰ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

American people will have the ability to let go of (white) innocence and to truly try to see and understand each other. To Baldwin, it is only by truly understanding and seeing each other as whole, complex human beings, and by doing so with love, that there will be a chance for a better future.

David and Giovanni, Rufus and Leona – “hearts growing cold with the death of love”²³¹

Throughout *Giovanni's Room*, main character David is preoccupied with keeping himself clean, to avoid the “stink of love”²³². His preoccupation with metaphorical cleanliness relates to his whiteness both in the direct link between white as cleanliness and purity, as well as American ideals of sexual, unsullied purity. David, through his denial of his own homosexuality, both evades self-examination and experiences an enormous sensual disconnect. Because of his internalized self-hatred, David is unable to truly achieve sexual and emotional intimacy. He keeps himself removed from the situation, which again makes him unable to love. He thinks of Giovanni:

Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought it doesn't matter, it is only the body, it will soon be over. When it was over I lay in the dark and listened to his breathing and dreamed of the touch of hands, of Giovanni's hands, hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again.²³³

David must disassociate from the physical act of love when it happens, thinking “it is only the body” to somehow keep his mind and his body two separate things. But by distancing himself emotionally, waiting for the act of love to be over, he becomes, as Butorac says, unable to partake in “the physical intimacy, that sense of place each of us finds in each another's arms, that liberates us.”²³⁴ His feelings of shame, connected to his need to keep his innocence, comes down like a fence between him and his lover. Still, he lies awake after, thinking of how Giovanni's hands “have the power to crush me and make me whole again”, seemingly realising the transformative power love could have upon him if only he would let himself *be* loved and love in return. Unfortunately, David is, as described in detail in chapter two, unwilling to let go of his perceived innocence, and keeps Giovanni at arms' length. One could

²³¹ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*., p. 125

²³² Baldwin., p. 125

²³³ Baldwin., p. 79

²³⁴ Butorac, “Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love.”

argue that this sensual disconnect stems mainly from David's inability to reconcile himself with his own sexual orientation, but this disconnect is just as prevalent in his heterosexual encounters. When he sleeps with Sue, another American ex-patriate, in a misguided attempt to prove his own heterosexuality to himself, he "approached [her] as though she were a job of work"²³⁵, and he is "terribly aware of the small of my back and the cold sweat there"²³⁶. Cold sweat conjures up images of sickness and fear, not passion and excitement. After they are done, he thinks that he "hated her and [himself]"²³⁷, removing himself further from love and into another emotional extreme, hate. After he has left Giovanni and is back with Hella, he finds "her body uninteresting, her presence grating."²³⁸ Her underclothes seem "unaesthetic and unclean", her body "grotesque", and when they sleep together, he now "began to feel [he] would never get out alive".²³⁹ David has become so far removed from sensual experience and the physical act of love that he now seems unable to form any meaningful connection at all, instead he only feels disgusted by the other person. He is trapped in what Butorac described as the state of white "lovelessness [that] arises from unexamined lives"²⁴⁰, and cannot achieve a higher understanding of either himself or anybody else.

In the case of Rufus and Leona, their attempt at love is destroyed as they fall into a pattern of violence and destruction, fuelled by Rufus' growing insecurity and hatred. Rufus wants to love Leona, but their relationship sharply brings into focus how little acceptance there is in American society for an interracial couple, and how little worth he has in that society as a black man. The treatment he is subjected to by an unforgiving, racist society causes him to question his abilities as a man and as a human being. Instead of being able to love Leona he ends up hating her because he hates himself, and he hates himself because that is what he has been taught by society to do. What has happened to Rufus can be compared to Baldwin's description of black Americans in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni. Here he said that black Americans "ha[ve] become a collaborator, an accomplice of [their] own murderers, because [they] believe the same thing that [white Americans] do. [White Americans] think it's important to be white and [black Americans] thinks it's important to be white; [white Americans] think that it's a shame to be black and [black Americans] thinks it's

²³⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*. p. 89

²³⁶ Baldwin.

²³⁷ Baldwin.

²³⁸ Baldwin., p. 139.

²³⁹ Baldwin., p. 140

²⁴⁰ Butorac, "Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love."

a shame to be black.”²⁴¹ Rufus experiences a sensual disconnect from Leona because he thinks that she only views him as a “priapic black stud”²⁴² whom she imposes her sexual fantasies on. Feeling that all he can ever be in her eyes is what white Americans fear black men are, “violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by”²⁴³, he becomes exactly that:

Many times [...] he had, suddenly, without knowing that he was going to, thrown the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, pinned her against a table or a wall; she beat at him, weakly, moaning, unutterably abject; he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her the most. It was not love he felt during these acts of love: drained and shaking, utterly unsatisfied, he fled from the raped white woman and into the bars. In these bars no one applauded his triumph or condemned his guilt.

Lovemaking is turned into rape, once again mirroring Rufus to Bigger Thomas from *Native Son*, who commits rape and murder against a white woman in that novel’s first act. There is no room for love in this violent and terrifying relationship; Leona’s innocence, and white American innocence, has reduced Rufus to the monster he feels that white Americans have always suspected him to be. But becoming the monster has no joy for him; he only feels drained and dissatisfied. No one is offering him support nor judgement, which only contributes to him feeling small and insignificant.

Giovanni also feels small and insignificant because of the treatment he gets from David. He finally confronts David with his innocence, obsession with purity and inability to love. In his anguish and despair Giovanni describes David in terms that evoke the whole of the fraught relationship between black and white America, in a passage so powerful and relevant that I quote it in full:

‘You do not,’ cried Giovanni, sitting up, ‘love anyone! You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror – you are just like a little virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe *diamonds* down there between your legs! You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody *touch* it – man *or* woman. 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.’ He grasped

²⁴¹ Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue.*, p. 17

²⁴² Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”, p. 311

²⁴³ Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone.”, p. 22

me by the collar, wrestling and caressing at once, fluid and iron at once: saliva spraying from his lips and his eyes full of tears, but with the bones of his face showing and the muscles leaping in his arms and neck. ‘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. Look, *look* what you have done to me. Do you think you could have done this if I did not love you? Is *this* what you should do to love?’²⁴⁴

David, the representative of white America, “loves his purity”, and does not want to “stink”. He thinks himself clean and pure, free of guilt, like white America in Baldwin’s description thinks itself: pure and free of the guilt of white supremacy, centuries of racism and atrocities committed against black America. Giovanni lashes out at him in a furious duality of rage and love, of violence and tenderness, “wrestling and caressing at once”, he is caught in the “web of lust and fury” that Baldwin called the struggle between black and white Americans. The “bones of his face” evokes thought of death, foreshadowing both Giovanni’s own death as well as, perhaps, the death of a successful relationship between him and David. And while Giovanni is speaking of himself, his lament to David could just as well be spoken by Rufus, directed to Leona. What *he* has become – violent, angry, and full of self-hate, is because of her. She is immoral and she has destroyed him because he loved her.

At the end of *Giovanni’s Room*, David himself thinks that “[m]uch has been written of love turning to hatred, of the heart growing cold with the death of love. It is a remarkable process. It is far more terrible than anything I have ever read about it, more terrible than anything I will ever be able to say.”²⁴⁵ If we are to read the “love turning to hatred” between Giovanni and David, and Rufus and Leona as an allegory for black and white Americans, then the resulting tragedies of their lives are absolutely, as David says, “far more terrible than anything I have ever read about, more terrible than anything I will ever be able to say”. The fate Baldwin assigns these characters becomes a sombre and desolate premonition of what the future of America will look like unless white and black Americans work together, like Baldwin calls for in “My Dungeon Shook”, to “accept [each other] with love.”²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, p. 125

²⁴⁵ Baldwin., p. 139

²⁴⁶ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook.”, p. 292

Ida and Vivaldo, towards Bethlehem

While Ida and Vivaldo's relationship is fraught with the same problems of white innocence and toxic masculinity as Rufus and Leona, David and Giovanni's relationships, they are throughout the novels the one couple who are trying to have a conversation with each other. Vivaldo's final breakthrough, his shedding of his innocence, so to speak, is achieved after a long and harrowing self-search, as well as a sexual experience which has the effect of finally releasing him from the confines of destructive white innocence and American ideals of masculinity. Frustrated and consumed with thoughts of Ida's infidelity, Vivaldo ends up in the apartment of his friend Eric, where he gets drunk and falls asleep. Upon waking up, he and Eric have a sexual encounter, which acts as a breakthrough for Vivaldo. It makes him situate himself as Ida, and as Rufus:

He remembered how Ida, at the unbearable moment, threw back her head and trashed and bared her teeth. And she called his name. And Rufus? Had he murmured at last, in a strange voice, as he now heard himself murmur, *Oh, Eric. Eric*. What was that fury like?²⁴⁷

When he has sexual experience where he is not in the traditional position as the "man", the dominant one, Vivaldo is finally able to put himself in Ida's position, to see the world from not only hers, but also Rufus' point of view. His same-sex encounter with Eric frees him from his rigid perspective of masculinity and whiteness. Josep Armengol writes that

Giovanni's Room suggests a parallel between the heterosexual and white (with its metaphorical associations with light, cleanness, purity, rationality, transparency, goodness, *innocence*, etc.), on the one hand, and the homosexual and black (with its symbolic meanings of darkness, dirt, sin, emotionality, obscurity, evil, guilt, and so on), on the other, a parallel that Baldwin simultaneously re-inscribes and problematizes.²⁴⁸

Armengol's text is primarily looking to "race-ing Baldwin's early fiction"²⁴⁹, in particular *Giovanni's Room*, as well as arguing that "race is deflected onto sexuality with the result that whiteness is transvalued as heterosexuality, just as homosexuality becomes associated with blackness, both literally and metaphorically".²⁵⁰ Armengol's reading is more concerned with imagery of light/dark, as well as doing a more thorough examination of expressions of race and sexuality in *Giovanni's Room* than this thesis; he also does not concern himself directly

²⁴⁷ Baldwin, *Another Country*. p. 378, italics in original.

²⁴⁸ Armengol, "In the Dark Room.", italics mine

²⁴⁹ Armengol.

²⁵⁰ Armengol.

with *Another Country* or its characters. This paper is also looking for a race-related reading of *Giovanni's Room*, but does so as a part of a reading of that novel alongside *Another Country*, as novels reflecting Baldwin's views on American society. However, the idea of re-inscribing blackness and homosexuality by Baldwin can be purposed for my reading as well, because it is when Vivaldo aligns himself as such - as the other person - that he finally becomes ready to try to be a better man. By making Vivaldo have a same-sex experience with Eric, Baldwin situates Vivaldo in the maligned position of the homosexual, which again is a parallel to blackness. The parallel allows for Vivaldo's breakthrough in understanding Ida, as well as Rufus. He tries to imagine the world seen from a different perspective and comes to the conclusion that he has to accept Ida's anger and try to understand her pain. He tells Eric,

'I think that perhaps you can begin to *become* admirable if, when you're hurt, you don't try to pay back.' He looked at Eric and put one hand on the back of Eric's neck. 'Do you know what I mean? Perhaps if you can accept the pain that almost kills you, you can use it, you can become better.'

Eric watched him, smiling a strange half-smile, with his face full of love and pain. 'That's very hard to do.' 'One's got to *try*.'²⁵¹

His words of "pain that almost kills you" calls to mind Rufus' thoughts of himself and Leona, a relationship that "hurt so badly, went so deep, and changed the world forever"²⁵², and Baldwin's words in "Many Thousands Gone", of the relationship between black and white Americans containing "the force and anguish and terror of love".²⁵³ Vivaldo realises that to really love Ida, he must let go of his pride and his innocence. He realises that love is not easy; it is difficult, and it is full of terror and hurt. But because he loves Ida, he is willing to accept what David Leeming calls, in his essay on Baldwin and love, "the stink of love, the hard work of love"²⁵⁴. It is what makes him ready to meet her and for the first time, truly listen to what she has to say. Vivaldo's talk of becoming admirable by not trying to pay someone back, even if they hurt you, is referring to himself. But it also applies to Ida. The death of her brother Rufus, and the resulting anger and rage towards racist society in general, and Vivaldo as a white man in particular, has been consuming Ida throughout their relationship. It is Ida's love for *him* that has kept her in the relationship for as long as she has been, despite all the rage she

²⁵¹ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*., p. 382-383, italics in original

²⁵² Baldwin, *Another Country*., p. 58

²⁵³ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone.", p. 32

²⁵⁴ Leeming, "James Baldwin."

feels, over his innocence, over Rufus's terrible fate. When Vivaldo comes home, she tells him this, though in a conflicted manner:

‘Are you trying to tell me – without my having to ask you or anything – that you love me?’
‘Am I? I guess I am.’ Then she dropped the knife and sat perfectly still, looking down, the fingers of one hand drumming on the table. Then she clasped her hands, the fingers of one hand playing with the ruby-eyed snake ring, slipping it half-off, slipping it on.²⁵⁵

The ruby-eyed snake ring was a present from Rufus, and it is a symbol of him, as well as a reminder of his death and Ida's pain and anger. She slips it half-off and on again, a symbol of how she is torn between holding on to her anger towards Vivaldo and letting go of her rage and accept his love, as well as accepting *him* with love. She starts to tell Vivaldo about how Rufus' death changed her, and how it made her want revenge upon those she saw as responsible for what happened to him. Ida had seen Rufus as her protector, the one to get her out of her neighbourhood. When he died, she “felt that I'd been robbed. And I *had* been robbed – of the only hope I had. By a group of people too cowardly to even know what they had done.”²⁵⁶ She became set on finding a way of getting out of growing old in the poor black community where she grew up by any means necessary, and so she entered into an affair with wealthy white producer Ellis. As she tells Vivaldo about this affair, she breaks down in tears, describing how having sex with him made her feel “pumped full of – I don't know what, not poison exactly, but dirt, *waste*, filth, and I'd never be able to get it out of me, never be able to get that stink out of me.”²⁵⁷ Her words echo that of Giovanni to David, but Ida feels dirty and filthy because she *does* love Vivaldo, and *doesn't* love Ellis, so being with Ellis makes her feel used and wrong in comparison. Vivaldo is shocked by her confession, but he helps her up and makes her coffee while she goes into the bathroom. She comes back out, and tells him, for the first time, that she loves him. Feeling hurt and angry, Vivaldo at first falters – “He wanted to say, *I love you*, but the words would not come.” He looks down into his coffee,

noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not 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.

Noting this Vivaldo seems to be subconsciously letting go of the reductive labels of black and white, calling back to what Baldwin said in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni that “Just

²⁵⁵ Baldwin, *Another Country*, p. 402

²⁵⁶ Baldwin., p. 407, italics in original

²⁵⁷ Baldwin., p. 413.

because white people say they're white, we're not obliged to believe it.". Vivaldo is not obliged any more to believe that he is white and Ida is black.

'Vivaldo,' she said, wearily, 'just one thing. I don't want you to be *understanding*. I don't want you to be kind, okay?' [...] 'Promise me that.' 'I promise you that', he said. And then, furiously, 'You seem to forget that I love you.' They stared at each other. 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. She clung to him; with a sigh she buried her face in his chest. There was nothing erotic in it; they were like two weary children. And it was she who was comforting him. 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.²⁵⁸

Vivaldo is finally letting go, and is, like Baldwin called for in "My Dungeon Shook", "accepting [Ida] with love". She is accepting him in return, freeing him of his innocence, which she strokes out of him. Their embrace is not erotic, but one of comfort, which further amplifies that they are freed from the "web of lust and fury" that trapped David, Giovanni, Rufus and Leona. Instead they are "like two weary children", given a new chance for a new world. Throughout the evening, the rain pours down mercilessly. But when their fighting is over, and Ida is asleep, Vivaldo looks out the window and sees that "the rain had ceased, in the black-blue sky a few stars were scattered, and the wind roughly jostled the clouds along."²⁵⁹ It is almost inelegantly obvious, but there is also no mistaking its meaning: the storm has passed, and there are a few glimmers of hope. Ida and Vivaldo, in letting go of their innocence, acting as lovers and accepting each other with love.

Chapter summary

This last chapter has discussed the concept of love as a direct consequence of innocence, either succeeding or failing to overcome the obstacles made by innocence to achieve an understanding and hope for a better future. It has shown how in the cases of David and Giovanni, and Rufus and Leona, both couples are unable to love each other and thus their relationships end in tragedy. Their relationships fail, because they are unable to overcome Baldwin's concept of a destructive innocence through the power of love. These relationships

²⁵⁸ Baldwin. p. 420, italics mine

²⁵⁹ Baldwin. p. 421

become Baldwin's warnings on how American society will fail in reconciliation and a better future. The chapter then argues for love as the redeeming factor in the relationship between Ida and Vivaldo, by showing that love make these two characters able to cut through their tangled web of mistrust, racial discrimination, and notions of sexual innocence and come together in a deeper understanding of both themselves and each other. As this thesis purposes Ida and Vivaldo as representatives for white and black America, they also became Baldwin's representatives for Americans who are able to reach each other and create a new future together. Ida and Vivaldo become Baldwin's examples in giving black and white Americans a hope for a new and better society, and another country.

Conclusion

And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down in the pit together.²⁶⁰

The title for this thesis, “Unraveling the web of lust and fury”, comes from James Baldwin’s singeing critique of the protest novel genre, the essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel”. The potent imagery he delivers in the epigraph can also, however, work as an effective metaphor for what this thesis imagines as Baldwin’s vision of both a contemporary and a future America: this is one where black and white Americans end up destroying each other in the tangled web of its own history. On the basis of his essays and interviews, this thesis has chosen to read Baldwin’s view of the future of America to be that unless black and white Americans are able to, like lovers, come together to create a better and different future, they will end up destroying each other. With reference to Baldwin’s essays, I have singled out two concepts, love and innocence, as central to understanding Baldwin’s take on the relationship between black and white America.

While a respected figure on the issues of racism in America in his own time, James Baldwin was throughout his life and his writing career a unique and sometimes difficult voice for his contemporaries to deal with. He was never afraid to be controversial, although what made him controversial was his steadfast commitment to never taking the easy option; to never generalize, reduce or dismiss those around him; never expect anybody to be either saints, martyrs, heroes or villains, but to truly see people as they were: flawed, complex, *human*. While fully aware of the enormous wounds left on American society by its history of slavery and racism, Baldwin still stressed, as shown in my analysis of his essays and interviews, that the way to a new and better America was not through hate, but through love. Baldwin’s approach to understanding the human condition, as well as himself defying easy categorization, made him something of an anomaly in his own time. He was the subject of skepticism and at times scathing criticism from other voices in the Civil Rights Movement, such as Eldridge Cleaver, both because of his homosexuality as well as his inclusion of white characters and queer relationships in his fiction writing. Today, however, we can see that he

²⁶⁰ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” p. 18

was an early proponent for what we today call intersectionality – “the theory that the overlap of various social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality and class, contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual”²⁶¹. As this theoretical approach gains more and more traction as a way of understanding how to overcome the difficulties of a multifaceted modern society, Baldwin’s message of understanding through love seems more relevant than ever. With this thesis I have wanted to show that the biggest obstacle to Baldwin’s approach of love was however white Americans’ self-perceived innocence; the idea that they themselves were the heroes of their own history, free of repercussions from the atrocities committed against black Americans. This innocence would also manifest itself in an overly sanitized and hetero-normative view of sexuality and masculinity, all of which would contribute to continue a society which would eventually end in a “web of lust and fury”²⁶².

The introduction to this thesis considered the continued relevance of James Baldwin’s writing, especially with regards to American society and to relations between black and white Americans. While the characters in these novels are very different in terms of gender, identity, sexuality and class, the problems they face are similar. By showing these similarities, this thesis shows the universality of Baldwin’s writing, as well as point to the fact that overcoming the problems of racism and destructive American ideals of innocence in Baldwin’s understanding, is a universal issue. There are several indications that American society today is moving towards a future where people are growing further apart, rather than closer together. A more polarized political climate, as well as a flourishing of echo chambers across the internet, nourishes a move towards a culture and society where people are less interested in trying to understand each other and more interested in protecting what they see as their own interests. At the same time, the effects and after-effects of centuries of institutionalized racism and white supremacy in America have enormous and wide-reaching consequences that are still on-going. Baldwin wrote to his nephew James in 1963 that white Americans, his countrymen, had caused him “to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described by us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago”²⁶³. While living conditions for most black Americans will perhaps have improved somewhat

²⁶¹ “Definition of Intersectionality | Dictionary.Com.”

²⁶² Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” p.18

²⁶³ Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook”, p. 292.

since then, the disparity in quality of life for black and white Americans are still evident today.

As this thesis is being written, the world is still dealing with the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. The U.S. has been hit hard, but as the numbers of the effects of the coronavirus are being tallied up, evidence of the difference in life conditions of black and white Americans are made starkly clear by the disproportional number of black Americans hit hard by the effects of the virus.²⁶⁴ According to the NAACP, African Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites²⁶⁵. Despite making up approximately 32 percent of the population, African Americans and Hispanics compromise 56 percent of the incarcerated people in the U.S. in 2015.²⁶⁶ At the moment of writing this, George Floyd, an unarmed black American, died in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, after being suffocated by a white police officer.²⁶⁷ His tragic death is only one of many other examples of black Americans being targeted by police²⁶⁸, and has sparked a new wave of protests across the U.S. as a response to wide-spread societal racism.²⁶⁹ These grim facts and cases paints a bleak picture of the future of America. When there is evidence that tensions between black and white Americans are growing more fraught rather than easing, there is reason to believe that we need voices like Baldwin's, who urge for understanding and mending of bridges, rather than calling for further segregation and violence.

Baldwin's voice of thoughtful, nuanced reflection is an extremely useful addition to the increasingly toxic rhetorical climate of American politics, and to the ongoing debate about racial injustices in America today. While never afraid to point out the extreme injustices and horrific trauma brought upon black Americans, Baldwin also expressed in his writing that unless there was an effort to move forward through understanding and love, America as a country would never achieve neither its maturity nor its identity. I will, therefore, leave the last words of this thesis to James Baldwin himself, who put it more eloquently than I could ever dream to achieve:

²⁶⁴ Taylor, "The Black Plague."

²⁶⁵ "NAACP | Criminal Justice Fact Sheet."

²⁶⁶ "NAACP | Criminal Justice Fact Sheet."

²⁶⁷ "George Floyd Death."

²⁶⁸ Evelyn, "FBI Investigates Death of Black Man after Footage Shows Officer Kneeling on His Neck."

²⁶⁹ CNN, "George Floyd's Death Sparked Heated Protests across US as Many Call for Charges against Officers."

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands, we have no right to assume otherwise. If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfilment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song from a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Baldwin, "Down at the Cross.", p. 347, italics in original.

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