

# The Quest for African-American Identity in James Baldwin's Fiction and Non-fiction

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**Master's thesis / Diplomski rad**

**2020**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zagreb, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:473983>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2021-09-25**



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**ODSJEK ZA ANGLISTIKU**  
**FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET**  
**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU**

**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**THE QUEST FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S  
FICTION AND NON-FICTION**

**(Smjer: književno-kulturološki, amerikanistika)**

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**Ak. godina: 2019./2020.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Now, though I was a stranger, I was home”, Baldwin said. This is a perfect definition of what it means to be African-American in America. This quote is part of Baldwin’s unfinished manuscript *Remember This House*, which is just a fragment of Baldwin’s works dealing mainly with race and identity. According to Stuart Hall, “there has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of ‘identity’, at the same moment as it has been subjected to a searching critique” (15), and it is no wonder the world is turning to James Baldwin again. Baldwin is a key figure when it comes to the changing idea of the African-American identity since he was the one to give it a new definition, to constantly bring it into the spotlight, not hesitant in tackling the problem of *the American Negro*. Additionally, Baldwin has recently resurfaced as a person of interest due to the release of his FBI files, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as Raoul Peck’s documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. The world is turning to him again after so many years because his words are timelessly accurate and, even though it seems like everything is different, little has changed when it comes to racial relations and the African-American identity in the United States.

Burgett and Hendler say that “common representations characterize the United States as a ‘nation of immigrants’, a ‘melting pot’, or a ‘multicultural mosaic’” (129), which is, in fact, a fertile ground for growing violence and injustice towards the minority groups because of the American myth of ‘white supremacy’. Formation of one’s identity is quite a complicated process, and it is important to illustrate how family, race, religion, appearance, and social position affect people’s identities. The African-American identity, its formation and various forms (individual and collective identity) are central ideas in Baldwin’s works, both fictional and non-fictional. In his works, Baldwin tried to depict a path of identity formation – his own and of the African-American people, who are part of American society. Baldwin’s contribution to the African-American quest for identity is significant because, through his works, he shows how that quest is obstructed by societal challenges caused merely by a darker skin tone and by being different. Baldwin enjoyed intertwining the literary and the political because he considered himself a witness whose role was to convey the struggles of African-American people to the world around them and to help them in any way he can.

While exploring various kinds of identities, Baldwin emphasized the enormous importance of understanding the past and the relationship between the black people and the white people. His interpretation of the African-American quest for identity is of great importance because he experienced it himself. He faced the menace of racism and its influence on the African-American identity. Baldwin used his works to depict the perils lurking on the path to identity formation, as well as to show how ‘innocence’ can be a serious crime. His works make readers question their own identities and understand American history a little bit better. Baldwin was determined to find and build up his identity and he refused to let other people (white people, his own father, his Harlem community ...) do it for him. It is important to read Baldwin’s works and constantly come back to him because “he explores the ambiguities and the ironies of the situation and helps you to see the problems more personally and clearly, and then leaves it up to you to draw the conclusions” (Bakare).

## 2. *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO* – Raoul Peck’s Documentary

Thirty years after his death, the world evinces a reinvigorated interest in Baldwin and his works mainly because of the ideas he discussed in his writings that are more than interesting even today. Amongst other things that sparked the renewal of interest in Baldwin, one finds a 2016 documentary made by Raoul Peck titled *I Am Not Your Negro*. This documentary is based on James Baldwin’s unfinished work *Remember This House* and it is narrated by a famous actor Samuel L. Jackson. According to A. O. Scott and his article in *The New York Times*, “whatever you think about the past and future of what used to be called ‘race relations’ - white supremacy and the resistance to it, in plainer English - this movie will make you think again, and may even change your mind.” The movie tackles the history of race relations alongside the lives of three prominent African-Americans: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., all of whom Baldwin knew very well. More specifically, as it is emphasized in the movie itself, Baldwin wants to tell his story of America through the lives of his three murdered friends, who were mentioned earlier. All three of them were civil rights leaders who were trying to make a difference when it came to lives of the African-American community in America.

*I Am Not Your Negro* opens with a 1968 interview clip from The Dick Cavett Show that shows James Baldwin who is asked why aren’t *the Negroes* optimistic because the situation in the country is getting so much better and there are *Negroes* in all kind of sports, there are *Negro* mayors, etc. Baldwin smiles and replies: “I don’t think there’s much hope for it, you know, to tell you the truth, as long as people are using this peculiar language.” The host is visibly appalled by Baldwin’s remark about the use of that peculiar language (labeling African-American people *Negroes*) and his face in a state of shock is easily caught on camera for a moment. This host’s reaction is a perfect example of many ignorant people in the country at that time who don’t even realize how offensive the language is that they use all the time, the language being just a scratch on the surface of their deeply rooted behavior towards black people indicating their prejudice and ingrained notions.

Regarding the documentary, it is interesting to see how Peck presents the viewers with all kinds of footage and pictures in order to illustrate and, occasionally juxtapose with the present, Baldwin’s words on race and identity. What Baldwin is mostly known for are these themes previously mentioned, which are “themes that occur irrevocably in practically all of his writings and speeches” (Boyd 47). This documentary tackles the representation of the

black people in Hollywood in various movies throughout the history, it presents the lives of Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. King and their relationship with Baldwin in a chronological order, and Peck is using this documentary to present “Baldwin as his chief witness to interrogate the so-called relative gains for black Americans in the socioeconomic realm” (Boyd 48).

While trying to convey Baldwin’s interpretation of racial injustice throughout American history, Peck simultaneously intends to show how nothing has really changed. Baldwin thought that nothing is different when he compared country’s present with the past, and now, thirty years later, Peck emphasizes the same thing. If some things have changed, it is upon us to evaluate whether those are real changes, or ‘perceived progress’ only. In order to illustrate the lack of change, Peck is juxtaposing pictures and murders of Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. King to the pictures and murders of young black children killed by police brutality. As Boyd has pointed out in his review: “What Baldwin meant and what Peck has thoughtfully illuminated is the history of race relations in America, the menace of racism that has wreaked violence on black Americans for centuries and booms even more ominous today” (49).

The documentary was praised by the media and well-received by the public because of the message that it tried to convey. The purpose of this documentary was not only to “provide Baldwin’s prophetic voice a narrative and visual format” (Boyd 47) but also to remind the world, once again, to look around. Violence and racial injustice are still very real and very much present in the United States. In relation to violence, an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, H. Rap Brown once said that “Violence is a part of America’s culture. It is as American as cherry pie”, and one must admit that this is true. The documentary ends with another video clip of Baldwin’s interview where he says that *the American Negro* is nothing more than an American creation. In that spirit, with the following words, Baldwin invites American people to think about one thing that is crucial to what is going to happen to their country: “If I’m not the nigger here and you invented him, then you’ve got to find out why.”

### 3. BALDWIN'S POLITICAL AND LITERARY ACTIVITY

According to an article from *The Guardian*, “there is never a bad time to encounter James Baldwin, and as the wide success of the Oscar-nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* has made clear, the appetite in Trump’s America for his prescient brilliance on race and civil rights is fierce and growing” (Thrasher), which means Baldwin and his works will never be dated, no matter the year we live in. It is possible to find many similarities between America today and America in Baldwin’s time and his works are definitely an interesting ‘playing field’ when it comes to all the issues America constantly faces mostly because he was way ahead of his time in his ideas on the matter.

Aside from the documentary, another thing that sparked a renewed interest in James Baldwin and his works is the recent release of the FBI files that are now available to the public eye. Since Baldwin was kept under the FBI’s eye for quite some time, these files contain around 1,884 pages of documents of all kinds. According to the FBI’s official webpage, these documents date back to the period between 1963 and 1971. The FBI’s interest in Baldwin began in the early 1960s when he was linked with several Communist Party front groups. Another reason for being under constant surveillance was his activity in regards to the civil rights and black power movements. All this happened while the FBI was under the directorship of J. Edgar Hoover. Even though Baldwin never saw these FBI files, he knew that he was being followed and he often spoke of the clicks on his phone line and, on occasion, of the fear for his own life. These files contain all kinds of information, from his date of birth and the titles of his books to the words he said on national television during various interviews. However, even though the files were made public, much information was omitted from the documents, meaning it was blacked out for the purpose of remaining a secret.

Baldwin’s FBI files make an interesting read because they contain all kinds of information. There are various letters directed towards the FBI director Hoover, where citizens were expressing their concerns regarding Baldwin’s work and words. For example, there is a letter from someone whose name was blacked out concerning Baldwin’s two books: *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *Another Country*. The author of the letter included one copy of each of two books and two copies of *Hi Way* magazine dated November 1964 and February 1965. He was “more than concerned” when he saw that Baldwin’s books were advertised in the magazines that are part of the materials for the Senior High Young People’s Sunday



School Literature in the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. The author of the letter sees that “as a matter of obscene literature and poor church organization” and is requesting the director’s help with the matter. It is unclear to him “how and where these writings fit into Christianity” and that does not come as a surprise since Baldwin, more often than not, was a sharp critic of the church. Another interesting example of a letter from the FBI files is the one where a concerned party asks director Hoover to tell him “why any ‘would be’ intellectual, if black, can get on a nation wide TV program and tell every and any thing, true or not.” That letter followed Baldwin’s guest appearance on the TV David Frost program. Aside from gathering information about his political and social activity, the FBI was interested in his private life, i.e. his sexuality, and the fact that he was a homosexual was mentioned on a couple of occasions in the files. One document shows that, on the subject of homosexuality, Baldwin stated: “If you fall in love with a boy, you fall in love with a boy. The fact that Americans consider it a disease says more about them than it says about homosexuality.”

In order to vividly paint the picture of the historical, social, and political surroundings of James Baldwin’s literary creation, one must take into account the period of the 1950s and the 1960s, in particular the Civil Rights Movement, which was very important. According to George Burson, “to understand the Civil Rights Movement two things must be kept in mind. First, the United States’ population has always had strong racist elements in it. Second, Americans generally believe in the creed of equality” (35). He also claims that, due to predominant Northern European cultural influence, people of color were not the only ones who were discriminated against. Burson says that “anyone who was different was fair game” (35), and that included people of different religions, people coming from different cultural backgrounds, people who spoke different languages, other ethnicities, etc. However, “the discrimination against blacks is better known because they make up the largest minority in the country - about twelve percent of the population” (Burson 35).

During these politically and socially challenging times, Baldwin’s involvement was present on several fronts. He traveled around the country giving speeches for The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in which he “pleaded for an end to racism and warned the nation of the price it would have to pay for not facing the plight of black Americans” (Leeming 220). He was advocating for change, both of the South and the North. He even sent a telegram to the attorney general, Robert Kennedy, after which he was invited to have breakfast with him in Virginia. The attorney general asked him which *Negroes* will other *Negroes* listen to, and in response to that Baldwin gathered a group of such people for a meeting with Robert

Kennedy in New York. Even though it seemed like the meeting was not a success, taking a look back at it now, it might have had some impact on “the Kennedy administration’s apparent awakening one month later to the importance of civil rights” (Leeming 226). Besides all that, Baldwin took part of the Washington march and he worked on the voter registration in Selma, Alabama, which was his most direct participation in the movement in the American South.

Bearing all that in mind, one might ask, who is James Baldwin really? How do the literary and the political coexist in his work and life? This is going to be one of the key questions addressed in this essay. According to Beau Fly Jones, “that is the question embraced by Baldwin throughout his writings. He seeks desperately to define his identity as an American Negro writer and as a spokesman for his people” and in order to do that, “Baldwin must examine his cultural heritage” (107). As one can clearly notice in Baldwin’s work, “the past is all that makes the present coherent, and we must understand the present before we can look forward to the future” (Jones 107). This is one of the key elements running throughout all his works and in order to understand Baldwin, one has to participate in the journey he tries to undertake. When it comes to his writing, it is obvious that many members of his own family have served as models for his fictional characters because they were key figures on the quest for his own identity. What makes Baldwin’s writing unique is the fact that “when Baldwin writes about the handicaps of his colour at different levels of society, it is because he knows them personally” (Jones 112).

As Jones points out, Baldwin was,

one of the first writers to define extensively the details of what it is like to be a Negro in a white society. He is one of the only Negro writers to portray such a wide range of Negro characters in his fiction; to discuss with such insight the psychological handicaps that most Negroes must face; and to realize the complexities of Negro-white relations in so many different contexts. (119)

As his readers, we get to explore the variety of his literary creations, and to get at least a step closer to understanding the constant struggle of African-Americans in their own country. As a writer, Baldwin has greatly contributed to “the identity of his race, his nation and his profession” (Jones 119) and by doing so, he has called the American nation to face the damage and pain it has brought upon black people throughout history. In spite of everything

that was done to him and his race, Baldwin was hopeful and he advocated *love* as the main weapon in the African-American's quest for freedom and identity.

#### 4. BALDWIN'S FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

In order to explore the concept of identity; more specifically, the African-American identity through Baldwin's eyes, we will try to look at it through several categories. On the one hand, we are going to talk about individual identity as opposed to collective identity. On the other hand, we are going to talk about fictional approach versus the autobiographical or non-fictional (documentary, historical) approach to identity. In addition to that, Baldwin's idea of identity has to be approached from two different aspects, the one being the African-American identity inside the African-American community itself and the other the African-American identity inside American society as a whole where the emphasis is on the struggle of being in a world of blacks and whites co-existing. Two of Baldwin's novels and two Baldwin's non-fictional works will be used for the purpose of further exploration. The African-American identity inside the African-American community will be explored through a novel written in 1953 - *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. On the contrary, the best novel for exploring the African-American identity in the context of American society is, as its name itself suggests, *Another Country*.

Published in 1953, Baldwin's first novel was characterized as "brutal, objective, and compassionate" by *San Francisco Chronicle* and it does indeed provide a unique representation of life in a Harlem community. The opening statement of Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* gives away one of the major influences on identity formation, as well as on the novel itself - religion, i.e. in this case Christianity: "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late" (*Go* 3). After reading about Baldwin and his life, one soon realizes that this part of John's character was inspired by Baldwin's own personal experience and the relationship between him and his father. The story described in the novel revolves around a number of members of the Grimes family and it tells about events of one day only - John Grimes' fourteenth birthday.

The story of the Grimes family is told through memories and experiences of some of its members and Baldwin has tried to highlight "the extent to which the conditions of John's existence are shaped by a family history that he knows very little about" (Melton 10). One can notice here the other significant influence on the formation of a person's identity, which is the

influence of one's family. In this case, both of these influences are pretty strong when it comes to the formation of John's identity, and he cannot seem to withstand them. John's father Gabriel, i.e. his stepfather, as it is discovered later on in the novel, is the head deacon in the Temple of the Fire Baptized - a church in Harlem. The fact of his being a religious fanatic influences everyone around him and it puts his family in a difficult position because he claims that "anyone who opposes him *ipso facto* opposes the will of the Lord" (Melton 11). Religion and family are strong influences on all people, but especially on a young, confused man like John. When it comes to family, it is important to mention John's relationship with the members of his family. On the one hand, it seems that John really loves his mother and that he is really fond of his baby sister Ruth. On the other hand, he fears his father as much as he hates him. Besides him, John didn't like his sister Sarah, and it seems that his relationship with his brother Roy was something between love and hate. This is also an autobiographical element of sorts because Baldwin did not have a good relationship with his father and, as he says in his essay *Notes of a Native Son*, he could not remember "that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home" (65).

The fact that their father loved Roy, and hated John (at least from John's perspective) did not help the relationship between the two brothers. It has even gotten to a point where John wished that Roy had died when he was stabbed with a knife only to hurt his father: "And John knew, in the moment his father's eyes swept over him, that he hated John because John was not lying on the sofa where Roy lay. John could scarcely meet his father's eyes, and yet, briefly, he did, saying nothing, feeling in his heart an odd sensation of triumph, and hoping in his heart that Roy, to bring his father low, would die" (*Go* 43). His hatred for his father was so deep that he even wished death to his own brother. Not only did he wish death on his brother but also on his father, and he was even ready to do it on his own: "Nevertheless, this man, God's minister, had struck John's mother, and John had wanted to kill him - and wanted to kill him still" (*Go* 53). Bearing in mind that, as a primary community in one's life, family has a great influence on developing one's personality, it is hard to imagine how much damage this can do to a young man on the quest for his own identity.

The previously mentioned statement also testifies to Gabriel being a hypocrite. He is a man of God even though he beats his wife and children, even though he had an affair and a child with Esther, and even though he stole money from his first wife Deborah. All these things are considered to be grave sins, and yet, he is considered to be a devoted believer with many members of the Harlem community looking up to him. Life stories of the characters in

the novel are told through the stories of temptation, sin and, eventually, redemption. John's father Gabriel is presented as the main antagonist in the novel, and his story of redemption is possibly the most interesting one because he was far away from God early in his life and a great preacher all of a sudden after he was placed in the hands of God by his own mother: "She had placed him in the hands of the Lord, and she waited with patience to see how He would work the matter. For she would live to see the promise of the Lord fulfilled. She would not go to her rest until her son, the last of her children, he who would place her in the windings-sheet, should have entered the communion of the saints" (*Go* 103).

Even though it lasted nine days only, Gabriel's temptation was, as it was previously mentioned, an affair with Esther: "So he had fallen: for the first time since his conversion, for the last time in his life" (*Go* 145). However, this was certainly not the last time he has fallen since he stole money from Deborah so he can send his pregnant lover out of town. Theft is a grave sin, just as adultery is, for the Ten Commandments say: "You shall not steal". There is at least another sin that needs to be added to Gabriel's list, and that is beating his own wife and children. It is interesting to see how his son Roy both respects and breaks the "Honor your father and your mother" at the same time by defending his mother and fighting his father: "'Don't you slap my mother. That's my *mother*. You slap her again, you black bastard, and I swear to God I'll kill you'" (*Go* 49). Esther told Gabriel he was going to pay for his sins one day and that she was not going to raise her son with God but he was going to be a better man than his father in spite of that. One could say that both Roy and Royal (Esther's son) are better men than Gabriel himself. Gabriel thinks that redemption for the sins of his youth was marrying Deborah when she was undesirable and unwanted. That is perhaps one way of looking at things but it is definitely not noble to look at your wife as a charity case. If marrying her is supposed to wash your sins off of you, you should not have married her in the beginning because that is just selfish. Gabriel's identity was mostly formed through his religion but is religion supposed to make a man selfish and sinful?

Another thing that Gabriel thinks is one more way of him doing what is right by God is marrying Elizabeth and taking her child as his own, even though he never fully accepted John as his own. This act of accepting another man's child cannot be seen as redemption because the sins he committed after that cannot be redeemed with what was done in the past. This line of Gabriel's thinking tells the reader more about his character than anything else. On the one hand, religion was quite a bad influence on his identity formation because it has made him delusional thinking that he has redeemed himself in the eyes of the Lord while continuing

to be sinful. On the other hand, Gabriel is afflicted by a common sin, that of hypocrisy. By being a hypocrite, Gabriel is closer and more similar to his community than he would like to be. That makes him feel angry because he would like to think that he is morally superior. We are inclined to think that priests and preachers are pure and untainted by sin, but that is often not the case because they are human too. In spite of being more human, Gabriel's behavior divulges moral hypocrisy of the church because many times priests look down on the believers because they think they are better than everyone else, when in fact, they also tend to make mistakes. Even though it is not present in all the 'saints', hypocrisy is not a rare occurrence in all kinds of churches around the world. Baldwin used Gabriel's character to expose the moral hypocrisy of the church because it plays such an important role in the life of this African-American community in Harlem. According to Melton, "Baldwin routinely questioned the doctrine of the fundamentalist Christian tradition in which he was raised, and so often directly challenged those beliefs that he considered to be most damaging" (9).

It is important to emphasize Gabriel's deceitfulness in the denying of his child. By doing that, he thinks he is going to hide that sin from everyone else, but it turns out Elizabeth knew everything from the beginning - about the stolen money and about Royal being his son. She would have done a good deed if he had only said something: "if you'd said something even when that poor girl was buried, if you'd wanted to own that poor boy, I wouldn't nohow of cared what folks said, or where we might of had to go, or nothing. I'd have raised him like my own, I swear to my God I would have - and he might be living now" (*Go* 174). This bears the notice that everything would have been fine if he had only faced up to his past and admitted his sin. However, there was no hope for that because he was constantly trying to forget it and escape his past tainted by sin. Unfortunately, as Baldwin keeps reminding, forgetting and escaping the past is not possible no matter how hard you try, especially because our past is something that shapes our identity.

The formation of John's identity is very much influenced by his stepfather Gabriel who overshadows everything he does in life, ever since he was six months old. One's identity is formed throughout one's relationships with family members because that is the primary community in which one is born and raised. By not knowing much about his family's past, John is unable to form his identity as a whole. He is constantly looking for answers because he believes that knowing things from the past will give him a better understanding of the present, as well as point him toward the future. Within the first chapter called 'The Seventh Day', "Baldwin provides several key passages that reveal the importance of a past that lies

beyond John's understanding" (Melton 12) and he uses a mirror as a powerful metaphor because John must first clean the mirror in order to actually see and accept himself while he is struggling to figure out his own identity. While reading this part of the chapter, one can easily notice Gabriel's influence on John's identity formation: "With a shock he saw that his face had not changed, that the hand of Satan was as yet invisible. His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan - and was there not something - in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow - that bore witness to his father's words?" (*Go* 23). His father's hatred has shaped his self-image and everything his father said to him got through to John and his subconscious was projecting that as his own thoughts. By emphasizing this, Baldwin tries to convey the message about the danger the others' opinion poses to us.

Aside from that, Baldwin also emphasizes Deborah's role very early on by mentioning her in John's thoughts when he was cleaning the pictures on the mantelpiece: "And this shadowy woman, dead so many years, whose name he knew had been Deborah, . . . , it seemed to John, the key to all those mysteries he so longed to unlock" (*Go* 26). She is the key to unlocking the answers to John's questions, primarily about his father, because "it was she who had known his father in a life where John was not" (*Go* 26) and also, most importantly, perhaps "she could have told him - had he but been able from his hiding-place to ask! - how to make his father love him" (*Go* 26) because he is, as any young man would be in this position, desperate in seeking his father's approval, love and acceptance. Since these are only pictures that cannot speak, "the answers that John so desperately needs are buried beyond his reach" (Melton 13) and that leads the readers to the only person who holds all the answers regarding Gabriel's past - Gabriel's sister and John's aunt Florence. By being the only person who has known Gabriel his entire life, "she stands as the one true obstacle to his authoritarian rule" (Melton 19) and she holds the power to disrupt Gabriel's identity as a holy man and a preacher who is appreciated and respected in his community.

As opposed to John's lack of information about his father's past, Florence knows everything there is to know and she is not afraid to use this information to challenge Gabriel and do him harm even though he is her brother. Melton claims that the greatest punishment for Gabriel would be for him not to be elevated above his community, "but integrated into the collectivity of sinners by the pronouncement that he 'ain't no better'n nobody else'" (19). Gabriel's identity of a holy man is the most appreciated aspect of his own identity and it is what he values the most because it allows him to judge other people, not only in his own



family, but in his entire community. By having all the information in her possession, she is able to dismantle that feature of his and expose him as a hypocrite that he is. The fact that she has the power to do so threatens Gabriel, and the part of his identity that he spent years carefully building is in danger. At the center of the novel's last chapter called 'The threshing-floor' is John's first religious experience. In this chapter, while everyone is at church, John hears God's voice and he is reborn. This is both a celebratory and, at the same time, a dangerous moment for Gabriel because he feels threatened by John's experience that he witnesses because, as Melton points out, the moment John is touched by God's hand "is when John feels most liberated from Gabriel's oppressive presence" (20) and, for the first time, he sees himself in John's eyes:

Gabriel had never seen such a look on John's face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John's eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John's staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother's eyes when she beat him, of Florence's eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah's eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther's eyes and Royal's eyes, and Elizabeth's eyes tonight before Roy cursed him and of Roy's eyes when Roy said: 'You black bastard.' And John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel's soul. (*Go* 175)

These moments are of tremendous importance for both John and Gabriel because, in order to fully accept themselves and their histories, they must undergo a metamorphosis so profound as to become new people after the experience. By being saved on the church's floor, John is born again, and that allows him to accept everything about himself that he learned and to finally be able to know who he is. By accepting Christ as his savior, John becomes one of the 'saints' himself. When it comes to Gabriel, by staring in John's eyes, he has finally faced everything he did in his past and that enabled him to become a full person who is no longer running from his past mistakes. In order to fulfill the quest for one's identity, one has to accept all the good and the bad, and embrace it all.

Another Baldwin's literary masterpiece, published in 1962, is his novel *Another Country*, which is "the story of the bohemian, jazz drummer Rufus Scott who commits suicide because he could not find his way in a Eurocentric, Puritan, infantile, masculinist American society" (Hogue 1). After Rufus is gone, the story focuses on the remaining members of his inner circle of family and friends. *Another Country* is a perfect example of fiction interrogating "naturalized but repressive and stifling American categories such as race, sex,

class, region, and gender, as it offers/imagines a social world where racial identity, sexuality, gender identity, and subjectivity are much more fluid, multiple, open, dynamic, and becoming” (Hogue 1), and it does so by engaging multiple characters co-existing in the same society. All these characters are struggling with problems of their own and are trying to navigate their lives in the lively New York surroundings. In this novel, unlike in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin has put the emphasis on the coexistence of two different racial groups in the same society, as well as all the issues coming alongside it. *Another Country* also shows how our relationships with others influence our lives. Baldwin shows us both advantages and disadvantages of social norms and constraints.

In his article, Hogue examines

how Baldwin in *Another Country* painstakingly describes Rufus’ demise, and how that demise serves as a catalyst for other characters to confront their conscious and/or unconscious past, to challenge their social labels and categories, to recognize and acknowledge their human needs and desires, their otherness, to take risks, to grow, and to find freedom and fulfillment in the midst of the turbulent, angst-filled, racially balkanized, capitalist, and spiritually empty world of New York City. (2)

Hogue’s description of this novel is more than accurate because all the main characters that are left behind after Rufus’ death are, in a way, soul searching. They are exploring social categories, moving racial lines, and facing their hidden desires. They face their own troubles and suffer in their unique ways. At the same time, they are somehow unable to understand the suffering of ‘the other’ and are primarily focused on themselves. However, during the course of the novel, they are learning to put themselves in someone else’s shoes for a change.

One of the most prominent social categories explored in the novel is sexuality. Baldwin uses sexuality in order to follow the characters’ flow of desire, and to demonstrate that sexuality is something fluid. Sexuality is an important aspect of a person’s identity and this novel proves how sexuality does not need to be a fixed and closed category, as it is often represented. While Baldwin describes sex and all kinds of physical activities pretty vividly throughout the novel, Lombardo claims that Baldwin’s writing on issues of sexuality “has received remarkably little philosophical commentary” (40). While every person’s individual identity is unique and special, there are always parts that are influenced, and sometimes even predetermined, by the society that surrounds the individual. One of those parts is definitely sexuality because society that we live in pretty much defines what is socially acceptable, and

what is not when it comes to one's sexuality. Even though these 'rules' are changing, it is still difficult to define yourself as someone who does not subject to societal norms, and one can only imagine how difficult it was in Baldwin's time and how much struggle and strength it required to declare that to the world.

If I had to describe Baldwin's approach to sexuality in *Another Country*, I would choose one word: fluidity. Many characters in the novel are crossing the boundaries of gender, race, class, and even the institution of marriage, in order to satisfy their desires that were sometimes buried deep inside them. According to Hogue, one of the reasons the issue of identity formation is complicated for Baldwin is because, "although these racial, gender, and class categories limit and cage individuality, causing repression in the psychic, they are also an inescapable part of one's individuality" (3). How does one achieve individuality if one is categorized? One of the ways is definitely travelling freely between different categories and exploring things that work best for each individual. In the novel, Baldwin presents us with a couple of characters who are reaching beyond racial and class lines in the exploration of their sexuality, and that brings them their own share of suffering, which is, according to Baldwin, crucial for the identity formation.

An important character who needs to be mentioned in terms of his sexuality is definitely Rufus' friend Vivaldo. His exploration of sexuality and relationships is amongst the most interesting and complex ones. As a white man, he is constantly drawn to black girls and he cannot help it - that is why he is more often than not wandering around Harlem. He maintains meaningless relationships during the first part of the novel, but later, he gets interested in Rufus' sister Ida. Aside from thinking that he is in love with her and constantly chasing her, in his mind, he has to conquer Ida and satisfy her needs in order to own her - he is sure that she belongs to him after he satisfies her. However, it turns out that is not the case in the end. During the course of the story, one gets the impression that Vivaldo is not interested in men because he is constantly chasing women, but there is a plot twist later on when he hooks up with Eric. As it turns out, the two of them love each other, but they are realistic about the course of that relationship, and they know it was for one night only because it is easier that way.

Vivaldo is a character who is constantly reaching across racial and gender lines because he dates a black woman, and we also learn that he had previous experiences with men, as well as the night he spent with Eric towards the end of the novel. It is as if he had

trouble accepting the fact that he can also enjoy men, not only women, and he tries to fight that part of himself which was his unconscious desire. However, when he decides to accept it and let it come out, he realizes that Eric is the person he truly loves:

When the borders of Vivaldo's white male identity, as he knows it, become blurred and porous, and his conscious and unconscious desires, his secrets are accepted, Baldwin makes us understand the possibility of another way of existing, of conceiving of our subjectivity. Such moments emphasize the socially constructed nature of many of the categories that human beings use to define themselves and others - including, but not limited by race, sex, class, and gender. (Hogue 23)

After exploring and accepting all parts of him, Vivaldo is ready to find freedom and fulfillment and his suffering is finally done.

Eric is also an interesting character, especially because he is somehow held out of our reach during the first part of the novel. He is briefly mentioned a couple of times, but we do not get to find out more about him besides the fact that he was once important to Rufus. When we get to find out more about Eric, we discover that he is a white man from Alabama living in France and that he faced his sexuality very early on but due to the society that he lived in, he was not given the opportunity to fully embrace it because "his life, passions, trials, loves, were, at worst, filth, and, at best, disease in the eyes of the world, and crimes in the eyes of his countrymen" (*Another* 211). In order to reach happiness, he had to leave his homeland and go somewhere where he will not be judged by the people surrounding him. Even if he was judged in the other country, there is some consolation in the fact that he is not being judged by his countrymen - Americans. While he was still in the United States and seeing Rufus, they were in the closet and they both had girls around them - Eric was even thinking about getting married at some point. This is a perfect example of the societal influence on the formation of one's identity because both Eric and Rufus were pretending to enjoy more 'standard' choices when it comes to love and sexuality because they have had a feeling they had to satisfy the societal norms that were imposed on them. The community's influence is inevitable and it can have devastating consequences on a person because we all just want to feel accepted even when we say we do not care what the society thinks about us.

By showing how his characters are crossing from one social category to another and switching their interests during the storyline, Baldwin is trying to demonstrate the fact that these categories are not fixed and closed and that *transitions are allowed*. These categories are

social constructs and the world would still exist without them. The fact that people have to declare to which category they belong is ridiculous and it does more damage than good because people do not wish to stand out in a way that separates them from others if that way is perceived as something ‘negative’. “A prominent theme that runs throughout both Baldwin’s fiction and nonfiction is that, whether we like it or not, who we are is a story that never fits so easily into the names that others call us or that we call ourselves” (Lombardo 41), which is to say we do not fit into these categories all too often imposed on us. One’s identity is constantly changing and we can be many things at the same time if society lets us. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that these social norms and categories are needed because, if it weren’t for them, we would walk around and do whatever we want to, regardless how it affects other people around us. We wouldn’t think about the consequences of our actions. Some characters in the novel (for example Rufus) tend to do that, and they do not end up happy later. At the end of the day, blindly following the rules does not bring us happiness but nor does breaking them completely. Another interesting thing in this context is the hypocrisy of the society that is often exposed in Baldwin’s works. “Baldwin discovered firsthand that the society’s explicit prohibitions were not at all the same thing as its private desires when he found that the very men who directed homosexual epithets at him were often the same ones that would later solicit sexual favors from him when they were not among their peer group” (Lombardo 42). Baldwin’s experience is that, in a number of cases, the loudest opponents of the homosexual community are precisely those who are interested in the same sex themselves but do not possess the courage to accept themselves as homosexuals. That secret is a heavy burden on their shoulders and the rage that boils in them often explodes when seeing others who are comfortable in their own skin.

Aside from male characters, Baldwin also introduces female characters who are crossing the lines and stepping out of their categories. Unlike men, women are not exploring their sexuality in terms of being with the same sex. However, we have a strong black woman who is crossing racial and class boundaries when it comes to forming relationships and exploring her sexuality. Ida is dating Vivaldo, and while their relationship is obviously troubled, she tells the truth in the end and reveals that she is “just a poor, ignorant, black girl, trying to get along” (*Another* 400). He was actually her way out. She wanted to escape her life and he was the perfect opportunity for her to leave Harlem. Even though they were living together and they loved each other (at least that is what they think), they both knew they were not going to marry. While talking to Cass one time, Ida says it out loud: it is because he was

white and she was black. Even though they reach beyond racial lines, there were still certain limits to their relationship. They can have fun and everything but there can never be anything serious like marriage between them. “Although she falls in love with Vivaldo, she, as with Rufus in his relationships with Eric and Leona, cannot commit herself to the relationship because he is white. Having grown up in America, Ida knows the reality of race, knows about whites’ inability or refusal to deal with racism. She knows the gulf between the races” (Hogue 17). If one is to reflect upon everything that happened in their relationship, it is easy to conclude that it has brought them more difficulties than anything else. They even had a feeling that they were holding each other back in their careers but they still remained together: “In this instance, even as Baldwin emphasizes the redemptive power of love, he also suggests its limitations. That is to say, Baldwin’s vision of redemption is not utopian, in which recognition signifies resolution. Rather it is a blues vision of redemption, where individuals accept the good with the bad, the best and the worst” (Hogue 19).

While Ida is crossing the racial line, Cass, her white woman friend, is reaching beyond the institution of marriage in order to explore and reach her happiness. She cheats on her husband Richard with Eric, and that is where readers become familiar with the fact that Eric is into women too, even though he is primarily interested in men. Cass steps out of her ‘perfect life’ because she is unhappy and after taking certain actions, she is not any happier in the long term, but she accepts that. On the contrary, she finally suffers: “In experiencing some suffering of her own and in understanding and empathizing with the pain and suffering that Rufus endured, Cass intellectually is beginning to realize what Vivaldo and Eric already know - that suffering and pain are aspects of one’s life, one’s identity” (Hogue 26). Cass’ adultery is significant not just in terms of her relationship with her husband but also in terms of her relationship with Ida. Ida’s knowledge of Cass’ adultery changed her attitude towards Cass because it gave her the power over her. Even though she was cheating on Vivaldo, she thought that Cass is to be judged more harshly than she is because “the world assumed Ida’s sins to be natural, whereas those of Cass were perverse” (*Another* 339). When Ida says that “even the most faithful of wives deserves a night out” (*Another* 353), she is showing off her power over Cass - power over a white person. She held that kind of power probably for the first time in her life and she was enjoying it because she got to feel the one thing she never felt before, and as Baldwin says in his essay *The Fire Next Time*: “the only thing white people have that black people need, or should want, is power - and no one holds power forever” (341).

All this points to a central theme in Baldwin's works once again - race. According to Michael Rustin, "'race' is both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization" (183), which means that something completely arbitrary holds a significant amount of power which is affecting people's lives in reality. This also brings us to an important question: "How is it that a categorization that is so empty and arbitrary can nevertheless give rise to such powerful, oppressive, and even catastrophic social effects? What is the mechanism or principle that can explain how a nothing, an objectively insignificant no-thing, can become and remain so disastrously and dismally important in its effects on human lives?" (Rustin 184). Racial issues, together with racism and injustice, as well as other things that go hand in hand with it, are significantly emphasized in *Another Country*.

When it comes to *Another Country*, we have already mentioned the experience of suffering, which is a vital part in the quest for one's identity. The central character whose suffering was 'a trigger' that has pushed others towards the exploration of their identities is Rufus. In regards to his suffering, it is important to mention his relationships, especially the ones with Leona, his white lover, and Vivaldo. Inevitably, the main cause for suffering when it comes to these relationships is race. "Although she is marginal and can empathize with Rufus, Leona is unable or refuses to accept the difference between her own life experiences and Rufus" (Hogue 4). When Rufus asks her "Didn't they warn you down home about the darkies you'd find up North?" (*Another* 22), she naively answers "They didn't never worry me none. People's just people as far as I'm concerned" (*Another* 22) and that is where one can see that she makes no difference regarding people's skin color, or at least that is what one is supposed to believe. Leona is constantly telling Rufus that "ain't nothing wrong in being coloured" (*Another* 60) and that made Rufus angry enough to respond "Not if you a hard-up white lady" (*Another* 60) which often caused them to fight for an entire evening.

Rufus was not impressed by her misplaced and irritating white sympathy and, as it was presented to the reader, it did not make it easier for him to receive her love and support. He was so heavily laden with race that it made him think that nobody can understand his position and his struggles if they are not black. All these things made him angry and raging up to the point where "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 most" (*Another* 60). It was her skin

color that made him so furious because, by being white, she represented her entire race during those moments and that act of violence was his revenge; his way of getting back at white people for everything that they have done to him. This was a clear representation of the hatred black people feel towards white people whether they are willing to admit it or not.

Rufus also accused Leona of sleeping with other black men, even though he knew that was not true, but he needed a reason in his mind to justify his actions. Later on, when crying in Vivaldo's lap, he is tormented by his own behavior and, at the same time, he is himself - "perhaps for the first time in his life, ... Rufus was aware of every inch of Rufus. He was flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair, and skin. His body was controlled by laws he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force within this body had driven him into such a desolate place" (*Another* 61). It is maybe his unconscious desire that led him to Vivaldo's lap that night. Either way, this act of Rufus' violence calls for a standard household story used in many books and films where violence is a key feature when portraying black men in relationships and painting a picture of a black family. As Vivaldo states when witnessing such an act at one point: "You could be killed for this, all she has to do is yell. All I have to do is walk down to the corner and get a cop" (*Another* 62), he could get killed, and not just arrested, for beating a white woman. By constantly trying to escape being the man society expects him to be, he ends up playing that role perfectly. It is also the fact that Leona puts him in constant danger that makes him even madder. Apart from putting him in danger by being with him, she is one of the reasons for his separation from his Harlem community because "he is separated from both blacks and whites by his relationship with Leona" (Hogue 5). This is what Baldwin calls "a double alienation" because he was being refused by his own community and not fully accepted in the white community, which caused him great distress.

As previously mentioned, race is an important factor of one's identity because it is a visible characteristic that makes people different from one another. It is important to mention once again that both of these novels engage with racial issues. While tackling it in a bit more discreet way in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin uses *Another Country* to really put the emphasis on the racial theme. It is fair to say that race is one of the focal points in this book. The novel clearly shows how race influences one's identity and how others' attitudes toward racial issues can influence other people. One can see throughout the book that both Vivaldo and Leona are ignorant to racial difficulties that Rufus is facing during the course of his life. While Leona constantly repeats that there is "nothing wrong in being coloured" (*Another* 60), Vivaldo "had refused to see it, for he had insisted that he and Rufus were equals. They were



friends, far beyond the reach of anything as banal and corny as color” (*Another* 136). He refuses the fact that Rufus’ life was somewhat different from his just because of his skin color, despite the fact that they had similar backgrounds. It is not until his friend’s death that Vivaldo starts questioning this issue and that brings a degree of guilt because he realizes that “perhaps they had been afraid that if they looked too closely into one another each would have found - ... Each would have found the abyss. 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” (*Another* 136). By feeling that way, they were playing the part that the American society has put together for them.

In spite of feeling guilty, Vivaldo cannot change if he does not question himself and his guilt because, according to Hogue, “guilt does not bring about change if it remains unexamined” (16). Perhaps both Vivaldo and Leona were trying to pay as little as possible attention to the fact that Rufus was black and they were white. While they were trying not to emphasize it, it hit them one day after Rufus’ violent outrage: “looking at her with something, after all these months, explicit at last between them. They both loved Rufus. And they were both white. Now that it stared them so hideously in the face, each could see how desperately the other had been trying to avoid this confirmation” (*Another* 67). They thought that it will make it easier for Rufus if they somehow denied it, but it only made it harder because they were all aware of it but it was never said out loud. Another important thing to mention is that, even though they did not want to, they emphasized Rufus’ skin color by just being with him; as Leona said to Vivaldo: “But, Rufus, he’s all the time looking for it, he sees it where it ain’t, he don’t see nothing else no more” (*Another* 65). When walking with her under his arm, all he could think about were the people who are going to be bothered by a black man and a white woman being together. He was constantly looking for someone who is going to look at them the wrong way because he felt like she made his skin color even more visible - her being white made him all the more black. Aside from the obvious black and white conflict, it is interesting to observe how Baldwin has mastered the little details employed to further emphasize the contrast between black and white. When at Rufus’ funeral, the reader gets the opportunity to look through Cass’s eyes while catching a meaningful detail as a girl there gave a short speech: “Then she dropped her head and twisted a white handkerchief, the whitest handkerchief Cass had ever seen, between her two dark hands” (*Another* 122). This contrast gives away the message of difference; white was never so white until put next to something black.

“In the end, all of the characters in *Another Country*, except Richard and Leona, and with Rufus as a catalyst, are moving toward Bethlehem, as the title of Book Three suggests” (Hogue 27). Each and every one of them has dealt with what they were supposed to deal with: Eric has engaged his buried past, Vivaldo has faced his inner desires and explored his sexual identity, Cass has troubled the traditional category of family and marriage, while Ida has questioned the category of race, and class. They have stopped avoiding themselves, and that made their lives easier. All in all, they have all accepted themselves for who they are, which has endowed them with the ability to feel more and empathize with others around them. Having done that, they are moving towards the future more hopeful and ready for new challenges. Their quest for identity continues, but they are already better people who are able to face different limitations of human categories and desires.

## 5. BALDWIN'S NON-FICTION

After all these years, Baldwin's words are as important and powerful as they were once he wrote them. One cannot think, talk, or write about James Baldwin without taking into account his non-fictional works, which are quite famous and popular even today. In order to fully understand his fictional works, one mustn't be afraid to dive into his essays which he wrote over the course of his life. We can draw the comparison between Baldwin's fictional and non-fictional works because, in both cases, one can follow the struggles of African-American people who are on their way of societal and self-acceptance. While his novels are following individual characters facing both internal and external obstacles during their lives, his essays are more focused on the struggles of African-Americans as a collectivity, but he does not hesitate to include his thoughts on the individual struggles African-American people are facing in the American society of that period.

One of the most popular non-fiction books by James Baldwin is *Notes of a Native Son*, in which "he had continued the process of exploring the effect of his relationship with his stepfather on his own ability to overcome the isolation imposed by race and sexual ambivalence" (Leeming 98). This book was published in 1955, which makes it Baldwin's first non-fiction book. The first essay in this book is called 'Autobiographical Notes' and the first three things that Baldwin shares with his readers are that he was born in Harlem, that he "began plotting novels at about the time [he] learned to read" (*Notes* 5), and that he would not consider reliving his childhood. This explains his good knowledge of the Harlem community and one can see that his personal experience was an inspiration for many of his fictional works. Besides that, Baldwin reveals that his father was not delighted by his literary activities because he wanted him to be a preacher. He became one at the age of 14 and stopped being one at the age of 17. This autobiographical instance was clearly an inspiration for his main character John in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which was in fact an autobiographical novel. He was able to illustrate John's struggles so vividly in the novel because, in a way, these struggles were his own as well.

Baldwin was, and still is, well-known for being very vocal about race and everything that comes with it, and he said: "I suppose, the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality" (*Notes* 6) and he immediately emphasizes: "truce, by the way, is the best one can hope for" (*Notes* 6). Another thing Baldwin was vocal about and often emphasized in his works is the fact that one has to face his past in order to understand the

present and meet the future. In order to build his identity, one has to investigate and accept his past, as Baldwin says: “I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly” (*Notes* 7). Also, while comparing Baldwin’s fiction and non-fiction, one can spot many similarities between his fictional characters and himself and that is so due to one simple thing: “One writes out of one thing only - one’s own experience” (*Notes* 8).

In his works, both fictional and non-fictional, Baldwin often emphasized the interconnection between blacks and whites in the American society. One of Baldwin’s fictional works which tackles this theme deeply, as it was already mentioned earlier, is his novel *Another Country*. In the second essay of the *Notes of a Native Son* collection, Baldwin said that “it must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality” (17) and that is what makes their relationship special in a way. Baldwin also emphasizes the secret desire for the new society, dreamt by the oppressed. It would be a new society where there would be no inequalities, there being two options for that: “either there will be no oppressed at all, or the oppressed and the oppressor will change places” (*Notes* 17), i.e. the power will no longer be in the hands of the white people. However, Baldwin is more inclined to believe this new society is not possible and that the desire that is left is to be accepted within the existing community.

What Baldwin is trying to express in his non-fictional works is the fact that the story of *the Negro* in America is in fact the story about America because it shows America’s sins and all their deeds throughout history, and, at the same time, it defines the identity of the white people as much as it defines the identity of the black people. The only thing the black man is trying to achieve in America is in fact quite simple: “that the white men cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being” (*Notes* 122). The question of the humanity of *the American Negro* is unique because it was the question used to divide the American nation. Since *the American Negro* was, “even as a slave, an inescapable part of the general social fabric, no American could escape having an attitude toward him” (*Notes* 125). This one thing that he seeks from his fellow countrymen is supposed to be simple and easy, but it is obviously the hardest thing to do for the American people. White men resist giving black men the humanity they not only seek, but very well deserve, because it allows them to escape being called to account for the sins of their ancestors. Recognizing the value of black men and treating them as human beings would mean that everything white people believed about black men until that very moment is neither accurate nor justified. Accepting

black people as equally valid human beings would mean accepting the sins of their white ancestors and white Americans cannot bear that happening to them because they, as a nation, strongly believe they are not to blame for any crimes committed in their 'great country'. However, bearing in mind the intertwined connection between white and black Americans, the dehumanization of *the Negro* is indivisible from the dehumanization of the whites because "the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his" (*Notes* 20). In order for both groups to develop their own identity, they need to acknowledge one another.

All this leads to the problem of national identity because, according to Baldwin, *American Negro* was ripped off of his history - it was taken away from him when he was shipped from Africa to 'the greatest country there is' - America. How are African-Americans supposed to develop and shape their national identity? They were taken away from the history that was supposed to be their heritage and they were given a new history, which is tough, bloody and tormenting. They are supposed to be American as much as every other person living in America, but how are they supposed to feel at home in a country that is constantly degrading them and making them feel less valuable than anyone else? They are always somehow alienated from their fellow countrymen and that is even to the point where people in other countries never believe they are American because everyone knows "black men come from Africa" (*Notes* 118). Even while not being in America, *American Negro* still has to fight for his own existence: "he finds himself involved, in another language, in the same old battle: the battle for his own identity" (*Notes* 88). It is extremely hard for African-American people to build their national identity because they do not feel African enough in order to embrace African history, and even if they did, they know that it is not their history to embrace. On the other hand, American legacy is not their legacy and they have to find something for themselves in the American history in order to develop their group identity.

To be truthful, we all have parts of us that we do not like but we have to be brave enough to face them and accept them because that is the only way of building our identity and embracing who we are. White and black people in America are co-existent and co-dependent and they are part of each other's identities no matter how much they strive to avoid accepting that. Baldwin said that "the American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible" (*Notes* 48) and while white Americans are trying to make everyone like them, it is important to emphasize the crisis which is faced by many African-Americans on the quest for their own identity, and that is the double alienation. It was an unspoken custom that black men are not supposed to marry white women or eat in white people's homes and that they were supposed to embrace things that make them 'whiter'. By denying them these things, they

are being alienated from the white community. On the other hand, those who choose to marry white women/men are facing the alienation from their own black community because, in their eyes, they are forgetting what it means to be *a Negro*. It is similar to what Rufus was facing in the novel *Another Country* because, being with a white woman, he was denied the acceptance of both the white and the black community.

Another popular non-fiction book written by James Baldwin is *The Fire Next Time*, which was written in 1963, and it was ranked among the top five on the bestselling list for 41 weeks. This book is composed of two letters, i.e. essays that were an even harsher representation of Baldwin's philosophy than the one in *Notes of a Native Son*: 'My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation' and 'Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind'. These two essays tackle two different themes; the first one discusses the role and the importance of race in American history, while the other one discusses the relationship between race and different religions (Christianity and Islam) as well as the relationship between white people and black people and their individual and shared history. Another thing that Baldwin tackles in the second essay is the notion of collective identity - both Negro identity and American identity, which were both predetermined mainly by history and race.

According to Pakrasi, this work is "a perceptive commentary on race relations by Baldwin viewed not only as a Negro, but as one having a deep insight into human psychology" (60). In the first essay, Baldwin writes to his nephew James, who was named after him. He says that he has begun the letter and torn it up five times, which gives his readers the impression that it was extremely hard for him to transfer his thoughts onto the paper. Prior to anything else, he says to his nephew that he resembles his father and his grandfather. Mentioning his father in the opening lines of his essay is significant for Baldwin because he did not have a good relationship with him, and that relationship played an important part in the quest for his identity.

Baldwin contrasts his nephew and his father with his grandfather emphasizing their shared qualities, as well as the ones that make them different. When mentioning his father, Baldwin says that he died before getting to meet his grandson because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him" (*The Fire* 291). This is extremely important because one mustn't let anyone tell him what kind of a person he is. Baldwin repeatedly insists that the only person to trust in the whole process of life is *you*. He continues by saying that his nephew is part of a new era, the one where the Negro left the land and came into the city. However, this new era brings its own troubles with it, and so he warns his

nephew that his only destruction could be the belief that he really is “what the white world calls a nigger” (*The Fire* 291). Baldwin tells him that because he loves him and he does not want him to have the same experience his uncle or his grandfather had.

What Baldwin is doing by writing this letter is, in a way, telling James about his family’s history. By mentioning his father’s and grandfather’s hardship, he gives him an opportunity to know the truth, which is the complete opposite of what Baldwin’s character John has experienced in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The opportunity to know his family history gives him a push in the right direction in the formation of his identity. However, Baldwin leaves it up to his nephew to find his own truth and he says: “Take no one’s word for anything, including mine - but trust your experience” (*The Fire* 293). What strikes one the most when reading about his brother’s hardship while growing up is the fact that Baldwin accuses his country and fellow countrymen of innocence. He says that neither him nor time nor history will ever forgive them for destroying so many lives of African-American people but the greatest crime of all is that they “do not know it and do not want to know it” (*The Fire* 292). Also, “it is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (*The Fire* 292), he emphasizes. This ignorance that white people are being accused of is one of many themes integrated both in Baldwin’s fiction and non-fiction.

Another theme that acts as a bridge between Baldwin’s fiction and non-fiction is the inevitable connection of white people and black people. He constantly draws the parallel between the white experience and the black experience where in the latter “you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (*The Fire* 293). No matter how different their paths are, they are and will be intertwined forever. “In his writing Baldwin repeatedly tries to understand how, as a black man, to love those white Americans who (in the main) hate you” (Farred 285). The fact that he is trying to love those who did him harm tells us a lot about Baldwin, and it is no wonder that, as Farred says, love is “at the heart of his philosophy” (285). He also tried to transfer that love onto his nephew by saying him there is no need for him to try to become like white people but he must accept them: “You must accept them and accept them with love” (*The Fire* 294), even though it will not be easy. Even though he was a sharp critic of Christianity, here we can see that he is advocating ‘an asymmetrical love’. What is more Christian than to love those who hate you? Despite his constant criticism, he is convinced in the power of love. Baldwin is convinced that many white Americans know better than to believe the black man is inferior to them but it is difficult for them to act on what they know. If they acted on it, they would be in danger of losing their identity, at least in their opinion. The question here is how real and how firm is this American identity if they are not willing to

accept themselves for who they are? Baldwin invites his nephew, but also his readers, to fight for the collective American identity with love: “we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to ease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (*The Fire* 294).

The connection between African-Americans and white Americans is visible throughout the second letter, i.e. essay, too. Skin color is presented as an insurmountable limitation in America and that is often realized pretty early in life by African-American people. Baldwin claims that black people are taught to despise themselves from the moment they are born because “this world is white and they are black” (*The Fire* 302), and that means “white people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (...), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared” (*The Fire* 302). In Baldwin’s opinion, the world reacts to the child long before the child realizes he/she is black and no parents can prepare their children for that no matter what they did. Parents are frightened by the fact their children think they can do anything white children do, and Baldwin knows that from his personal experience because the fear that he heard in his father’s voice when he realized that his son really believed he could do anything a white boy can do was different from any other fear he witnessed in his household. However, children find all kinds of reason to defend themselves against fears their parents make them feel, and so did Baldwin. He chose to do it with the fact that his father was old-fashioned. Also, in order to avoid your fears conquering you, they must be faced - this is something that he constantly tries to convey to his readers throughout his works.

In order to further emphasize the interconnection between blacks and whites, Baldwin compares their relationship with the one between parents and children by saying that African-Americans “know about white Americans what parents - or, anyway, mothers - know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way” (*The Fire* 344). That is, in fact, why African-Americans “have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred” (*The Fire* 344). Baldwin is trying to show that African-Americans know white Americans better than they know themselves and he is illustrating that by describing a typical historical American household where he says: “Ask any Negro what he knows about the white people with whom he works. And then ask the white people with whom he works what they know about him” (*The Fire* 345). Their lives are interwoven just as Baldwin has tried to show in his novel *Another Country*. It is important to emphasize the extension of this connection and that is the fact that white people can be free only if black people are free. In order to achieve their group, i.e. national identity, black and white people need each other deeply. They need to



accept themselves and each other to be able to live in peace because “the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion” (*The Fire* 346).

As it was mentioned earlier, the church played an important role in Baldwin’s life. It is also an important element connecting his fictional works and his essays. More importantly, church was an important factor in forming John’s identity in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. While reading *The Fire Next Time*, one cannot escape the similarities between Baldwin while he was growing up and John - the main character in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Like John, Baldwin decided to become a preacher because being just a worshipper would be too boring for him, but he also wanted to beat his father on his own ground. The church was crucial in the formation of Baldwin’s identity because, in a way, it gave him his first opportunity as a writer. While writing, preparing and delivering his sermons, he was given the opportunity to influence people with his words. Baldwin loved preaching because he felt “the Word” (*The Fire* 306) and what he loved the most was the feeling that the church and he were one. A very clear autobiographical element in the novel previously mentioned is Baldwin’s, i.e. John’s salvation. In his essay, Baldwin says: “I fell to the ground before the altar” (*The Fire* 304) and “I was on the floor all night” (*The Fire* 305). It took all night for the saints to pray for him to be ‘saved’. After that experience, he was able to fully embrace himself and continue his quest for identity with new clarity.

To sum up, Baldwin’s non-fiction serves as a perfect ground for the exploration of major Baldwin themes - the quest for identity, relationship between blacks and whites, the acceptance of one’s history, and the power and “the urgent necessity of love” (Leeming 100). Both in his professional and personal life, Baldwin “took side of those who were made into exiles and outcasts by barriers of race, sex, and class or who turned away from safety and chose the honorable path of tearing down such barriers” (Leeming xiii). Baldwin experienced all kinds of struggles during his lifetime, but he strongly insisted on the power of love for each other. By writing, he shed a new light on the African-American identity and he was truly a witness to the complexity of human relationships. As David Leeming wrote in the Preface to Baldwin’s biography; “his audience was the whole ‘nation’, and he incorporated the whole nation into his voice” (xiii).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a path to identity formation is certainly not easy. At times, it can even seem like an insurmountable challenge. Baldwin was a notable figure when it comes to defining the African-American identity in the United States because he gave us the opportunity to see it from different perspectives. His philosophy was clear and well-articulated, both in his fiction, and non-fiction. He wanted to invite people to explore and accept their past, own their mistakes, and experience a suffering of their own because that is the only way towards your identity formation. We all have parts that scare us, but we need to be brave enough to face them. White Americans need to be brave enough to accept the sins of their ancestors. They need to start giving the African-Americans the humanity they deserve because that is the only way for both groups to achieve their identities. The existence of white and black Americans is interwoven and they need to accept each other with love.

Baldwin is calling America out for its moral failure and wants it to be held accountable for what it has done. One of the things he says in his unfinished manuscript *Remember This House* is that “it comes as a great shock that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you.” The quest for African-American identity was a long, difficult, and violent path, which should not have been so for people who are as much American as their neighbors. Even though there have been some changes regarding racial relations, it is upon us to think about whether anything has actually changed in reality. It is worth coming back to Baldwin’s words because he said: “What time will bring Americans is at last their own identity” (*Notes* 90), and what remains is to read his works and question whether Americans have finally fulfilled their quest for identity.

Baldwin’s contribution to the formation of the African-American identity is huge because he provided his own experience and his own view of things. He pointed out the dangers of racism and its influence on the African-American identity. Besides that, he emphasized the importance of understanding our past in order to make sense of the present and the future. By writing about social challenges and norms, Baldwin tried to show us that they are there for a reason. Even though it often seems that they exist to limit us, social norms are also there to protect us from being hurt and from doing harm to others. Baldwin was aware that there are many obstacles on the path to the formation of the African-American identity but one must face them with courage and love because “hatred, which could destroy

so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law” (*Notes* 84).

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## 8. ABSTRACT AND KEY WORDS

James Baldwin comes into the spotlight once again due to the release of his FBI files, Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Baldwin is an inevitable figure when it comes to African-American identity. This paper examines racial relations and the African-American identity formation in the United States from James Baldwin's point of view. By examining some of Baldwin's works, I clarify the exceptional importance of his contribution to the African-American quest for identity. While exploring various kinds of identities, both through his fiction and non-fiction, Baldwin was able to convey the struggles of African-Americans on the path of identity formation in their own country. Baldwin wrote out of his own experience, which makes his contribution even more valuable. Due to experiencing it himself, Baldwin was able to illustrate the effect that race, religion, social status, and sexuality have on identity formation (both individual and collective). Through exploration of Baldwin's fiction and a variety of characters, I try to show two different approaches to African-American identity formation – the African-American identity inside the African-American community and the African-American identity in the context of American society. In order to understand his fictional works better, Baldwin's non-fiction must be taken into account. Reading his essays is almost like reading his autobiography, which is the perfect framework for further exploration of his works. By always being one step ahead of his time, Baldwin was successful in making his works timeless.

*Key words: James Baldwin, African-American, identity, fiction, non-fiction, race, religion, sexuality*