

James Baldwin:

Dealing with the American Double Minority

BA Thesis English Language and Culture
Utrecht University

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Date: April 23, 2012

People invent categories in order to feel safe.

White people invented black people to give white people identity and straight cats invented faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves.

~James Baldwin

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1 Introduction

“People who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are” (134). This claim made by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* is characteristic for the man he was, and for the tone of his literary works. Baldwin’s struggles with sexual and racial identity in the novels *Giovanni’s Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* will be the focus of this BA thesis. Though one novel focuses on racial identity and the other on queer identity, both novels address struggles relating to identity. Social standards of society and prejudice towards the minorities are present in both books, as well as family influence on identity. The novels deal with two minority groups Baldwin was a part of: the gay community and the black community. *Giovanni’s Room* focuses on a man struggling with his queer identity, whereas *If Beale Street Could Talk* describes the life of a black woman whose black husband is being discriminated against. Both novels reflect Baldwin’s struggle with identity and intolerance, and both novels are stories of love. Moreover, they are stories of love without a happy ending. As Louis H. Pratt claims, “in Baldwin’s novels, love is often extended, frequently denied, seldom fulfilled” (80). The reason that love is not fulfilled in his novels is because love cannot survive in the corrupted atmosphere that Baldwin creates for his characters. This atmosphere is caused by respectively sexual and racial intolerance, and it is obvious that Baldwin’s own inner pain and disappointment with society filter through in these novels.

Baldwin grew up in New York, but he was so disappointed in American society and its prejudice against minorities that he immigrated to Europe in 1948. His disappointment with American society filters through most of his essays and novels, as do his problems with sexual and racial intolerance in the United States. Identity, both racial and sexual, and its consequences in society, self-acceptance and inner pain are important themes in his essays and novels. In many essays, such as “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) and “Nobody Knows My Name” (1961), Baldwin discusses what it means to be black. He claims that being black meant “that one was never looked at but simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one’s skin caused in other people” (N.A. 1717). Baldwin often focuses on the pain of never being able to escape this black identity. His move to Europe helped him to escape this suffocating racial identity and enabled him to reflect on other parts of his identity. In his early essays “Stranger in the Village”, “A Question of Identity”, “Encounter on the Seine: Black meets Brown” and “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American”, which were written when he lived in Paris, he discusses not only his racial identity, but also his identity as an American and American identity in general. In these essays, James Miller argues, Baldwin

“radically revises the concept of citizenship and makes his racial identity a source of cultural strength and critical authority” (52). It enables him to look past his “negro identity,” as Miller puts it, and “embrace a much more emancipated and individual sense of himself as an American” (53).

Scholars agree that one of Baldwin’s leading themes in his fiction as well as non-fiction is the search for, or discovery of, self-identity. Emmanuel S. Nelson argues that almost all main characters, fictional and autobiographical, are “involved in an agonizing quest for self” (27). This claim is supported by Pratt, who states that identity is overtly present in *Giovanni’s Room*, *Sonny’s Blues*, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* and *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. He claims that *If Beale Street Could Talk* is also about the self-realization of two people, though less explicitly than in other novels by Baldwin (Pratt 32-79). Also Kenneth Kinnamon argues that the theme of discovery of identity is present in most of Baldwin’s work, and most successfully in the short novel *Sonny’s Blues* (139). Though the theme of identity is evident in most of Baldwin’s novels, his works usually focus on either racial or sexual identity. Baldwin’s 1962 novel *Another Country* is his only novel dealing with both black power and gay power, and Matt Bell extensively discusses the relationships between racial and sexual identities in his essay “Black ground, gay figure: working through *Another Country*, black power and gay liberation”.

Nelson, Pratt, Bell and Kinnamon are just a few of the scholars who discuss Baldwin and the sexual and racial struggles of the protagonists in his novels. However, these scholars discuss the issues of racial identity, American identity, expatriate identity, and queer identity (Pratt 17) in their own right, but a comparison between the struggles relating these identities is not made. Yet, a comparison between novels that focus on, for example, queer identity and racial identity, which are both minority identities and often subject to prejudice, may give insightful information about Baldwin’s experience with both identities and how he may feel racial and sexual prejudice, as well as society and family in general, might influence these identities. There is a fundamental linkage between oppression of gay and black people, and, therefore, it is interesting to see if this linkage can be found between a novel by Baldwin which focuses on the search for sexual identity, and a novel by Baldwin which focuses on the search for racial identity. Minority groups are similar to each other in that they differ from the majority. However, minority groups differ from each other, too, and struggles relating to minority identities are, therefore, not necessarily similar to each other. They might be, but it is reasonable to assume that different minorities have to deal with different problems. Looking at both gay identity and black identity individually will, I hope, shine a light on how society

and family influence struggles relating these identities. Combining the two minority identities will provide similarities and differences between the two identities and, above all, give a more complete view on the struggles James Baldwin, or someone else who is part of a double minority, may have to endure.

The thesis will start with a theoretical framework that will discuss the American double minority and identity, as well as the influence of society and family on identity. This framework will be used when analyzing identity in *Giovanni's Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Firstly, the role of society on identity in both novels will be discussed. After this, the role of family on identity in both novels will be examined. Finally, the results will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis. Baldwin's views on how society and family influence gay identity and black identity will be addressed and a comparison between *Giovanni's Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and, thus, the two identities, will be made. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on similarities and differences between influences of society and family on the two identities that figure in Baldwin's work, and give a more complete view of the struggles relating the double minority that Baldwin was a part of.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Identity

This thesis focuses on the concept of *identity* in the novels of James Baldwin and before exploring this concept, it is important to define the term. One of the most important features of *identity* is that it is “fluid and dynamic” (Patton 93), meaning that identities can change with time and social situations (Narvaéz e.a. 75). They are in constant development. Identity development is described as “a process involving constant negotiation among different parts of the self, among different times of the self, and among the different settings or systems to which each of us belong” (DeGuir-Gunby e.a. 114). An assessment of different parts of the self, such as religious, racial, sexual, gender and group identities, takes place, and identity development is a continuous “negotiation between these components” (DeGuir-Gunby e.a. 114-115). As the definition of identity development implies, *identity* is subject to internal and external influences. According to Judith Butler, personal actions, like style of clothing, choice of partners and political participation, generate “socially constituted expectations” (Abes, Jones & McEwen) and, hence, create identity. Social identities, like race, gender, sexual orientation and social class, change with “evolving contexts and relationships” (Abes, Jones & McEwen 2). Family, sociocultural settings, social norms, peer culture and present occurrences can be considered contextual influences (Abes, Jones & McEwen 1-3). The contextual influences of society and family will be discussed in this thesis. These contexts were chosen, because they played a big role in the life of James Baldwin. The family difficulties he endured as a child as well as his struggles with American society throughout his life shaped him a certain way (N.A. 1697). Therefore, it is interesting to look at the role of society and family in the life of his protagonists. Both religion and American identity were also contexts of importance in Baldwin’s life. However, these identities are not of any significance in either *Giovanni’s Room* or *If Beale Street Could Talk*, even though some small references to religion and American identity are made. Therefore, this thesis will solely focus on society and family, and their influence on identity in both novels. The following paragraphs will discuss social influence on queer and black identity as well as family influence on queer and black identity. To gain a better insight into what it means to be black and gay in American society, and to get a better understanding of James Baldwin and the minority groups he was a part of, the last paragraph will focus on the American double minority.

2.2 Society Influence on Queer and Black Identity

As discussed in the section above, society has an influence on identity. Queer identity is influenced by society, because mainstream society is heterosexual-oriented. As Beverly Greene states, there is a “presumed superiority of heterosexuality” (270). Heterosexuality is seen as “normal” and societal expectations of how someone should live their life are present. Many countries even have laws that control the sexualities of people and homophobia often limits options for gay and lesbian people to be themselves (Greene 270). Moreover, for men, there are expectations of “what it means to be a man” (Patton 78). According to Lori D. Patton, these expectations have “associated latent hetero-masculine undertones” (78), which can be very difficult for queer men. They are expected to marry a woman and have children, which is not a realistic option for them (Patton 78). The social pressure to follow the heterosexual script and the constant discriminatory often takes an emotional toll of queer people. Their sexuality often becomes a “daily focal point” (Greene 271). Greene claims that queer people often struggle with their sexuality, because they have to accept their differences with mainstream society. She states that first, they “must contend with what society thinks of them” (271). After that “they must contend with how they think of themselves, regardless of what society thinks of them” (271). Finally, they have to “contend with the dissonance of how they think of themselves in response to what society thinks of them” (272). This acceptance process “results in varying degrees of self-love/hate, denial, and acceptance” (Greene 271-272).

Like queer identity, black identity is influenced by society as well. History plays an important role in the development of black identity in the United States. This becomes apparent when looking at the definition of black identity as stated by Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby: “The diverse attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to which an individual comprehends as well as engages in the unique heritage associated with African American cultural practices” (115). W.E.B. du Bois stated in “The Souls of Black Folks” that being black meant that one had to maintain a “double consciousness, by always looking at oneself first through the eyes of others”, namely white society (N.A. 694). The painful history of slavery and suppression of black people in the United States strengthens the significance of black identity in the life of most African Americans (Eggerling-Boeck 29). Vetta L. Sanders-Thompson and Maysa Akbar claim that “individuals of African descent were characterized as subhuman, irresponsible, lazy, and stupid” (1). This stereotype is still present in today’s society. As a result, African American people can be subject to negative macro-societal aspects, such as discrimination, prejudice and racism, which play a significant role in the construction of racial

identity (Eggerling-Boeck 29). People might have a neutral racial identity of themselves, but once someone else sees them as a black person, the neutrality of the racial identity diminishes (Narvaéz e.a. 75). Therefore, social environment influences racial identity. As a result, change of environment might cause an identity shift (Narvaéz e.a. 83).

2.3 Family Influence on Queer and Black Identity

Not only society influences identity. Studies show that family has an influence on both queer and black identity as well. One of the reasons for this is that, as Shadmanghadi Ali claims, “family event is considered by far the most important aspects of people's lives” (52). Queer identity is influenced by family in more than one way. Firstly, children grow up with models for sexual identities that are mainly heterosexual. The most important model for children, next to media, school or peers, is parents. As Beverly Greene states, queer people are raised with “a rationalization system of heterosexual modeling” (268). Parents often have heterosexual expectations of their children, and project these expectations on them. As a result, children have heterosexual expectations of themselves. Hence, “queer people have to begin the process of disengaging the identity-forming influence of heterosexuality before they can confront themselves and come out” (Greene 268). Secondly, parents are not always supportive of gay relationships. Queer people may encounter difficulties and painful situations, because their family rejects them. When they move away from their family, they often explore their queer identity more freely. This might influence their sexual identity in a positive way (Narvaéz 74-77).

Despite the fact that parents have an influence on both queer identity and black identity, this influence is not alike. In contradiction to queer identity, studies by DeGuir-Gunby e.a. show that African American parents contribute to racial identity development of their children (113). As Greene states, “African American family and community have functioned as a necessary protective barrier and survival tool against the racism of the dominant culture” (224). African American culture includes strong family ties and support for all family members, and an important aspect of this culture is racially socializing African American children. Parents teach their children messages that give them “various perspectives on race and racial hierarchies in American society” (DeGuir-Gunby e.a. 115). Different messages are used to racially socialize children. Some examples are “racial/cultural pride, strategies for negotiating discrimination, egalitarian perspectives (e.g. equality) and self-development” (DeGuir-Gunby e.a. 115). This racial socialization teaches young African Americans how to deal with racism and other racial issues in a predominately white society. Moreover, through

these messages, parents stimulate the identity development process of their children and increase their sense of black identity (DeGuir-Gunby e.a.121-128).

2.4 The American Double Minority

James Baldwin was part of two minorities in his life, namely the gay community and the African American community. Hence, being black and gay made him part of the so-called American double minority. Gay, lesbian or bisexual African Americans are often “doubly marginalized” within American society. Mainstream society often views straightness as normal and moral, whereas homosexuality is denigrated as wrong or immoral. Moreover, unchangeable blackness exclude African Americans from the White American norm (Kumashiro 491-492). However, despite their double minority status, people who are part of the American double minority do not necessarily experience racial and sexual identities equal in prominence. Identities interact with each other and with social contexts, and people may experience one of their identities as more important than their other identities. Identities that coalesce around the most prominent identity of a person are referred to as conjunct identities. However, when identities are experienced as two separate entities by a person, a clash between entities occurs. Identities then do not “fit” and are in conflict. These conflicting identities are referred to as disjunct identities (Narvaéz e.a. 73-81). Studies on dual-identity and identity statuses of African American men classified four different identity statuses, namely assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. African American men who strongly identify with their race and have a low sexual identification have an assimilation status. The integration status is given to African American men who have a high sexual identification as well as a high racial identification. When men strongly identify with their sexual identity, but not really with their racial identity, they have a separation status. Finally, men who do not identify with their racial identity or with their sexual identity have a marginalization status (Patton 80). James Baldwin was an advocate for both the gay and the black minority, and he was involved with agendas of both communities. He strongly identified with both his sexual identity and his racial identity, and, thus, the integration status applies to him.

Besides their double minority status in American society, African American queer men may have to face problems within their own community as well. They are sometimes seen as traitors of the community, because they cannot fulfill family responsibilities and obligations, like marry an African American woman and have children. African American men are suppose to be a role model for African American boys, but queer men are not

perceived as capable mentors, because they are “a threat to the endangered masculinity of African American males” (Greene 148-149). As a result, these men “struggle with being respected as a ‘man’ within the community” (Patton 78). Being gay is not a topic that is often discussed within the African American community. The community in general is quite homophobic and anti-gay, and queer African Americans often experience the pressure to remain closeted. Many gay men have never discussed their sexuality with their family. The fact is “simply understood” (Greene 137). As long as they do not reveal their sexuality openly, they are accepted in the community. However, “the absence of the overt acknowledgement of the label *gay*” (Greene 295) is experienced as painful, because gay men feel unsupported by their family in their struggles with their double minority status. The men that did discuss their sexuality with their family describe the first conversation about the subject as traumatic (Greene 138). Nevertheless, as opposed to other racial minority communities, the African American community often “mitigate against outright rejection of gay and lesbian family members despite clear rejection of gay and lesbian sexual orientations” (Greene 224). On final note, it is significant to state that even though the African American community shares oppression and homogeneity in many ways, it is a diverse community as well, with differences in class, religion and region (Greene 285). Therefore, the problems that are described above, do not apply to all queer African Americans. However, the fear they might have about being rejected by their own community is realistic (Greene 226).

2.5 The Relevance of Identity for this Paper

This paper attempts to reflect on James Baldwin’s experience with queer and racial identity, and how he may feel society and family might influence these identities. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, studies show that there is a fundamental linkage between society and identity as well as family and identity. This linkage is not necessarily the same for queer identity and racial identity. Societal expectations and the pressure to follow the heterosexual script of society are issues concerning queer identity, whereas negative stereotypes, discrimination and racism are matters relating to racial identity. Family influences queer identity through the heterosexual modeling of parents and sometimes rejection when a person comes out, while racial identity is influenced by family through racial socialization of children by parents and through mutual support in the community, which results in a stimulation of the black identity of its members. It will be interesting to see if similar issues and influences concerning identity will appear in *Giovanni’s Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Considering Baldwin’s integration status as an American double minority, it is expected

that he has explicit ideas about these contextual influences. The following chapters will aim to unravel the role of society and family in relation to identity in Baldwin's novels. Queer identity and racial identity will be compared to each other.

3 Society and Identity in *Giovanni's Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*

3.1 Introduction

The following paragraphs will focus on the linkage between society and identity in the novels *Giovanni's Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Societal aspects that influence queer identity in the first novel, and racial identity in the latter, will be discussed. This might provide us with insightful information about Baldwin's own experiences with both identities and on how he feels society might influence them. In the concluding paragraph, social influence in both novels will be compared.

3.2 *Giovanni's Room*

In *Giovanni's Room* protagonist David struggles with his sexual identity. One night, when he is still in his teens, David sleeps with his best friend, a boy named Joey. David describes this night as a fantastic experience, and he claims that "it seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love" (7). Yet, when he wakes up the next day, he is suddenly very afraid as it occurs to him that Joey is a boy. From that moment on he starts being untrue to himself. He started being nasty to Joey, he makes up stories about dating a girl, and, eventually, he actually starts dating a girl. When he moves to France and falls in love with Giovanni, David struggles with admitting the truth to himself. Society and its expectations of him as a man have great influence on David's view on his identity and the struggle with his identity.

Firstly, society taught him that gay relationships are wrong. David thinks very lowly of gay men. He is repulsed by them. He repeatedly calls Giovanni's gay boss Guillaume "disgusting" and "dirty" (94, 43), and a "disgusting old fairy" (133), and he claims that "they all are" (97), meaning that all gay men are disgusting. Furthermore, he loathes Joey for being gay, and he thinks lowly of himself, because he is friends with him: "The idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me"(5). Not surprisingly, David does not want to be associated with gay men: "I was intent on proving them I was not one of them" (20). The novel does not reveal explicitly where this negative image comes from, but it is reasonable to assume that this was taught to him by society. As Stanley Macebuh notices, "the culture into he was born is presumably a healthily virile one, one in which such sexual deviations in men are frowned upon" (70). David knows that society can be very unforgiving towards gay relationships, as he explains to Giovanni that "people have very dirty words for – for this situation" 2). Moreover, in 1956, when the novel was

published, homosexual behavior was still criminalized in the United States and it remained a criminal act throughout the U.S. until the 1960s (Adam 260-261). When Giovanni claims that David and he have “not committed any crime” (72), David reminds Giovanni of the situation in the US by stating that “it *is* a crime in my country, and, after all, I didn’t grow up here, I grew up *there*” (72). David grew up in a society where homosexuality is a crime, and, as Aliyyah Abur-Rahman states, he “internalized his native country’s homophobia” (482). Therefore, it is not strange that he has an aversion to homosexuality.

Not only did society influence David’s thoughts about gay relationships, he was also raised in a system that values heterosexual marriage. Each society has a value system, which represents what is expected or hoped for in a society. These “values deal with what is required or forbidden, what is judged to be good or bad or right or wrong” (Ferraro 100). In Giovanni’s Room it becomes apparent that society expects David to marry a woman and have children. For example, his landlord, an older lady from Italy who does not know anything about David’s affair with Giovanni, states repeatedly that David needs to find a woman to marry. She claims that “it is not right for a young man like you to be sitting alone in a great big house with no woman” (60). She states that David will be happy again if he finds the right woman: “You must go and find yourself another woman, a *good* woman, and get married, and have babies. *Yes*, that is what you ought to do” (60). To strengthen her case, she even says that his father “will be very happy to see *bambinos*” from him (60). Some men in the neighborhood treat David as “their son who has but lately been initiated into manhood” (57). David, however, knows that he does “not really belong to any of them” (57) and he says that “they also sensed (or I felt they did) something else about me” (57). David fears that if they find out about his sexual behavior, they will no longer treat him as their son. He feels the pressure to be someone that he is not, because society will not accept him otherwise.

It is interesting to see that David has similar expectations of other people as his landlord has of him. At a certain point, he looks at a woman walking down the street, and he envisions her life: “I watched the woman continue down the street – home, I thought, to her husband, dressed in blue working clothes, dirty, and to her children” (129). He’s internalized society’s values and judges others by them. Therefore, it is not surprising that not only society expects him to get married and have children, but that David himself has these expectations as well. He has trouble accepting the “practical implications” of his love for Giovanni (Macebuh 85). He cannot picture a future with a man: “‘But I’m a man’, I cried, ‘a man! What do you think can *happen* between us?’” (126). David cannot imagine a future with Giovanni, because “what kind of life can two men have together?” (126). He grew up in a society where two men

cannot have a decent future together and, furthermore, he does not expect himself to grow old with a man. David explains to Giovanni that they cannot be together anymore: “I-I cannot have a life with you” (126). To David it does not matter that he loves Giovanni. He wants to be with a woman, he wants children, he wants to feel like a “real” man, and he is prepared to make it happen:

I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted the same bed at night and the same arms and I wanted to rise in the morning knowing where I was. I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed. It had been so once; it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again (93).

In conclusion, David was raised in a society that expects him to be in a relationship with a woman. As a result, he loathes his homosexual feelings and he does not want to associate himself with other gay men. Not only is he repulsed by his queer identity, he also fears this identity will not be accepted by society. He fights his feelings and tries to be someone that he is not, because he cannot accept himself in any other way.

3.3 If Beale Street Could Talk

The importance of society and identity in *Giovanni's Room* can be found in Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* as well. However, this novel focuses on racial identity rather than queer identity. Fonny, the boyfriend of protagonist Tish, is being falsely accused of rape, because he is black. The racial identity of both characters impacts their lives and this impact can be directly linked to society, as Tish and Fonny are being discriminated against. The novel revolves around Baldwin's criticism on the “failed promises of American democracy, and the consequent social injustice” (N.A. 1698). Tish learns about the racial standards in New York, and experiences that black people are seen as inferior by white people. She slowly discovers what it means to be black in the United States in the 70's, and it makes her scared, frustrated and angry.

Tish understands that her being black will not give her any advantages in life. She has a job at a store and she realizes that “the store thought it was very daring, very progressive, to give this job to a colored girl”(42). She also comprehends that a lot of black men in her neighborhood become criminals, end up in jail or turn to drugs and alcohol. That is one of the

reasons she loves Fonny: “He was just about the only boy I knew who wasn’t fooling around with the needles or drinking cheap wine or mugging people or holding up stores” (39). She is aware of the fact that people will look down on her, because her boyfriend is in jail: “Can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say to me if they knew, from my mouth, that I love somebody in jail?” (8). However, in the beginning of the novel she does not really understand what it means to be black in city full of racist white people, because she had never personally encountered a difficult situation involving her and white people. This becomes apparent when Fonny and Daniel talk about white people: ““*You* know how they do it.” I *don’t* know. But Fonny nods, his face still, his eyes very dark” (115). She is naïve and Fonny worries about her, because “she trusts everybody” (109). Tish’ attitude towards white people and towards her racial identity slowly change throughout the novel. When Tish is attacked by a white man in a store, none of the bystanders stand up for her: “I looked around, for someone to help me—people were staring, but no one moved” (147). When the situation gets out of control and Fonny is almost arrested, she expects people to speak up and fight the social injustice, but “no one said a word” (148). This is the moment when Tish realizes that she can only count on herself and her family. She explains that she “was frightened because, in the streets of the Village, I realized that we were entirely alone. Nobody cared about us except us” (186).

Tish’s fear, as well as her sense of black identity, is strengthened when the racism and prejudice in her life increases. She starts to comprehend the difficult position of black people in New York City. Not only are they, as Tish explains, “poor enough” (10), but racism and discrimination is part of their everyday life. For example, Tish and Fonny are looking for an apartment, but most landlords are not interested in renting to them, because they are black. Fonny claims that “this country really do not like niggers. They will rent it to a leper first” (108). Tish compares the situation of black people in New York City with zebras: “They looked at us as though we were zebras- and, you know, some people like zebras and some people don’t. But nobody ever asks the zebra” (8-9). Even though the unsuccessful apartment search is confronting for both Tish and Fonny, the real difficulties start when Fonny is almost unjustly arrested in a store and saved by a white lady. Fonny knows that the officer is “going to try to get” him (154), because “white men don’t like it at *all* when a white lady tells them, You a boatful of motherfuckers, and the black cat was right, and you can kiss my ass” (154). The officer is indeed out to get him, because he does not like the fact that Fonny has a mind of his own: “He wasn’t anybody’s nigger. And that’s a crime, in this fucking free country. You’re supposed to be *somebody’s* nigger. And if you’re nobody’s nigger, you’re a bad nigger: and that’s what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown” (41). When the

officer makes Fonny a main suspect in a rape case, it becomes apparent that it is almost impossible for Fonny to win his case, even though it is painfully clear that Fonny could not have committed the crime. According to Louis H. Pratt states, it is the “sinister forces of our society which are determined to accomplish his destruction” (29). An example of this determination to destruct Fonny is the fact that when they make the rape victim in Fonny’s case point out her attacker in a lineup at the police station, they put Fonny in the lineup with only white men, even though the woman claimed that a black man raped her. Naturally, the victim picks Fonny as her rapist, as he is the only black man in the lineup. There is enough evidence that Fonny is being framed, yet society does not condemn the situation, because Fonny is black. As Tish’s sister Ernestine points out: “It isn’t very much of a case. If Fonny were white, it wouldn’t be a case at all” (130). Tish now understands her position as a black citizen and it makes her scared, frustrated and angry. She ventilates her frustrations by calling the Puerto Rican rape victim a “filthy bitch” (99). The lawsuit underscores the hopeless position of black people in New York and Tish knows that “maybe you get scared or numb, because you don’t know if you can depend on people for anything, anymore” (8). Her life as she knew it is over. She wants to escape the situation, but she cannot, which terrifies her: “I lay there – wide awake; and very frightened. *Get me out of here*” (122).

Because Tish, Fonny and their families are constantly subjected to discrimination and prejudice, they feel like inferior citizens. Fonny’s father Frank claims that they are “all in the hands of white men” (70). Most black characters in the novel hate white people. As Tish explains, “nobody can take the shit they throw on us forever” (8). Fonny’s friend Daniel states that “the white man’s *got* to be the devil” (111) and he does not believe that “there is a white man in this country, baby, who can even *get* his dick hard, without hearing some nigger moan” (117). Ernestine also claims she “don’t need no more of the white man’s lying shit” (42). Because of their constant trouble with white people, Frank perceives white people as his enemy and he, evidently, harbors a lot of hatred towards white people: “That white man, baby, and may his balls shrivel and his ass-hole rot, he *want* you to be worried about the money. That’s his whole game” (135). Because Fonny’s lawyer is white, Frank is not happy with him. He does not want his son’s life “in the hands of these white, ball-less motherfuckers” (70). The continuous discrimination the black characters endure throughout the novel increases their hate for white people and it strengthens their racial identity. They are aware of the consequences of their skin color and it reinforces their bond with the black community.

In conclusion, Tish is subjected to discrimination and racism by white people throughout the novel. She becomes aware of her racial identity and its consequences. The actions and reactions of society strengthen her racial identity, as they impact her everyday life. This notion makes her angry and scared. Her racial identity causes society to control her life.

3.4. Conclusion

In *Giovanni's Room* the protagonist David has internalized society's aversion towards homosexuality. He feels the pressure to marry a woman and he cannot see himself end up with a man. This results in self-hate and a strong aversion towards the homosexual community. He is frustrated with himself and wants to escape his queer identity. As a result, he chooses to be with a woman. Even though his shift of identity is merely a failed attempt, it is a choice that the protagonist of *If Beale Street Could Talk* cannot make. Tish does not have the option to escape her racial identity, because she cannot hide her black skin color. Consequently, she is constantly subjected to racism and discrimination, which strengthens her sense of black identity and makes her frustrated with society. Society controls her life, and the only way of escaping her hopeless fate is to fight society. This is substantially different from David, who tries to fight himself. Hence, even though society influences the identity of both David and Tish, the impact of that influence on their lives differs significantly.

4 Family and identity in *Giovanni's Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*

4.1 Introduction

In succession to the previous paragraphs on society and identity, the linkage between family and identity will be the focus of the following paragraphs. This may shine a light on Baldwin's understanding of how family might influence queer and racial identity. In the concluding paragraph, family influence in both novels will be compared.

4.2 *Giovanni's Room*

People derive a part of their identity from their family and their family life. As studies show, parents or other relatives influence the expectations people have of themselves, as well as affect views on their individual identity. Aspects such as family background, family religion and family incidents influence a person, and, hence, it influences identity and confidence about personal identities. When looking at *Giovanni's Room*, it becomes apparent that family and identity are strongly intertwined in the novel. Parental expectations about David's love life influence his feelings about his sexual identity.

Important aspects of family and identity in *Giovanni's Room* are David's difficult, awkward relationship with his father, and the absence of his mother. These aspects, which will be portrayed in this paragraph, lay the foundation of David's struggles with his identity. David's mother died when he was a young boy. However, despite her absence, she still played a big role in his family life. There was a picture of her in the living room and "no matter what was happening in that room, my mother was watching it" (11). His father never spoke of her as his wife, only as David's mother. David's aunt Ellen always spoke of her in an extremely praising way. This made David uncomfortable, because he felt that he "had no right to be the son of such a mother" (11). It immediately becomes apparent that David is not happy with himself. With the absence of his mother, he needs a parent who takes care of him, who looks out for him. However, his father does not give him the attention he needs. As a young boy, David claims he was "desperate to conquer his attention" (10). The relationship with his father is never how he pictured it. Stanley Macebuh claims that David's father is an "inadequately authoritative figure" (70) and responsible for the difficult relationship between David and his father. His father wants them to be friends, whereas David just really wants him to be his father:

We were not like father and son, my father sometimes proudly said, we were like buddies. I think my father sometimes actually believed this. I never did. “I did not want to be his buddy, I wanted to be his son (15).

David’s relationship with his father deteriorates when he finds out about his lifestyle. His aunt Ellen calls his father out saying that he is not setting a good example for David: “Do you really think that you’re the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up? (12)” His father comes home late all the time and he sleeps with a lot of women. Ellen thinks David knows this, but he does not:

‘Don’t fool yourself that he doesn’t know where you’re coming from, don’t think he doesn’t know about your women!’ She was wrong. I don’t think I did know about them. [...] But from that evening, I thought about them all the time (13).

David hates Ellen for saying this, because after finding out about his father’s lifestyle, he starts to despise him (14). His love for him is slowly decreasing, because “I was beginning to judge him. And the very harshness of this judgment, which broke my heart, revealed, though I could not have said it then, how much I had loved him, how that love, along with innocence, was dying” (14). When the love for his father starts to fade, the absence of his mother becomes more evident. David misses her. After he has an accident with his car, he is badly injured and, as David claims, he “screamed” for his mother (16). He needs her, but she is not there. However, not only does he miss a mother figure, his mother’s absence also feels like a burden, because it puts more pressure on him in his role as a son. When he first sleeps with Joey and discovers his sexuality, he immediately thinks of his father: “Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little” (8). He feels a responsibility towards his father to be “normal”, because he is his only child. Hence, this feeling makes him struggle with his sexual identity.

Louis H. Pratt claims that because David’s father “never recognized the need for “the merciful distance” conducive to a viable paternal relationship” (59), they were never able to talk to each other. This resulted in David always “telling his father what he wanted to hear” (Pratt 59). Not feeling comfortable to tell his father the truth, David is to be very secretive of his life. His father, who does not have anyone else, wants to know what is happening in his son’s life: “You’re all I’ve got. I’d like to see you.” – “What the hell are you doing? Let your old man in on the secret, can’t you? You may not believe this, but once I was a young man,

too” (81). However, David is reluctant to confide in his father, because he is ashamed of who he is: “I was in full flight from him. I did not *want* him to know me. I did not want anyone to know me” (14). He individually struggles with his identity, as he tries to live up to the expectations his father has of him, resulting in him trying to be someone he is not. When David was younger, David’s father wanted David to “grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don’t mean a Sunday school teacher” (14). Considering David questions his manhood because of his homosexual feelings, this expectation makes David insecure about himself and ashamed of what his father would say about him living his life with a man. Now that David is older, his father wants him to settle down, meaning that he wants him to marry a girl and have children: “He wanted me to come home – to come home, as he said, and settle down, and whenever he said that I thought of the sediment at the bottom of a stagnant pond” (20). However, he never actually asks him about women. David thinks he wants to, but that he is too afraid of the answer:

The question he longed to ask was not in the letter and neither was the offer: *Is it a woman, David? Bring her home. I don’t care who she is. Bring her home and I’ll help you set up.* He could not risk the question because he could not have endured the answer in the negative (81).

David cannot live up to his father’s expectations, though tries to. He thinks about writing his dad he is marrying Hella, as he knows it will please his dad:

I did not write my father – I put it off from day to day. It would have been too definitive an act. I knew which lie I would tell him and I knew the lie would work – only – I was not sure that it would be a lie (101).

Eventually, he does not tell his father a lie, because he really asks Hella to marry him. He is too insecure, too scared and too ashamed of his sexuality to be with Giovanni, even though he loves him more than he loves Hella.

In conclusion, David’s feelings of responsibility towards his father, make him struggle with his sexual identity. He wants to live up to the expectations of his father, even though it is difficult for him to do so. As a result, David’s father has a big influence on David’s decisions in life. James Miller claims that it is “the normalizing coercive power of family” that prevents David “from acting on the self-knowledge produced by his affair with Giovanni” (66). David

refuses to accept his queer identity, because, among other things, he does not want to disappoint his father.

4.3 If Beale Street Could Talk

The struggles that the protagonist in *If Beale Street Could Talk* encounters because of her identity are, in contradiction to *Giovanni's Room*, not family related, but the consequence of racial standards. Family and identity are entangled in the novel though, as Tish's family teaches her how to embrace her identity and deal with the consequences. As mentioned earlier in this paper, studies show that parents contribute to racial identity development by teaching their children messages that racially socialize them. When analyzing *If Beale Street Could Talk*, it becomes apparent that Tish's family plays an important role in racially socializing protagonist Tish. Not only does her family pool together to defeat "the Establishment which has harassed, humiliated, abused, jailed, beaten, robbed, killed, and raped black people since the acceptance of slavery as a way of life in the United States" (Pratt 78-79), they also strengthen her sense of black identity by doing so.

When Tish was still a young girl, her sister Ernestine sets an example for Tish on how to deal with racism and her black identity: "Sis was always in front of that damn mirror all the time, when we were kids. She was saying *I don't care. I got me*" (50). Tish claims that Ernestine "knows who she is, or, at least, she know who she damn well isn't" (51) and Tish sees in her a role model.

Tish is loved and protected by her family. Her parents give her pet names, such as "little one" (34) and "little bit" (35). They worry about her, and want to protect her. It immediately becomes apparent that Tish's parents expect Tish to obey the family rules, mainly because they are protective of her. When Tish and Fonny stay out late one night and come home early in the morning, Joseph is "both furious and relieved" (92), because he worries about Tish when she does not come home in time. He tells Tish and Fonny that they better do not disobey him again, because "if you want to leave home, then you leave home, you hear? But, as long as you in *my* house, you got to respect it. You hear me?" (92). Fonny and Tish accept the lecture they are given, because they both respect him. Tish's father is extremely happy when he finds out that she is pregnant, because "I was his daughter, all right: I had found someone to love and I was loved and he was released and verified" (53). He supports Tish, just as her mother does. He tells her that he is proud of her and she feels loved by him:

I felt like a princess. I swear I did. He took me in his arms and settled me on his lap and kissed me on the forehead and rubbed his hand, at first roughly and then very gently through my hair. “You’re a good girl, Clementine,” he said. “I’m proud of you. Don’t you forget that.” (53).

Not only Tish’s parents love her and protect her. Tish’s sister Ernestine looks after her as well. When Fonny’s mother and sisters are unsupportive of the unborn baby and act very denigrating towards Tish, Ernestine tells them off. Fonny’s mother claims that she always knew Tish would be “the destruction” of her son (74), and she hopes that the Holy Ghost will “cause that child to shrivel” in Tish’s womb (74). Ernestine protects her little sister by sticking up for her by telling Fonny’s mother that if she ever comes anywhere near their house again, she will kill her. “You just cursed the child in my sister’s womb. Don’t you *never* let me see you again, you broken down half-white bride of Christ” (80).

Tish’s family helps her deal with the consequences of her black identity. Tish’s mother gives Tish strength and advice. Firstly, she assures her she is a good girl: “You got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that” (35). Moreover, she teaches Tish that “the only ways *anything* ever gets done is when you make up your mind to do it” (121). Tish’s mother tells her she cannot do anything about discrimination and prejudice, but she tries to give her strength to deal with the situation:

I know I can’t help you very much right now – God knows what I wouldn’t give if I could. But I know about suffering: if that helps. I know that it ends. I ain’t going to tell you no lies, like it always ends for the better. Sometimes it ends for the worse. [...] You the only one who can do it. But you’re strong. Lean on your strength (121).

When Tish and Fonny are being discriminated against, her family sticks up for her and helps her deal with the situation. Joseph works extra shifts to generate more money, Tish’s mother travels to Puerto Rico to look for the rape victim in Fonny’s case and Ernestine tries to make useful connections that might help her family in the future. As Louis H. Pratt assents, Tish’s family has “banded together” (80). Because of the support of her family, Tish does not have to bear the racism by herself. The struggle she endures is a group struggle, instead of an individual one. As Pratt states, they fight society together:

This family has power, because they are united by their sympathy and compassion for humanity, by their mutual love and respect, by their strong clannish ties, and by their unyielding determination to free Fonny and protect his heirs forever from the enslaving institutions of our capitalistic society (79).

In conclusion, Tish's family not only strengthens her black identity, but makes her feel comfortable with her identity as well. As a result, Tish has the confidence and strength to keep going, because her family set an example for her on how to deal with racism and discrimination. Moreover, she knows that her family is proud of her and that she has their support. She is aware of who she is and what needs to happen to make her survive in racist New York City. Despite the racial standards and the consequences of her racial identity, she never complains about being black. She is comfortable with her identity, because her family taught her so.

4.4 Conclusion

Protagonist David in *Giovanni's Room* has a considerably different relationship with his family than Tish, protagonist in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The relationship with his father is awkward and he does not feel protected nor supported by him. The heterosexual expectations his father has of him create a feeling of responsibility in David to marry a woman. He really wants to live up to the expectations of his father, and, as a result, he desperately tries to fight his queer identity. He keeps his struggles to himself, because he is ashamed of himself. Hence, he fights alone and experiences his crisis as an individual struggle. Tish, on the other hand, is part of a family that supports, respects and protects each other. Her family functions as a role model for her, and teaches her how to deal with her racial identity. Instead of making her feel uncomfortable about her identity, as is the case for David in *Giovanni's Room*, Tish's family strengthens her sense of black identity and make her feel at ease with herself. Thus, the influence of family on identity is significantly different in *If Beale Street Could Talk* than it is in *Giovanni's Room*.

5 Conclusion

Scholars agree that James Baldwin and the theme of identity are indissolubly entwined. His sense of himself as an individual as well as the search for self-identity influenced his work and the “agonizing quest for self” (Nelson 27) is a central theme in most of his novels and essays. Baldwin struggled with his double minority status, being black and gay in a difficult period in time for both minority groups in the United States. He identified with both the gay community and the black community, and he used this integration status to be an advocate for both minorities. He used his novels and essays to express his anger and frustrations about social injustice in American society, and he addressed his struggles with identity through his protagonists. When analyzing *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Giovanni’s Room*, it becomes apparent that society and family play an important role in the way his protagonists look at themselves, and, as discussed earlier in this paper, not incidental, studies show that family and society indeed have an impact on queer identity as well as racial identity. Heterosexual script, heterosexual modeling and rejection play are issues concerning queer identity, while discrimination, racism, stereotypes and racial socialization are aspects influencing racial identity. Being part of both minorities, Baldwin might have had experience with these contextual aspects.

This paper was an attempt to reflect on similarities and differences between influences of society and family on the two identities that figure in Baldwin’s work, and give a more complete view of the struggles relating the double minority that Baldwin was a part of. The analysis of both *Giovanni’s Room* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* reveal that Baldwin deals with queer identity differently than with racial identity. Society and family influence the identity of protagonist David in *Giovanni’s Room*, just like they influence the identity of protagonist Tish in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. However, David’s struggle with identity is a more individual one than Tish’s struggle. David fights his fight alone, because he hates his own community, and he feels he cannot confide in anyone outside of his community, because of the heterosexual expectations of his father and society. He is ashamed of himself and he wants to change queer identity. Moreover, he wants to marry a woman and have children, so that he can make his father happy. Procreation plays an important role in why the African American community often perceives queer men as traitors, and this could be a reason why James Baldwin deals with the issue of not being able to procreate. In contrast to David, Tish’s struggle strengthens her sense of identity. She fights the social injustice and discrimination, and her family gives her support and confidence. Her struggles with identity are not internal,

but they are something she shares with her community. Racial socialization plays an important role and the racial socialization that Baldwin himself might have had when he was younger, might have influenced him to address it in his novel. This study shows us that James Baldwin might have experienced his struggle with his sexual identity as a much more personal, individual struggle than his struggle with his racial identity. However, even though queer identity and racial identity are addressed in a different manner, both approaches are, above all, criticism on American society. He describes how social injustice, along with the expectations and prejudice of the white majority in his nation, limits the freedom and choices of minority groups. The influential elements of society and family on identity in Baldwin's novels are comparable to the elements mentioned in studies on the development of identity, and, therefore, an argument can be made that Baldwin's experience as an American double minority influenced his protagonists and their search for identity.

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