

Baldwin's fiction: liminal agency and the condition of blackness



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James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* and "The Man Child" are both texts that demonstrate how the isolation of characters can yield overtly violent outcomes. Though the perspective from which Baldwin challenges dominant forces differs between the two texts, the race of the protagonists seems to be the underlying factor in how the characters experience and combat their own oppression, if they experience it at all. These varying forms of oppression range from gender inequality to hate crimes, but Tish and Fonny's families are subjected to a condition by which they are trapped in their isolation and status with no viable way of escape. There are numerous similarities between the characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and "The Man Child", but Baldwin's black characters do not have the agency to exist in a space that fosters freedom, agency, or even love; those who face similar oppressive forces experience them differently specifically due to the fact that white characters are not subjected to a hellish wasteland.

As Baldwin expresses through both narratives, those who are able to exist comfortably within the confines of American ideology experience a life that is less constricted by oppressive forces. Early on in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish expresses the constrictive nature of the corridors both in prison and in the church. Tish as describes the situation, "I swear New York must be the ugliest and the dirtiest city in the world...If any place is worse, it's got to be so close to hell that you can smell the people frying. And, come to think of it, that's exactly the smell of New York in the summertime" (*Beale Street*, 9). Whether considering New York or in Puerto Rico, Baldwin describes both places as literal and metaphorical wastelands that people of color are forced to inhabit. In "The Man Child," Eric and his family view the space and land

that they own as representing opportunity through the patriarchal pursuit of happiness. While Jaime is, perhaps, ostracized in comparison to Eric's family, he is still a white male and thus has the means and opportunity to gain a stronghold within the American landscape. As Baldwin writes, " Eric rode his father's shoulders through the wide green fields which belonged to him, into the yard which held the house which would hear the first cries of his children" (" The Man Child," 74). The land for Eric's relatives is something they have the opportunity to own because their space is neither limiting nor suppressing. Eric's inherited land thus becomes a physical representation of an American idealism which breeds hope as well as of agriculture: both are key values in American philosophy. The contrasting nature of these two texts and how space is perceived in them demonstrates how Baldwin proclaims that the differences between black and white families cause black families to experience hell on earth while white families experience power through ownership.

Despite Baldwin's tendency to write from male perspectives, he does not shy away from exploring the roles of women in his works. In both texts, Baldwin emphasizes how powerful gender stereotyping forces women into boxes so restrictive that their value comes solely from their ability to reproduce. Women are only vessels for new life, as is evident through Tish's and Eric's mothers' stories. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* the child represents hope, which is something that is vital and necessary to black lives. In " The Man Child" the child that died was merely a representation of the nuclear family; as the son and heir, Eric is the key focus in the narrative. As is typical through American inheritance practices, Eric, the first born male, will gain

the land after his father dies. Therefore, Eric's mother's children have the ability to both own and gain land in comparison to Tish and Fonny's child, who is born in a hellish wasteland. Characters like Tish fall victim, at times, to internalized sexism, heteronormativity, and racism; Fonny faces similar circumstances. In the city and in black lives there is nothing to gain besides the representation of hope despite the treacherous conditions of their existence, at least in Baldwin's narratives.

The pressures of gender expression and masculinity exist as options in both texts, but it is Fonny's expression of white hegemonic masculinity that causes him to end up in prison. Both texts proclaim that there are overwhelming gender policing forces that yield to violence, but if black men fall into those practices then their freedom at risk. Fonny explains the cycle in which oppressive forces disallow the existence of black masculinity: "They got us in a trick bag, baby. It's hard, but I just want or you to bear in mind that they can make us lose each other by putting me in the shit" (Beale Street, 142). Though Fonny's act of protecting Tish against the Italian Thug is justifiable by moral law, it is unacceptable for a black male to protect his partner at the expense of the pride or authority of white men. This act directly causes Fonny to end up in prison, as his target of retaliation is an individual who is allowed to exist within the confines of white American masculinity. In contrast to Fonny, Jaime expresses his masculinity by killing Eric and asserting his power over things that are meant to be owned. Jaime retorts when he is chastised for hurting the dog, "It is my beast. And a man's got a right to do as he likes with whatever's his" ("The Man Child,"

64). Jaime's ability to own is something that Fonny, like other black characters in Baldwin's work, is unable to experience because of his race.

Though both texts have very different protagonists, the characters of Jaime and Daniel can be perceived as foils because they struggle with expressing their masculinity and feeling oppressed within their own liminal spaces or, simply, their bodies. Considering the naming of both these characters is vital when attempting to understand their roles as foil characters and as combatants against American ideological systems, especially in regards to masculinity. Baldwin's "Here Be Dragons" talks explicitly about the violence that presents itself in American masculinity. Baldwin writes in regard to the American ideal of sexuality and masculinity that "This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it has virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—the American boy evolve into complexity of manhood" ("Here Be Dragons," 678).

Sexuality is thus rooted in a type of violent dichotomy, as are other factors like race, gender, and masculinity. It is through this same theory that Daniel's story becomes a tragic story of marginalization in ideology. Sexual violence, as Baldwin emphasizes in many of his texts, is a tool used for the sexual gratification of white men, and Daniel becomes yet another victim of this violence. Daniel explains, "I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard, without he hear some nigger moan" (Beale Street, 108). The rape that Daniel experience in prison as well as the rape he witnessed both show the penetrative force of white ideology. Prison, according to this text, is an institution designed to oppress black men

and stop them from existing in the very hellish conditions that white men have designed in the outside world.

The naming of these two characters, Daniel and Jaime, highlights their significance both in and outside of the text. Baldwin's adherence to certain theological beliefs is important for understanding the themes that characters represent, especially in regards to how Baldwin intermixes morality and secular ideology. Though Jaime's name could be perceived as feminine or masculine, his violent actions can be viewed as a way for him to prove his masculinity by expressing it appropriately, or as any white American male would. Daniel's name relates him to the character of Daniel in the bible. The lion's den for Baldwin is New York and subsequently America, and the metaphorical lions are attacking Daniel, who is a vivid representation of the struggles of black masculine identity. Daniel is, perhaps, broken; he proclaims that the system itself is attacking his very existence. Jaime, in his nature, is privileged by the system and thus fully buys into it because his compliance will not lead to his execution. The fact that Daniel is presented as "feminine" because he openly cries, because he's metaphorically owned by the state, and because he was raped in prison all allow Baldwin to show that, despite the similarities between Daniel and Jaime, Daniel's mis-identification with masculinity causes him to experience violence and imprisonment while Jaime is merely forced to take agency.

True masculinity, for Baldwin, is an opaque ideology that is undoubtedly flawed but undoubtedly exists for the characters that he presents in both narratives. Tish and Fonny's fathers represent two sides of the same coin. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin represents the fluidity of masculinity, but <https://assignbuster.com/baldwins-fiction-liminal-agency-and-the-condition-of-blackness/>

in doing so he shows that black masculinity is a hindrance to social and political freedoms. Characters who are arguably liberated within the texts, such as Joe and Frank, struggle throughout the narrative to raise, and subsequently steal, enough money to pay for Fonny's bond. When facing overwhelming pressure, Frank submits to the justice system: " It's over. They got him. They ain't going to let him go till they get ready. And they ain't ready yet. And ain't nothing we can do about it" (Beale Street, 188). Despite the fact that Frank and Joe fit into a hegemonic masculine role because they are not physically restrained by the state, they are not perceived as weak because of their emotions, and they have agency inside their homes and in their communities; still, their blackness still makes them feel hopeless in the face of their white oppressors. Their expressions of gender and masculinity do not give them power, especially when displaying power would be most significant in their lives and the lives of their family members.

James Baldwin is a mastermind at exposing the turmoil behind the ideal of American masculinity. If *Beale Street Could Talk* and "The Man Child" both play a vital role in Baldwin's narratives surrounding gender, sexuality, gender expression, and race. James Baldwin asserts, through these two texts, that his principal characters face similar oppressive forces due to their varying identities, but it is the black characters who are ostracized, caged, and subjected to violence. This condition of blackness, as Baldwin indicates, disallows for freedom of any kind to the point where characters are systematically oppressed and end up locked in jail or end up living in a metaphorical hell. This hell, thus, becomes a wasteland for black bodies, and this wasteland is inescapable.

Works Cited

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