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Act as Lovers: Ethics of Love in James Baldwin's Early Works

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Introduction

"What did you do in Paris all that time?"
"Oh" - he smiled - "I tried to grow up."
(Baldwin, *Another* 237)

One of James Baldwin's greatest merits is to have truly been able to depict human nature, in all its ambiguity, with great care and sympathy. Baldwin's novels and essays have no heroes and no villains, everyone falls and then rises again, or in some cases does not, but the reader must finally sympathize with all the characters in their fundamental human nature. When Eric tells Cass that he tried to "grow up," he describes the fundamental journey of all of Baldwin's characters, a path that all enter but none can ever conclude. Growing up is fundamentally a process of love: it requires strength and courage, it requires self-knowledge but also engagement with others, it requires changing where needed and keeping one's ground elsewhere and it requires conscious choices and patience. Loving is one of Baldwin's fundamental themes and a question that he could never fully resolve. He engaged with a God-inspired love that bid him to love everyone, indistinctly, but he was also a black, openly queer man in a racist, homophobic society that oppressed him and rejected him. Indeed, love, or lack thereof, was and is a pivotal negotiation to engage with social issues, especially, in the case of the USA, the racial issue. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fundamentally disagreed on love, on the duty to love of the former and the mandate to act by any means necessary of the latter. Even modern civil and human rights movements such as Black Lives Matter are essentially rooted in what it means to love and be loved as a black person in modern USA. The phrase Black Lives Matter was born in a Facebook post in 2013, where Alicia Garza, an anti-police-brutality advocate, wrote what she described as a "love letter to black people" which she concluded with "black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter" (qtd. in Cobb). Worth and love are inherently tied in a discourse that leads from Baldwin to Black Lives Matter to give a fundamental recognition of human value starting from oneself to reach the rest of society. Love is a force, both personal and political, that drives the recognition of what Jesse Jackson called "our own sense of somebodyness" exactly because it demands intimate engagement with the bounds of oneself and the Other. In its socio-political dimension, Baldwinian love is

not, therefore, to be understood as an uncritical acceptance of white oppression but, in fact, as the very opposite, meaning a critical, and difficult, demand for America to engage more deeply with its promises and failures. Accordingly, all these leaders, activists, writers, and movements, throughout the decades, are brought together by what is finally a commitment to provide justice to the oppressed and a wish to make the USA a better place for everybody. While Baldwin offered scathing critiques of the USA, he recognized that it would be "a spiritual disaster to pretend that one doesn't love one's country" and, rather, he felt that "you may disapprove of it, you may be forced to leave it, you may live your whole life as a battle, yet I don't think you can escape it" (Baldwin, "Art"). It could be argued then, that for Baldwin and later movements such as BLM, critically engaging with the issues of his country, and arguably the world's, is a necessary labor of love.

Baldwin's conceptualization of love is grounded in the context of a 1950s and 60s USA, that acted as the stage for his complex work. Indeed, contextualizing Baldwin's work into his lived experience is a vital operation to provide a complete analysis of said works, since his amazing talents and visionary rhetoric came into the world just as major, historic events were happening. James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York, on the 2nd of August 1924, from a single mother (Leeming 3). His father's identity remains unknown, just as it remains unknown whether Baldwin knew his identity or not (Leeming 3). Surely, it is known that Baldwin recognized and called as father the man who was his stepfather, David Baldwin, whom his mother married in 1927, when Baldwin was still just two (Leeming 9). Both his mother and father had moved to the North from the Southern states in search for better job opportunities and quality of life but happened to find neither. David Baldwin, described by the author as a difficult and despotic man, was a preacher and worked hard to feed and house his large family of nine children and at his death, in 1943, that responsibility fell on James, as the eldest son (Leeming 41). Following a passionate conversion, at age fourteen Baldwin started preaching at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, and continued to do so for about two years, until, full of skepticism, he decided to leave the church, but importantly never his faith. His work as a preacher deeply influenced Baldwin's prose style, which many have defined as prophetic for its use of images and rhythm. Furthermore, his experiences growing up in Harlem and the themes, contexts and even events of his short-lived career in the church play a huge role in all of Baldwin's work, but especially in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which closely resembles his experience.

As a child, Baldwin attended Public School 24 where he first met a white teacher, Orilla Miller, who was the first to encourage and nurture Baldwin's play-writing talents

(Leeming 14). The author later attended Frederick Douglass Junior High School where he was taught by Countee Cullen (Leeming 21), a prominent poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Against his father's advice, Baldwin also attended high school at DeWitt Clinton High School, where he formed life-long friendships with white peers and directed the school paper, showing precocious literary talent (Leeming 26). After graduation and his father's death, with WWII raging in Europe, Baldwin's life changed, as the author started working menial jobs to support his family, jobs from which he was often promptly fired (Leeming 38). Nevertheless, the author still found time to write, which was ultimately his calling, and in 1944 he met renowned author Richard Wright, who at first acted as a mentor (Leeming 49). During this time, spent living in Greenwich Village, Baldwin first explored his sexuality, having relationships with both men and women (Leeming 45). In 1948, Wright helped him obtain a fellowship to write his first book, which enabled him to leave the USA and go to Paris, where he sought refuge from the racial and sexual oppression he faced in his native country (Leeming 48). Many of his early experiences in France are retold in the essays of the collection *Notes of a Native Son* and re-elaborated in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin would spend most of his life in a sort of self-imposed exile in France, between Paris and St. Paul de Vence, where he eventually made a stable home for himself and entertained many known guests from the literary, music and art scenes.

Baldwin also lived for long periods of time in Istanbul and made frequent trips back to the States. These visits often had two main purposes: visiting his family and participating in the fight for civil rights. Indeed, Baldwin participated in momentous events of the civil rights movement such as the March on Washington in 1963 (Leeming 229) and the Selma Montgomery March in 1965 (Leeming 246). By the early '60s, and especially after the publication of his essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind" in 1962, Baldwin was a widely known author and was often asked to appear on tv discussing issues of racism and integration. He often debated with Malcolm X, whom he knew personally; indeed, the author was even asked to write the screen-adaptation of Malcolm X's life after the leader's assassination (Leeming 288). Nevertheless, both the civil rights movement and the Nation of Islam and later the black panthers would exclude and criticize Baldwin for his sexuality. Indeed, throughout the years Baldwin had many different lovers and he would reflect on the experiences of interracial and homosexual love in his 1962 novel *Another Country*.

The author died in 1985, in his house in southern France, due to stomach cancer but was brought back to the US to be buried (Leeming 386). At his funeral some of his life-long friends, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka eulogized him, cementing

his status as a legend of the literary world (Leeming 387). Baldwin is part of a generation of black thinkers, like Frantz Fanon, that was able to use reflections on their personal experience to work out, in their fiction and non-fiction works, massive theoretical and philosophical concepts which are still relevant in 2022, some 60 years later. Their scope into the dynamics of race and power was able to challenge dominant views, in many ways being prophetic of the future that would come. In a moment of powerful social change and unrest such as the 50s and 60s were, Baldwin and his peers were able to imagine a new world "full of potentiality but already haunted by the specter of a failed to-come" (Drabinski and Farred 176).

In this thesis, I will propose that Baldwin elaborated throughout his career an "Ethics of Love." By using the words "ethics" I wish to indicate, following the Merriam Webster dictionary, "a guiding philosophy," which, in Baldwin's case, is informed by love. The author, it seems, repeatedly, throughout his fiction and nonfiction works tries to work out how it is possible to love those who hate you. This work will then look at Baldwin not only in its literary value, but also in philosophical and cultural terms, to understand what kind of questions the author raises of human life, community, and relation. Notably, this thesis aims to engage with the following questions: What are the characteristics of Baldwin's Ethics of Love? And how does Baldwin's Ethics of Love translate to his fiction works? Considering the incredible amount of written work that the author left, and the changes in his thought through his career, this thesis will scope Baldwin's earlier works, especially those published between 1955-1963, but it will reference, occasionally, later works, articles and interviews given by the author. Furthermore, it will aim at understanding and contextualizing Baldwin's earlier Ethics of Love to then apply such understanding to two of Baldwin's earlier novels, namely: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1955) and *Another Country* (1962).

The following work is situated at the intersection of Literary Studies and African American Studies. This is a particularly rich intersection to explore the complex production of afro-descendants in North America, that will allow to broaden the research towards other related areas of study, such as Cultural Studies and Philosophy. Notably, this thesis would like to propose a philosophical and cultural reflection on Baldwin's nonfiction to produce an interpretative frame that will be used to investigate his fiction work. The choice to work on African American Literature is not only due to the vast experimentation of the genre with different modes of expression, but also and most importantly to the abundance and depth of social and philosophical ideas that these works provide. As Maryemma Graham

rightfully points out in her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, African American Literature poses an extremely vibrant object of research exactly because it is embedded in "a history of achievement and cultural heritage that raises as many questions as it answers" (1). Especially during and after the Civil Rights Movement, when Baldwin wrote, the African American novel had a particular focus on "culture and cultural transmission" and it "served up notions of human possibility," which ties in well with a literary, cultural, and philosophical exploration on the Ethics of Love (Graham 2).

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will aim to outline Baldwin's Ethics of Love, by way of analysis of Baldwin's writings and comparison with other contemporary political and academic figures. Firstly, I will work to establish why love is a relevant topic of discussion when dealing with past and present political landscapes. Drawing on Black Lives Matter's adoption of Baldwin as a political forefather, I will outline how contemporary social and political movements share Baldwin's response to racial, sexual and gender oppression within an Ethics of Love, therefore making an investigation of love's deeper meaning relevant. To begin an analysis of how love can work and be defined, I will start by setting as frameworks the Ancient Greek concepts for love: *eros*, *philia,* and *agape.* Starting from these grounding concepts, I will then define Baldwin's Ethics of Love, as established in *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*, as a twofold movement: it starts from the rejection of hate in favor of resistance and resilience, that are to be found in love, and then strives to continually reach an acceptance of the duty to love the Other[1] by taking a sometimes-painful responsibility towards all human beings, regardless of their specific identity categories. Love in Baldwin's terms, a subsequent section will show, does not only have elements of *philia* and *agape* but, importantly, also has major elements of *eros*. Baldwin's love requires a visceral, physical entanglement to allow the breakdown of Western epistemological barriers and the entrance within the Other's skin. In understanding of love as erotic I also refer to Audre Lorde's understanding of erotic love as necessary in creating a type of physical immanence that will in turn lead to personal and political action. Following this analysis, I will then question whether love can indeed be political by contrasting Baldwin's thought with Hannah Arendt's strict separation of the Public and Private Realms. Where Arendt saw love as a type of emotion that can solely exist when

[1] In the following work, "the Other," capitalized to avoid confusion, refers to the colonized others "who are marginalized by colonial discourse" and "identified by their difference from the centre" (Ashcroft et al. 155)

private, and by definition will be corrupted when made public, Baldwin believed that love could only be real in the communion of people, therefore making it in a force that creates community rather than isolation. Having established love's political potential, I will turn to consider love as understood by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, both of whom Baldwin had known and worked within the fight for civil rights, or human rights, as Malcolm X would promptly stress. This section will place Baldwin mid-way in a "love spectrum" between King and Malcom X and will finally show how both figures had tended towards the center of such a spectrum towards the end of their lives. In the final section of the chapter, I will explore similarities and differences between Baldwin's and Frantz Fanon's concepts of liberation. Notably, I will juxtapose Baldwin's Ethics of Love with Fanon's conception of the necessity of violence in the upturning of fraught racial relations.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I will propose an analysis of Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that will hinge on the theme of rebellion against father figures, both God and actual fathers. Firstly, I will examine the religious context that comprises the novel's setting: the anxiety brought by a vengeful, Old Testament God, making sexual desires into moral dirtiness, and the fundamental unlovability of blackness by a white God. Having set the frame within which the novel's action takes place, I will then propose an in-depth analysis of the novel's four major characters. The character of Florence will highlight the failure of love within an entrenchment in hate, which leads the woman to live a life in search for vengeance and, unsurprisingly, to an unsatisfying life. The character of Gabriel will highlight the failure of love in hypocrisy and in the excesses of the ego, which will finally be interpreted as an expression of fear. The character of Elizabeth will highlight the failure of love in the lack of a courageous stance in front of the real possibility of love itself, leading to regret. Finally, the character of John, the protagonist, will allow the author to show how, despite a history of love's failures, a young black boy can rebel towards hate and vengeance and love himself deeply, thus ending the cycle of hurt that his family is in. The final section of the chapter will move to consider Baldwin's own personal rebellion to father figures, to find love in other, alternative father figures, which I will propose could be understood as Otherfathers, in a re-elaboration of Patricia Hill Collins's concept of Othermothers.

The third and final chapter of this thesis will focus on Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, and will notably focus on how unsanctioned sexual desires, both homosexual and interracial, serve as necessary motives to push the characters to overcome their racial and sexual innocence. This chapter will be structured around the novel's four

main couples and looks at romantic relationships as a major mode of personal and community engagement. Starting from the interracial couple composed of Leona and Rufus, in this section I will explore notions of black masculinity and black nationalism and the fetishization of the white female figure in the fight for masculine supremacy. Moving to the second interracial couple of the novel, Vivaldo and Ida, I will explore notions of white masculinity and I will frame the acceptance of homosexual desire as a vital action to open up to the experience of love, which requires the overcoming of racial and sexual innocence. For the couple composed by Cass and Richard, I will explore how the safety of white heteronormativity acts as a shield to the possibility of real reciprocal knowledge in the couple and therefore the need for Cass to betray that safety by having an affair with Eric to allow the couple to move forward. Finally, I look to the couple of Eric and Yves, and to the character of Eric most notably, as an expression of the fine balancing between sexual and gender fluidity and active and conscious social positioning. This novel, I will finally argue underlines how, in order to love, one must first sympathize with the Other's pain, namely, one must learn how to take responsibility for the Other's pain. Therefore, following Emmanuel Levinas conceptualization of the ethical face to face encounter, I will argue that interracial sympathy is a necessary act of taking responsibility for the Other, once we allow the Other to come close to us.

Chapter One: "Not A Pretty Story" - Why and How We Need Love

To begin this thesis, we must first take a step back and ask, why did Baldwin talk about love? Or most essentially, why do we need love when dealing with complex socio-political situations? The present political situation all over the world is nothing short of fractured and love does not seem as the most obvious answer, at a societal level. As I look at the world around me, as a young European woman, I wonder if the progress we boast of is somewhat of an illusion, and the deeper, meaningful changes needed to reason with those who would oppose fundamental human rights must still be faced. Today, the situation in Baldwin's native USA, is, of course, no different from Europe's. When Barack Obama was elected as President of the United States in 2009, many, perhaps naively, believed that his election would usher in a new, post-racial USA. This, of course, has most violently been disproven by Donald Trump's controversial and divisive presidency, which followed Obama's, from 2017 to 2021. In an iconic 1965 debate at the Cambridge Union Society, whose video has over 3.5 million views on YouTube, Baldwin mocked the then US Attorney General Robert Kennedy for stating that it was "conceivable that in 40 years in America we might have a Negro President" (Baldwin and Buckley 87). Baldwin points out, with the sharp irony that distinguishes him, that for the black Harlemites who witnessed such a statement "Bobby Kennedy only got here yesterday and now he is already on his way to the presidency. We were here for 400 years and now he tells us that maybe in 40 years, *if you are good*, we may let you be President" (Baldwin and Buckley 87; emphasis added). If Robert Kennedy was indeed prescient in the real possibility of a black man becoming President forty years later, Baldwin was also right in scornfully recognizing that it was not so much a black presidency that would make a difference as much as the recognition of those four-hundred years of black lives that had built the country. In many ways, the tumultuous political situation of the 1960s is not so dissimilar to the political situation we are living today, since many of the issues are staggeringly the same. Perhaps, the clearest parallel that can be drawn from Baldwin's 1960s to today's situation is a shared feeling of disillusionment. In the above-mentioned debate, Baldwin notes that "we have a civil rights bill now. We had the 15th Amendment nearly 100 years ago. If it was not honored then, I have no reason to believe that the civil rights bill will be honored now"

(Baldwin and Buckley 33). As will be further explored throughout the ensuing chapter, the hopeful and integrationist Civil Rights movement championed by Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was gradually substituted by the more reactionary Black Panther Party. The acknowledgement of political and civil rights in the laws of the country simply was not enough to effect what was just as needed: a change in culture. Those living in the 2010s and the current early 2020s have seen Barack Obama's "Yes We Can" being followed directly by Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again," and they have remarked that having a black man in the highest position of power was not representative of a change in the culture of race relations. Both periods of time then, it could be argued, share a degree of disillusionment with the naked power of politics to effect change, and understand the importance of coupling them with a change in social life. Therefore, though in different modalities, the 2010s have seen an increased political participation, with the rise of strong political and social movements, chief among them Black Lives Matter (BLM).

BLM, as its website notes, was founded in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of the police officer who murdered Trayvon Martin, a black American teenager. What perhaps drew the movement to international influence was its expansive response to George Floyd's murder by a police officer in the early summer of 2020, a death whose brutality and senselessness was captured in a grueling video. BLM's declared mission is "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities […] by creating space for black imagination and innovation, and centering black joy" ("About"). Not surprisingly then, BLM has found in Baldwin's voice and message a prophetic echo of their own voices and mission. Thomas Chatterton Williams notes, in his 2015 *New Yorker* piece on Baldwin, that Baldwin's peculiar persona makes him so particularly appealing to modern movements:

> Where his cosmopolitan, nonconformist interests and way of life rendered him suspect to many in his later years, he now appears prescient, too enlightened for his time. The same characteristics of the Baldwin brand that so "estranged" him from the concerns of his generation and of black America writ large—his intersectionality before that was a thing—are what make him such an exemplar of the decidedly queer-inflected mood of the Black Lives Matter era now.

In Williams's view then, what makes Baldwin so relevant to the present is exactly what made him somewhat of an outcast in the past. Although the scholar William Maxwell disagrees with Williams on the exact extent to which Baldwin might have been an actual

outcast in the past, he does agree that "Baldwin's renewed appeal is linked to the queer theory and queerer historicism of BLM" (816). Baldwin's merit, as he is read in the present, is to have understood race as an issue standing in a groove of identity questions that could not possibly stand alone, or as Maxwell terms it "the proto-intersectional Baldwinian question of race-and-sex-and-more" (815). Baldwin offers BLM an access to the civil rights era that is necessary to insert them into a history of political and social mobilization, while also being sensitive to issues of gender and sex that had once been considered as separate battles.

It is not just Baldwin's attention to the convergence of oppressions that makes him so relevant to today's battles, but it is also, perhaps, the style of his prose, elegantly hypotactic, and the prophetic deliveries of his speeches, closely bordering sermons. A perfect example of the emotive value of his performances can be found in the black and white video of the Cambridge debate, when Baldwin slowly, theatrically says: "*I* picked the cotton, *I* carried it to the market, *I* built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing" (Baldwin and Buckley 33; emphasis added). The words dramatically echo off the walls of the hall and hit with all their naked truth the white audience that sits listening, mesmerized and petrified at the same time. There is something incredibly personal yet stunningly universal in Baldwin's well-built arguments and yet it is not just the arguments themselves that make Baldwin's speech so powerful, it is his delivery. Compared to the undergraduate students who precede him and William F. Buckley who follows him, Baldwin's delivery is much slower, it builds silence and momentum and hits the listener in a way that the other speakers are simply unable to. This is, in many ways, representative of Baldwin's enduring legacy, his ability to enter his audience's mind not just logically but affectively. At the same time, his predilection of complex syntax makes Baldwin appreciable exactly for the "fundamental *un*-tweetability of his prose" (Maxwell 818; emphasis in original). His style is then both modernly performative but also perfectly representative of a "felt pastness of a selective black past" that "can be measured for present use" (Maxwell 818). Indeed, the understanding of past, present and future as expressed by Baldwin is what, in sum, links most closely the author to modern social and political movements.

Baldwin held the core belief that for all Americans, of any shade and color, to find a measure of peace, America's history of violence had to be reckoned with, and the discourse of a chosen, supreme civilization in constant and necessary progress had to be abandoned. In the essay "Many Thousands Gone," collected in *Notes of a Native Son*,

Baldwin wrote that "the story of the Negro in America is the story of America […]. It is not a very pretty story" (26). The recognition of the truth of such a statement is the main battleground over American identity and modern race relations. The discourse surrounding history of the USA, a discourse of alleged freedom, democracy and continuous progress, with its heroes and conquests, is the necessary foundation of white American identity. In acknowledging that the history of the USA is not a story of white success but a history of black pain, and it is most certainly "not a pretty story," Baldwin is putting into question the very core of white identity. Baldwin believes that the historical discourse that Americans accept as the truth shapes the future of Americans going forward, which is exactly why he understands that a reckoning with history is necessary. Until such a reckoning can be affected, both Baldwin and BLM maintain a somewhat Afropessimistic outlook on the present and future of the USA. Briefly, Afropessimism looks critically at the discourse of liberation that has made up much of the mainstream debate on race and understands the violence of the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery as materially present. Saidiya Hartman, one of Afropessimism's foundational scholars, writes, in her seminal work *Lose Your Mother*, that "if slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" ("Prologue" 6). It is exactly the lingering of those hierarchies of human life, what she terms as the "afterlife of slavery," that determine what BLM actively protests: "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman, "Prologue" 6).

Baldwin takes a further step and, starting from a Afropessimist position, considers how this afterlife of slavery can possibly be dealt with in the present, or otherwise put, how the impasse of race relations can be overcome, and his answer is love. Where Hartman would see the resolution of the impasse in "nothing less momentous than yet another revolution" ("Prologue" 40), Baldwin imagines black and white lives outlasting to the afterlife of slavery through the work of love. Baldwin's thought-provoking understanding of race relations radically upturns mainstream understandings of where the responsibility for change truly lies. In a 1963 Kenneth Clark's broadcast titled *The Negro and the American Promise*, later giving the title to Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, Baldwin says: "I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. […] If I'm not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then *you've got to find out why*. And the

future of the country depends on that, whether or not it is able to ask that question" (Baldwin*, I am Not* 107; emphasis added). Baldwin therefore sees the work of love as a work of responsibility: to act with love towards black Americans, white Americans will have to learn to get to know themselves and have the courage to challenge the truths they hold as unchangeable; Black Americans will have to demand that whites do the work of love, by letting white Americans engage deeply and personally with them. Love, for Baldwin, is the necessary force to open "some kind of dialogue between those people who enjoy the American dream and those other people who have not achieved it," without which "we will be in terrible trouble" (Baldwin and Buckley 87). Therefore, BLM, Maxwell notes, rather than engaging in outright revolution, adopts Baldwin's "humbler imaginative solution to the impasse of overdue emancipation, a recipe for outlasting the longue durée of black confinement by embracing the longue durée of a free-ranging black style" (819). This is exactly why, then, Maxwell argues, authors like Ralph Waldo Ellison or Richard Wright have not received as much attention by contemporary activists as Baldwin has, for Baldwin's paradoxical "polarization of affect" that has him preach both love between white and black Americans while at the same time recognizing the necessary anger of black Americans (Maxwell 825). Therefore, this thesis will contend, following Baldwin's work, that the hope the world needs now can only be affected by recognizing hate, and, importantly, its historical roots, to counter it with a love that is firstly personal and then political.

Love is a question that touches everyone's life, eventually and however fleetingly: how to love and be loved, what love does and, the core question, what love is, seem to have filled countless pages since the dawn of time and have vibrated in every lyric of every song. Simply put, love is an inherently human question. Importantly for the work of James Baldwin, love can also be understood as a social and political force, able to shift the balances of power and thus reshape lives and countries. Having understood love as such an all-encompassing question, the aim of this chapter can only humbly be to contextualize how love was understood by James Baldwin and by some important contemporary critics that shared, with variations, or countered, Baldwin's views, to finally form a conceptual base for his Ethics of Love, that will then be relevant to analyze Baldwin's earliest novels. Notably, this chapter will first provide a brief account of the Ancient Greek concepts for love, *eros*, *philia,* and *agape*, which will later be used as a sort of unit of measure in comparisons made between Baldwin's and other authors' views of love. Afterwards, the chapter will move to Baldwin's early understanding of love, as expressed most poignantly

in some of his earlier essays. Having established this theoretical foundation, this chapter will then move to comparing Baldwin's views with Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic, which will lead to a shared understanding of political love as *eros*, and not only as *agape* or *philia*. In a subsequent move, this chapter will explore if love can indeed be political, by comparing Baldwin's Ethics of Love with Hannah Arendt's, who had written to Baldwin criticizing his "Letter from a Region in My Mind." Afterwards, this first chapter will turn to consider love as understood by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, both of whom Baldwin had known and worked with in the fight for civil rights, or human rights, as Malcolm X would promptly stress. The final section of the chapter will explore similarities and differences between Baldwin's and Frantz Fanon's concepts of liberation. Moving now to the first section, it will attempt to contextualize a historical vision of the concept of love.

1.1 Love: *eros*, *philia,* and *agape*

Starting from anyone's lived experience, it is somewhat obvious to state that there are many different types of love: the way a parent loves a child is different from the way someone may love their partner. This fairly clear distinction is further complicated by the fact that, whereas love may indeed be recognized as a universal feeling, the way we understand it is also inherently tied to our value systems, making love a feeling that is often culturally informed. Every culture, and religion, has assigned a specific name to a specific understanding of what love is, which, while still maintaining some general similarities, points to the difficulty in providing a universal definition for it. Some of the most built-upon definitions in the Western world are surely those conceptualized by the Ancient Greeks. The three main concepts of love that the Greeks distinguished are, as mentioned above, *eros*, *philia,* and *agape*.

Starting from *eros*, its meaning, according to the respected Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon, is "*love*, mostly of the sexual passion." Whereas we nowadays understand this word as pointing to a sexually-connotated concept, by interrogating it further it will be possible to uncover a much more nuanced meaning. As Cyril C. Richardson elaborates in his useful essay on Greek and Christian Love, *eros* is the "principle of movement in the soul" to reach a status of mystic contemplation (174). As the soul is awakened by *eros*, "in the moment of romantic passion," it has then the choice of either "lust" or "creativity" (Richardson 174). Insomuch as lust is understood by Plato as

unproductive or even detrimental to the one experiencing it, *eros* as creativity is instead conceived as the "power that mediates between the divine and the mortal," allowing to reach the status of contemplation of "Essential Beauty" (Richardson 175). Interestingly, once reached the status of contemplation, for Plato, there is no more need for love since love stems from a lack that once fulfilled ceases to exist; as Richardson explains, "contemplation, and not personal relations, stands highest in the hierarchy of value" (175). Plato's understanding of *eros*, then, shares with Stoicism its final result, self-sufficiency, without sharing its means: whereas *eros* reaches self-sufficiency by fulfilling desire, Stoicism reaches it by negating it. Compared to more modern and general visions of love, this classic conception of *eros* understands love as a need to be overcome through the act of creativity, whereas, arguably, the innate need for affection could only be matched by loving.

Unlike *eros*, *philia* means "friendliness, amiability," to be understood as an "affectionate regard […] usually between equals" (Liddell and Scott). In Aristotle's understanding of *philia*, the quality of the members participating in the relationship is central, in fact, "the highest love is that between two equally virtuous persons" (Richardson 176). This implies that one can only wish so much good to a friend, otherwise the other will become unequal, in terms of virtue, to oneself, rendering the relationship impossible. Consequently, it will then also provide the tenet that a friendship lacking in equality is destined to end. This concept may be somewhat limiting, as it does not understand the "potentiality" of people but only their "actuality" (Richardson 178). Furthermore, some love relationships cannot be rooted in equality by their very own nature, as, for example, may be the case of the relationship of a child with its parents. For this reason, Aristotle introduces the idea, dear to Christianity, of *Caritas* or self-love. Following Aristotle's principle of correspondence, "there is a basic correspondence between the good man's relation with himself and his relations with his friends" since "our feelings toward our friends are an extension of our regard for ourselves" (Richardson 177). Differently from Plato's understanding of love as *eros* then, Aristotle's stress on equality and correspondence entails a continuous need for others to be able to contemplate one's virtue in the friend, rather than Plato's final reaching of self-sufficiency and therefore the complete fulfillment of the need or lack one felt.

The third main category of love, as understood by the Ancient Greeks, is *agape* which is "the love of husband and wife" or "love of God for man and of man for God" (Liddell and Scott). In the Christian meaning of *agape*, love from God comes to humans as

a gift, meaning it finds them before they search for it; thus, if compared to *eros* and *philia*, love as *agape* is realized neither within creativity nor within equality, it comes from "the overflowing powers of the source of existence" (Richardson 178). Indeed, as it will be further explored in the following sections, one of the main features of God's love for his creation is that it is highly asymmetrical. What can arguably be considered as the founding event of God's love, the crucifixion, was highly unequal, as of course "there can be no love that equals that of God the Father sacrificing his Son in order that all of humanity might be saved" (Farred 285). Furthermore, in the New Testament *agape* stands for different types of love, love for God and love for other humans, but, as Richardson rightly points out, "it is not possible to love God in the same way in which we love others" since "the relation of the self to the Ground of its existence is not an interpersonal relation" (Richardson 179). If used with the meaning of love for others, or "love thy neighbor as thyself" (King James Version, Matthew 22.39), *agape* entails "spontaneous concern for another's genuine interest" (Richardson 179), a concern that must extend also to one's enemies. In loving the enemy, we recognize that they are "our equal fellow humans" but, importantly, this does not exclude the right to feel anger against one's oppressor and to rebel against it (Richardson 179). In its quest to love those who do not love you, *agape* proves itself once more to be asymmetrical: following the example of God's love for his creation, agape must be "an act of supreme Love" where one always loves more than the other (Farred 286). When *agape* is used with the meaning of love towards God, it should be understood as a synonym for serving; this type of love forms a symbiotic relationship where, by removing the barrier between difference and identity, the self can yield to the power of God's love. Unlike loving one's fellow human then, *agape,* in this sense, calls for a self-abandonment to God that will in turn allow one to reach "true selfhood" (Richardson 180).

Agape and *eros*, in particular, have been interpreted as opposing by Christianity, the latter as "egocentric love striving upward" and the former as "divine love descending" (Richardson 184). Nevertheless, a more valid question to be asked about the difference between these two categories of love is rather, as Richardson points out, tied to what we understand to be "the final end of man," is that mystic contemplation or fruitful relationships with other fellow human beings? *Agape* looks at human relations as a fine balance between self-love and abandonment to God's love, *eros* is instead concerned with creativity, and whilst it also requires self-love, under the guise of self-confidence, and abandonment to beauty, it does so within oneself.

Having now established these three classic categories of love, as understood by the Ancient Greeks, this chapter will now move to Baldwin's conceptualization of Ethics of Love, where these former categories will serve as a framework.

1.2 Baldwin's Ethics of Love: *Notes of a Native Son*

Love is one of the central themes to be recognized in Baldwin's work, both fiction and non-fiction, perhaps because it encompasses fundamental elements of his personal struggles, first and foremost his ambivalent relationship to Christianity and his just as complicated positioning in a racially fraught USA. In this thesis Baldwin's Ethics of Love is understood in a twofold argument: firstly, Baldwin recognizes that hate destroys the hatemonger just as much as the hated and therefore finds the need for an "adjustment" to survive and overcome it; secondly, in light of his journey in faith, Baldwin finds that the "adjustment" to be made is fundamentally a push towards love, understood as an act of responsibility and openness towards other fellow humans. For the purpose of establishing an understanding of Baldwin's Ethics of Love, this subchapter will, notably, refer to five of Baldwin's essays: "Everybody's Protest Novel," "Many Thousands Gone," and "Notes of a Native Son," from Baldwin's first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, first published in 1955, and to "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," from Baldwin's third collection of epistolary essays, *The Fire Next Time*, published in 1963.

Interestingly for Baldwin's thought, his discussion of love does start from its exact opposite: hate. Indeed, hate is exactly what the author imputes to the protest novel, when discussing Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[2]. Baldwin critiques Stowe's need to "present a complete picture," making her novel into a "catalogue of violence" (*Notes* 14). Her focus on the fieriest representations of hate completely obliterates "the only important question: what it was […] that moved her people to such deeds" (Baldwin, *Notes* 14), wondering, therefore, where the source of hate might be located. Whereas Baldwin recognizes that Stowe is much more a pamphleteer than a novelist, and that her aim, therefore, was to simply prove that slavery was wrong, he does

[2] In the *Notes of a Native Son*'s "Autobiographical Notes," Baldwin states that he began "plotting novels at about the time [he] learned to read" and the two books he cites as a major influence on his early life are *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities* (3), making Stowe's work a major motivator in Baldwin's career as a writer.

feel that her work fails to reach a truth much more complete, but also ambiguous and paradoxical, that would serve to "free us from ourselves" (*Notes* 15). To Baldwin, the novelist's responsibility is not to affect change directly but to use his "power of revelation" to create "a journey more vast than reality" (*Notes* 15-16). In the context of this work then, it seems that Baldwin is suggesting that an "honest man and a good writer," such as he claims he wants to be (*Notes* 9), should work towards a difficult, and perhaps painful, Ethics of Love, rather than a clear-cut narration of hate, and this is exactly what he will work towards.

With a similar critique, Baldwin famously discussed Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and namely the character of Bigger Thomas. According to the author, Bigger Thomas is a descendant of Uncle Tom, insomuch as he is burdened by hatred, having "accepted a theology that denies him life" and admits "the possibility of his being sub-human" (*Notes* 22). In fact, Baldwin finds Wright's work itself to be filled with a most "unrewarding rage," that went on to form the most complete portrait of "the fantasy that Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro" (*Notes* 34). Hate therefore cages blackness within a dialectical relationship with whiteness, where blackness is forever defined by and through whiteness, creating, therefore, a white fantasy of the black American that is both unrelated to but constitutive of reality. Indeed, Wright tries to make Bigger into a "social symbol, revelatory of social disease and prophetic of disaster" (Baldwin, *Notes* 35), meaning that he is only relevant in his actions and agency in his own social context but has no inward introspection, and, therefore, that he is a myth, not a person. This is what truly makes Bigger into a "native son": he is the "nigger"[3] of our imaginations (Baldwin, *Notes* 38). Like many of the intolerably degraded, Bigger's story is precipitated by his "forcing into the arena of the actual those fantastic crimes of which [we] have been accused of" (Baldwin, *Notes* 38), meaning that since he has internalized society's ideas of him, he goes on to act just like they expect him to, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. When Bigger Thomas finally dies, he does not die trying to fight for his family, rather he dies due to "his hatred and self-hatred […] and his own fierce bitterness at having been born one of them" (Baldwin, *Notes* 40). Putting this idea in different terms we might say that Bigger Thomas's lack of self-love, and consequently of love for his

[3] It is important to note that the use of the slur "nigger" is opposed, in Baldwin's work, to the use of "negro" which has instead a neutral connotation. "Nigger" is used to refer to the debasing view of white Americans towards black Americans. The very same idea expressed in the text above is also present in *The Fire Next Time*, where Baldwin warns his nephew that he could "only be destroyed by believing that [he] really [is] what the white world calls a *nigger*" (*Fire* 13).

fellows, left him unprepared for life and ultimately led to his death. Furthermore, Bigger's lawyer's final speech to the jury should serve to restore Bigger's humanity, by shifting the blame to the "awful sum of generations of oppression" (Baldwin, *Notes* 41) but this does not convey the truly complex situation of black Americans[4]. It is not just a matter of a relationship of oppression and servitude, it is not only motivated by hate, but also "a *blood* relationship" that we cannot begin to understand until we accept "the force and anguish and terror of love" that it contains (Baldwin, *Notes* 42). Baldwin argues that each black subject must make a "paradoxical adjustment" to his or her own private Bigger, his or her "dark and dangerous and unloved stranger" (*Notes* 43) that is fundamentally part of him or herself; differently from Bigger though, the black subject must not be consumed by him as Bigger was, and should rather even make use of him, giving black life its ironic element. Bigger is a reinforcement of "American guilt and fear" (Baldwin, *Notes* 43) towards the stereotyped oppressed black subject: if black is the color of damnation, Bigger can only die alone and guilty of terrible deeds, because "he glories in his hatred" (Baldwin, *Notes* 44). We may want to work towards the liberal dream, represented by *Native Son*, of a color-blind future to be built in Bigger's wake, but, for Baldwin, "the battle is elsewhere" (*Notes* 45); It will be hard fought in life itself, where there is no perfect good or evil, "where no one's hands are clean" (Baldwin, *Notes* 45). The protest novel then, for Baldwin, is informed exactly by a model that favors terror over real engagement and far from bringing greater freedom it is actually more of a "mirror of our confusion, dishonesty and panic immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (*Notes* 19). The protest novel's main fault, in sum, is that instead of accepting humanity in "its beauty, dread and power" it rejects it, ultimately placing race over love (*Notes* 23).

Indeed, starting from his critique of what we might term as an ethics of hate in protest novels, Baldwin is then able to move the very same analysis he made of Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas to his own life, implicitly placing his story in lieu of Bigger's story, to portray himself as a Native Son who chooses a different ending.

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[4] In the following work, I will use "black American" to refer to black and brown-skinned Americans, descending from those Africans who were first brought to the American continent as enslaved people. The choice for this compound was made by excluding other options that were deemed less acceptable or precise: firstly, I excluded using "Negro," Baldwin's word of choice, as the Merriam Webster Dictionary tags it as dated and offensive; secondly I also excluded African American as I wanted to underline in this text that black Americans are fully, and as many authors have suggested, perhaps the most, representative of Americanness of all and I did not want, therefore, to lead their identity back to Africa. After all, as Baldwin himself emphasizes: "Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other [country]," they are the painful product of America (Baldwin, *Fire* 30).

Baldwin's upbringing had been deeply impacted by his father's profound bitterness and distrust towards white people, which later turned into paranoia, but Baldwin had not shared those sentiments until the summer before his father's death, when he started working in defense plants in New Jersey. While working there, Baldwin found himself working among black and white southerners; while he knew of the reality of the South, Baldwin started only then to experience life under Jim Crow laws, such as not being served in diners and restaurants but also having separate living quarters and leisure spaces. The author retells, in particular, of an instance in which, having been refused service in a restaurant, he threw a water mug at the waitress. Only the appearance of his white friend allowed him to escape and avoid the consequences of his actions. In this situation, Baldwin realized that his life was in danger "not from anything other people might do but from the hatred [he] carried in his own heart" (98). Mirroring Bigger's story, this was the year when the author "first contracted some dread, chronic disease," the disease of anger and bitterness, which, according to him, every black American has acquired at some point down their path; just as importantly though, and in contrast to Bigger's story, Baldwin underlines that everyone "has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously, or surrendering to it" (*Notes* 96), and to him finding an "adjustment," is the way forward. Furthermore, when later listening to his father's eulogy at the funeral, Baldwin reflects on the difficult choices his father must have faced, especially the "impossibility every parent in that room faced: how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child [...] a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself" (*Notes* 107). It seems then, that there is no judgment on Baldwin's part on those who come to be unable to make the adjustment, but he seems to keep suggesting that, to live a mentally and physically healthy life, the black American must find an "antidote," must find an "adjustment."

In a final reflection on his father's passing, Baldwin advances that while "the dead man mattered, the new life mattered […] blackness and whiteness did not matter" and to believe that they did would mean to participate in one's own destruction, for "hatred [...] never failed to destroy the man who hated, and this was an immutable law" (*Notes* 114). The author then comes to the conclusion that one must always keep in mind two opposing ideas, which resemble closely the Christian conception of *agape* outlined in 1.1: the first is to accept all life and man as it is without any hatred; the second is to never accept any injustices as inevitable, but to fight to end them.

So far, Baldwin's Ethics of Love can be seen as a call to a whole-hearted embracing of a complicated reality, where everyone is tied to one another in virtue of a shared human

nature, as opposed to the temptation of turning towards the simplicity, the clear-cut divisions of hatred, that, without fail, destroys the life of those who harbor it. Love is never an uncomplicated endeavor and requires as much, if not even more, courage as hating, in Baldwin's circumstances. As Leeming puts it in his Baldwin biography, "love for Baldwin cannot be safe; it involves the risk of commitment, the risk of removing the masks and taboos placed on us by society" (126). Importantly though, Baldwin does not judge or blame those, like his father in real life, or Bigger Thomas in literature, who are unable to work towards this Ethics of Love, rather what transpires is a sort of pain for the tragedy of missed chance of life,[5] seen very clearly, for example, in the case of Rufus Scott's suicide in *Another Country*.

1.3 Baldwin's Ethics of Love: *The Fire Next Time*

With *The Fire Next Time*, a collection of works written on the brink of his forties, Baldwin furthers his Ethics of Love with a more complete philosophical framework, and by urging a more direct call to action.

The longest letter of the two in the collection, "Down at the Cross," details Baldwin's journey in faith, and through a troubled USA, from his start as a preacher in Brooklyn in the 30s to a meeting with Elijah Muhammad and some of his Nation of Islam (NOI) followers. Starting his narration from his teenage years, Baldwin recounts feeling contradicting emotions: on the one hand he felt a similar anger to that of his peers that led him to "never make [his] peace with the ghetto" and "to die and go to Hell before [he] would let any white man spit on [him]," a feeling that could be attributed to that inner Bigger Thomas that was outlined above (Baldwin, *Fire* 29); on the other hand he felt that he was in actual serious danger, due to the racial tensions that split the country, and, having finally a will to live, he realized that he needed to find, and fast, "a 'thing', a gimmick, to lift him out and start him on his way, which might also be interpreted as the "adjustment" which the author had called for in his previous essays. During the summer of his fourteenth year, a friend of Baldwin's takes him to the church he was a member of, importantly not his father's church, and soon after joining the congregation, young Baldwin experiences an intense mystic experience, similar to John's in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

[5] In this sense, love in Baldwin's writings could also often be understood as a type of resilience. As he explains in *The Fire Next Time*, for example, "if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you" (Baldwin, *Fire* 15). We might even say that there can be no survival without love.

This experience leads Baldwin to reflect on the nature of salvation: as a young man he had needed someone to love him and guide him, but as a black person growing in the USA, he feels that there was an impossibility of communion not only with white people but with other black people as well. The lack of communion, the inability to look at each other, instead of "up," "down," or "away," makes it impossible to love, or be loved by, other fellow human beings, and leaves him with the only solution of turning to God's love. But even during his own spiritual conversion, the author acknowledges, he is unable to find an answer to a central question: "if his love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?" (Baldwin, *Fire* 34). Following his conversion Baldwin becomes a successful young preacher. After about a year of intense preaching, Baldwin's faith startsto slowly change. He felt that "people […] ought to love the Lord because they loved him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell" (Baldwin, *Fire* 37). The author finally came to realize that there were quite a few contradictions in the Church teachings he had been given:

> I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant everybody. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all. […] But what was the point, the purpose, of my salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love towards others, no matter how they behaved towards me? (Baldwin, *Fire* 41)

As a young man, Baldwin realizes that many black Americans did not live as they preached, just as whites after all very much did not, and they were both guilty, ultimately, of not loving each other. Baldwin clearly believes that everyone has a responsibility of loving the Other: "what others did was their responsibility, for which they would answer when the judgement trumpet sounded. But what I did was my responsibility, and I would have to answer, too" (Baldwin, *Fire* 41); in this sense then, Baldwin very much equates love with personal responsibility towards others, and in spite of the many just reasons for anger and revenge fantasies on the part of the black community, Baldwin will not compromise on what he sees as the supreme power of love. In a move towards accountability, Baldwin's decision was then to separate himself from the Christian church, importantly distinguished from faith, to distance himself from its "prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies" and become a "truly moral human being" (Baldwin, *Fire* 46). Finally, he reflects, if the way he

understands the conception of God is true, it should only make him "larger, freer and more loving," and if this is not the result of believing in God, then "it is time we got rid of Him" (Baldwin *Fire*, 46).

Years later, having dinner at Elijah Muhammad's Chicago, South-Side mansion, the NOI headquarters, Baldwin finds himself in a context where power and vengeance are at the center of racial relations. During the dinner, in a move of rebellion to a Muhammad that is starting to feel more and more like his own father, Baldwin announces that he approves of interracial romantic relationships and that he has many white friends. To this he adds to the table that, if the final reckoning were to come, "[he] would have no choice, if it came to it, but to perish with them," while, in an aside to himself, he adds: "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?" (Baldwin, *Fire* 64). Indeed, Baldwin believes that the future of the USA as a nation fully depends on the color question: only when black subjects will truly be free, will also white subjects be free. Whiteness is to be understood as an undesirable mask, kept in fear of judgment and self-judgment, that only love, understood as the "tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth," can lift (Baldwin, *Fire* 82). In this sense then, the way the white subject can grow and dare to be themselves is to, in effect, become black in order "to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power" (Baldwin, *Fire* 82). This "burden of love" (Farred 289) is the same idea Baldwin expresses in the letter directed to his nephew: he should not strive to become like white people, for it is not white Americans that should accept black Americans, but the very opposite, they must accept whites. This acceptance, for Baldwin, is an act of love: "you must accept them and accept them with love" (*Fire* 16). White Americans, according to Baldwin, perceive the submission and inferiority of black Americans as a fact of their reality, just like the stars are visible during the night and the sun during the day, and are therefore "trapped in history" (*Fire* 16). This is, of course, not the case for black Americans, who have a much more truthful comprehension of reality.

Without wanting to sentimentalize pain, Baldwin feels that the suffering endured by black Americans has allowed them to not be "controlled by fear of what life can bring," and not to be attached to white myths, such as safety, money, or power (Baldwin, *Fire* 85). In talking of the generations prior to his, Baldwin says that he is proud of them not because they are black but because "of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty" (Baldwin, *Fire* 86). To achieve any of this, clearly, blacks and whites "deeply need each other" and the idea of two separate nations, as advanced by the NOI, seems quite

counterproductive (Baldwin, *Fire* 83). Color must be understood not as "a human or personal reality" but as a "political reality," which Baldwin recognizes is a difficult distinction to make, but truly necessary to enact real change, to move forward from racially informed thinking. For this, Baldwin urges his nephew towards integration: white people are their "brothers - [their] lost, younger brothers" and as black people "[they], with love, shall force [their brothers] to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" to finally "make America what America must become" (*Fire* 17). Similarly, in the final lines of *Down at the Cross*, Baldwin offers a true call to action, inviting "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" to act "like lovers" to "insist on, or create, the consciousness of others" in order to effect change in the country (Baldwin, *Fire* 89). There is a sense of urgency in his appeal, for he warns that, if we do not work together, the fire will come, just like the great flood had come for Noah's contemporaries.

The ideas portrayed so far, may, in sum, not seem particularly new, since many among the human race have recognized the importance of love to build a healthy psyche and society. Nonetheless, Baldwin's Ethics of Love is radical exactly because it can bring forth these ideas in new unconventional ways, especially because they are "saturated by race […] as he (felicitously) refuses to let race […] be philosophically untouched by love" (Farred 289). Starting from a critique of hate, as destroying and self-destroying, the author then moves to a description of love, not simply as the tender feeling of romantic comedies, but a powerful inner force to act with responsibility towards others, in order to first and foremost act with responsibility towards oneself. His Ethics of Love surely share with Aristotle's *philia* the idea that what one feels towards himself one then projects on to the world, hence the need for an "adjustment," a "gimmick," something to give the strength to find self-love no matter the environment one is in. Most importantly though, his ethics share a profound link to the Christian concept of *agape*, as Baldwin's love is profoundly asymmetrical. To love white people as a black person, as the Black Church is unable to, is to require a profound adhesion to the values of Christianity, and especially to Matthew's gospel: it is to effectively try "to approximate (however poorly or inadequately), not replicate, of course, God's love" (Farred 293). This type of fidelity to the Christian message requires that one makes no exceptions, as one's salvation is only possible by behaving with love towards others, no matter what others' behavior is towards the subject. This is, as Farred puts it, the "nonnegotiable duty of love" (293). Loving to this degree, loving people who hate you no matter the cost, is of course very risky, and in many unpredictable ways.

To love "to the 'edge of doom'," as Farred phrases it, bears no guarantees of safety to the Self; indeed, just like Jesus Christ, "risking the Self is the first principle of asymmetrical love" (297). Furthermore, the duty of loving the other, as Baldwin states multiple times, is far stronger than racial divisions, and therefore far stronger than a justifiable anger towards white Americans. This leads him to a clear dilemma, as indeed, he cannot and will not negatively judge his father, or the church goers, or Elijah Muhammad and the NOI for their rightful anger and discontent over the racial situation in the USA. The author must then venture into an unsolvable negotiation between his duty to race and his duty to love. This, Farred argues, is Baldwin's ultimate demonstration of duty, because it asks, "to do what we have not yet done, what we, in truth, do not know if we are capable of doing" (Farred 299). Love demands, as some, like Eldridge Cleaver, later accused him of, that Baldwin be willing to betray his allegiance to the black community in order to keep faith in his duty of loving everyone. Within these terms, the salvation Baldwin aspires to, for himself and for others, when he demands that we act like lovers, is completely new, a "previously unimaginable experience," like the resurrection after the crucifixion (Farred 299). Finally, Baldwin's love ethics, as expressed in his early works, could, in short, be reduced to a form of "spiritual and intellectual labor (pedagogical labor: to teach love)" (Farred 288).

Following *The Fire Next Time*, the political and social climate surrounding Baldwin changed. Published in 1963, with both its texts first published in magazines in 1962, this collection shortly precedes, on the one hand a series of assassinations – John Fitzgerald Kennedy's and Medgar Evers's (1963), Malcolm X's (1965) and Martin Luther King's (1968) – and on the other hand a series of civil rights achievements, notably the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965), which however failed to bring the progress that was expected to come with them. It became clear that laws, alone, were not at all sufficient to change a culture of dehumanization of black subjects that had lasted four hundred years; it became clear that the changing of law did not imply the commitment to loving the Other, which in some ways even seems to prove Baldwin's point. Nevertheless, and quite understandably, in the wake of these events, black opposition shifted even more towards anger and became much less conciliatory. Following this shift then, Baldwin's Ethics of Love were clashing with general black culture; while in the fifties and early sixties he had been elected as a "shadow delegate for black America in the congress of culture," by the late sixties it seemed that "his term had expired. Soldiers, not delegates, were what was wanted these days" (Gates). Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Eldridge Cleaver, all central black thinkers of those years, attacked Baldwin's stance. It felt, Henry Louis Gates Jr.

argues, like "a new generation was determined to define itself by everything Baldwin was not" (Gates). To some of these critiques, or even outright attacks, as in Cleaver's case, Baldwin did not respond critically. Instead, he changed his own rhetoric towards a more antagonistic and angrier stance but was never fully able to renounce his Ethics of Love and his hope for integration. Finally, understanding himself as a "transgressor" in black culture, Baldwin, in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), one of his last works, maintained that "I had been told to love everybody. Whoever else did not believe this, I did" (122). Indeed, as it has been made clear throughout these last two subchapters, Baldwin was aware that a call to such a universal love would not be easy, but, in his final years of his quest, he recognized that, as a transgressor, he fulfilled a duty of renewal in his community, by bringing forth his different point of view.

1.4 Love as embodiment: uses of the erotic in Baldwin's love ethics

Moving towards a more complete understanding of Baldwin's love ethics, it is important to note that they do not only share traits of *philia* and *agape*, but also include a radical component of *eros* as well. So far, much of the discussion has hinged on Baldwin's fundamental adherence to the Gospel, insofar as he believes that above all identity categories there must be a shared duty to love everybody, or to take responsibility for others. Nevertheless, when Baldwin asks to act "like lovers," what sort of relationship is he implying? As it will be made clear in the following section and through the analysis of his earlier novels, Baldwin is not simply implying a relationship of forgiveness that leads to friendship, he is asking to become entangled with one another in a bodily sense, erotically and sensually. In his call for an erotic love, the author makes his biggest leap from Christian theology towards his own personal understanding of love. Baldwin's understanding is of course informed by his unique positioning: he was not, after all, only a black man, but an openly queer, black man.

To begin to understand Baldwin's use of the erotic, it is first vital to understand what was the role played by the erotic in the black Christian environment the author grew up in. The black Church could be understood as descending from puritanism, hence the widespread repression and denial of sexual desire and the subsequent restriction of "sexualized bodies in relation to race, gender, and religion" (Kornegay 120). Indeed, in a white, racist society, black bodies in particular were, and arguably to a certain degree still are, understood as either especially depraved and hypersexualized or as perfectly

asexualized. As proof of this, it suffices to look at the stereotypes that American society attached to black Americans: Uncle Toms and Mammies, existing only to happily serve and perfectly asexual, or the Jezebel and the myth of the threatening black man, both hyper sensual and only existing in a sexual dimension. Considering the ways in which puritan America had elaborated its anxieties towards sexual depravity and sexual conformity, it can undoubtedly be argued that norms of sexuality are closely related to racial identities. Interestingly, the very understanding of the black community as inherently sexually depraved "is the source of the […] sexual freedom that white homosexual and heterosexuals experience within [the black community] or are at liberty to create outside of it," something which becomes particularly apparent in *Another Country* (Kornegay 126). Following from this sexual freedom, that whites feel is justified by the existence of the black community, the response on the part of the black community is a reactionary politics of respectability that ultimately causes "black heterosexuals both male and female" to become "overtly homophobic and carceral about black sexual practices" (Kornegay 126). According to the theologian El Kornegay then, Baldwin grew up within an "inherited puritan theological terror," where his safety was threatened in more ways than one: the fear of God and Hell, a "theological threat," the fear of being black in a white society, a "sociological racial threat," his budding sexual desire, a "sexual threat," and the accepted black masculinity as represented by his father, "a gendered threat" (14). In contrast to the repressive environment of the black community, Baldwin seeks to find a safety that cannot, therefore, be fully granted by this God or this religion.

Instead of rejecting desire, the author fundamentally understands love as desire. Baldwin recalls, in *The Fire Next Time*, that when he first entered his friend's church, at fourteen, the preacher, a woman, asked him: "Whose little boy are you?" to which Baldwin responded "Why, yours" (33). This very same question, Baldwin realized, was used by the pimps and drunkards in the streets of Harlem, which made him finally reflect on the fact that he "unquestionably wanted to be somebody's little boy," meaning that he most certainly needed love (Baldwin, *Fire* 32-33). In matching, in his narration, the church and the sensual streets, Baldwin, from its very beginning, sits desire on a crossroad between "spiritual seduction" and "carnal knowledge," which essentially grounds his Ethics of Love (Kornegay 13). He retained Christian theology insofar as it bid him to a courageous duty to love, but working through the contradictions of such theology that, as a queer man, excluded him, he opened up to a more radical way of love. Instead of repressing sexual desire, Baldwin accepted it full heartedly, not only as a matter of life, but as a necessity,

and in doing so he liberated depraved bodies, "that are able to express sexual desire as a source of redemption for black religion, theology, God, and the black church" (Kornegay 119). Desire, in Baldwin's terms, is much more than the sexual act, it is the acceptance of a truth beyond the socio-racial conditions of the USA; it is, in short, the means of liberation, to find reconciliation with oneself and others. Whereas in puritan theology the body was the site of depravity, for Baldwin the body is the site of liberation, exactly because it exists at the crossroad between race and religious oppression. As Kornegay deftly explains, desire, understood as the "revolutionary act of touching," "propels bodies, (sometimes violently when misunderstood), toward one another in a sociosensual and sexual-sensual barrier breaking need to touch ourselves and other selves" (Kornegay 122). Within these terms, love becomes the courage to act on desire, the act needed to shed "the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know that we cannot live within" (Baldwin, *Fire* 81). Through *eros* Baldwin is able to question western epistemological binaries, forcing bodies to break down boundaries and relate through connection, literally entering each other's skin.

To further deepen Baldwin's understanding of love as sensual, it will be useful to turn to Audre Lorde, a central figure of feminist and queer theory, who also wrote of desire as a fundamental force of liberation. In a wonderful simile, Lorde, in her now classic collection Sister Outsider, describes the erotic as "a kernel" within herself; once freed from the constraints of the seed, the kernel "flows through and colors [her] life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [her] experience" (Lorde 43). On the personal level then, desire has a twofold power: firstly, it produces an embodied immanence, the ability to live fully in the moment and feel satisfaction; secondly, it is also a push to action, meaning that once one has become acquainted to the beauty and joy of love, one starts demanding it from all areas of life, either through creating it or selecting those areas which bring most satisfaction. This status of immanence is described by Baldwin in very similar terms, as sensuality, understood as the ability "to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread" (Baldwin, *Fire* 43). In relational terms, the erotic functions for Lorde as the "sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" which leads to the creation of "a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde 42). Baldwin's understanding of love as sensual could not be more in line with Lorde's understanding, as it ascribes to love as the complex solution to the complex problems of a

racialized USA. In sum, love, in pushing to action and creating bridges, allows human beings to "become less willing to accept powerlessness, [...] resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (Lorde 43).

Moreover, sensuality, Baldwin argues, is something that is especially observed in the black community, particularly in its music, jazz, and the blues. He felt that white Americans do not completely understand this type of music as they "seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad"; this is due to the fact that they do not understand the sensuality of the blues, which results in "something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged (Baldwin, *Fire* 42). White Americans do not understand sensuality, or are even scared of it, because whiteness is fundamentally to be understood as a condition of lovelessness. This lovelessness results from "historical detachment" which in turns produces "an embodied, sensual disconnect" (Butorac 713). Therefore, for Baldwin, racial innocence, meaning the inability to understand American history as inherently flawed and American myths as untrue, leads to a denial of reality that disconnects white Americans from their own lived experiences and leaves them fundamentally alienated. At the same time, Baldwin also proposes his own understanding of love as the remedy for lovelessness: by building a relational bridge, love allows to bring reality, immanence, to the fore, and with a newfound understanding of American history the possibility to finally resolve the differences between whites and blacks. Acting like lovers in a sexual sense, in conclusion, can bring together psychological and embodied elements, to eventually reach liberation. Love as erotic is, therefore, not only to be understood as a personal force, but also, on a bigger scale, as a political force. The question of whether love can be a political force is exactly the next question this chapter aims to explore.

1.5 Can love be political? Arendt's critique to Baldwin

Following the publication of Baldwin's "Letter from a Region in My Mind" in the *New Yorker* of November 1962, discussed at length in 1.3 as part of *The Fire Next Time*, Hannah Arendt responded to Baldwin's Ethics of Love in a letter, dated 21st November 1962. Hannah Arendt, widely recognized as an accomplished thinker and philosopher of German origins and Jewish descent, had worked extensively on the topic of love, having completed a PhD under existential philosopher Karl Jaspers on *Love and Saint Augustine*.

In her letter to Baldwin, Arendt begins by recognizing his essay as a "political event of a very high order" and certainly "an event in [her] understanding of what is involved in

the Negro question," a question that, as an adopted American, she felt she had to be involved in (*Letter* 1). Arendt criticizes what she terms as Baldwin's "gospel of love:" in her view love should be kept "a stranger" from politics as it will not achieve anything but hypocrisy (*Letter* 1). Moving forward in her argument, Arendt contends that the "beauty," "capacity for joy," "warmth," and "humanity" that Baldwin claims for the black American community are typical traits of an oppressed people; while of value, Arendt argues, these traits do not survive the liberation of an oppressed people. She concludes by explaining that "hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive" therefore "you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free" (Arendt, *Letter* 1). With this letter, Arendt seems to raise a valid question over Baldwin's Ethics of Love: can love function as a force in the political sphere, particularly when it comes to a country, such as the USA, fraught with racial tensions?

Starting from the assumption that politics belongs to the public realm, in her work *The Human Condition* Arendt proposes that this particular realm has in it two distinct, but related, meanings. The first meaning of the public realm is appearance, "something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves," which "constitutes reality" (Arendt, "Public" 50). Whereas many private feelings or intuitions can receive confirmation by being transposed to the public realm, some cannot. Love, the author argues, "is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public" (Arendt, "Public" 50). This is argued in Christian terms, where love is equated to love of goodness, which can retain its specific character only when it is not seen or heard by anybody. To be good, meaning to love in Christian terms, Arendt argues, is an "absurd" endeavor, because it seeks to bring "into being that which can never survive the fleeting moment of the deed," exactly because love of goodness recognized is no longer love (Arendt, "Public" 75). In this sense, love cannot be understood as an effective political strategy because, when it becomes part of the public realm, it must be "corrupt in its own terms and will carry its own corruption wherever it goes" (Arendt, "Public" 77). For Arendt love is destructive of the public realm exactly because "it negates the space the world offers to men, and most of all that public part of it where everything and everybody are seen and heard by others" (Arendt, "Public" 77). Greatness or glory, Arendt proposes following Machiavelli's appeal "to teach men 'how not to be good'" (Arendt, "Public" 77), would be better suited in the public realm, since it would teach men how to oppose evil rather than loving goodness.

The second meaning attributed to the public realm, in *The Human Condition,* is "the world itself, insofar as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned

place in it" (Arendt, "Public" 52). The world, Arendt explains, is essentially the "in-between" that "relates and separates men at the same time" (Arendt, "Public" 52). The "in-between" must fundamentally be representative of plurality, a basic human condition, that demands that men are both equal, in order to understand each other, but also distinct from each other, so that they can still represent the uniqueness of their existence. Considering its history, the author suggests that Christianity was first created to unite a community of people that no longer felt separated and united by a common world, a shared in-between; this was achieved by making charity, *Caritas*, as one of its founding principles. Charity should be understood as an iteration of Christian love. As with neighborly love, and love of goodness, the specific understanding of Christian love must be inherently "worldless" as opposed to worldly, or of the world. In fulfilling the commandment to love as God does, man denies himself completely, "now he loves and hates as God does" (Arendt, "Creator" 94). This self-denial leads man to fundamentally renounce any worldly relations, hence the fundamental "worldlessness" of Christian love (Arendt, "Public" 76). As well explained by Butorac, "love requires that we renounce the significance of our uniqueness, that condition of action that gives purpose to public life," because we are completely absorbed in God, making it fundamentally unfit as a political force (712). Nevertheless, whereas as an iteration of love, *Caritas* is to be understood as inherently "worldless," it still worked in uniting people under Christianity by creating a bond between them. These bonds, however, were "non-political and even antipolitical" as communal life was organized in familial ties. Even convents, the only places known to use charity as a political principle, added supplementary rules to regulate their existence.

For Arendt, love as a political principle, finally, can only work if it is assumed that the world will not last, because, on the contrary, a public realm that functions as an "in-between," both uniting subjects but also allowing their distinctness, must rely upon "permanence," meaning it transcends one's single lifespan (Arendt, "Public" 55). Whereas Christianity is preoccupied with the salvation of one believer's soul, the public realm is entered at birth and will keep existing after one's lifespan and, in fact, existed before it; the public realm, therefore, transcends one's lifespan. Those who do enter the public realm do so because they want something of theirs or that they share with others to "be more permanent than their earthly lives" (Arendt, "Public" 55). Furthermore, as compared to the limited communality offered by love, which will only provide "the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position," those in public life will be able to see matters "in a variety of aspects without changing their identity," finally seeing "sameness in utter

diversity" (Arendt, "Public" 57). This is also tied to why Arendt believes that the beauty of oppressed communities cannot survive liberation: these communities held together by such an intense reliance on love become "worldless." They lose the in-between that characterizes the public realm but must surely regain it once they are part of a liberated world, in effect losing the beauty of their loving, but perhaps we might say shortsighted, community.

Having briefly sketched Arendt's Ethics of Love, it may at first sight seem that hers and Baldwin's are fundamentally different. To begin a comparison of the two, it may be important to underline that Baldwin had not meant to provide a systematic political thought, but rather was received as such due to his eloquent ideas. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin recognized that he saw in his thought a "tension […] between love and power, between pain and rage" that he could only solve by trying to "choose the better rather than the worse" (Baldwin, *Fire* 56). This choice remained on a theoretical and philosophical plane, it remained, in other words, a personal choice, but in terms of social choices, or in Arendt's term public choices, he could not be made to solve the conundrum (Baldwin, *Fire* 56). Indeed, many critics recognize Baldwin's thought's strength in exactly the nuanced way he could grapple with the paradox of American race relations, whereas Arendt's thought's strength lies in the logic soundness of all her arguments, even when, by her own admission, she takes "extreme examples" to bring the discussion forth (Arendt, "Public" 78). Furthermore, perhaps Baldwin had never meant to become a public intellectual, such as he was and is perceived nowadays[6]. Like Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out in his 1992 article on New Republic, Baldwin "was here to 'bear witness' [...] not to be a spokesman," he was rather "the alienated artist or intellectual." In this sense, it may firstly be argued that Baldwin had never meant to come into Arendt's public realm and give directions on how to run it but was instead simply narrating the world as he saw it from his own unique standpoint.

Nevertheless, it is impossible not to recognize the inherent political and social message present in Baldwin's writings, and it is therefore noteworthy to understand how Baldwin's love can meet Arendt's. Arendt's understanding, and critique, of love is very much informed by Christian conceptions of love, such as *Caritas* and neighborly love; Baldwin's conception is also ultimately born in the Christian context, since he takes at heart the commandment of loving everybody, but it is also elaborated and enacted fundamentally

[6] As said 1.2, in the original autobiographical notes to *Notes of a Native Son* Baldwin states his aim as wanting to be an "honest man and a good writer" (*Notes* 9)

outside of the context of Christian faith. When Baldwin asks to act "like lovers," Butorac argues, he is not suggesting, as in the case of Arendt's account of neighborly love, that we love everybody all the time but rather that "we can engage with them - and ourselves - in ways informed by love" (Butorac 713). Baldwin's love is extremely worldly, not isolating, exactly because it demands engagement with one's fellow humans to reform their consciousness. Differently from Arendt, for Baldwin, love, rather than erasing the "in-between," enhances it because it leads those "lovers" to reflect on "the spaces between them, how they are constituted, and how they may sustain racial hierarchies" (Butorac 714). Furthermore, Arendt, in her letter, maintains that both love and hate are destructive, while for Baldwin, although he recognizes the proximity of the two emotions, only hate is, as was highlighted in 1.2. For Baldwin love counteracts hate in its being a mode of resistance to the despair and bitterness which ultimately result from it.

Where the two authors finally seem to agree though, is the fact that the love and beauty of an oppressed community derive from the experience of oppression and may not last past liberation. In *The Fire Next Time* itself Baldwin recognizes, of the joy and zest he felt he was leaving when leaving the black Church, that "perhaps we were […] bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run" (Baldwin, *Fire* 42). In his only known response to Arendt, Baldwin stated, during an interview: "Hannah Arendt told me that the virtues I described in *The New Yorker* piece [...] are typical of all oppressed people. And they don't, unluckily, she said - and I think she's entirely right - survive even five minutes the end of their oppression" (qtd. in Butorac 713). This final agreement with Arendt does not ultimately change Baldwin's strife for love as a, perhaps utopian, mode of relation and resilience, but it seems rather to acknowledge the difficulty of acting "like lovers" in a world that offers the freedom to act in many other modes. Indeed, the practical difficulties of abiding to an Ethics of Love were a main concern for Martin Luther King, the leader of the 1950s and 60s nonviolent civil rights movement.

1.6 Ethics of Love in the civil rights movements: separatism or integration

Baldwin's earlier writing period, that is under examination here, notably 1955 to 1963, coincided with major political unrest and great calls to social justice. Posterity recognizes two major players in the civil rights movement: Martin Luther King and

Malcolm X. In simple, though somewhat imprecise terms, the two leaders could be placed at opposite ends of the spectrum of the Ethics of Love. On one side, King's preaching on love and nonviolence understands the impossibility of a better future without brotherhood among all races, hence his call for integration; on the other side, Malcolm X's preaching, especially under the guide of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, called for black people's right to react to white people's oppression with violence to finally establish a separate black nation. Baldwin knew both leaders personally: he participated in nonviolent protests with King but also appeared in several televised debates with Malcolm X; he undoubtedly felt great admiration towards both. The following section, therefore, will explore how Baldwin's Ethics of Love could be placed in the spectrum between King and Malcolm X and will show how each leader started to converge towards the center of this very spectrum close to their assassinations.

In his *Strength to Love*, King detailed his journey towards nonviolence: starting from a fundamental discontent with both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, King was looking for "a method that would eliminate social evil" (King, *Strength* 160). Indeed, as a Protestant minister he believed that taking care of the souls of those in the congregation went hand in hand with taking action against the material conditions that disfavored and oppressed them. His research finally led him to investigate Gandhi's nonviolence, leading him to believe that "the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom" (King, *Strength* 161). In 1954, when, as a pastor of the community, King led the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he had a way to test in action nonviolence, which became for him "more than a method [...] it became a commitment to a way of life" (King, *Strength* 162). King admitted that nonviolence could not perform miracles and that hearts and minds were not so easily swayed but felt that the particular merit of nonviolence was that it changed the hearts and minds of those who were committed to it because it allowed them, in calling onto their sense of love and bravery, to form a strong self-respect. Furthermore, King argues, in a world with weapons of mass destruction, a threat that was strongly felt during those years, war can no longer be considered as a viable solution, if we mean for humanity to survive; King reminds us that "the choice is either nonviolence or nonexistence" (King, *Strength* 163). Baldwin felt ambivalently towards the philosophy of nonviolence: while he participated in numerous fundraisers and actions organized with such philosophy, he also wrote that "there is no reason that black men should be expected to be more patient […] than whites" and that finally "the real reason that nonviolence is

considered to be a virtue in Negroes […] is that white men do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened" (Baldwin, *Fire* 55).

King's nonviolence credo is deeply informed and sustained by Christian love. While recognizing the importance of a battle for the recognition of rights, as "behavior can be regulated," the minister finally maintains that "morality cannot be legislated" (King, *Strength* 29). To finally overcome the race problem in the USA, changing the law is surely a vital first step, but to truly achieve an integrated society Americans must be willing to enact a change of culture that cannot possibly be enforced: Americans must be willing to become "good neighbors." Loving one's neighbor means to be able to love beyond labels of personal belonging, with true sympathy and engagement with the other's struggles, and most importantly to love even, and especially, when it is most dangerous to love. Exactly because "the ultimate measure of a man is [...] where he stands at times of challenge and controversy," true Christian love demands that one loves one's enemy and not only his friends and fellows (King, *Strength* 27). Furthermore, the minister perfectly understands the difficulty of demanding of an oppressed community, such as his own, to love to such an extent. In true Christian fashion, he argues that to love one's enemy we must, first of all, forgive them and give up on revenge, to instead build a friendship with them. Easier said than done, of course, nonetheless King argues that a good Christian must always follow words with actions. Finally, King also addresses the vital question: why should one love one's enemies? Firstly, hate begets hate, in a never-ending spiral, which, as argued above, could only lead to nonexistence. Secondly, King argues, hate is not only dangerous for those who receive the hate but also for those who do the hating because "hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity" (*Strength* 48). The minister warns his community that if they were to fall into the temptation of hating their oppressors, "the new order we seek will be little more than a duplicate of the old order" (*Strength* 50). Finally, only love can make an enemy into a friend, whereas hate will only make more enemies; love in short is the only logical solution to oppression. The final end to the duty of love and nonviolence, for King, is "reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community" (*Facing* 458)

Baldwin's and King's Ethics of Love have many points of contact because they were altogether formed in similar Christian environments. The main point of contact is surely to be found in their treatment of hate as a destructive force for those who harbor it; both also find in love the remedy for it. Consequently, both also fundamentally believe that the qualities of the black American community might not survive a revolution based on

hate. Their conception of what love entails is where they start to depart from each other: on the one hand King explains that Jesus's teachings call to "love" and not to "like," since "like" is a sentimental and affectionate word. Indeed, King argues that "when Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of *eros* nor *philia*; he is speaking of *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men" (King, *Strength* 47). On the other hand, Baldwin's conception of acting like lovers, whereas it retains the fundamentally asymmetrical Christian character of *agape*, it also demands a more embodied and directly relational type of love, which must therefore include elements of *eros* and *philia*. Furthermore, Baldwin's writings are also filled with much more anger and ambiguity than King's, which is quite understandable considering that the former writes as a lay and radical person and the latter as a minister. Finally, in sum, it is in their respective adherence to Christian doctrine that there stands their major difference. Baldwin was openly homosexual and in his Ethics of Love he was calling for the downfall of more than just categories of race; King, on his part, avoided excessive closeness to Baldwin, feeling that the author's open queerness was a "political liability," with others in the nonviolent movement criticizing the author for it[7] (Butorac 716).

During those same years, Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and his most well-known speaker, Malcolm X, were following different, or even opposite, methods to reach the full liberation of black Americans, and liberation itself was, to them, of a different kind. The NOI, in sum, believed in a black God that would restore power to the black man, who was the original first man, while the white man had been created later by a scientist and was fundamentally evil; black people would soon be liberated and would crush white people and regain their rightful place. On this narrative, Baldwin commented that "the dream, the sentiment is old; only the colour is new" (Baldwin, *Fire*, 53). Nevertheless, Baldwin approved of the NOI's ability to help black men and women with varying types of addictions to stay sober or those who had been in prison not to be reincarcerated. Generally, Baldwin gave them the credit to have been able to give their followers a sense of pride, something which Christianity had clearly failed to do. This movement would eventually influence the rise of other movements such as the Black Power and the Black Arts movements, that further engrained the idea of "black is beautiful."

[7] It is important to note that skepticism or outright criticism of Baldwin's sexuality did not only come from the nonviolent movement; the Islamic movement also heavily criticized him, with Eldridge Cleaver going as far as to compare homosexuality to "a sickness, just as are baby rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (Cleaver 136).

Following this theology, the NOI sought to establish a black nation state, in states, potentially the southern states, that the USA would surrender as restitution for slavery. The revolution, Malcom X argued in his 1963 "Message to the Grassroots," "is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality" (X 9). Furthermore, revolution, by definition, must involve bloodshed, and after all, Malcolm X asks, if black Americans are trained and deployed to cause bloodshed abroad in the name of freedom, then they should be able to use violence in their country in the name of those same values. Within these terms, Malcolm X's view of what a revolution should entail and lead to is fundamentally different from King's labor to change the laws and hearts of an already existing nation, to make it an overall better place for everybody, whites included. On the NOI's quest for land, Baldwin felt that if the point of reference for dreaming of power can only be the current symbols of power, then such a quest was obviously understandable. In Baldwin's view, people often rally together behind "a principle that has nothing to do with love" because such a principle "releases them of personal responsibility" (Baldwin, *Fire* 71). The author fundamentally understood the reasons why the NOI sought to form a black nation state but thought it practically unfeasible and morally useless.

Furthermore, Malcolm X felt that the nonviolent movement was not "asking for a nation" but rather they were trying to "crawl back to the plantation" (X 10). He compared the nonviolent movement to house slaves and its leaders to Uncle Tom: they retained a closeness to the white master out of a misled love and were finally used to keep under control all the other slaves, the field slaves. These slaves, for Malcolm X, were comparable to the NOI, because they had no love for the master and were ready to fight for their freedom. The NOI is in this position also because "there is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone" (X 12); but where King argued that Jesus's example taught that hate was not a solution, because hate begets hate, Malcolm X felt that his notion of Islam rather preached for "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life; That's a good religion" (X 12). This absolute symmetry or equality as an absolute demand for any type of relationship is diametrically opposed to both King's and Baldwin's Ethics of Love, and where finally Baldwin sees the NOI's biggest failure. As Farred explains, the NOI "cannot conceive of love as a transcendental force" that is ever superior to categories of race, and that finally "love (not race) is the only principle of being that cannot be compromised to the point of risking the Self absolutely"

(Farred 295). Indeed, Baldwin himself remarks, in *The Fire Next Time*, that the NOI's teachings were not so dissimilar from the American Nazi party's insomuch as they glorified one race and debased another, thus denying a fundamental responsibility towards the Other. Therefore, just like the NOI, if Baldwin is worried about the future of Black Americans, he is also just as worried about "their dignity, for the health of their souls" and would consequently oppose "any attempt that Negroes may take to do to others what has been done to them" (Baldwin, *Fire* 73). Baldwin, in short, will not perpetuate discourses of racial oppression but rather proposes the creation of a new discourse, based on love.

Having painted what can only be a limited picture of a varied and complex political and ideological landscape it may be possible to argue that Baldwin does not seem to fully agree either with Martin Luther King's movement or with Malcom X's and Elijah Muhammad's, but is rather placed roughly in between them. Baldwin was in fundamental agreement with the premise of both King's and Malcolm X's arguments, that is that the white world is set on destroying the black subject and that the black subject must have some sort of reaction, but disagreed with the bulk of the conclusions of both. Importantly, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X also finally did not disagree as much as it may have transpired. After his separation from Muhammad, Malcolm X vowed to protect Martin Luther King "by any means necessary" (X 201), because he had come to realize that "all of our people have the same goals, the same objective. That objective is freedom, justice, equality. All of us want recognition and respect as human beings. We don't want to be integrationists. Nor do we want to be separationists. We want to be human beings" (X 51). Indeed, in the final months of his life Malcolm X sought to shift the discourse from civil rights to human rights. His was an effort to eventually lead the case of racial discrimination in the US in front of the UN, in hopes to shed light on the situation internationally and receive the support of the new African states. King himself, in the last years leading up to his death, became more and more radicalized in a quest to help the poor in the black community. The two, it seems, were slowly becoming closer to each other, politically, and might, at some point have, collaborated if it had not been for their untimely deaths.

To conclude this chapter, the discussion will now turn to a final author, Frantz Fanon, who theorized central concepts in the field of Postcolonial Studies. North America is often not thought of in the context of the colonial struggle, yet the racial issues the countries experienced and experience are very much tied to colonialism and the set of values it entailed.

1.7 Shedding the White Mask: Baldwin's love and Fanon's violence

Fanon and Baldwin had many things in common, starting with their dates of birth: they were born just a little under a year apart, with Baldwin being the slightly older one. They were both black men of a generation that witnessed and participated in World War II in their youth, either by fighting or participating in the war effort, and that later conceived notions of liberation and decolonization and participated in these processes actively. Fanon, a Martinican psychiatrist, fought for France in the war, to then turn on that very same colonial power by joining the Algerian National Liberation Front, fighting in the bloody process of Algeria's independence. Furthermore, Baldwin and Fanon have a similar use of the personal, biographic element as a pivotal element in the creation of theory. Both start from painful personal experiences that they are then able to transpose to a cultural level, which is what makes the work of both authors so fascinating and moving. Fanon's main works, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), propose an embattled portrait of black subjectivity that has many points of contact with Baldwin's work, but, importantly, a few major differences.

In Fanon's earlier work, *Black Skin White Masks*, the author offers a compelling portrait of the psychological impact of colonialism on black subjects, and it is especially compelling because it is a firsthand account of Fanon's own reckoning with his black skin. In general terms, the author argues that colonialism is internalized by the black subject, creating a complex set of internal traumas. In the collective unconscious, Fanon explains, whiteness is to be understood as a symbol of civilization, of "Justice, Truth, Virginity" (*Black* 139), whereas blackness stands for its exact opposite, "ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality" (*Black* 149); hence, the black man is, in virtue of his being black, immoral by definition. Within this scheme of things, the only way that black subjects can be moral is to renounce their blackness and assume a "white mask." This understanding was especially informed by Fanon's experience in France, a country he had considered his motherland. Once physically there he realized that his blackness marked him as fundamentally different from white French citizens and rendered him at the same time hypervisible and invisible. When on a train a young girl started crying at the sight of him, at the sight of a black man, Fanon recounted: "all this whiteness burns me. I sit down at the fire and become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?" (*Black*, 86). It becomes clear for the author that the internalization of his own perceived inferiority, of the inherent ugliness of his being black, should be the main concern. If there

is no self-love and pride, the black ego crumbles and the absolute aim of the black subjects' life turns to becoming like the white, colonizing subjects, so as to be accepted by them and become a part of their world. This is the alienation of the black subjects, that in order to be moral, beautiful and accepted must reject their blackness and assume a white mask. But the white mask is not a healthy place to be, it is not a site of liberation, on the contrary it is their very prison.

Liberation, for Fanon, begins with the facing of these masks, their recognition and later their rejection and final overcoming. A first reckoning with the identity underneath the mask may indeed be of disgust, as Fanon's was. This is of course understandable in a context that has taught the black subject to tie blackness to undesirability and immorality. Moving forward from self-hate requires the black subject "to rise above the absurd drama that others have staged around me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal" (Fanon, *Black* 153). This rejection of terms requires the fundamental liberation of the black subject from a White value system, a hard task for a people that was now talking in variations of the colonizer's language, in a world built on racist sciences. In Fanon's liberation, "man" is a "yes," "yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity," but, importantly, "man" must also take position as a "no," "No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human man: freedom" (*Black* 173). Furthermore, liberation must free the black subjects from their history, they must not be trapped in a historical cycle of reparation but rather think of themselves as "[their] own foundation" (Fanon, *Black* 180). Fanon's earlier message leads towards a "new humanism," where love and understanding form a duty to act in the world. The action, following from the liberation of thought, is that "of demanding human behavior from the other" and not renouncing one's freedom. In conclusion of his first work, Fanon argues that there cannot be absolute freedom, because freedom is created in relation to others, so instead of the superiority or inferiority complexes imposed by colonialism, the author proposes "to touch each other, to feel each other," to build freedom together (Fanon, *Black* 181). Hate, the predominant currency of the colonial world, is not "inborn", but rather must be cultivated, it is therefore possible to disavow it and move forward into a bridging of differences (Fanon, *Black* 37).

Fanon's thought shifted in his later work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published almost ten years later. Composed in the wake of his participation in the Algerian decolonization efforts, Fanon no longer believed in a new humanism, but rather that any decolonization process must inevitably be violent. The process of decolonization, Fanon

argues, “is an agenda of total disorder” that “cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm or a gentleman’s agreement” (“Violence” 2). Violence is inherently involved in the process of decolonization because it was involved in the process of colonization and its maintenance. The process of colonization, according to Fanon, was a process that “fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject” from which “the colonist derives its validity, i.e., his wealth” (“Violence” 2). In this sense then, if the process of colonization made the colonized into an object, the process of liberation must be the process by which the object becomes subject, becomes human, again. Decolonization must be a process that makes true the gospel verse “the last shall be the first” and in order to do so must include a process of total disorganization of society. Indeed, the colonial world, the author explains, is a “compartmentalized world,” divided in two between colonized and colonizer, and the division is upkept by the violent forces of the police and the military. Fanon describes the two compartments, the colonist’s and the colonized’s, as fundamentally different and unrelated. The sectors are not complementary, meaning that they cannot come together to form “a higher unity,” instead they follow a principle of “mutual exclusion,” “one of them is superfluous” and must be eliminated (Fanon, “Violence” 4). Whereas the colonist sector is built in durable material, and it is clean, safe, and well-served, the colonized sector is “the shanty town, the Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people” (Fanon, “Violence” 4). The process of decolonization must then be not simply the desire of the colonized to inhabit the colonist’s section, but his desire to demolish it, “burying deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory” (Fanon, “Violence” 6). Furthermore, the Manichean world Fanon paints on the page cannot be turned upside down intellectually or through logical discussion, because the colonizer does not only occupy the physical space of the colonized, but, importantly, the colonizer also dictates the colonized’s own personal self-representation. As in his earlier work, Fanon maintains that the colonized subject represents “not only the absence of values but also the negation of values,” “the enemy of values” or, simply, “absolute evil” (“Violence” 6). The alienation is vastly produced by the Christian Church, understood as a white Church, with a white God, whose process of evangelization works just like DDT rooting out parasites: it roots out heresy, and with it takes away culture, self-love, and personal value. Finally, this means that while there can, and must, be a philosophical and psychological discussion to root out the alienation produced by colonization, the main battleground remains first and foremost the quest for land, that for Fanon is the main provider of dignity.

Fanon's later thought has much in common with Malcolm X's call for land and his essential belief of the impossibility of a peaceful revolution. Even more so, Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was a foundational book for the Black Panthers Party, that used it as a required reading for all new party members. The necessary use of violence is opposed to Baldwin's view of the way forward, but he did share much of the logical discussion that, for Fanon, made its use inevitable. The world Baldwin describes in all of his work is as much a violent world as Fanon's is, with law enforcement keeping the two factions, white and black, separated through the use of brute force. Undeniably, the history of the USA, and arguably Baldwin's identity itself, are entrenched in the violence of chattel slavery, just as Fanon's Martinique was. Even Fanon's description of society's two compartments perfectly corresponds to Baldwin's countless descriptions of Harlem on the one hand and Manhattan on the other. The compartmentalization of New York City is perhaps most evident in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: starting with a description of John's home and neighborhood loaded with dirtiness, ugliness, and fundamental amorality, it then shows John moving to Manhattan where the wide, clean streets and elegant building represent everything he cannot ever aspire to have and to be, indeed he cannot even enter those buildings, as the color of his skin forbids him to. The main difference between the two is that, where Fanon sees a fundamentally Manichean world, a world of irreconcilable differences, Baldwin sees a world of painful interconnection that cannot possibly be liberated if it strives to subvert compartmentalization by leading to more compartmentalization. This is finally why, at a time when Baldwin was preaching his Ethics of Love, Fanon was turning to a necessary violence.

Baldwin does nevertheless have much in common with Fanon's earlier work. Fanon's recognition of the existence of a white mask to cover an unloved blackness is not so dissimilar from Baldwin's appeal to his nephew not to believe white people's myths of blackness. The "nigger," exemplified for Baldwin in the character of Bigger Thomas, has many points of contact with Fanon's recognition of the ugliness of his "uniform." Baldwin believes that it is finally the black subject having to accept the white subject, and for the white subject to liberate themself, to become grounded, they must assume a blackness of their own. This is because Baldwin feels that it is not only the black subject to be alienated, but most importantly also the white subject. Both authors fundamentally recognize in the alienation produced by oppression the main obstacle to face in order to find personal liberation. Indeed, compared to the liberation prefigured in Fanon's later work, Baldwin's liberation is instead very similar to Fanon's earlier ideas of liberation as action spurred from

de-alienation. The prefigured act involves a mixing of people, in a physical sense, meaning the touching of the Other, in order to finally understand that freedom can only be reached when shared. Whereas Fanon's discourse is not necessarily centered on the need for love, his ideas did involve an engagement, an openness to everybody, above racial distinctions, that very much needs love to be acted out.

This chapter has attempted to define Baldwin's Ethics of Love, first by defining a common framework, through the Ancient Greek concepts of *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. Then it turned to Baldwin himself, to analyze some of his early essays, to understand the system of thought he built on the duty to love. Baldwin's love, this chapter has argued, includes aspects of all the three Greek love concepts, and most importantly, in its difference from Christian love, it is a sensual, erotic type of love. To further delve into Baldwin's Ethics of Love this chapter has then presented a series of comparisons to other important thinkers: Audre Lorde, Hannah Arendt, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon. These comparisons investigated the possibility of using love in the political field, as a solution to complex social problems, and were also extremely useful to provide much needed context and depth to Baldwin's thought.

Chapter Two: "Respect Thy Father" - Love as Rebellion in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

The following chapter will explore Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*[8], published in 1953. At the time of publication of this first novel, the author had been living in Paris for a few years and had had the opportunity to reflect on his experiences growing up in Harlem, from the distance he needed to gain perspective. During the years preceding the publication, Baldwin had already gained notoriety as a writer, through his short stories and essays. His critique of Richard Wright through essays such as "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), which would both later be included in the collection *Notes of a Native Son*, had already singled him out as a particularly promising black writer. Although the novel was composed in Paris, it has nothing to do with the intellectual and bohemian environment it was born into, which would later be portrayed in *Giovanni's Room*. On the contrary, *Go Tell* is very much the product of Baldwin's upbringing, and most critics tend to consider it as semi-autobiographical. In a 1985 interview with the *New York Times*, on the occasion of the release of the tv adaptation of the novel, the author said about *Go Tell*: "[it] is the book I had to write if I was ever to write anything else, [...] I had to deal with what hurt me the most. I had to deal, above all, with my father. He was my model; I learned a lot from him. Nobody's ever frightened me since" (qtd. in Bennets). The novel could then be understood as Baldwin's reckoning with his childhood and his view on life moving forward.

The title, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is taken from an African American spiritual of the same title, that talks about the spreading of the news of the birth of Jesus Christ, therefore already invoking the joyous news of a special birth, or in the case of the novel, a re-birth. Different versions of the song, later used within the Civil Rights Movement, substituted the line "that Jesus Christ is born" with "let my people go," referencing the Book of Exodus and the liberation of the Israelites from the Pharaoh. Shirley Allen, in her essay on the religious symbolism of the novel, suggests that this ambiguity is intentional as the cry "Go Tell It on the Mountain" suggests much more than the announcement of good news: "it is a shout of faith in ultimate victory while the struggle and suffering are still going on," which is exactly the situation in which John, the protagonist, will find himself in by the ending of the novel ("Religious" 176). The whole novel itself is introduced by a

[8] For the sake of brevity, from this point onward the title of the novel may also be abbreviated as *Go Tell.*

quote from the Bible, notably from the book of Isaiah, which, interestingly, is also the same chapter of Isaiah that the hymn of the title makes reference to:

> They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; / they shall mount up / with wings as eagles; / they shall run, and not be weary, / they shall walk, and not faint. (40:31)

Isaiah chapter 40 describes how the Lord's strength will help the Jews to cross the desert and shout from mountaintops the good news of the coming of the Messiah. Since John, symbolically, will be the one walking across to shout from the mountaintops, this quote may suggest that God's strength will accompany him in his journey. Interestingly, Allen notes that the line "they shall run, and not be weary" (Isaiah 40:31) may be echoed in the ending of the novel, when Elisha, who acts as John's erotic and mystical guide, encourages him to face his fears and re-enter his father's house by telling him "Run on little brother […] don't you get weary" (Baldwin, *Go* 256), therefore closing the novel with God's promise of strength coming full circle ("Religious 177).

The novel is divided into three parts, all set during one, long, exhausting Saturday in March 1935: John Grimes's fourteenth birthday. During Part One, "The Seventh Day," the reader meets John Grimes, a young boy living in Harlem, and his family members: his father Gabriel, his pregnant mother Elizabeth, his younger brother Roy, and two younger sisters. John's family mostly fails to wish him a happy birthday, and only his mother gifts him a small amount of cash. With it, John wanders outside of Harlem, in search of a movie theater. After having guiltily enjoyed a movie, John returns home to find his brother Roy bleeding in the living room, after having been knifed in a fight, and his family, with the addition of his Aunt Florence, arguing. At six, John finally heads to the family's storefront church, The Temple of the Fire Baptized, where he makes preparations for service with Brother Elisha, an older boy who has already been saved, for whom John has a strong admiration.

In Part Two, Baldwin offers three different "Prayers:" Florence's, Gabriel's and Elizabeth's. Starting from the present situation in the church, the three characters reminisce about their story and their motives leading up to the present day. Florence reminisces her upbringing in the South by a formerly enslaved mother, her escape to the North, her failed marriage and finally her present fear of approaching death. Florence strongly dislikes her brother and wants to expose him for having fathered an illegitimate son. Gabriel's Prayer follows Gabriel's conversion upon his mother's death bed, his divine call to become a

preacher, followed by his divine call to marry Deborah, a friend of Florence whom nobody had wanted to marry due to the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hand of white men. During Gabriel's prayer, Baldwin also uncovers that John is not actually Gabriel's son, although John does not know this, and this is partly why Gabriel treats him so poorly. Gabriel himself had fathered an illegitimate son in an extramarital relationship with Esther, a coworker, but had never recognized the child, who had eventually taken to bad ways and died. Finally, Elizabeth's Prayer describes her strict upbringing by an aunt after her mother's death, until she finally meets a young man named Richard. The two fall in love and decide to move to New York City together, where they have a happy relationship until the man is unjustly charged for a robbery. Following his successful discharge, Richard commits suicide, leaving, unknowingly, a pregnant and unmarried Elizabeth. After John's birth, while working as a cleaner, Elizabeth meets Florence and Florence eventually introduces her to Gabriel.

Part Three, "The Threshing Floor," returns to focus on John, who experiences a painful but illuminating conversion, and can now say that he is saved. On the walk back home from the church, in the early morning, the tensions between the characters come alive: Elizabeth yearns for Richard, Florence threatens Gabriel of informing Elizabeth of his illegitimate son, and John has to finally face his father, by, once again, entering his house.

The entire novel is narrated by a third person narrator, who adopts the internal point of view of the character that is the focus of that particular section, notably John in Parts One and Three and Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth in Part 2. The focus remains on only one character at a time, apart from Part Two, where sometimes the narration shifts briefly to John's point of view. The fact that the narrator is external to the events of the novel is also made clear by the fact that his style of speech, mostly standard American English, is different from the characters' diction, who instead mostly express themselves in a Black American variety of English. The contrast between the two styles of speech, Allen suggests, is useful in both emphasizing "the universality of [the character's] inner conflicts" while also giving space to "the inner conflicts and the particular circumstances of their inner lives as Negroes in America" ("Ironic" 31). Furthermore, the entire novel is written in the past tense, even if events are clearly being narrated as they happen, with no hindsight illuminating the perspective on the events of the book. Indeed, rather than providing hindsight, the narrative technique instead provides a "corrective viewpoint" to the reader

him or herself, by allowing the reader to travel in the minds of the different characters, whilst knowing more than the characters themselves know (Allen, "Ironic" 33).

Finally, in introducing the novel, it must be noted that *Go Tell* is built within a rich system of cultural and religious references: all characters use, at some point, some passages from the King James Bible in their speech and most of them can be identified in characters of the Bible or with specific passages of the Bible which are important to them. The novel is also structured with multiple epigraphs, which play an especially important part in understanding the subtext that the events described in the novel carry with them. Each Part is preceded by a quote from the Bible[9], notably Parts 1 and 2 from Revelation and Part 3 from Isaiah, and each part is also introduced by a quote from a hymn, with Part Two having a hymn introducing each prayer. The whole novel itself, as mentioned above, is preceded by an epigraph. It may be interesting to note that none of the epigraphs has its original source mentioned, making it hard to understand at first glance where that quote may be taken from. The symbolic structure built on religious sources is strictly tied to the Christian environment described in the novel and, therefore, it flows naturally from the narrated action itself, which makes it, at times, particularly elusive. Indeed, Allen rightly argues that Baldwin's only "'technical fault' may be his assumption that most readers are as familiar with the Bible as the members of his childhood Harlem community were," which acts as an impediment to a deep understanding of this religious reference system, at the very least for contemporary readers ("Religious 175).

This chapter will argue that *Go Tell*'s main theme, the rebellion against the father, both on a physical plane against Gabriel and on a metaphysical plane against God, is enacted to open to the possibility of love. To argue such a point, this chapter will firstly contextualize religion within John's life, within Baldwin's life and finally also within the literary structure of the novel. Starting from that, it will then move into *Go Tell*'s three "Prayers," Florence's, Gabriel's and Elizabeth's, and will propose an in-depth analysis of these three main characters and their failures. Having presented John's underlying motives and environment, the following chapter will then move to discuss John's conversion on the threshing floor, and by providing a thorough examination of his mystical journey, it will attempt to highlight the scope of his love rebellion, as opposed to the different failures examined in his relatives' stories. To conclude the exploration of Baldwin's first novel, this

[9] All quotes taken from the Bible are in the King James Bible version.

chapter will finally provide a reflection on father figures, both in the fictional character of Gabriel and in the real-life figures of Beauford Delaney and Richard Wright.

2.1 Living in a world of sin

To begin an exploration of the Ethics of Love in *Go Tell*, it is first and foremost necessary to understand the context the novel builds. The Grimes family lives in what is described as a dirty and sinful world; fittingly indeed their last name is Grimes, that ironically points to "grime" meaning broadly "accumulated dirtiness and disorder," according to the Merriam Webster dictionary. The beginning of the novel is particularly clear in describing a situation where physical dirt leads to moral dirtiness, understood in John's Christian value system as sin. The Grimes family, John recollects, left for church on Sunday mornings always irrevocably late, and walked through the dirty streets of Harlem. The dirtiness of the streets for John is primarily moral, although described in physical terms: "sinners along the avenue […] men still wearing their Saturday-night clothes, wrinkled and dusty now, muddy-eyed and muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths" (Baldwin, *Go* 12). Their material conditions, the drinking, smoking, wearing of tight or dirty clothing are, for the protagonist, what finally leads them to "lust" (Baldwin, *Go* 12). The very beginning of the novel is also vital in fundamentally setting apart John and his brother Roy: whereas Roy is amused by the Avenue's sinners, and will, John seems to think, soon belong to their ranks, John is rather embarrassed and scared of them. Roy does not seem to espouse John's, and we might argue Gabriel's, view of sin as something intrinsically physical and dirty, indeed he is not at all disgusted by it. John on the other hand is completely invested in Gabriel's value system, and, perhaps prophetically, the first two lines of the book are, in fact: "everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father" (Baldwin, *Go* 11). As compared to Roy, John is expected to be saved, he is expected to feel the call of God on the threshing floor, while Roy is not, to Gabriel's great dismay. Yet, John feels he has had insufficient conviction in his faith, as his father's spiritual heir, and he does not feel the presence of God as the other Saints do, before his own religious experience.

He had failed to pay much attention to Sunday school, and the arrival of a new teacher, brother Elisha, made it even harder for him to focus. In what is, unmistakably, an extremely homoerotic admiration, John praises "the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper

and manlier than his own," "the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit," to the point that "when, sometimes, Elisha paused to ask John a question, John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer" (Baldwin, *Go* 14). Clearly, the protagonist is physically attracted to the young Elisha and is still somewhat unable to understand and handle his physical reaction to that attraction. In the sexually repressive Christian environment John is in, sexual desire and bodily pleasure are heavily sanctioned, and homoerotic desire is to be considered even more deviant. The saintly Elisha himself is in fact reprimanded by the Temple's preacher, Father James, for his friendship with Ella Mae, a young woman of the congregation. Father James, knowing that no sin had yet actually occurred, warns the two that "walking disorderly" would put them "in danger of straying from the truth" (Baldwin, *Go* 17). Sin, the pastor explains, is in the flesh and "should they continue with their walking out alone together, their secrets and laughter, and touching of hands, they would surely sin a sin beyond all forgiveness" (Baldwin, *Go* 18). At this reprimand John responds at first with guilt, for he has desired Elisha physically and therefore feels called into question by Father James, but importantly, he also feels curiosity, he wonders what it must be like for the couple when they are alone together, how Elisha must have looked when he desired someone. After the public reprimand Elisha and Ella Mae no longer spend time alone together and might only do so again within the bounds of matrimony, proving that freely expressed erotic love is completely erased by the Temple's repression. Indeed, only marrying and procreating might be considered, in John's father's value system, the only way to lead a holy life and therefore to satisfy God. In John's world, as scholar Stanley Macebuh rightly points out, all of the characters in the Temple's congregation, not only John and Elisha, but also Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth, and the other Saints, sin, but what sets them apart from the sinners on the Avenue is their awareness to "the promise of redemption" as opposed to the sure, unfortunate end of the sinners, who are doomed "to suffer God's vengeance on the day of reckoning" (54). The Temple's congregation therefore must commit to a life fully devoid of any type of sin if they wish to live up to the promise of salvation, or rather if they wish to survive the threat of damnation. What can finally be concluded, is that the deep-seated fear of sin is exactly that, fear. Acting well in John's community is not a matter of doing good per se but of avoiding God's vengeance, which is a type of understanding of Christianity that seems to derive much more from the Old Testament, with its cursed men and righteous prophets, than with Jesus's approach, filled with love and forgiveness.

Within this context, John wakes up on his fourteenth birthday, arguably with good reason to, with a strong sense of impending doom, not what would be expected by a typical teenager on his birthday. John remembers with fear and guilt the sin he had been guilty of, a masturbatory act in the school bathroom, "thinking of the boys, older, bigger and braver" (Baldwin, *Go* 20). To a modern reader, John's act seems part of a normal sexual discovery most teenagers make; to John instead it feels, as he describes it, as if he had forgotten to get up for church and while everyone would be saved, he would be left with his sinful body, "to be bound in hell for a thousand years" (Baldwin, *Go* 20). Even more, Macebuh argues that John's sin is so "enfleshed" exactly because it precedes his birth. Indeed, even if born out of love, John was also born out of wedlock and therefore has sin "forcefully impressed on him" (Macebuh 54). It may therefore be argued that the purpose of the Saints' Prayers in Part 2, portraying John's family history, is exactly to situate just how John's life is deeply steeped in the guilt of sin, not of his own doing, of course. Starting from the stories of his relatives, *Go Tell* then can truly outline what a titanic enterprise it will be for the boy to climb up the mountain of personal salvation. What sets John apart from his relatives is that, though he feels guilt for the sin in his flesh, he is also unwilling to completely deny it, as for example is the case of his desire for Elisha. In fact, while describing his sin, John feels that he had a "hardheartedness with which he resisted God's power" and often received with scorn the Saints' mystical raptures (Baldwin, *Go* 21). Furthermore, John clearly promises himself that "he would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life" (Baldwin, *Go* 21). The protagonist of the novel, as arguably also Baldwin himself seems to have felt, lives in constant contradiction between his personal convictions of greater freedom of expression and self-love and the culture that surrounds him, which comprises his support and value system. This contradiction is the root of John's need for rebellion against the father, both physical, in the character of Gabriel, who upholds the Temple's teachings, and metaphysical, in the vengeful God the congregation fears.

John's rebellion towards God, it may be argued, also starts fundamentally in how John perceives his unlovability through God's eyes. At the core of John's unlovability is his blackness: how can a white God love a black boy? Or, otherwise put, how can a black boy believe that a God, that is conceptualized as a prominent symbol of whiteness, loves him? In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin, in recounting his own experience of conversion on the threshing floor, says that, even at the height of his mystical experience, he could not help but feel that "God […] is white," and therefore he wondered why, "if He loved all His children," were black Americans so oppressed (Baldwin, *Fire* 34). God's whiteness

depends on a history of colonial violence and white saviorism, where the black "heathen" would have to be saved "by the healing blood of Christ," who therefore comes to stand for everything that the black subject is not, and can never hope to become, and is therefore not just any color, but is "the alabaster Christ" (Baldwin, *Notes* 31). The color of Christ, hence the color of God, has been a matter of cultural and political interpretation for centuries, since the Bible does not provide an exact description of Christ. As Edward Blum and Paul Harvey note in their work *The Color of Christ*, "the white American Jesus first rose to power and prominence in the early 19th century," the era of slavery's peak and downfall, of land expansion on Native territories, and most generally "of nation building and defining," where "whiteness became a crucial symbol of national identity and citizenship" (9). Whereas past European representations of Jesus had also depicted him as white, the representation of Jesus as white became important at this moment in time exactly because it represents an essential part of the colonial project that invented the concept of race. Jesus was made racially white in those crucial moments of identity building to "create the perception that whiteness was sacred and everlasting" and that it "stretched back in time thousands of years and forward in sacred space to heaven and the second coming," and in doing so was able to justify the dehumanization of all those who did not belong to the category of whiteness (Blum and Harvey 8). White Jesus can be understood, as proposed by Blum and Harvey, as "a shape-shifting totem of white supremacy" (8). On the other hand, it is important to note that the figure of Christ, in particular, was also adopted by black Christian communities, who saw him as the "trickster of the trinity" (Blum and Harvey 9). Slave communities connected to Jesus's oppression and sacrificial death and saw in him a figure that promised justice, love and liberation. Reaching Baldwin's time period, King and the Civil Rights movement actively worked to make Jesus into the first non-violent activist, and therefore the symbol of their fight for liberation: a figure whose suffering could redeem an entire people, and therefore a figure whose moral qualities, and importantly not skin color, was significant. Yet, as Blum and Harvey note, they were not completely successful in convincing Americans that Jesus's skin color was insignificant, since all Americans, for too long, had been immersed in "a history of racial division" (215). This is what prompted a recoloring of Jesus as a black man by the Black Power movement, a movement which celebrated the beauty and power of blackness and could not, therefore, accept the gaze of the "Alabaster Christ." When the 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which left four young girls dead, also blew away the white Jesus's face on the church's windows, Baldwin commented that "the absence of the face is

something of an achievement since we have been victimized so long by an alabaster Christ […] If Christ has no face [then we must give] him a new face. Give him a new consciousness. And make the whole ideal, the whole hope, of Christian love a reality" (Baldwin and Niebhur). This, in some ways, is John's journey through *Go Tell*, an encounter with religion which allows the formation of a new consciousness through self-love.

While it is also important to note, that while the darkness of sin and the whiteness of God seem to haunt John and all of his family, the Temple's environment is not solely oppressive. Very much in line with Baldwin's description of his experiences in the church as a young man, John also describes the Sunday services at the Temple as joyful and intense experiences of beauty and community. When the congregation meets, on Sundays, the women wear white dresses and caps, which "seemed to glow in the charged air like crowns," and the men are dressed in blue, with "kinky, gleaming heads" (Baldwin, *Go* 15). The way the Saints are described points to their power, beauty and pride and not to their fear of damnation: even if that is part of the environment, it is not its only feature. The musical dimension is also important to understand the environment of the Temple. Baldwin will become more and more of a blues poet in his later works, but his roots are well planted in gospel. The Temple's service starts with music, played on the piano by Elisha: "Down at the cross where my Savior died!," "Jesus, I'll never forget how you set me free!," "Lord, hold my hand while I run this race!" are all very rhythmic and very hopeful songs. The song that inspired the title of the novel itself, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," carries an extremely joyful message. It is the Saints' joy as expressed through music that, if only briefly, can fill John's heart with the belief, scary and wondrous, that God actually does exist, because "they made that presence real" (Baldwin, *Go* 15). In the rapture of the communal experience of the service, John feels that all the Saints' traits, including his mother's and father's, become stronger: his father's face, "always awful [...] was transformed into prophetic wrath," his mother's raised hands made real "that patience, that endurance, that long suffering, which he had read of in the Bible" (Baldwin, *Go* 16). The collective catharsis achieved during the service, through music, has John feel that the "church seemed to swell with the Power it held, [...] the temple rocked with the Power of God" (Baldwin, *Go* 16). The sensory experience of the service in the Temple is for John a powerful moment of closeness with his community, that helps him to overcome his many doubts on faith and his need for rebellion.

Just like his protagonist John Grimes, Baldwin also had an ambivalent relationship with religion and *Go Tell* is a perfect representation of his attitude. Following his bout as a preacher in his teens, the author was no longer part of any specific congregation and did not consider himself as a religious person per se. In a 1965 BBC interview, British author Colin McInnes outright asked Baldwin if he was religious, to which Baldwin replied evasively that he was not "a believer in any sense which would make sense to any church" and that "any church would throw [him] out" ("Race" 56). As opposed to faith as necessarily inserted into a religious system, such as Christianity, Baldwin understands faith as love, which, as this chapter will propose, is ultimately also *Go Tell*'s message. Yet, Baldwin's positioning within the church, growing up, had deep influences on his work, first and foremost in his fundamental debt to what O'Neale terms as "Black America's centuries-old struggle to formulate a Christian faith that would assuage and reconstitute the evil-oriented identity that white Christian culture had imposed upon them" (102). *Go Tell* may be considered a deep reflection, as mentioned above, on what the Christian faith means for a young black boy, when the faith itself is white and discriminatory and the black community that lives with it denies his developing sexual impulses. In this quest Baldwin merges into a long history of black literary ambivalence towards religion. Starting from the very first contributions of black Americans to the literary canon, black writers could not fully condone the way white people had used Christian religion with its curses, such as Cain's and Ham's, to justify the servitude of black people as an inherent predestination. Notorious slave narrative writer and activist Frederick Douglass, for example, felt that there existed "the slaveholding religion of this land" and "the Christianity of Christ" and the two had "the widest possible difference" (71). Thus, Douglass identifies a real Christian religion, that does not oppress or dehumanize, and the white understanding of religion, used to justify the enslavement of black people all over the world. This ambivalent understanding of religion develops further during the Harlem renaissance, where religion is either absent from literature or only referred to with deference. Baldwin is indebted to all this tradition and, importantly, to black musical tradition as well, particularly since much of the black community's poetry had been expressed in song for centuries, when black subjects were not allowed to read and write. Nevertheless, what finally sets Baldwin's work apart from the previous tradition, although clearly being in dialogue with it, is that Baldwin does not only question Christianity as a white, discriminatory religion, but, as O'Neale points out, he also questions "the validity of life-alternating salvation in the black church," to the core disputing "the justice, judgement and sincerity of God" (104). Therefore, *Go*

Tell presents a religious community that is utterly fraught with irony, because all the characters, in one way or another do the exact opposite of what they preach: Florence's final turning to religion is ironic, Gabriel's religious piety is ironic, Elizabeth's fear of damnation is ironic.

Secondly, Baldwin is surely indebted to religious tradition because religious texts and hymns themselves are a central structure of interpretation within the novel. Indeed, as Allen rightly points out, the most extensive use of irony in *Go Tell* is "the use of biblical texts and Christian doctrine to comment upon the attitudes and actions of the characters" ("Ironic," 34). A clear example of the ironic use of sacred texts is surely Gabriel's favorite quote from the Bible: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live" (2 Kings 2:1). The first mention of the passage is placed right after the description of the Grimes's family home as irreparably dirty and disorderly (Baldwin, *Go* 37), and it is later used by the character to justify his undying belief that God is sending him signs. When he meets Elizabeth and her illegitimate son, Gabriel sees it as a sign that God has forgiven him and as a chance to "set his house in order." Unfortunately, Gabriel is not only unable to truly love Elizabeth, or anybody for that matter, but importantly is also unable to fulfill his promise to take care of John as one of his own. By using religious texts and themes to comment ironically on his characters' behaviors, Baldwin is able, at the same time, to uncover the fundamental limits of human nature but also "to establish as trustworthy the religious faith [the characters] profess, even when they misinterpret it" (Allen, "Ironic" 35). The role of religion in *Go Tell*, in sum, is central, as it is the system that holds together the lives of John's relatives, that in turn shape John's fears and hopes. Although not unbiasedly positive in the least, the representation of religion Baldwin offers is full of empathy and sensitivity: though it is ironic, it is also never mocking, and seems to finally point to the necessity of personal faith over Christianity as a religious system. In a world fraught with the guilt of sin, John's quest is to look for self-love to push back against the oppressive forces in his life, or as Macebuh proposes to formulate a new "religion of love" (67).

As opposed to John's seeking a religion of love, Part Two of *Go Tell* is preceded by a quote from Revelation: "And they cried with a loud voice, / saying, How long, O Lord, holy and/ true, dost thou not judge and avenge/ our blood on them that dwell on the/ earth?" (6:10). Fittingly, this quote seems to comment on the hard lives the reader will be introduced to in each Prayer, and, just like Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth, remains within a system that would demand an eye for an eye rather than work towards forgiveness. The Prayers, as it will become apparent in the following sections, serve not only to illuminate

John's position in his family, but also as a warning of the failings of living within a religion of vengeance, hate and fear.

In the following sections this chapter will try to understand how John's relatives fail to achieve a religion of love, to then explore John's radical turning to self-love.

2.2 Florence's vendetta

Florence's section, ironically, starts with a quote from the notorious Christmas-themed hymn *Hark! The Herald Angel Sing*: "light and life to all He brings / risen with healing in His wings!" (qtd. in Baldwin, *Go* 73). Florence, Gabriel's sister, is a widower in her sixties and she is sick, so there is hardly light, life or healing on the horizon for her. Even more so, the very first lines of "Florence's Prayer" make it clear that, if Gabriel is God's representative on Earth, then God will surely not help Florence in any way. The entire family is surprised by the woman's presence in the Temple, as she is not used to going to church with them. This is evident starting from the very end of Part One, when John wonders what her absolutely out-of-the-ordinary presence there might mean for the night to come: "the Lord was riding on the wind tonight," John reasons (Baldwin, *Go* 70). On much less conciliatory terms, Gabriel instead feels triumphant in seeing that his sister should "at last be humbled," therefore feeling satisfaction in her pain and not in her now possible salvation (Baldwin, *Go* 73). As it had already been made clear in Part One, brother and sister are not on good terms with each other. In the Temple, Florence leads the congregation in a song, "Standing in the Need of Prayer," which discloses to all present, including, to her frustration, her brother, that she found herself in a situation which demanded help. It is at this point that Florence's pride almost takes the best of her: kneeling at the altar feels for her as kneeling in front of her brother and "she would rather die and endure Hell for all eternity than bow before His altar" (Baldwin, *Go* 74). Going back to the opening quote then, Florence, on a psychological level, clearly equates God with Gabriel and is therefore unable to ask for forgiveness, as she does hold Gabriel accountable for her misfortune, to a certain extent. Perhaps tellingly then, Florence realizes that she no longer knows how to pray, therefore her prayer, as in her story, cannot possibly lead her to be saved, because she no longer knows how to ask for salvation.

Florence is searching for salvation because she has received a "message," tellingly in the form of Gabriel's favorite quote from the Bible: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live" (2 Kings 2:1). This time, though, the message is to be interpreted

more literally: Florence is about to die. The message, she had felt, bid her to turn to God, but in her pride and resentfulness towards her brother, Florence had decided to turn to any other possible solution, such as medicine and witchcraft but nothing seemed to heal the illness in her bowels. It is symbolically significant that Florence's sickness resides in her bowels, as it almost seems as if she has been holding down so much bitterness throughout the years that it is finally, uncontrollably, purging out of her system. In a very Dickens-like move, Florence is visited by the spirit of death, a male death[10]: at this point, with no other possibility, Florence turns to God to escape death, but her turning is out of fear and not out of faith. Florence's conversion, it may be pointed out, is not in the least sincere. Following in the *Christmas Carol* theme, Florence is then also visited by the spirits of her family: her mother, her brother, Deborah, her husband, and all mock her for her fear of death when she had once been so haughty. Florence tries to beg for forgiveness, but the spirits can give no forgiveness, for "they came like trumpets," God's judgment day's trumpets, and it is finally only God who can offer forgiveness. Baldwin makes it starkly clear that Florence is doomed from the very beginning of her prayer, there is no possibility of her gaining salvation after the tumultuous Saturday in March that represents the present of the narrative action. Even before moving to a long flashback explaining why Florence is in that particular position on that particular day, the narrator throws a hard judgment on Florence:

> Neither love nor humility had led her to the altar, but only fear. And God did not hear the prayers of the fearful, for the hearts of the fearful held no belief. Such prayers could rise no higher than the lips that uttered them. (Baldwin, Go 74)

What truly condemns her to never be able to access God's salvation is the lack of love in her prayer. Florence's "fall" on the altar is not due to, as Lynch terms it, a "pure, prayerful transport" but is rather due to "the release from overwhelming tensions and fear of death" ("Everlasting" 161). Indeed, Allen also agrees that Florence is unable to rid herself of malice, which Allen sees as "a necessary condition to salvation," and is what John is instead able to do during his own conversion ("Ironic," 37). As opposed to the recurring theme of falling from God's grace into sin, which is arguably Gabriel's,

[10] In the Anglo-Saxon tradition death is usually personified as male, whereas Latin countries such as Italy, Spain and France often also personify it as female, but in the case of Florence, it is interesting to note that it is male because, seen her antagonistic relationship with the male gender, it is also finally a male-gendered spirit that brings her metaphorically and physically to her knees. For more information on the gender of death see Karl S. Guthke's *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Elizabeth's and John's obsession, for Florence the fall is from the opposite direction, from unbelief to God's altar, but it is nonetheless to be understood as a fall, meaning that it is the moment that proves, with most certainty, her hypocrisy. While it may be argued that Florence, differently from her family, has been able to escape the oppressive religious environment described in the previous section, what Macebuh calls "theological terror" (53), she is not free from fear, or self-loathing, and is not able to achieve the tragic freedom that other non-religious characters, such as Elizabeth's father and Richard, attain. On the contrary, it seems that Baldwin really tries to single out Florence as hypocritical, because in Elizabeth's Prayer, much later in the book, but much earlier in time than her fearful conversion, Florence comments on her brother's conversion, doubting that people may indeed change their "heart" but admits only to a possibility of a change of "ways." Even more so, she seems critical of the cultural practices surrounding heartfelt conversions in the black religious community, saying that "these niggers running around, talking about the Lord done changed their hearts - ain't nothing happened to them niggers. They got the same old black hearts they was born with" (Baldwin, *Go* 290). It is also interesting to note, in this case, how Baldwin mixes temporal planes to gradually build Florence as a hypocritical person, providing a very nuanced and human portrait of the woman. The reader first meets her as a sick woman in need in the present, then the text goes way back to the root of her unbelief and animosity towards her brother in the past, arguably building a small sense of empathy towards her, and finally having her appear in others' stories, fully cementing her judgmental demeanor in the eyes of the reader.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that Florence is not only constructed as a hypocritical character: she is also positioned as the only character that can stand up to Gabriel. Reading this symbolically it may also be argued that she is the only adult character who has enough courage to doubt God, meaning she is the only one to put into doubt the set of restrictive beliefs the community lives with, and to survive, as opposed to Richard. Although she fails, since her rebellion is fundamentally steeped in hate and not in love, she is also the only voice of common-sense and rationality in John's family. When, for example, Roy is knifed, she is the only one that is able to stop Gabriel from whipping his son further and, arguably satisfyingly, puts Gabriel back in place by reminding him that he too had been a troubled child and that "You can't change nothing, Gabriel. You ought to know that by now" (Baldwin, *Go* 47). Her opposition to Gabriel is fueled, as Baldwin skillfully uncovers throughout the novel, by her knowledge, guarded for thirty years, that Gabriel had fathered a child out of wedlock. Undoubtedly, to fully understand just how

Florence finally fails her chance to salvation, it is vital to look at the character of Deborah, who is the one who provides Florence the ammunition, a letter, to face her brother in a final confrontation.

Deborah and Florence are strongly connected, and this is evident, for example, in the choice to start Florence's flashback with a prayer uttered by her mother, exactly on the night Deborah suffered a sexual abuse at the hands of a group of white men. This occasion is marked by Florence as the only time she ever heard a prayer from her mother that demanded her protection more than her brother's. It seems that, through Deborah's hurt, Florence is able to remember the only positive praying experience in her life, an activity which she has otherwise erased from her life. Following Deborah's father's failed reprisal after the attack, the black community was fearfully locked in their homes, in fear of retaliation: it is on this occasion that Florence's mother prayed for her then thirteen year old daughter, at high risk of suffering the same abuse endured by Deborah. Since, as Porter Nenon rightly points out, Deborah's point of view is never explored, narratively speaking the purpose of her abuse is not so much to uncover the psychological trauma it caused her but rather to inscribe "an act of violence against an individual within a larger system of social control," a system that concerns the entire community represented in *Go Tell* (12). It serves, in particular, as the most striking example of a recurring theme in Florence's Prayer, meaning the use of sexual and gender violence as a tool of oppression. As Florence's childhood and adolescence are set in the late 19th Century, the reader is able to gauge at abuse under slavery through Florence's mother, who had formerly been enslaved and mothered a child with her enslaver. Even more, Florence herself finally decides to leave the south, at the age of twenty-six, when her "master," importantly not called her employer, "suggested" that she become his concubine (Baldwin, *Go* 85). Throughout this temporally layered narration, Baldwin is able to uncover the overt "links between economic exploitation and sexual violation" well after the emancipation (Nenon 12). In this, Baldwin's work is in line with much more recent works, such as Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, where the scholar posits that "emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (6). Starting from Baldwin's representation of the Reconstruction Era in the south, it is clear that the legal assignation of a "human" status to black subjects did not, as Hartman explains, "redress the abuses of the institution nor the wonton use of the captive warranted by his or her status as chattel" (*Scenes* 6); in the case of Deborah's sexual abuse or Florence's sexual harassment, subjecthood did not entail that they would own the authority to express

consent. Starting from this, through the character of Deborah, Baldwin makes an important point, which is that the widespread use of sexual abuse as a form of control "has corrosive effects on sexual intercourse generally, including between black men and black women," as it is proved by her outcast status within the black community (Nenon 12).

Within this context, Florence also faces gender oppression: her mother denies her any privilege and all the family's efforts must go towards furthering the odds of her male younger brother, Gabriel. Florence is not only denied the most nutritious parts of food, but she is also most importantly denied the education she longs for: she must work to provide for her brother, a brother who, in her view, does not fully take advantage of the opportunities he is given, not as much as she would anyway. This is the root of Florence's hatred of her brother, and her need to escape her mother's cabin, the site of her submission to her brother's authority. As Allen argues, Florence is filled "with the sense of unworthiness that is typical of children who are deprived of parental love," and therefore feels called to "prove her own worth by leaving home, going North, and finding a husband who would amount to something" (Allen, "Religious" 189). Florence and Deborah, both victims of gender and sexual oppression, find a common ground in their hatred of the male gender and become good friends. Nevertheless, the two remain fundamentally different in their treatment of Gabriel: while Florence picks her hatred towards Gabriel as her hill to die on, Deborah loves and is perhaps consumed by the man, but never lets her hatred take the best of her energies. Indeed, while Florence vents her hate for Gabriel, Deborah, in what is an unmistakably Baldwinian voice, reminds Florence that "the Word tell us to hate the sin but not the sinner" (*Go* 85). Florence and Deborah represent two reactions to similar environments, but their rebellions assume different reaches and results. Deborah's ultimate rebellion is her significant defense of Esther, the woman Gabriel had fathered a child with while married to her. After a life where she had lost "the right to be considered a woman" and could therefore "only be looked on as a harlot" due to the abuse she suffered (Baldwin, *Go* 83), Deborah does not accept Gabriel's judgment of Esther as a harlot: "Esther weren't no harlot" she comments (Baldwin, *Go* 171). Deborah understands deeply Gabriel's faults but lets go of her hate for the hurt Gabriel has caused to her and others and leaves judgement and punishment in the hands of God, which is exactly what Florence is unable to do. Interestingly, looking at the symbology of the name Deborah, in the Old Testament's Book of Judges, Deborah is a political leader and prophet, but rather than doing the killing of the enemy herself, she prophesies it. Through the name of Deborah perhaps Baldwin might have wanted to underline the reach of the mistreated character's words and her fundamental

righteousness. Florence on the contrary very much wants to punish Gabriel herself, and in the final pages of the book, when on their way back to church she finally confronts Gabriel with Deborah's letter, she says: "you done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time you started paying" (Baldwin, Go 248). Florence's rebellion is both her only redeeming trait and her final condemnation: she is the only character who dares to question Gabriel/God, to confront him on his sin and hypocrisy but on this quest, she builds her entire persona on an antagonistic hate that finally destroys her from within.

2.3 Gabriel's royal line

Understanding Gabriel's failure to adhere to the Ethics of Love is perhaps most central in order to understand just how radical John's conversion to a religion of love is. Gabriel's prayer starts, just as Florence's and Elizabeth's, with a quote from a traditional black spiritual, *Cryin' Holy Unto the Lord*, whose exact lines are "Now I been introduced/ To the Father and the Son/ And I ain't/ No stranger now" (qtd in Baldwin, *Go* 104). This spiritual talks about the journey of a sinner: from sinning and realizing the impossibility of hiding from sin, to being baptized, to finally knowing God, therefore becoming a witness of His word. This is exactly Gabriel's path throughout the book, nevertheless, it is clear that the parallel is drawn ironically, as he is still as much a stranger to the message of God by the end of the novel, as he was at the beginning of his story. The choice of the name Gabriel for the character is both symbolic and ironic, since Gabriel is the Annunciation archangel and is often understood as one of God's most important messengers. To be sure, Gabriel does make himself into God's mouthpiece, by bringing messages "of man's sinfulness, of God's abiding hatred for sinners, and of eternal punishment in hell for the unregenerate," and yet the entire novel seems to offer an exploration of how this is fundamentally a misinterpretation of God's message (Bell 398). If Gabriel is God's messenger, mystical lines of communication between him and God must surely be jammed, if we look at the novel's course of events. Nevertheless, the choice of the name Gabriel, while ironic, also serves the purpose, as Allen explains, of assigning to the character the "agency of fatherhood" and not to be "sidetracked by the specific personality of Gabriel or the fact that he is not John's real father" (Allen, "Religious" 179); this entails, is sum, that whether or not Gabriel is John's actual father, emotionally or practically, he is invested with the authority of fatherhood, which is descending directly from God.

By the time the readers reach Gabriel's Prayer in *Go Tell*, they already have a pretty clear view of Gabriel: a harsh father, who mistreats both his sons physically and mentally, an unreasonable husband, a selfish, vindictive brother, and a religiously strict man. Entering Gabriel's point of view through the narrator then, the reader is not surprised in finding, right at the opening of the Prayer, that Gabriel has a strong, but delusional, belief that he is God's chosen one. As the narration shifts to the flashback of Gabriel's conversion, the man recalls his life before that point, his life in sin, as completely separated from his current self, and his conversion as a moment of "birth," that made him certain that he had been redeemed and chosen (Baldwin, *Go* 105). Differently from John's conversion, it seems that Gabriel sees his conversion as a moment that magically changed his whole being, erasing in a moment all of his character flaws, implying therefore that he would not have to work hard to keep those flaws at bay, because he had been saved. Furthermore, the motives behind Gabriel's conversion are also intrinsically different from John's. Gabriel's conversion, as John's, comes into the early hours of the morning, when, after a sexual encounter with a woman older than him, Gabriel feels, as never before, that sin was like a burden on him and that "he longed to lay it down" (Baldwin, *Go* 105). It is the intention behind his need to lay down the burden of sin, nevertheless, the reason why Gabriel's conversion also fails to reach true salvation and communion with God. Starting from his flashback but also, and perhaps most significantly, in the present of the narrated action, Gabriel is fundamentally motivated in life by a thirst for power. In the context of the mystical experience of his conversion, the narrator recalls that Gabriel desired "all the glories that his mother prayed he should find," but Gabriel's desires have very little to do with God's love and forgiveness and much to do with a sense of righteousness and superiority that Gabriel would like to gain:

> Yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed, His well-beloved, and worthy, nearly, of that snow-white dove which had been sent down from Heaven to testify that Jesus was the son of God. He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God. It was later to become his proud testimony that he hated his sins—even as he ran towards sin, even as he sinned. He hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenceless city of his mind. (Baldwin, Go 106)

Gabriel's conversion is motivated by a desire for power, but the power the character seeks is empty, since it is not an internal power that lets him overcome his fears and self-hate, but rather a power to be exercised on his circumstances, an external type of authority. Gabriel's

conversion is also different from John's in one fundamental aspect: while John is able to walk through the darkness alone, Gabriel is lost in the silent valley he describes as the site of his mystical journey towards God's righteousness, and is only able to make it through with the guide of his mother's singing, as if "she knew if she just called Him, the Lord would come" (Baldwin, *Go* 110). In his inability to make it through, Gabriel is unable to also achieve the complete sense of self-growth, and ultimately self-love, that John instead is able to reach. The Gabriel described through Florence's Prayer, Gabriel's conversion and later attitude to life seems to be the victim of what is essentially an Oedipal archetype, since he is coddled and spoiled by his mother, he also needs her in his uttermost time of self-definition; he also seems to be attracted to women he describes as "harlots," who are completely different from his mother, but is then unable to love Deborah, who instead could be considered "a surrogate mother" (Allen, "Religious" 189). Indeed, Gabriel even goes as far as to dedicate his preaching career to his mother, "If only," he feels, "his mother could be there to see - her Gabriel mounted so high!" (Baldwin, *Go* 123). Gabriel's subsequent career and life choices are steeped into two seemingly opposing notions: on the one hand the intimate conviction, as Lynch explains, "that God hardens his heart to the sinner" ("Everlasting" 160) and that, as punishment, God will not allow him to establish a "royal" line of sons, on the other hand his narcissistic, and wrongful, interpretations of signs from God that he is indeed his chosen one, making him into an annoyingly self-centered and hypocritical character.

Gabriel's fundamental fear of God becomes evident, over and over again, in his concern for the destination of "his holy seed" (Baldwin, *Go* 107). Before his conversion, he felt that, on the occasion of his intercourse with the older woman, his seed had been spent "in a forbidden darkness where it could only die," and therefore that there would be "for him, forever, and for his, no hope of glory" (Baldwin *Go* 107). After his conversion, Gabriel first has the idea to marry Deborah because she is holier than the other women in the congregation, and he has the explicit intention "to continue the line of the faithful, a royal line" (Baldwin, *Go* 125). Having asked God to give him a sign that this is how he should proceed, Gabriel subsequently has a long dream: first his sexual encounters with women in the past come back to haunt him, and as he wakes, he finds himself "covered with his own white seed" (Baldwin, *Go* 127). Gabriel himself compares this act of spilling his seed to the story of Onan, a character in the book of Genesis, who, when asked by his father to lay with his brother's wife to produce an heir to the line, rather than giving his brother an heir, preferred to spill his seed on the floor, a behavior that earned him God's

displeasure and punishment. Symbolically, the first act of the dream seems to point to the fact that Gabriel's past in sin could only lead him to waste his seed and incur in God's wrath. The second act of the dream, befitting to the title of the novel, sees Gabriel climbing a steep, dangerous mountain. Gabriel is scared but realizes he has no choice but to keep climbing up, until finally he reaches "a peaceful field," illuminated by the sun "like a crown of glory" (Baldwin, *Go* 129). In this valley of salvation Gabriel meets "the elect" and the voice of God tells him, "Touch them not [...] my seal is on them," and then adds "so shall thy seed be" (Baldwin, *Go* 129). Gabriel takes the dream as a sign to marry Deborah, to therefore father a blessed family line. Yet, God's promise does not come to fruition because Gabriel is unable to keep faith to his promise to live within God's commandments: he does not love Deborah, who rather acts as a prop of his righteousness, and soon after their marriage he cheats on her with Esther. While Deborah remains barren until her death, Esther becomes pregnant with Gabriel's child after their extremely brief affair. In shock Gabriel comments of her conception that "it was the womb of Esther, who was no better than a harlot, that the seed of the prophet would be nourished" (Baldwin, *Go* 149). As Allen rightfully proposes, for Gabriel "salvation is connected with lawful paternity" ("Religious" 195), therefore the son Esther brings into the world, whom she ironically names Royal, cannot possibly belong to Gabriel's own royal line, because he has not been carried by the chosen "womb" but by an inadmissible, sinful "womb." Gabriel never acknowledges Royal as his first son, who eventually dies violently, having always been a troubled individual. Realizing that he has done wrong towards his only son, Gabriel seeks repentance and thinks he finally has received the sign of God's forgiveness in his marriage to Elizabeth, and his mission to save her and her illegitimate child from sin. Yet, the rightful heir he finally fathers with Elizabeth, Roy, is not at all the rightful heir to the line of the faithful he felt he had been promised, on the contrary, the boy not only is not interested in religion, and this is clear to every character in the novel, but openly questions Gabriel's "life-hating attitudes" (Lynch, "Everlasting" 167), as can be seen in the breakfast scene in Part One. When Roy, in defense of his mother, calls Gabriel "a black bastard" (Baldwin, *Go* 56), Gabriel reads it as a curse, and wonders if it is indeed the same curse that Esther had uttered when she brought Royal into the world. Gabriel, finding that the rightful heir to his line is not worthy of the task, wonders, considering "all the signs of His favour" in his regard, if it may be that his son is cursed "for the sin of his mother, whose sin had never been truly repented" (Baldwin, *Go* 131). Gabriel is unable to see what is patently clear to the rest of the characters, and most of all to Florence, which is that Royal and Roy were very much his

heirs in their wild behaviors and violence, and he therefore tries to push the blame to his partner, proving once more that he is incapable of love.

Within Gabriel's quest to finally establish that he is in fact God's chosen one, John sticks out as the most blatant contradiction to his interpretation of God's signs. Gabriel feels that perhaps Roy is "cursed," as said above, because of his mother's lack of true repentance, and sees John as "the living proof of her sin, [...] a very interloper among the saints," who stands "between [Elizabeth's] soul and God" (Baldwin, *Go* 131). While proposing to Elizabeth he had promised to love her son as his own, but Gabriel is actually unable to keep his promise: the difference he feels should be between his blood child and John, is the root cause of his mistreatment of his stepchild. Indeed, Gabriel wonders:

> How could there not be a difference between the son of a weak, proud woman and some careless boy, and the son that God had promised him, who would carry down the joyful line his father's name, and who would work until the day of the second coming to bring about His Father's Kingdom? (Baldwin, *Go* 132)

The fact that John might follow in his footsteps into the Church better than Roy, as everyone after all expects him to[11], feels as "one more parody of [Gabriel's] plans" (Lynch, "Everlasting" 167). In Gabriel's need to father a line of God's elected children, there seems to be much of the biblical theme of the covenant, that sealed with God is passed on through generations, bringing wealth and peace. Indeed, as Shirley Allen aptly notes, Baldwin is able to innovatively substitute "Freudian Greek Myths" with "Hebrew archetypes," to handle his central father-son confrontation ("Religious 182). The conflict, as presented through Gabriel's point of view, is understood within the story of Abraham and Ishmael, which is contained in a chapter of the Bible (Galatians 4) that Gabriel even uses for a sermon in his Prayer. Abraham's first heir, Ishmael, the son of the handmaid Hagar, was exiled to make room for the rightful heirs that Abraham had later fathered with Sarah. Indeed, Galatians 4:30 says: "Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." John, as an illegitimate child, born into sin and lust, cannot take the place of Gabriel's rightful heirs, conceived lawfully within the bounds of sacred matrimony, and should therefore be exiled to allow Gabriel's blood son to take his place in the "royal line." Nevertheless, as Allen notes, Baldwin seems to propose an alternative biblical precedent for Gabriel and John's conflict in Jacob and

[11] As mentioned in 2.1 the very first two lines of the book are "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father" (Baldwin, Go 11)

Esau's story. Jacob is the younger twin brother, and therefore not the rightful heir, but is, nevertheless, clearly much more suited to follow in Isaac's footsteps as a leader than Esau, who has a wilder and headstrong personality. Though through deceit and with the help of his mother, Jacob indeed becomes Isaac's heir, and not Esau. This symbolic identification of John with Jacob can be seen in several of the novel's episodes, such as John's encouragement by his mother on the morning of his birthday, while only Roy is understood by Gabriel as his heir, or in John's wrestling fight with Elisha in the Temple before the evening service. As Allen notes, just as Jacob had to wrestle an angel to earn the rights of the first born, so does John with Elisha, who is therefore "John's guardian angel" ("Religious" 182). These opposing interpretations, John as Ishmael, or John as Jacob, can sum up the conflict between Gabriel and John. On the one hand, Gabriel needs John to be as Ishmael, to confirm his belief that he has a covenant with God that will lead his son to be God's chosen one, which is also a confirmation that Gabriel himself is God's chosen one, like Abraham. On the other hand, John, as Jacob, is naturally better suited to enter God's covenant and will do so even without the support of his father. Therefore, it could be assumed that John's existence as one of the Saints after his conversion is, within Gabriel's terms, the recognition that he is not God's chosen one. This is further confirmed by the fact that Gabriel does not allow John to know that he is not his real father, because that might further strengthen John's claim against him.

By the arguments made so far, it seems that narratively and symbolically Gabriel is a character whose power hunger and hypocrisy are fundamentally motivated by fear: fear of the impossibility of redemption, fear of a life that can never give as much as his mother had promised. As many critics propose, his brief, sweeping erotic affair with Esther seems to be Gabriel's only moment of redemption, when the power of love seems to surpass the power of fear. Although there is no fairness and love in his treatment of Esther following the affair, during their erotic connection Gabriel "can momentarily see Esther as a creature of joy" (Bell 400). Esther, unlike Gabriel, is instead one of the novel's few free characters, together with Richard and Elizabeth's father, and just like them, her freedom leads her to her tragic final demise. Esther is the only one who is ever able to stand up to Gabriel, not merely in malice, as Florence does, but in love, inviting him to "break his churchly chain" (Bell 400). Gabriel, as it has been made clear, is not able to listen to her appeal, and instead ends up objectifying Esther simply as an unworthy "womb." Even more so, as Nenon compellingly explains, Gabriel's fear "divests desire from affection and cleaves sexuality from paternity," making it impossible for him to build a healthy family, whatever the

context (17). Exactly because Gabriel is truly incapable of loving anyone, whether it be in lawful marriage or in affairs, he seeks and finds in the vengeful, Old Testament figure of God a justification for his unloving behavior and fear. Gabriel is the antithesis of Baldwin's Ethics of Love; indeed, if we are to read *Go Tell* as primarily autobiographical, the author's Ethics of Love could even be understood as a direct reaction to Gabriel's real-life correspondent, Baldwin's father. The Ethics of Love are a radical response to fear through love. Moving to the next and final prayer introducing John's conversion, the reader finds Elizabeth's Prayer.

2.4 Elizabeth's irresolution

Elizabeth, John's mother, is someone with whom the reader may sympathize with, since she lives in difficult conditions, with a difficult partner, but she is also somewhat of a frustrating character, because, although she does love John, she is unable to fully protect him from the physical and psychological violence Gabriel puts him through. Elizabeth's irresolution, her inability to persevere bravely in her rebellion against traditional norms ultimately leads her to fail her ascent to the love journey that John is instead able to embark on. Nonetheless, it could easily be argued that, out of the three Prayers, hers is surely the one which gets closest to Baldwin's Ethics of Love. Just as with Florence and Gabriel's Prayers, Elizabeth's Prayer starts with a quote from a hymn, by the same title: "Lord, I wish I had of died / In Egypt land! (qtd. in Baldwin, Go 175). This song refers to the book of Exodus, in particular Chapter 16, where the Jews, having left Egypt, are now stranded in the desert and are hungry and thirsty, wishing they had died in Egypt, when they still had food and drink. The Bible suggests that they should not have doubted Moses's leadership though, because God provides for the group bread and water, so that they might continue the journey. The reference made to this episode of the Old Testament serves to point to Elizabeth's lack of faith and conviction: had she fully believed in her love, the quote seems to suggest, God, or love, would have provided for her. Furthermore, Elizabeth's name, just as Gabriel's, hints at a biblical character, namely it points to Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother and Virgin Mary's relative. As a biblical character, Elizabeth stands out as a woman of great faith: having lived within God's commandments all her life, Elizabeth had to wait until her old age to finally receive God's miracle of a child; the long wait never led her astray, her faith in God was complete and unwavering. If we look at Elizabeth's course of action in *Go Tell*, it is clear that she does not hold such an unwavering faith, not necessarily

in God himself, but rather in her capacity to love: she does not seem to believe that her love is enough to break through the undoubtedly harsh conditions of her life. Elizabeth's Prayer uncovers just how Elizabeth lacks conviction and courage, but also, finally, how systemic conditions in the USA are set against her, making her final demise somewhat understandable, as indeed Baldwin's merit is always to approach all characters with great understanding and compassion while also never pitying them.

Elizabeth's flashback brings her back to Maryland, where she had grown up with an aunt, following the death of her mother. Elizabeth, the narrator explains, "had scarcely known her mother and had certainly never loved her" (Baldwin, *Go* 177). Her mother had been very sickly and light-skinned, and Elizabeth suspected that the lack of affection or the difficulty with which she bore her mother's physical touch depended on the fact that Elizabeth was much darker than her mother and "not nearly, of course, so beautiful" (Baldwin, Go 177). Elizabeth's father, on the contrary "was dark, like Elizabeth, and gentle, and proud," and Elizabeth had always loved him and been loved by him with such an intensity, that the figure of her father lingered for her as a constant beacon of hope. It is interesting to note here, that, however briefly, Baldwin is able to impress upon the reader the idea that Elizabeth is proud of her blackness, effectively reversing notions of colorism. Even feeling that her mother does not find her beautiful because of her skin tone, Elizabeth never actually wishes to impress her or please her. It could even be argued that she somewhat despises her mother for her sickly whiteness, which she correlates sensorially to "stale milk" (Baldwin, *Go* 177). Her father, and by association blackness, are instead tied to all positive attitudes: beauty, kindness, generosity, affection. As compared to Florence, who spent her life trying to reach a "white" respectability and destroyed her marriage for it, or Gabriel, who spent his life simmering in his hate for white people, it seems Elizabeth is able to build, through her love for her father, a healthy self-image that will later perhaps serve her in building a loving relationship with Richard.

After her mother's death Elizabeth is forcefully taken from her beloved father by her maternal aunt, on account of her father's supposed unrespectable occupation. Her aunt, Elizabeth feels, made her live in a shadow of "fear—fear made denser by hatred," a feeling which is countered by her unconditional and nonjudgmental love for her father (Baldwin, *Go* 179). The aunt's concern for the child, the narrator posits, had come from a place of love, deep down, but a love directed towards her sister, Elizabeth's mother, rather than for Elizabeth herself. Love for Elizabeth, *Go Tell* seems to suggest, would have meant respecting the young girl's wishes, where possible. As a young woman, Elizabeth had been

able to make a very clear-cut distinction of what love should and should not be: her aunt's love was "a bribe, a threat, an indecent will to power," whereas in her own understanding, while love was a "kind of imprisonment," it was also an imprisonment that would bring forth "mysteriously, a freedom for the soul and spirit"; love "was water in the dry place, and had nothing to do with the prisons, churches, laws, rewards, and punishments, that so positively cluttered the landscape of her aunt's mind" (Baldwin, *Go* 180). Elizabeth's understanding of love within these terms adheres to Baldwin's Ethics of Love, inasmuch as love nurtures the self and does not tear it down, it inspires one to be brave and to let go of fear. Yet, while she is able to make such a distinction, that Florence and Gabriel are clearly unable to do, she is not able to live by it and doubts whether her misfortunes are due to a wrong she might have done towards God, hence falling back into the religion of fear and vengeance that permeates the novel. Indeed, the aunt's religious belief and environment are the same that Elizabeth later seeks out when deciding to be with Gabriel. Her aunt's promise that, if Elizabeth kept walking around with her "nose in the air," the Lord would let her "fall right on down to the bottom of the ground" seems to haunt Elizabeth and ultimately guide her decisions (Baldwin, Go 180).

Throughout her youth, Elizabeth kept wishing that her father would take her away from her loathed aunt, but he never could or did so. Although Elizabeth maintained the express wish to leave her aunt, a "determination, like a heavy jewel between her breasts," she never got to the point of fully realizing it on her own, as for example Florence was able to do (Baldwin, *Go* 181). It was Richard who took her away, in her escape from the symbolic mountain of faith she was to later climb back with Gabriel; it was Richard who led her to her own personal "city of destruction," New York City (Baldwin, *Go* 182). While Shirley Allen suggests that Elizabeth is "unable to emerge from childish dependency on men" ("Religious" 190), most critics, on the contrary, view Elizabeth's relationships with both her father and Richard as some of the most positive and liberating relationships in the entire novel. It is undeniable that, in her choice to marry Gabriel, while clearly not loving him, Elizabeth does seem to be dependent on the man's approval and strength, to need "a hiding-place hewn in the side of the mountain," as she symbolically sees him (Baldwin, *Go* 216). Elizabeth's relationship with Richard, though, is much different from her dependent relationship with Gabriel. Richard and Elizabeth meet in Maryland and soon find themselves deeply in love with each other, theirs is not a relationship of convenience. Indeed, the love story between the two has such a sweeping effect that, for Elizabeth, Richard has completely filled her life "from the moment he arrived until the moment of his

death" (Baldwin, Go 182). While surely Elizabeth is, to a certain degree, emotionally dependent on Richard to take action in her life, arguably the intensely positive and non-judgmental feelings he inspires, allow her self-growth. Furthermore, Richard and Elizabeth need each other and are made better in being with each other, and that is exactly the result that Baldwin's Ethics of Love envisions. As explained in the first Chapter of this thesis, love must intrinsically be rooted in the relation to others, there can be no fully independent love. By creating such a strong bond Elizabeth is able to take responsibility towards another human being, which eventually leads her to grow and find freedom, even if these feelings are short-lived.

Richard is described as "very thin and beautiful, and nervous - *high strung*" with "a cat's impressive, indifferent aloofness, his face closed, in his eyes no light at all" and Elizabeth is immediately attracted by his being visibly different from anyone else she knows. It seems clear from his very first description that Richard cannot fully be defined within the categories existing throughout the novel: his description rather than focusing on his handsomeness, masculinity, faith or color focuses on his energy, on his approach to life. In point of fact, he willfully does not belong to the strict religious world that Elizabeth is trapped in, rather he is interested in education, art and in general seems to have a wider gaze on life. As Elizabeth and Richard move to New York with a view to find better work opportunities and get married, they realize that life will not be so generous towards them. If Elizabeth at first believed that they would be married as soon as they arrived in New York, that is not the case. While both working in a hotel, the couple lives in poverty, and with Richard also going to night school, the plan to marry is postponed to an undefined future, "as soon as [Richard] had saved some money" (Baldwin, *Go* 188). The postponement of the marriage puts Elizabeth in the situation of compromising the value system she has grown up in, which bids her to save her virginity for marriage. While, as said above, Richard does operate outside of the boundaries of religion, it seems that he still follows the social rule that the man should provide for the female partner, but in doing so he exposes Elizabeth to a further dilemma. "In a city where no one cared," Elizabeth soon finds herself in intimacy with Richard without being married, and while she is happy with him, she also does describe herself as "sweetly fallen," implying that she did feel uncomfortable with the state of things (Baldwin, Go 189). As the tension of their life in New York rises, Elizabeth is unable to even fathom the idea of leaving Richard, or of insisting in marrying, which arguably would have put her more at ease, because she feels, again following gender binaries, that she should be "his strength," "the indisputable reality

to which he could always repair" (Baldwin, *Go* 190). On the one hand, Richard feels he has to be the strong man providing for the family, on the other Elizabeth submits to Richard's will and does not fully advocate for herself in the relationship. These "white, heteronormative values" that Elizabeth and Richard find themselves subjected to in New York, as Porter Nenon suggests, "were far out of reach for the vast majority of black people in the 1930s," when their story is set (19). Indeed, as Elizabeth aptly explains, the North was not much different from the South, to the extent that "what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with another" (Baldwin, *Go* 189). The racial, heteronormative oppression that hinders their relationship in New York peaks in Richard's wrongful arrest, which eventually leads him to give up on life. Richard is wrongfully convicted because society denies his black individuality not only in abstract terms, but also in very practical terms, when he is included in a group of robbers, simply because he is black and near the robbers at the time of their escape. Oppression acts in their relationship in two ways: first it hinders communication between the two of them and then it produces the material conditions that lead to Richard's tragic ending. The extreme choice to end his life, made by Richard, is built throughout the Prayer as the only possible solution to release the tension the young man had felt since his very first description; there is no constructive release envisioned for Richard.

The suicide as a final solution to oppression is a recurring theme in Baldwin's writing, and it will be further explored in the character of Rufus in *Another Country.* Although Richard is understood by most critics as a free and freeing character, and indeed as has been highlighted he is able to break through the restrictive climate of his community, he is nonetheless unable to reach Baldwin's ideal of love. While surely better equipped toward life than Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, which Baldwin had harshly criticized, Richard is unquestionably also just as unable to find the "gimmick" that the author sees as necessary to survive in the oppressive environment that surrounds them. Richard's story seems to be a tragic testament to what wrongs a racist society can make a young black man bear, and, while there is no type of negative judgment towards the character, as indeed he is one of the most positive ones, his story is also very much opposed to John's. Richard's sensitivity seems, in sum, to be his best quality, but also finally what leads to his demise; John, on the contrary, inherits Richard's sensible spirit but is also fierier, he is able to stand up to oppression and love himself fiercely. Furthermore, while it is obviously American racist society that kills Richard, Elizabeth finds herself with the lingering doubt that if she had told Richard of her pregnancy, which she had kept for herself

in fear of upsetting him, she might have indeed saved the man she had loved so deeply. Elizabeth is left wondering if she "had lost her love because she had not, in the end, believed in it enough" (Baldwin, *Go* 194). The novel seems to suggest that Elizabeth's inability to fully reject "her gendered assumptions of Richard's masculinity" is part of the tragic set of events that bring about Richard's suicide (Nenon 20). Even if Elizabeth later symbolically walks back up the mountain of restrictive faith with Gabriel, the freeing love she had felt for Richard stands on her as an indelible mark, and this why, out of the three prayers Elizabeth's is the one that exhibits regret rather than guilt. Even under Gabriel's pressure, Elizabeth never disowns her choice to love Richard and the product of that relationship, John. As Macebuh successfully argues, Elizabeth and Richard's story in particular seems to be an example not so much of the "impossibility of love," as indeed their relationship, following Elizabeth's metaphor on the meaning of love, does act as water on the arid ground (Macebuh 63); their relationship is rather a testimony of how this ideal can be corrupted, of how many ways life can lead love to fail. Interestingly, Baldwin's fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, sets up a very similar story of love and racial oppression between its protagonists, Fonny and Tish; yet, as compared to Richard and Elizabeth's, their ending is much more hopeful, possibly because they, and their support system, are able to escape norms of gender and respectability and fully embrace the promise of a new life.

The three Prayers presented so far set out all the conditions John is a product of, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and serve to prove all the ways love can fail, most times very understandably so. As the narration, and analysis, now moves to the very center of the action in the narrated present, John's experience on the threshing floor, it is important to ask, as Allen persuasively does, "Is there no way to prevent Gabriel's understandable concern to establish his royal line and Elizabeth's understandable refusal to climb to the top of the mountain from warping a new generation?" (Allen 196). In other words, how can John escape the systemic conditions that his relatives fell prey to, to truly save himself from hate, shame, guilt and fear and learn how to love?

2.5 John's love rebellion

John's section starts with a quote from Sister Rosetta's gospel tune "I Looked Down the Line and I wondered": "Then I buckled up my shoes, / and I started" (Baldwin, *Go* 223). "I looked down the line, / and I wondered" is also the opening epigraph of Part 1, which may imply that John's journey is finally reaching its peak. Following symbolically

from the title, if John is on his way to the top of the mountain to announce his rebirth, then he does need to "buckle up his shoes" and start his climb: the quote signals the beginning of a journey. In the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, the chosen lines from the song narrate of a sinner who is finally able to "look down the line" and to wonder how far he or she has strayed from the Lord. Having now seen and understood the road that must be walked to come back to faith, the sinner, then, embarks on the journey back to God with new determination. John's quote, as opposed to his relatives', does not read as ironic and it is, on the contrary, quite straightforward and optimistic: it tells of a renewed ability to act, to advocate for oneself, and, importantly, the willingness to work for the sought-after salvation. Furthermore, as in the case of Gabriel and Elizabeth, it is important to note that the name John can also be tied back to a few biblical characters, but, given also the name of his mother and father, and the title of the novel itself, most critics seem to agree that it may point in particular to the figure of John the Baptist. Although accounts vary between the Gospels, John the Baptist is understood to have been the miraculous son of Elizabeth, and his birth, as mentioned above, was announced by the Archangel Gabriel. John the Baptist's mission is understood by theologians to have been the preparation of the world to the advent of Jesus Christ, by introducing, in particular, the practice of baptism, intended to wash away sins and walk renewed in God. Just as the title of the novel suggests the action of announcing the birth of Jesus Christ from mountaintops, John the Baptist had the role of announcing the advent of the Messiah. As opposed to the ironic associations of Gabriel and Elizabeth to biblical characters, it could rather be argued that John's association with John the Baptist clarifies and confirms an optimistic reading of the ending of the novel. On an additional note, Allen suggests a further possible identification of John with John of Patmos, through specific mimicking of the language and episodes in the Book of Revelation. As Allen rightfully argues, John's identification with biblical characters can be understood as a literary device that is able to lift the racial situation described "to a more universal plane by equation of the Negroes's sufferings in America with those of the children of Israel in Egypt and the Early Christians in the Roman Empire" ("Religious" 179). The levels of symbolic association of the characters' names and life stories, therefore, serve multiple layers of interpretations that ultimately enrich Baldwin's work.

In the last and final Part of *Go Tell*, the narration returns fully to John's point of view. The boy finds himself on the threshing floor, the "dusty space in front of the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned" (Baldwin, *Go* 223). During the Roman Epoch, grains would be harvested and then threshed manually on a portion of floor that was smooth and

hard, the threshing floor. In the Bible, both Old and New Testament, the threshing floor, with its purpose of separating what is of use and what is to be thrown away and burned, becomes symbolic of divine judgment. John the Baptist himself, as narrated in chapter 3 in both Luke and Matthew's Gospels, used the threshing floor to symbolically allude to the coming of Jesus Christ, who would "gather his wheat into his garner" and "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). By setting John's spiritual journey in such a symbolic place, and indeed in titling the last Part itself "The Threshing Floor," Baldwin is already suggesting the painful but necessary action of separation, to be enacted through his conversion, which will indeed be a harrowing endeavor. John will have to let go of what does not serve him anymore: sin, on a strictly religious level of interpretation, or the hate for his father, on a vaster view within the novel. As a point of fact, John's experience on the threshing floor does start as a rebellion, a rebellion against his father and his father's God, which will have to be overcome, if John is to grow and survive. When trying to retrace the beginning of his mystical fall into darkness, John remembers turning to kneel at the Temple's altar[12] and staring at the cross "with an awful bitterness in his heart, wanting to curse" (Baldwin, *Go* 225). This curse to God, not actually spoken but felt with intensity, is associated to John's curse to his father and countered by his love for Elisha: this complex mix of emotions, as Lynch argues, is what makes John's growth possible ("Everlasting" 161), as this is the moment when "the Spirit spoke in him," plunging John into darkness (Baldwin, *Go* 225). The two entities, God and John's father, are completely enmeshed in the boy's mind: if rebelling against God "was so tragically impractical," his father was the "visible object of John's fear and hatred" (Macebuh 53). Yet, even if his turning to the altar is fraught with hate, his experience on the threshing floor is of a completely unpredicted intensity; surely, John had turned to the altar wanting deceptively to "speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and with authority, to confound his father," hence not truly envisioning a profound journey within his faith. Nevertheless, the experience he finds himself in, will lead him to question his hate of his father and to turn towards his own deep-seated fears. In sum, whereas the novel builds up John's experience on the threshing floor as a rebellion against his father and his father's values, the experience of conversion itself is revolutionary exactly because it goes beyond the single-minded aim of rebellion. Hence, the conversion becomes, as Robert Birdwell brilliantly explains, "an act of self-recognition or self-

[12] It may be interesting to note that Florence has also associated kneeling at the altar with kneeling before Gabriel, but she is never able to get past her hatred for Gabriel and therefore she can never fully pray, since she does not see God, but only Gabriel.

affirmation of a young queer black man," with love being "the fundamental act of recognition" (34).

Starting his mystical journey, John describes feeling that "dust was in his nostrils, sharp and terrible, and the feet of the saints [...] raised small clouds of dust that filmed his mouth" (Baldwin, *Go* 223). The insistence on dust at the beginning of the experience ties back to John's morning and the Sisyphean chore of cleaning the Grimes's house, and arguably to the Grimes's last name as well. Dust, or most generally the idea of a dirt that can never be washed away, no matter how much it gets cleaned, seems to permeate John's life. Arguably, dust could be understood as sin, and, at the moment of the maximum conflict with sin, dust literally enters John's body, transporting him to the dark abyss where he will have to face his own demons. In line with Baldwin's embodied and erotic idea of love, the mystical experience of conversion John lives through must also become extremely embodied, to produce lasting results. Soon after his contact with dust, John loses touch with reality and finds himself "helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness" (Baldwin, *Go* 224). John's embodied journey through the depths of his being is now underway.

From the very beginning of his climb, John is taunted by what he describes as a "malicious, ironic voice," which keeps bidding him to rise "from that filthy floor if he did not want to become like all the other niggers" (Baldwin, *Go* 224). It is at this point that John realizes that his arms and legs have become paralyzed, and he can no longer rise, but only sink deeper, in "a sickness in his bowels"[13] (Baldwin, *Go* 224). When the ironic voice scornfully bids John not to become "like all other niggers," it leaves the identification of the voice open to interpretation: is it an unloving, racist voice, mocking him? Or, in its use of the specific word "nigger," is it a friendly voice taunting John to make different choices? As was explained in the first chapter, in his non-fiction work Baldwin uses the word "nigger" to refer to the white myth of blackness, to refer, in short, to desperate characters like Bigger Thomas, who seem to have no way out of the oppression of black life in the USA. The voice may be asking John to let go of the racial stereotypes he has been imbibed with and to find love for his own blackness. In this case then, the slur may be an exhortation towards John to fight through the darkness, both surrounding him in his visions and within him as unloved blackness, and come out a changed boy, to become someone who has found a way to love through the hate, something that his relatives were clearly unable to do. It is

[13] It may be interesting to point out that Florence also suffers from a mysterious sickness in her bowels, but as she no longer has the strength to fight it out, she is consumed by it. Symbolically this may be read as an indication that she has dwelled in her hate for so long that she can longer find healing.

quite fair to assume that the voice does not belong to Gabriel, since it later responds, mockingly, to Gabriel announcing his usual motto "set thine house in order," by bidding once again John to rise up and adding, "Don't let him keep you here. You got everything your daddy got" (Baldwin, *Go* 226). As Allen convincingly explains, Gabriel is not a conscious hypocrite, and would never be capable of the "overt double-dealing," needed to "encourage John to rebel against his authority, to prevent John's salvation" ("Ironic" 36). Another possible association of John's ironic voice is to John himself: to his rationality, or, as Allen again proposes, to his "unbelief" ("Ironic" 36). This may be somewhat confirmed by a later interjection of the ironic voice, when John is considering the possibility of a generational curse, the curse of Ham[14], being passed down through generations. Like Ham, John had seen and mocked his father's nakedness, and most importantly, just like his father, John is black, therefore bound to be cursed. The ironic voice asks John "scornfully, if he believed that he was cursed":

> All niggers had been cursed, the ironic voice reminded him, all niggers had come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons. How could John be cursed for having seen in a bath-tub what another man—if that other man had ever lived—had seen ten thousand years ago, lying in an open tent? Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment? (Baldwin, Go 228).

A possible interpretation is that the voice seems to ask that John goes a lot deeper than hiding his hate and fear behind an alleged curse, deeper than listening to social justifications and conventions, and this is why the voice doubts that John actually believes in a generational curse. Possibly, the voice wants John to face his hate for his father, therefore wanting John to live in the moment and face his raw, unfiltered feelings on the threshing floor, to finally let those that do not serve him, hate and fear, go. As said above, Allen instead reads this ironic voice as John's voice of unbelief, and that is why it "attempts to discredit [religion] by associating it with 'niggers' and by ridiculing the Bible's story of Noah's curse on Ham" ("Ironic" 36). Arguably though, the interpretation of the curse on Ham's descendants as a generational curse on black subjects and its use as justification of their social treatment has not so much to do with religion per se as with American racial

[14] The Curse of Ham is an episode in the book of Genesis (Part 9), whereby Ham, a son of Noah, finding his father drunk and naked, did not cover his father's nakedness but went to call on his brothers. For this act of mockery Noah condemned Ham's son Canaan: "And he said, cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (Genesis 9:25). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, this episode was used, starting from the 15th Century as a justification for the enslavement and later the racialization of black subjects, by identifying them with the line spurring from Ham.

politics. Perhaps the ironic voice is not actually mocking religion, in terms of faith, but it is mocking the darkly vengeful and hateful environment that John has found in the temple. Indeed, the ironic voice's unbelief is not against religion in full, as represented by John's later conversion, but rather, against John's father and his religion.

As Florence's story proved to the reader before John's, though, while rebelling may be useful to make a first step in taking ownership of one's destiny, living a life fueled by hate cannot finally be considered a constructive approach to life. Indeed, as Allen rightly notes, John's "malicious irony" must be swept away in order for him to face "the psychic realities of his subconscious" ("Ironic" 37). In other words, John ultimately has to let go of his rebellion against his father and God, if he is to face his emotions: "the fear of being an adult, unprotected by parental love and responsible for his own life" (Allen, "Ironic" 37). Indeed, once John has voiced his hate against his father, he finds himself at the bottom of darkness, in a grave. There he finds himself within an army of darkness, "a cloud of witnesses," which includes his mother, father, aunt, and brother. At the bottom of this grave, unseen and unheard by his relatives, John feels there is "no love: no one to say: you are beautiful, John; no one to forgive him, no matter what his sin; no one to heal him, and lift him up" (Baldwin, *Go* 231). John starts to hear a murmur coming from the army of darkness, a sound that he now realizes he has heard since the very beginning of his life, in "his father's anger, and in his mother's calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of his aunt" (Baldwin, *Go* 232). This is the turning point for John: while he understands that this sound "came from darkness, that could only come from darkness" yet it also "bore such sure witness to the glory of light" (Baldwin, *Go* 232). Soon after this realization, a voice comes back to John, but it is no longer a malicious voice and the voice bids John to "go through" (Baldwin, *Go* 234). This is no longer the voice of unbelief, but rather the voice of true faith: the voice that looks to God for forgiveness and understands God as a generous being that will help John rise from the darkness, rather than keeping him there in punishment for his sins. It is quite possible to argue that the voice helping John on his way out of the darkness, as in the case of the ironic voice, is still John's, meaning that the ironic voice and the "voice of faith," as Allen defines it, are the very same voice, and not two separate entities. By leaving behind his hate, John is able to learn how to read reality in new ways and does not, therefore, create a whole new reality. Indeed, he has heard the murmurs of the dark army all his life, the murmurs never changed: it is John who changes, when he finally finds the light in them. John does not enter a new plane of reality through his conversion, he simply learns to understand reality through different eyes and ears, and

this is what finally allows him to briefly see God, when “the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear” (Baldwin, *Go* 236). In this final image of his experience on the threshing floor, John finally realizes that darkness and light are not opposed, but on the contrary they both combine to make God’s presence known. In this we may symbolically read Birdwell’s notion that John, through his experience, comes to terms with darkness, both understood as his own unloved blackness and as sin, and he is finally able to “describe the sin not as virtue, but as himself” (39).

Finally rising from the threshing floor after his divine vision, John’s life has not miraculously changed: when looking at his father he still feels “a stiffening, a panic and a blind rebellion” but importantly he now also feels a “hope for peace” (Baldwin, Go 239). Gabriel is clearly not at all pleased with John’s salvation and openly questions it, by ironically pointing out that John's claim to salvation comes from John himself and Gabriel will only believe it once he has seen John live it. The ending of the novel makes clear that while John has surely passed a great trial of fire on the threshing floor, the real trial John will have to go through, if he indeed wants to continue within his new, joyous and saved self, is to re-enter “his house - his father’s house” (Baldwin, *Go* 254). The conversion, as Lynch proposes, has given John “the strength to confront his father's hatred with hope and love” but he will have to learn how to make use of such tools (Lynch, “Everlasting” 157). The final scene of the novel takes place in front of the Grimes’s house, where John, scared, receives a final blessing from Elisha, “a holy kiss” (Baldwin, *Go* 256). With Elisha’s kiss as a mark on him, John finally crosses his father’s threshold: “I’m ready [...] I’m coming. I’m on my way,” the last line of the novel reads (Baldwin, *Go* 256). Just as with the quote opening the last Part, the last line of the novel seems to imply the beginning of a journey and a process that is continuously underway, rather than concluded. The ending is optimistic exactly because it does not portray John’s conversion as a magical, all-resolving solution, otherwise it may indeed be rather ironic; instead it looks at John as a human being who has accepted his flaws and has been made strong in them, a human being who has learned to read love in the murmurs of the army of darkness and can now work towards a new religion of love, rather than dwell in the harmful religion of vengeance. Whereas during the night John felt that his hate for Gabriel made the man into an ironic “everlasting father,” a hate so strong that not even the man’s death would assuage John’s anger and thirst for vengeance, by the end of the novel that image has been completely outshined by the vision of his divine father, and the hate that was destroying John from within is substituted by John’s ability to love.

2.6 Fathers and "Otherfathers"

Go Tell offers multiple representations of love: there is heterosexual, erotic love, more positively expressed through Elizabeth and Richard, and less so through Gabriel and Esther; there is homosexual erotic love between John and Elisha, possibly the most promising of all loves; there is *Philia*, companionate love, between Deborah and Florence, and Elizabeth and Florence; finally there is also some form of *Agape*, the love of family and of community, both amongst the family members of the Grimes's family and within the community. In representing all these different types of love, the novel is not necessarily providing a triumphant but simplistic portrait of love in society, but rather it seems to be showing how love can easily fail, while still only being the only truly viable solution to live a positive life. The possibility of love is present for all characters: while they live within a context that surely victimizes them, Baldwin makes sure that his main characters, especially Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth, are not represented only as victims but also as free agents, who consequently have to answer for their actions and choices. Love, *Go Tell* suggests, is not an easy choice, on the contrary, it is the hardest and most radical answer to the conditions that all characters in the novel are put in. Nonetheless, love is also the only possible answer, because hate, as can most clearly be seen in the character of Florence, destroys the hate monger and not the hated subject. John's true rebellion is his ability, as Lynch proposes, to rise "to a sense of his own basic goodness, strength, and ability to succeed in matters spiritual as well as temporal," while having no real example of it in his immediate family ("Everlasting" 173). It seems that all characters in the novel, excluding John and perhaps Elisha, finally hate and fear because they cannot find a way to love, even, and most frustratingly, when love is within their grasp. Gabriel, for example, is shown multiple possibilities to love, with Deborah, with Esther, with Elizabeth and with all his children but is always found at fault. It may be argued that his own failure to love is the most blatantly evident cause of John's misery. On a societal level, love is also denied, and its denial can be found, of course, in the racial discrimination in American society. Turning to the protagonist's different ending, John's circumstances are not at all different from his relatives', since, just like them, he finds himself receiving completely undeserved hate. When John is able to succeed on the threshing floor and to let go of his hate, he is the first character who lets down his walls and admits to his fallibility and, subsequently, learns how to love himself, in all his faults. While surely much of the novel can indeed be considered just as naturalistic as Richard Wright's work, John's hopeful conversion finally

represents the novel's optimistic core. As Bell points out, love, although hard to achieve, is shown as "an attainable goal" within the novel; it can be possible "if one is willing to live existentially" and "to abandon the puritan mythology of man's corruption, of the body's evil, of the necessity of sin and guilt," and "to live freely, unashamedly, and unselfishly as a trusting and committed person" (397). By the ending of the novel, it is somewhat unclear if John is destined to exit his father's religion or if he will take an authoritative place within it. Nevertheless, it seems that what is stressed, rather than the result itself of the conversion, is, as Birdwell points out, John's ability to see "the possibility of doing otherwise," which will allow him to exit the generational "curse" outlined in the Prayers, to finally achieve freedom to choose for himself (30). Just like John is able to find freedom from his oppressive environment through his choice to love and not hate, so was Baldwin, and the result of his seeking freedom can be found within the novel itself. One of Baldwin's best-known biographers, David Leeming, clearly indicates that "we must see John here as a metaphor for the real story — the inner story — of James Baldwin" (86). Leeming sees John's struggle on the threshing floor as a symbolic representation of Baldwin's struggle between his instinct to liberate himself from the Baptist religion of his childhood and the contradicting instinct to "journey to the very depths of the sorrow of his people," to find liberation with them (86).

Although Baldwin never provided a second installment for *Go Tell*, making it impossible to know how Baldwin would have interpreted John's future in detail, it may be interesting to briefly look at his short story "The Death of the Prophet," published on *Commentary* before *Go Tell*, in March 1950. The story, remarkably similar to his essay "Notes of a Native Son," included in the collection by the same title, narrates Gabriel's death, in a psychiatric hospital. Just as the real-life Jimmy, "Johnnie" finds in education the key to his final exit from his father's house. The short story tells of a John who is "an eighteen-year-old about to leave high school," "where he had read too much" (Baldwin "Death"). It was reading that ultimately expanded John's horizons, on the one hand undermining his faith, and on the other being distorted by his faith. Gabriel, the reader learns, had been taken to the psychiatric hospital two years prior, soon after John finally left the paternal home, and is now in a coma, due to tuberculosis. John, now unwillingly at his father's dying bed, realizes that he is finally safe from Gabriel, and that it was he, who had the burden and honor to be "the man, the conqueror, alone on the tilting earth" (Baldwin, "Death"). Nonetheless, the short story makes it clear that John is not free yet,

and likely will never be free, once the reality of his father's death, with no possibility of reconciliation, sets in:

> But he knew, in the awful, endless silence at the bottom of his mind, that it was himself who cried and himself who listened, that his cry would never be heard; it would bang forever against the walls of heaven and he would live with his recurring cry, the force of his anguish powerless to defeat the force of time and death. (Baldwin, "Death")

Compared to *Go Tell*, "The Death of the Prophet" leaves the reader much less reassured, as it makes clear that the shadow of Gabriel's teachings will never leave John, and that the freeing forgiveness at the end of *Go Tell* has not been lived through. It is safe to say that in time Baldwin was able to work through his feelings towards his father, not only in *Go Tell*, but also in the essay "Notes of a Native Son," which was published in 1955. In the essay, Baldwin seems to somewhat justify his father's choices, as he now further understands the "impossibility every parent in that room faced: how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child [...] a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself" (Baldwin, *Notes* 107). In point of fact, family structures in the black American community have been discussed for years as a focal point of the oppression of the community itself, often with inaccuracy and prejudice. The famous *Moynihan* report, for example, dating 1965, hypothesized that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" and that "so long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself." Moynihan, looking at data from single-mother households and male unemployment in the black community, understood the gap that existed between white and black households as one of the principal causes of the continued oppression of black subjects. The report may be representative of a partial truth: the lingering effects of enslavement on life opportunities and conditions meant that black families may indeed have had a harder time providing a stable environment for their children, which is well represented in Elizabeth's story. Undoubtedly, the family Baldwin represents is dysfunctional, and John will have to overcome some of its teachings to open up to the possibility of a different life to that of his father and forefathers. Nonetheless, as Libra Hilde convincingly explains in her work on slavery and fatherhood, "the legacy of slavery lies not in the pathology of black families or communities, but in the ongoing conditions of poverty, oppression and structural racism that Black Americans still face" (4). In delineating John's roots in the epics of black history, from slavery, through reconstruction,

to the Great Migration, reaching the Great Depression, Baldwin manages to stress exactly Hilde's point: the conditions of black life in America set the individual family members up for failure and shape the often-unsupportive family environments the characters are in. Baldwin goes a step further though, and he proposes that the only possible reaction to overcome such conditions is to armor oneself with the strongest of self-loves, that in turn will have a domino effect on others.

Furthermore, in opposition to the strictly white, heteronormative, Western type of family that the Moynihan report espouses, it is important to note that the black community in the USA has developed alternative family structures to provide stability, but these are often ignored by the raw data used in reports such as the Moynihan Report. Black families, as shown in *Go Tell*, rely on the community, and indeed, so did Baldwin. Once his father died, the author also looked for other male reference figures, which, I would propose, could be understood as "otherfathers." The figure of the "othermother" points to a female figure, usually older, taking care of children that are not biologically her own. The type of nurturing this figure provides is not to be understood only in strictly practical terms, but also in ethical and political terms. Importantly, as Patricia Hill Collins further proposes, othermothers are central in "offering [their children] a sense of their own unique self-worth" by encouraging "the development of their creativity," an activity which she calls "mothering the mind" (187). This type of relationship is "unlike traditional mentoring," and "goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts" (191). Turning these roles to male figures, the duty of "otherfather" and especially the function of "fathering the mind," in Baldwin's case, could be attributed to Beauford Delaney. Delaney, a black man twenty-three years Baldwin's senior, was a modernist painter, and like Baldwin he was also the son of a preacher and homosexual: all in all, as Leeming notes, a "kindred spirit" to Baldwin (33). When, following his father's death, Baldwin took on a series of menial jobs, which he substantially failed to keep, it was Delaney who proposed to the author that "perhaps you simply don't belong there" (qtd. in O'Neale 109) and, moving forward, encouraged him to develop his writing. Prior to that, it had been Delaney himself who helped collect, and substantially contributed to, the funds to organize Baldwin's father's funeral and burial, because the family could not afford it (Leeming 41). Delaney did not only support Baldwin with practical matters, but he also championed Baldwin's artistic development by providing for him a viable environment outside of the church, within the artistic scene of New York City. The artist acted for Baldwin not only as a model and reference point of what a black artist

would be like, but even more importantly, he proved to Baldwin that being a black subject working full-time as an artist was actually possible. O'Neale writes that Baldwin's brother David and others close to him would "all agree with Baldwin's claim that Delaney was the true father of Baldwin's art" (109).

Of course, when discussing Baldwin's "otherfathers," especially in connection to *Go Tell*, the other name that must be mentioned is surely Richard Wright's. As was briefly remarked at the beginning of the chapter, by the time *Go Tell* was published, Baldwin had already publicly criticized Wright's work. When the two writers first met in 1945, Wright was at the peak of his fame and Baldwin was a young, penniless, unpublished writer, with everything to gain. Leeming reports that Baldwin felt of their first meeting as if they had been "two black boys, in league against the world, and had just managed to spirit away several loads of watermelon" (qtd. in Leeming 49). It was in working on his first novel, *Go Tell*, originally titled "My Father's House," that Baldwin realized that "he was not a 'second Richard Wright,' that, in fact, their approaches to life and to art were very different" (Leeming 50). Despite Wright's concrete help in kickstarting Baldwin's literary career, Baldwin found that he could not agree with Wright's realist approach; though he approached the critique to Wright's work with much insensitivity, the public declaration of intents he made for his fiction, in criticizing Wright, was necessary in envisioning the new direction he would provide for black American literature. To conclude, *Go Tell* itself could be understood as a rebellion against Baldwin's literary father, Richard Wright, just like his protagonist, John, rebelled against his father Gabriel. Within the novel, Baldwin worked to provide a different future for his protagonist, effectively breaking out of a predestined tragic future, to give John the freedom to choose. Baldwin finds in his Ethics of Love a valid alternative to Wright's protest novel: undoubtedly his characters, just like Wright's, can walk towards self-destruction, but they can also turn in a different direction and can reach self-recognition and self-love.

The second chapter of this thesis has explored James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* to understand the possibilities of love it delineates. Following the novel's structure, the first section has contextualized Christian religion within the novel, by analyzing John's first steps in the story, and then has moved to consider the role of religion within Baldwin's life and its significance in the structure of the novel. Notably, it has been emphasized how religion functions both as a thematic conflict within the black American literary community and how religious contents themselves add layers of interpretation to

the novel. The subsequent sections have provided careful portraits of all three of John's relatives to delineate how their context leads them to failure, and how they are unable to find a way out of it. Florence drowns in her hate for her brother and fear of death, both of which make her unable to truly pray; Gabriel lives in the constant contradiction of extreme religious righteousness and fear of damnation, and he sees John as the material representation of all his anxieties; Elizabeth is too fearful to be decisive and lives in constant regret, although at least not in constant guilt. The three stories of his relatives, serve to set John's conversion as a journey of epic dimensions, to find himself in the darkness of hate and sin. John's rebellion, it has been argued, has him face to face with his hate for his father, and his father's God, and is revolutionary exactly because, through it, John is able to let go of said hate to find a more conciliatory and joyful attitude towards the world. His rebellion does not magically change the conditions of the world that oppress John, but it helps him to find new ways to respond to the oppression, through love. Finally, the conclusion of the chapter drew parallels between the fictional character of John and the real-life James Baldwin, and, in particular, dealt with Baldwin's "otherfathers" and his quest for a literary alternative to Protest Literature.

Chapter Three: "Baby Take All of Me" - Overcoming Racial and Sexual Innocence in *Another Country*

The following chapter will explore James Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, published in 1962. The writing of *Another Country* was particularly long: spanning over a decade, it was started in 1949 with the working title *Long at the Fair* (Leeming 68). Baldwin worked on it intermittently in the midst of other major projects, such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and two of his collections of essays, and finally finished the novel only in 1961 (Leeming 196). The work on the novel had often been arduous and had accompanied the author to "other countries": France, both the urban environment of Paris and the wild environment of Corsica, the tense USA, and Turkey, where the novel was finally finished. Published at a point in time when Baldwin's commitment to, and faith in, the civil rights movement was still very high, *Another Country*, together with *The Fire Next Time*, which was published shortly after (1963), represents the turning point in Baldwin's change in "tone and substance of his writing" (Fisher 139). The novel was one of Baldwin's two biggest bestsellers, together, again, with *The Fire Next Time,* and coincided with the author's period of maximum notoriety and recognition, while alive (Leeming 205). Despite its commercial success, *Another Country* received a mixed reception: while most of the black press was positive, the white press inconsistently criticized the book as either "conventional" or "too erotic," too "unrestrained" or incoherent (Leeming 205). A later, scathing critique of *Another Country* came from Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), which will provide useful parallels between notions of black masculinity in the following chapter.

The title of the novel, *Another Country*, has received and indeed will probably keep on receiving many different interpretations. A most basic spatial interpretation of the title would hinge on the novel's double setting, the USA and France, therefore highlighting either or both the fact that the USA is fundamentally different from Europe or that an escape to Europe is needed to understand or survive life in the USA, as Baldwin did. Taking this spatial interpretation further, it may be argued that "another country" is the site of a utopian tomorrow, which the characters in the novel have a possibility of reaching, although they have not quite made it there yet. This hypothetical "other country," as Stefanie Dunning proposes, is a "mythic, imaginary and unattainable place where relationships are not fractured by difference" (105). This interpretation could further be confirmed by the title

of the last Book of the novel, "Towards Bethlehem." Just like the believers following the comet towards the miracle of Jesus's birth, the characters within the novel faced a perilous journey to reach the miracle of salvation. In opposition to such a reading, other critics feel that utopia is not at all the envisioned destiny of the novel. Amy Reddinger notably argues that the author "refuses the utopian turn in a novel that would otherwise seem to promise it" (120). As an alternative to such a spatial interpretation, Laura Fisher would interpret the title not only spatially but temporally, starting from the novel's temporally-connotated working titles: *So Long at the Fair*, *The Only Pretty Ring Time*, and *Any Day Now*, which is the title of Book Two but was originally used to publish an excerpt from the book. According to Fisher these three titles would point to Baldwin's attention to notions of the passing of time in his writing of the novel, therefore creating a "sense of waiting for a moment that was sure to come but had not yet arrived" (Fisher 142). In sum, the title of the novel, as well as the novel itself, are split between the possibility of what could be and the complexity of what is.

The novel is introduced by an epigraph, a quote from Henry James's preface to his 1884 novella collection, containing, among others, "Lady Barbarina:"

> They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying. (qtd. in Baldwin, *Another* 7)

In the preface, James explores a genre he is most prolific in, the international narrative, portraying the complex and often burdensome meeting and melting of Americans and English people. With the quote James seemed to originally mean that, in a fast-changing world as his was, he could not claim to know exactly what the English were or thought, as that was "beyond [his] divination," and, therefore, that there remained a "mystery [...] what they think, what they feel, what they want" (VIII). By quoting James, Baldwin could be proposing a meta-reflection on the work ahead, perhaps inviting the reader to explore the by-design quality of indefiniteness of his work, to claim a personal interpretation of the characters in the novel. The epigraph, in other words, may be read as an invitation to the reader to engage intimately with the novel, perhaps allowing the characters of the novel to act as a bridge between very different identity positions, to foster, as will be explained later, an act of "facing." Furthermore, *Another Country* is structured into three "Books," further subdivided into a number of Chapters. Each Book is introduced by an epigraph, and each

epigraph, differently from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, has a different source. Each epigraph is attributed to an author, but only the epigraphs in Books Two and Three are also attributed to the author's related work. This is, of course, another difference from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which never attributed Bible passages or hymns; this difference may be due to the greater variety of sources. Indeed, it may be interesting to note here that the epigraphs span from W.C. Handy's *Yellow Dog Blues* to Conrad's *Victory* to end with a Shakespearean *Sonnet*, highlighting, if nothing, Baldwin's incredible literary, musical and cultural span of influences.

Another Country is mainly set in 1950s New York City, with the exception of some episodes, following Eric, set in southern France. Book One, titled "Easy Rider," starts with a homeless black man, Rufus, wandering the streets of Midtown. Rufus reminisces his brief and tormented love story with Leona, a white, Southern woman. The couple alternated bouts of, sometimes violent, passion to bouts of actual psychological and physical violence, where Leona was mostly the victim and Rufus the perpetrator. Eventually the tension between the two plunged Leona into a mental breakdown, which led her into a psychiatric hospital, where her family from the South came to collect her, leaving Rufus without any possibility of ever contacting her again. Following Leona's departure, Rufus's life went into shambles and led him to the place where the reader finds him at the start of the novel, a homeless, broken man, now making his way to a close friend's house. Vivaldo, a white aspiring writer, is relieved to see Rufus, after a month of looking for him, and tries to reason with the man. Eventually though, neither Vivaldo, nor the other friends that will populate the rest of the book are truly able to help Rufus, who takes the extreme decision to jump off the George Washington Bridge and kill himself, only about a hundred pages into the book, in Chapter One, Book One. The remaining two chapters of Book One build first the discovery of Rufus's suicide and his funeral and then, the aftermath of such an event in the circle of friends.

Book Two, titled "Any Day Now," fundamentally deals with how different characters come to terms with Rufus's suicide and their personal guilt over his death. Cass and Richard, a white couple, begin to have deep troubles in their marriage. Following Richard's literary success, Cass feels no longer understood by her husband and is disturbed by her husband's mediocrity. The woman eventually turns to Eric, a white bisexual man who had left the USA for France after a failed relationship with Rufus and has just returned to New York to further his acting career, and the two begin a relationship. Eric, who has come from a period of growth and stability in France, where he met his loving partner Yves,

comes to terms with the ghosts he left in New York and with his fluid sexuality. Vivaldo starts a relationship with Ida, Rufus's sister and the two move in together, but just as in Rufus and Leona's relationship, the couple has difficulties in communicating emotionally over their racial differences, which creates an enormous divide between the two. In pursuing her singing career, Ida meets, through Richard, powerful, white producer Steve Ellis, with whom she begins an affair to push her career forward. By the end of the second Book the tensions between the characters come to a breaking point, Richard confronts Cass over her affair, Ida is with Steve Ellis and Vivaldo confesses his guilt over Rufus's death and his difficulties in his relationship with Ida to Eric.

Book Three, titled "Toward Bethlehem," starts with Eric and Vivaldo's sexual encounter, which both men feel as a moment of great affection. Afterwards, Eric meets with a distraught Cass and ends their relationship, and it remains unclear whether Cass will leave Richard or not. Vivaldo finally faces Ida, who admits her affair with Ellis and her anger towards Vivaldo, for his inability to save Rufus, due, fundamentally, to his whiteness. The two, it seems, are finally able to find some sort of understanding. The novel ends with Yves's arrival in the USA, reaching therefore "another country," and with his partner Eric, who has chosen him over the other characters in the novel.

All three Books are narrated by a third person narrator with a shifting, limited point of view, just as in the case of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The first chapter of Book One is the only chapter narrated through Rufus's point of view, whereas the following chapters are narrated through the point of view of one or more among Cass, Vivaldo or Eric. The last chapter, finally, provides a whole new perspective, through Yves's eyes. The novel is mostly narrated in the past tense and is interspersed with clearly marked flashbacks throughout. Although less extensive than the flashbacks in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the flashbacks in *Another Country* serve to build the multiple characters' personality and interconnection, which stresses for the reader how they are all fundamentally entangled in a web of human relationships. The style of the novel, as Fisher notes, "weaves experimentalism and melodrama together with psychological and social realism" (140) What is perhaps most visible is the novel's realist vocation, since it describes in great details settings throughout Manhattan or actions the characters take, such as the in-depth description of Ida's preparation of a pork chop while her relationship with Vivaldo comes to a breaking point. If, on the one hand, the realist approach of the novel seems to point to the necessity of urgently dealing with the here and now, the experimental and melodramatic

qualities of the narration create a tension towards a possible, but unrealized future, that is promised throughout the work.

With regards to the mood of the work, if *Go Tell It on the Mountain* hinged on religious symbolism and was largely populated with the voice of the King James Bible and of Gospel music, *Another Country* represents Baldwin's decisive turn towards a Blues sensibility. In an illuminating reply to some of the criticisms that had been moved against the novel, Baldwin wrote, in response to a prompt by the *New York Times Book Review*, that if many had read *Another Country* it was perhaps because many led "lives not at all unlike the lives of the people in my book" ("Cross" 39). Drawing a parallel between his writing and Ray Charles's and Miles Davis's music, Baldwin's project would have its reader react to the writing just as he or she would react to Jazz music. The author had been working to "write the way [Jazz musicians] sound" to achieve "what Henry James called "perception at the pitch of passion" ("Cross" 40). Jazz and the Blues represent a major structure of knowledge and allegorical level in *Another Country*, not only because this type of music accompanies major moments of the novel, as, most notably, is the case of Rufus's suicide, but also because it seems that the solution the novel proposes is fundamentally steeped in a Blues sensibility. As Lawrence Hogue proposes, such a Blues sensibility allows the characters not to move towards Utopia, but towards accepting "as the norm, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, the spectrum of life" (3).

Reaching a Blues sensibility, this chapter will argue, is a twofold movement: on the one hand it requires the overcoming of racial and sexual innocence on the part of the white characters and, on the other, the resolution of a need for vengeance on the part of Ida, the only surviving black character. With racial innocence this chapter means to refer, notably, to the idea, first expressed by Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, that Americans are deliberately blind to racial oppression in favor of a discourse of continuous progress and racial blindness. In "My Dungeon Shook" Baldwin writes that "it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime" (*Fire* 14). As Kristine Taylor explains, racial innocence is not an inability to see racial oppression but, on the contrary, "the productive effort of not-seeing" which "takes a significant amount of will and energy" (8). This chapter will then propose that the willful ignorance of sexual and gender oppression works similarly to the willful ignorance of racial oppression, meaning that same-sex and interracial desire are often denied or covered up, producing further oppression of those who would freely express them. By sexual innocence, therefore, this chapter means to identify the willful ignorance of one's own

unsanctioned sexual desires, be they homosexual or interracial, impeding the free and loving flow of desire. For Baldwin then, the work of love on the part of black Americans, and in this particular chapter, of queer Americans is to "force [their brothers] to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (*Fire* 17). Following this vital inner working of love then, the title of this chapter, containing a verse from Billie Holiday's *All of Me*, hints at the novel's central plea for intimate and complete knowledge of the Other, a knowledge that will require taking responsibility for racial misgivings and historical privileges that thwart the possibility of ever truly loving one another. In opposition to the message of *All of Me* that accompanies Rufus into his suicide, "Baby take all of me" is not a plea to an all-consuming love, but, as this chapter will propose, to a stimulating love that allows its participants to grow. To explore such a concept, therefore, the following analysis will provide an in-depth study of the novel's major characters, starting from Rufus and his troubled relationship with Leona. Rufus's sexual desire for Leona, it will be argued, is completely framed within racial categories, which is what determines the substitution of violence for love. The central figure of Rufus as the major catalyst for action within the novel determines, at the same time, a lack of sympathy for the character of Leona, who, though in different intersections, is just as oppressed and abused as Rufus. Then the chapter will move to discuss Vivaldo's and Ida's relationship, in particular touching upon Vivaldo's complicated relationship with blackness and his need to overcome strict masculinity and Ida's complicated sexual history and the risks she takes in loving a white man. The last part of the chapter will take into consideration Cass's risky relationship as a means of self-discovery and Eric's illuminating androgyny. Finally, the analysis of *Another Country* will be linked to Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the face-to-face encounter to provide a wide understanding of how love functions within the novel.

3.1 Sexual desire, anger, and black masculinity: Rufus's sacrifice

It may be argued that most of *Another Country*'s narrated action is pushed forward by the inability to come to terms with the emotional complexity of unsanctioned sexual desires, both interracial and queer. The character of Rufus, in particular, even with the relatively little space he actually occupies in the novel, is particularly relevant in this sense, as his downfall is precipitated by a failed interracial relationship and his inability to seek or accept help. Rufus's relationship with Leona is flawed in multiple ways: firstly, Rufus's

desire is split between racial vengeance towards a white woman's body and guilt for his love for that same body. Rufus's hate for whiteness and his self-hate for his own unloved blackness drive him to gravely mistreat Leona. At the same time Leona is also unable to see or accept that Rufus's blackness is not an invisible identity category and that it does play a role in their relationship. Furthermore, the relationship is also fraught with the additional tensions imposed by the world around the couple, as the community's gaze, both white and black, judges them. Rufus's priapic black masculinity is also reflected in his homosexual and violent relationship with Eric and in his friendship with Vivaldo, who, also acting within his own category of white masculinity, is finally unable to help Rufus in his utmost time of need. All of these themes, which will be explored within the next few paragraphs, lead to Rufus's suicide, which reflects his inability to overcome the hateful feelings that guide him, and consume him, preventing him from accessing a blues sensibility. Indeed, by the end of the first chapter it becomes clear that the only envisioned possibility for Rufus to get out of the impasse is suicide.

Right on the first page of the novel Rufus's thoughts are accompanied by a verse from Billie Holiday's song *All of Me*, "you took the best of me so why not take the rest?" (qtd. in Baldwin, *Another* 13). The same verse accompanies the narration of the last moments of Rufus's life, when, under an oppressive white gaze, he is riding the subway to his final destination, the George Washington Bridge (Baldwin, *Another* 92). The song, only quoted in these two instances, links Rufus's first and last acts in the novel, and, by connecting the two moments it makes Rufus's suicide unavoidable. Holiday's song describes an abandoned lover, who, having given her heart to the loved one, now offers the rest of herself because she can no longer go on without him or her. Importantly though, within these terms, the offer of all of herself may indeed be considered suicidal: the love is not invigorating, it is consuming, it is taking away the use of her body, as she can no longer function without the one that she loves. The choice of quoting this song at such important moments in the novel poses central questions about Rufus: has Rufus given all of himself to Leona, the white woman he had a love affair with? Could it also be argued that he took away everything from Leona herself and maybe the song is an expression of guilt? Moreover, if contextualized within the exact moments when the verse is placed, the song seems to point quite decidedly at those who victimize Rufus, sexually in the first instance, and racially in the second, as those who took everything from him. The "you" that took all of me, it could be argued, is quite mobile in *Another Country* and is the major point of its first, pivotal chapter.

Starting from Rufus's position as an outcast, quite literally gazing from the outside into the bars and clubs where he had, not so long ago, been a habitual client and performer, the novel quickly goes back to the beginning of his fall, when he met Leona. The thought of Leona feels for Rufus as a "cold, familiar sickness," familiar, in effect, because Rufus associates Leona to memories and feelings from his own life that do not have anything to do with her directly:

> For to remember Leona was also—somehow—to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls behind the stairs and on the roofs, the white policeman who had taught him how to hate. [...] It was to remember the juke-box, the teasing, the dancing, the hard-on, the gang fights, the gang bangs, his first set of drums—bought him by his father—his first taste of marijuana, his first snort of horse. Yes: and the boys too far out, jackknifed on the stoops, the boy dead from an overdose on a rooftop in the snow. (Baldwin, *Another* 16)

The memory of Leona is associated with so many things that it may, at first glance, seem like there is no correlation between them. Indeed, Rufus himself is unable to understand the connection between them, as signaled by the "somehow" that opens the list. Leona is associated at the same time to affectionate bonds, as those to his family, but also to the experience of being a black boy in Harlem, surrounded by police violence and drug use, but the experience of Harlem itself is nuanced through moments of community and friendship. As Brandon Gordon argues, the association of memories of both "hedonistic excess" and "pain and suffering" with the figure of Leona implies Rufus's unconscious connection between his "treatment of Leona" and "his own past experiences of suffering" (84). It is perhaps Rufus's inability to untangle the knot of a common thread spanning from his experiences of racial hate to his own mistreatment of Leona that precipitates the unraveling that brings both characters to the edge of sanity, and tumbles Rufus over that same edge. On the contrary, as it will be explored later in the chapter, Ida, who in many ways follows in Rufus's footsteps, will be able, by the end of the novel, if not to unravel the knot, at the very least, to recognize its existence.

Leona and Rufus first met only a few months prior to Rufus's suicide, yet the man feels that it has been "a lifetime ago," signaling that his meeting with Leona had created a definite caesura in his life (Baldwin, *Another* 17). Rufus had played the drums in a small Jazz concert, and, as he was dismounting the stage, he found himself face-to-face with a "blonde girl, very plainly dressed" (Baldwin, *Another* 19). As opposed to Ida's almost

seducing and haughty beauty, Leona is in no unclear terms described as fundamentally common, banal, or even uninteresting: she has a "damp colorless face" with "straight pale hair," and she was "considerably older than him," her body "too thin" (Baldwin, *Another* 19). Yet, her white, southern womanhood, not her beauty, made "something leap in Rufus," and made her body "the most exciting body he had gazed on in a long time" (Baldwin, *Another* 19). As soon as they meet Rufus, almost defiantly, propositions Leona sexually, notably calling her "Miss Anne" (Baldwin, *Another* 19). "Miss Anne" was "a derisive term for a white woman, by extension, used to refer to any uppity-acting Black woman, especially one 'who act white'" (Smitherman 55). During the Harlem Renaissance, it stood for a white woman who had amicable relations with blacks and she was "often dismissed as a sexual adventurer or a lunatic" (Kaplan 14). As Carla Kaplan explains, "Miss Anne" was not only held in contempt by whites as little more than a prostitute, but by blacks as well, who felt she was "unpredictable, as likely to sentimentalize [...] or to claim that she could speak for black desires" (13). Rufus's use of such an epithet, with a clear disparaging intent, summarizes, it could be argued, his initial view of Leona as a sexual adventurer, someone who is not particularly respectable, and most importantly someone who is fully and solely described in racial terms. Implicitly, Rufus believes that no self-respecting or actually attractive white woman would want to be intimate, let alone love, a black man. This is also later expressed more explicitly during the first meeting between Vivaldo and Leona, the morning after Rufus and Leona's first intercourse. Looking at Vivaldo interact with Leona, Rufus feels that Vivaldo could not possibly simply be nice to the woman, but that he either must be "contemptuous of her because she was so plain - which meant that Vivaldo was contemptuous of him," or that he must be flirting with her "because she was so simple and available; the proof of her availability being in her presence in Rufus's house" (Baldwin, *Another* 35). It is made abundantly clear that, at least unconsciously, Rufus must feel a feeling of inferiority towards both Leona and Vivaldo, making the relationship with both people tense with hate and uncommunicated feelings.

The sexual desire Rufus manifests for Leona straight away has nothing to do with Leona as a singular subject: Rufus desires to possess the forbidden body of a Southern white woman. Her being a "splendid specimen of Southern womanhood" (Baldwin *Another* 34) acts on Rufus as both a threat and a challenge. Leona's accent brings Rufus back to a military training camp in the South, where a white officer pushed Rufus in his "white uniform" into the "red clay" and smashed his face down in the ground (Baldwin *Another* 22). If we are to read symbolically the colors of the scene, we might say that whiteness is

denied to Rufus, who is dirtied in red, the color of blood, and of blood itself. In getting intimate with Leona, Rufus may get revenge on whiteness, claim the vengeance against racial violence that he had been unable to do in the case of the white officer. Feeling both threatened by her whiteness and challenged to defraud it, Rufus's recollection of his intercourse with Leona is filled with violent imagery, as the intercourse itself is described as borderline nonconsensual:

> And, shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. She began to cry. I told you, he moaned, I'd give you something to cry about, and, at once, he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die. A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies. (Baldwin *Another* 31)

Leona is described as a "milk-white bitch" and this is all she is to Rufus during their intercourse: a white woman to desecrate, not to love, but to use as a token of his own personal revenge. In this instance the reaching of climax arrives as a sort of defiance towards the institutions of white violence, against the "white God" and the "lynch mob," who are nevertheless powerless against Rufus's "weapon," his member. Visually speaking, the image of penetration enacted through a weapon is particularly striking because it encapsulates a history of violence in one single, upsetting image. The ejaculation itself is described as shooting "venom" into the white woman, reinforcing the view of the intercourse as an attack. As El Kornegay explains the "venom" Rufus ejaculates "represents a remembrance of and rage against the pain experienced by racialized and sexualized bodies" yet, importantly, it "does not have the power to unmask white innocence or combat the puritanism keeping it in place. The sting of violence remains in the place where sexual desire ought to be" (127). In this instance then, erotic desire is not a bridge to open up to the experience of others, and therefore love, but a poisonous product of hate.

Nonetheless, it is also important to note, as was mentioned earlier, that Rufus does not hate Leona only due to his feelings of "general racial anger" and of inferiority, but he hates her because he has a "presentiment of real love" (Lynch, "Beyond" 7). Before the rough intercourse which has been analyzed above, Rufus feels "a tenderness for Leona which he had not expected to feel" and "tried to [...] make amends for what he was doing to her" (Baldwin, *Another* 30). By this passage it is clear that, although hate and self-hate are the dominating emotions surrounding his relationship with Leona, and especially their

first intercourse, it is not the only emotion. Behind the thick wall of hate, surges, unwillingly, tenderness, affection, what might turn into love. When Rufus declares that he loved Leona, on his last evening on earth, Vivaldo is right in understanding that was exactly the reason behind the "bleeding," meaning behind Rufus's losing of his house, jobs, and all other stable relationships (Baldwin, *Another* 58). As Lynch rightly points out, Rufus's potential love for Leona is "precisely the reason that he punishes her and himself" ("Beyond" 7). Interestingly, this same guilt and anger over potentially loving a white subject is also expressed in the other relationship of Rufus that is, at least partially, explored in the novel, which is Rufus's relationship with another southern subject, Eric, a white, bisexual male. Just as with Leona, Rufus "had allowed Eric to love him in order to despise him more completely" (Baldwin, *Another* 53). As Baldwin's Ethics of Love clearly indicates, "it is an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself" (Baldwin, *Nobody* 63). In diminishing and abusing all of the people who could potentially love him, Rufus is showing that he is incapable of loving, not only others, but most importantly, himself, and right when the possibility of love materializes, he feels most at danger. Indeed, it is important to stress that the presumption of love can never be the justification for physical or psychological abuse, as this is often the narrative surrounding domestic abuse in real life.

Within these unarguably violent scenes, Leona, as a character, is only acted upon, she has no autonomy. She just seems to endure Rufus's sexual advances, rather than being fully proactive about them, and it is unclear, which is already quite a telling sign, whether she is truly consenting to the ensuing intercourse or not. Later in the relationship, Rufus himself recognizes that he "used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most," and after the intercourse, feeling "drained," he would leave the "raped white woman," fully acknowledging the sexual abuse to which he subjected Leona (Baldwin, *Another* 60). On the one hand, in framing Leona not as his individual partner but as a generic "raped white woman," Rufus is once more looking at himself through the white gaze, making himself, almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy, into the black rapist. On the other hand, Leona is a woman with a history as a victim of gender violence: her husband beat her and took away her child, which is why she eventually left the South; but that same violence followed her into her new relationship. She is narrated as a servile woman, as for example she serves both Rufus and Vivaldo breakfast, and though she fights Rufus back, she is unable to leave what is clearly an extremely unhealthy relationship. At most, she is implicitly critiqued

because she is unable to see or accept that Rufus's experience, as a black man, is deeply steeped into racial categories. Rufus recalls that Leona would often tell him "ain't nothing wrong with being colored," which rather than comforting Rufus, it made him accuse her "of ignorance and indifference" (Baldwin, *Another* 60). Scholars have pointed out that Leona refuses to acknowledge Rufus's blackness in a skewed, color-blind effort to equality. Gordon proposes that Leona willfully denies Rufus's blackness in order "to displace her own sexual anxieties and fears onto him" (82). Just as Stowe had done with the character of Uncle Tom in her classic novel, Leona is "attempt[ing] to absolve Rufus of the sin of being born black," by making him into a raceless, colorless man (Gordon 82). As clearly expressed in Rufus's thoughts, of course, denying the importance of color in a tense 1950s New York City seems hardly the way to open an emotional and honest dialogue with her partner. The fact that color is an undeniable factor in Rufus and Leona's relationship is visible by the community's reaction to their relationship. Rufus describes an oppressive walk around the Village, the Sunday morning after the night they first met, when "the big world [...] stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people" (Baldwin, *Another* 36). It is at this point that Rufus realizes that the community and his own family will not look kindly upon the union, leading Rufus to plan an escape to Mexico, where "people would leave them alone" (Baldwin, *Another* 49). The gaze of the community peers through them, making Rufus into a target for racist abuse and Leona into "the lowest whore in Manhattan" (Baldwin, *Another* 39). It seems important to note, nonetheless, that Leona is not blind to the racist and sexual politics that cause the judgment and abuse they are both victims to, she simply decides not to react to it. This is not to deny that Leona's behavior towards Rufus is, at least partially, a symptom of racial innocence but it leaves the reader wondering what her alternative would be. Surely, she is no stranger to the racist environment she is a product of, and indeed, "Little Eve" as she is jokingly called at the party Rufus takes her to, may indeed, as proposed by Gordon, need to justify her desire for a black man by making him colorless, or, otherwise put, by deracializing him; nonetheless, in the face of an increasingly violent Rufus and of an undeniably violent environment, her decision not to react to racist provocations that make her into a "whore" for her love for a black man, and her attempts at appeasing Rufus may simply be understood as necessary self-preservation, both for herself and Rufus.

Rufus's pain acts as the novel's central cog, thanks to which all action in the novel takes motion, which in turn determines a certain erasure of Leona's pain, not only from the novel itself but also from the scholarship regarding the novel. As it will later be explored

with Ida and Vivaldo especially, the expression of sympathy across racial categories is a main lesson to learn in order to open up to love, yet it seems that there is no attempt on Baldwin's part to elicit any sort of sympathy for Leona within the novel. Surely Vivaldo separates Leona and Rufus, but it is finally not so much to save Leona as much as to save Rufus from himself. When, on the final night of his life Rufus asks Vivaldo if he blamed him for what had happened to Leona, Vivaldo responds: "you are my friend, and, after all, let's face it, you mean much more to me than Leona ever did" (Baldwin, *Another* 58). As Gordon rightfully points out, "the compassion generated on Rufus's behalf comes at Leona's expense" and "to identify with Leona would require acknowledging that Rufus both endured and inflicted pain, potentially mitigating the pathos of Rufus's suffering" (85). At no point in the novel Rufus is ever openly condemned for what he did to Leona, rather what he did to Leona acts as a lesson to those around them on the need to let go of internalized racial beliefs, that render interracial relationships impossible. The same lack of clear engagement with Leona's gendered oppression, as she is beaten, raped, and finally suffers a psychological breakdown, leaving her in a mental institution and later in the hands of her brother to an unknown destiny, can be found within scholarship. As Dunning points out, "the tendency to focus so exclusively on Rufus illustrates the power of the black male figure as the referent for masculinity, sexuality, and raciality" (104). Indeed, the character and academic understanding of Rufus should be placed into a wider discourse of black masculinity and black nationalism[15] that Baldwin meant to confront and critique through homosexual and interracial desire.

To understand how Rufus in particular, as a character, stands as a reflection on black masculinity, it may be interesting to draw a parallel between the fictional Rufus, with his violent interracial and homosexual sexual desire and the real life violent sexual desire and homophobia expressed by Eldridge Cleaver in his book *Soul on Ice*. In the essay "Notes on a Native Son," Cleaver presents both a praise and a critique of Baldwin as a black intellectual. If, at first, Cleaver "lusted for anything that Baldwin had written" and would have gladly sat "on a pillow beneath the womb of Baldwin's typewriter," as time went on, he started to feel that there was "in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning,

[15] A social and political movement prevalent at the time of *Another Country*'s writing and publication, it had Malcolm X as one of its main representatives. Within nationalistic discourse, reproduction is an issue of major importance, to sustain the propagation of the discourse itself, which is why homosexuality and miscegenation are understood as particularly threatening.

synchopathic love of the whites" (pp. 122-124). Cleaver finds unacceptable not only Baldwin's homosexuality, but most importantly his depiction of interracial homosexuality, as that entails submission to the white man. His quest, as Dunning phrases it, to achieve and maintain the position "as *top* man" (100; emphasis in original) informs his critique of Rufus in *Another Country*. Cleaver argues that Rufus is "a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in the ass and who took a Southern white Jezebel for his woman," and that made him into "the epitome of the black eunuch" (132). Indeed, if Cleaver equates homosexual, interracial intercourse to castration, Rufus, in accepting to have sex with Eric, is renouncing his black masculinity, his "impregnating phallus" (Dunning 100). Yet, Cleaver using clearly sexual language in describing his admiration of Baldwin, who had the ability of "penetrating so profoundly" his world (122), seems, on an unconscious level to demonstrate that his homophobia is rather a product of a feeling of rejection of his own blackness, rather than an actual hatred of homosexuality. If Rufus, and Baldwin, love whiteness, he (they) cannot love blackness, implicitly rejecting Cleaver. The inherent contradiction in Cleaver between his critique and love of Baldwin is fundamentally steeped in black nationalist discourse, that is structured within homosocial bonds, since "it is the love between men that cements the bonds of nationalism" (Dunning 103). Otherwise put, Baldwin, by going against black nationalist discourse, is betraying the non-erotic love bonds between black men and is therefore rejecting the accepted category of blackness and maleness.

Yet, insomuch as Cleaver is conflicted in Baldwin's regard, he is also strikingly similar to Rufus, the character that embodies all that he critiques of Baldwin. The first essay in Cleaver's collection recalls in clear, and indisputably appalling, terms, his quest to rape white women, starting with his "practice" on black women. In raping white women, Cleaver wanted to achieve an "insurrectionary act": by "defiling [the white man's] women," he was avenging the white man's treatment of black women (Cleaver 33). Aside from the obvious contradiction in Cleaver's argument, who would avenge black women by causing them more pain, it is clear that the model for Rufus's violent sexual desire for Leona's body is rooted in the raw reality of American race relations. Even more startling, the depiction of Rufus's first attraction and intercourse with Leona is remarkably similar, in terms of imagery, to the poem Cleaver positions in the first essay of his book, titled "To a White Girl:"

> I love you/ Because you're white,/ Not because you're charming/ Or bright./ Your whiteness/ Is a silky thread/Snaking through my thoughts/ In red-hot patterns/ Of lust and desire./ I hate you/Because you're white./ Your white meat/Is nightmare food./ White is/ The skin of Evil./ You're my Moby Dick,/ White Witch,/ Symbol of the rope and hanging tree/ Of the burning cross./ Loving you thus/ And hating you so,/ My heart is torn in two./ Crucified. (Cleaver pp. 32-33)

Just as Rufus with Leona, there is no interest in white female subjecthood, but on the contrary the female body is to be understood only along racial lines, as a mere bargaining chip with the white man, who is ultimately the real intended target of the rape. The black man's violent sexual desire for the white woman can be understood as a form of revenge on white manhood and therefore, as Fanon might have conceptualized it, as an act of reversal of the castration enacted by the white man on the black man. Both Cleaver and Baldwin, through Rufus, describe sexual desire for a white woman as a continuous tension between love and hate. Hate, particularly, is described by both subjects through the theme of lynching. When Baldwin calls into question "the lynching mob" and Cleaver "the rope and the hanging tree" and "the burning cross", they both inscribe the violence enacted on the female white body in a history of American racial violence that, as Dunning proposes, "negated the possibility of their interracial love" (108). Furthermore, lynching is to be understood as a particularly sexual type of racial abuse, as it most often included the literal castration of black males. In this sense, lynching operated around stereotypes of priapic black masculinity which are at work in Rufus and Leona's relationship. When Vivaldo tries to mediate with Rufus over the subject of his hate for white people, by proposing that Leona is not any white person, but loves him, Rufus responds: "'she loves the colored folks so much [...] You know all she knows about me? The only thing she knows?' He put his hand on his sex, brutally, as though he would tear it out" (Baldwin, *Another* 75). Just like the lynching mob, Rufus believes that Leona can only fetishize him, reducing him to his phallus, and the violent act of trying to pry it away from his body is a direct reenactment of the lynching mutilations. Rufus, and in real-life Cleaver, are clear representations of the harmful internalization of the "conflation of desire and national anxiety, sparked by the threat of competing masculinities" (Dunning 109). It is exactly the internalization of such hate and the guilt of acting upon it that plunge Rufus, and Leona, into the depths of desperation.

The theme of "falling" already present in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a metaphorical fall from grace, assumes here a most literal meaning when we look at Rufus's

suicide by jumping off the George Washington bridge. Baldwin was personally familiar with suicide, as he attempted it three times, and Leeming goes so far as to posit that "suicide was a clear tendency in Baldwin's personality. It grew out of an essential loneliness that was in turn related to his sexuality and to his mission" (132). Nonetheless, Rufus's suicide was most likely inspired by the suicide of one of Baldwin's first loves, Eugene Worth, who also killed himself by jumping off the same bridge as the fictional Rufus (Leeming 46). The dramatic account of Rufus's last thoughts on earth are mixed with guilt towards his mistreated lovers, Leona and Eric, and for his sister Ida but also with a defiant curse to God. Whereas in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* John is unable to fully articulate the curse, Rufus, as he takes his final plunge off the bridge, acrimoniously curses God: "You bastard, you motherfucking bastard. Ain't I your baby too? [...] *all right, you motherfucking Godalmighty bastard. I'm coming to you*" (Baldwin, *Another* 93; emphasis in original). Rufus's final curse testifies to what his inherent contradiction has been all along, a consuming anger, countered by the unmissable cry for love, the need to be his "baby" too. While John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had found a way to balance out anger and the need for love, Rufus, like Richard, simply cannot find a way out. The way the chapter is built makes it seem as if Rufus never truly had any chance of escaping his anger, as if he was destined, by a larger design, to suffer for the redemption of others.

Baldwin had never tried to become sexually intimate with Worth, who was heterosexual, but had later often reflected on his choice and whether, by expressing his love for the man, he might have saved him. This is, in fact, the exact journey all the other characters in the novel go through, and most precisely it closely resembles Vivaldo's developing feelings. Rufus's pain acts as a catalyst for the other characters to confront their guilt and the racial discourses informing their lives. As most scholars note, Baldwin takes a big risk in killing off his protagonist only a hundred pages into a book that is over four hundred pages long, and he is able to do so because Rufus's memories and the significance of his lived experience and tragic ending remain in the ensuing chapters of the novel as a sort of ghost presence guiding the actions of the remaining characters. As Lynch notes, Baldwin "does imply a sacrificial aspect to [Rufus's] distress" making him into "a Christ figure" and "a martyr and an icon" ("Beyond" 8). Leeming also understands Rufus as "the novel's Christ figure — the sacrificial victim" as he represents the "curse that lurks in the American soul" which "must be squarely faced if we are to find peace in ourselves and our society" (201). Finally, looking back at the lack of sympathy Leona receives, it has to be understood as a necessary erasure, to make Rufus into the Christ figure that the novel needs

him to be in order to function. *Another Country* seems to confirm black, nationalist claims by making the black male body into "the legitimate space of suffering," at the cost of the female, white body (Dunning 98) but at the same time it challenges those same notions because it provides no possible survival for the suffering body. As Dunning proposes, "Rufus' death suggests that there is no black utopia, no place where he can escape the iniquities of racism" and that "we have not yet found a model for thinking outside the box that frames our discussions of interraciality and same-sex eroticism" (105). The following sections within this analysis of *Another Country* will propose an exploration, therefore, of how the remaining characters react and absorb Rufus's death, in order to conceptualize the need for this original, out of the box thinking towards interraciality and queerness.

3.2 Learning how to love: Ida's racial vengeance and Vivaldo's racial innocence

Aside from Leona and Rufus, the other interracial couple that the novel majorly explores is composed by Rufus's best friend Vivaldo and Rufus's sister Ida. The couple brings forth many of the issues that were central for Rufus and Leona, especially the inability to communicate emotions interracially to foreground a positive and healthy relationship. Ida, deeply impacted by her brother's death, tries to punish his friends for their inability to support her brother, and she does so especially with Vivaldo. Vivaldo, on his part, starts a relationship with Ida out of guilt, and while he does progress to actually loving her, he is unable, just as he had been with Rufus, to accept the significance of race in Ida's lived experience. It is finally the surrendering of vengeance and innocence that promises, by the end of the novel, to allow the couple to truly love each other, even if they are not given any space in the novel to actually do so.

Vivaldo, a white man of Irish descent, is, in many ways, as much of an "easy rider" as Rufus was: an artist living in poverty at the edge of society and thriving in meaningless sexual connections. Due to their similar lifestyle, Vivaldo tends to only see the similarities between his own and Rufus's life, and to willfully ignore the fundamental differences. Even more so, Vivaldo tends to conceptualize his and Rufus's childhoods and teenage years as essentially overlapping. During his visit to Rufus's house after the man's death, Vivaldo notices that "all seemed [...] familiar [...] they were colored but they were the same, really the same" (Baldwin, *Another* 116). Yet, the experiences of growing up in Brooklyn that Vivaldo describes are difficult for him to look back to, especially the toxic culture of

masculinity that surrounded him, perfectly expressed in the episode of a group sexual abuse on a young, queer man that Vivaldo took part in as a perpetrator. All these experiences make Vivaldo feel like "he had left something of himself back there [...] which he was afraid to look at again" (Baldwin, *Another* 115). Vivaldo wants to make a clear cut with the past, but he is, it transpires, unable to confront it, rather he simply sweeps it under the rug. It is indicative then, that Vivaldo claims his and Rufus's upbringing to be the same and yet he cannot face his upbringing, just as much as he cannot face Rufus's blackness. Indeed, what surely differs in his and Rufus's experiences growing up, is starkly visible, and it is, of course, race. Cass rightly notes, at Vivaldo's claim that his and Rufus's upbringing had been similar, that bad things "didn't [...] happen to you because you were white. They just happened, [...] But what happens up [in Harlem] [...] happens because they are colored. And that makes a difference" (Baldwin, *Another* 117). Cass's insight is so advanced that many modern Americans still have difficulties grappling with it, and Vivaldo takes most of the novel to finally understand the truth of her statement. As in Leona's case, but arguably with less extenuating circumstances, Vivaldo refuses to acknowledge the lived experiences of those around him as valid, and therefore, as Hogue notes, "refuses to admit that Rufus' life experiences and existence might be different from his" (15). Vivaldo's unwillingness to truly see Rufus and accept his pain, and his own role in Rufus's pain as a white man, acts as a constraint on his friendship with Rufus, which is as much sustained by love as it is sustained by hate and fear.

Pushed by Rufus's death, Vivaldo comes to admit that "somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white because he was white" and "somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black" (Baldwin, *Another* 136). Importantly, the hate between Rufus and Vivaldo is always only inches away from turning into sexual attraction, which is deflected through the women that they both have sex with, who sometimes are even the same women. What keeps them from expressing their underlying desire is not necessarily homophobia, since they both have sexual relations with Eric eventually, but at stake are rather "their competing masculinities" (Dunning 106). As Dunning further notes, when Rufus wonders whether Vivaldo thinks Leona is "easy" because she is sleeping with a black man, he may indirectly be wondering if Vivaldo thinks he is "easy," because he is a black man and, therefore, whether Vivaldo would consider Rufus a deserving sexual partner. The core of the question, for Rufus, is to gauge at "how close Vivaldo is willing to get to a black man" (Dunning 106). The novel represents a pervasive tension between white and black masculinity that acts as an obstacle in most of

black and white male relationships, not only in Rufus and Vivaldo's. For example, Vivaldo recalls an evening in Munich where he and a black comrade in arms had shown their penises to a waitress, to prove which one was "the biggest" (Baldwin, *Another* 137). Vivaldo understands that the episode had very little to do with attracting the female waitress, nor, "certainly," with attracting each other, rather he understands the episode as an attempt "to set their minds at ease; at ease as to which of them was the better man" (Baldwin, *Another* 137). Just as was previously discussed with Cleaver's critique of interracial homosexuality, Rufus's and Vivaldo's masculinities are competing exactly because they are trying to reach the position of "top man," meaning that their relationship is fundamentally dictated by dynamics of power and submission, which erase productive, erotic sexual desire and substitute it with violence. Despite both Rufus and Vivaldo identifying themselves as liberal characters, Vivaldo especially, both of them are unable to escape racial underpinnings of sexuality, which put them in what Dunning identifies as a "battle of patriarchies," with "two nationalisms fighting for primacy" (107). Masculinity prevents Rufus and Vivaldo from expressing their desires and creates a barrier for Vivaldo to overcome his racial innocence and hinders Vivaldo's ability to help his friend in his uttermost time of need.

Vivaldo first notices Ida, in romantic terms, when Ida is frantically trying to locate her brother, not knowing, of course, that he had already taken his own life. After Rufus's funeral, Vivaldo admits his admiration for Ida to Cass, saying that he would like to "prove to her [...] that the world is not as black as she thinks it is" (Baldwin, *Another* 128). His desire, or love, for Ida stems, at first, from a desire to comfort her after her brother's death, to "help her forget it," and may ultimately derive more from his guilt over his role in Rufus's suicide than from authentic attraction and predilection (Baldwin, *Another* 129). Before falling for Ida, Vivaldo's relationships with black women had been limited to black sex workers, as in Harlem "he had merely dropped his load and marked the spot with silver" (Baldwin, *Another* 135). Therefore, while Vivaldo submits to Ida "for the guilt he feels about all his previous interracial relationships and for his negligence of Rufus," he is also unable to fully separate her from the other black women he had had sexual relations with prior to Ida (Harris 118). Consequently, not only Vivaldo's initial guilt makes Vivaldo unable to truly confront Ida, but Vivaldo's conflictual feelings over blackness also hinder his relationship with her, as they had hindered his relationship with Rufus. Ida is described by all characters, without fail, as a breathtakingly beautiful woman, and, by common consensus, also as an exceedingly proud woman. Vivaldo fetishizes Ida's black beauty by

consciously connecting it to some long-lost African roots, when he describes her as having "a wonderful, long-legged stride" and carrying "her head high, as though it had borne, but only yesterday, the weight of an African water jar" (Baldwin, *Another* pp. 145-146). Vivaldo seems to have a primitivist outlook on Ida's beauty, that points to his essentially prejudiced view of blackness; while Ida's beauty had helped Rufus to fleetingly see the "beauty of black people," in the white gaze it becomes another instrument of oppression (Baldwin, *Another* 17). Ida can recognize Vivaldo's fetishization, as Rufus had before her, and uses her relationship with Vivaldo to punish him by "flaunt[ing] before him privacies which he could never hope to *penetrate*" (Baldwin, *Another* 308; emphasis added). Vivaldo's conceptualization of Ida's reluctance in their relationship as something to be penetrated clearly highlights how Vivaldo understands the possibility of getting close to Ida as a sexually connotated endeavor. This is later made even more explicit within the description of the first sexual intercourse between Ida and Vivaldo, which the man describes as "traveling up a savage jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden," and the orgasm as an act that would bring her "into his possession" (Baldwin, *Another* 177). This description seems to link back to a colonizing type of discovery, with the intercourse, as Gordon proposes, as "an act of mapping the topographical contours of Ida's body," rendering her, as colonized land in the colonial gaze, "passive before Vivaldo's advances, allowing him to indulge fantasies of his mastery over her" (86). Yet, Ida is only passive in Vivaldo's imagination and never allows him to truly "penetrate" her psychologically, which is what he wishes he could achieve by having sex with her. Indeed, even during their intercourse, Ida is elusive and as soon as the orgasm is over "she got out of bed [...] he watched the tall, dusty body, which now belonged to him, disappear" (Baldwin, *Another* 178). The intercourse scene demonstrates that as long as Vivaldo will understand his love for Ida in terms of bodily possession, Ida will never allow him to get truly close to her.

As the reader approaches the ending of the novel, it seems that Ida and Vivaldo cannot properly function as a couple. Although unconfirmed until the ending of Book two, it is hinted and later explored at length that Ida is having an affair with music producer Steve Ellis. Vivaldo strongly suspects the affair but is unable to confront Ida openly about it, because, in addition to her aggressiveness about the issue, he is too scared that she will leave him. It may be said, as Trudier Harris proposes, that Vivaldo's guilt "about the lack of commitment to the bodies he uses," not only Ida's but also other black women's as well, is what ultimately makes him helpless and unable to defend himself from Ida's attacks

(119). Nonetheless, without the strength to get over his guilt and confront his partner openly, Vivaldo will never truly be able to love Ida. The situation between the two finally unravels in a long night, where both characters, separately, work through their inability to confront their feelings of guilt and anger. At this point in the novel, around the ending of Book Two, the situation between all characters has become suffocating, just like the hot, humid summer night which mirrors the status of the characters' relations. After having watched together a new movie Eric stars in, the couple goes their separate ways: Vivaldo spends the evening and later the night with Eric, while Ida goes to a nightclub with Cass, where she meets Steve Ellis.

The evening spent between Vivaldo and Eric allows the two characters, who had, so far, been kept at a distance, to finally really see each other for what they have become. On the one hand, Eric, who has begun an affair with Cass, finds himself reflecting on his sexuality: while he starts into the novel as a convinced homosexual, yet he still finds himself attracted to, and to a certain extent even needing, a woman. Vivaldo, on the other hand, is profoundly committed to his hypermasculine heterosexuality, which has hindered his ability to love Rufus and Ida. Therefore, Eric's sexual fluidity, which Vivaldo comes to admire, stands in stark contrast with Vivaldo's heterosexuality, which is consequently linked to his inability to perform an honest introspection. When Eric suggests that there is fundamentally no real difference between homosexual and heterosexual love, insomuch as love remains the same complex feeling in both cases, Vivaldo cannot make any truly convincing arguments against Eric's views. Through Eric, Vivaldo starts to realize that love is a matter neither of gender nor of race, but of accepting "that - terror - and that anguish and that joy" (Baldwin, *Another* 330). It is Eric's open and nonjudgmental attitude that finally allows Vivaldo to confront his guilt over Rufus's death, and helps him to face the last night he spent with Rufus before Rufus disappeared:

> I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened. I had the feeling that he wanted someone to hold him, to hold him, and that, that night, it had to be a man [...] and I lay on my back and I didn't touch him and I didn't sleep. [...] I wondered, I guess I still wonder, what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been—afraid. I was afraid that he wouldn't understand that it was—only love. Only love. But, oh, Lord, when he died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed, and held him. (Baldwin, *Another* pp. 335-336)

Vivaldo is finally ready to confront the root of his guilt towards Rufus, which is to have been finally too preoccupied with himself and his masculinity to truly be able to express his love to Rufus, just as Rufus himself had been. The novel does not suggest, of course, that Vivaldo, or any of his friends, are personally to blame for Rufus's suicide, but rather it is their avoidance of self-knowledge, as Lynch proposes, that leads all characters, including Rufus, to fail in their personal relationships ("Beyond" 12). The weather at this point changes, it starts to rain, the metaphorical and literal asphyxiation that had taken the air out of the characters' relationships is broken, and they can finally breathe again. It is at this point that Vivaldo and Eric find themselves covering "that quarter of an inch" that had once separated Vivaldo from Rufus, and Vivaldo is finally able to hold and be held, as he had been unable to do in the past.

The embrace soon becomes sexual, and Vivaldo lets himself be loved by Eric as Rufus once had. During his sexual encounter with Eric, Vivaldo is suddenly transported back to the thought of Rufus, and he wonders, "Rufus had certainly thrashed and throbbed, feeling himself mount higher, as Vivaldo thrashed and throbbed and mounted now. Rufus. Rufus. Had it been like this for him? And he wanted to ask Eric, what was it like for Rufus?" (Baldwin, *Another* 378). Different scholars read this scene differently: undoubtedly, in letting himself be loved, Vivaldo his finally able to overcome his unconscious disgust of being sexual with a man, which surfaces at multiple points during the scene, and to exit the restraints that his masculinity had imposed on him. Where scholars' interpretations of the scene depart is on whether Vivaldo's thoughts of Rufus during his intercourse are a confirmation of his unexpressed sexual desire for Rufus, and therefore of his dormant homosexuality, or if they rather point to a sort of liberatory, embodied sympathy, that acts as a key to understand his own relationship with Ida. Looking first at the thesis that would understand the thoughts of Rufus during the intercourse as a form of sympathy, Gordon proposes that the sexual encounter between Vivaldo and Eric could be read as a "reparative act" (Gordon 8). Such an encounter, through the "literal and physical merging of bodies," "allows Vivaldo to posthumously identify and sympathize with Rufus" (Gordon 87). As opposed to sex with women, where Vivaldo was "accustomed himself to labour," in his sexual encounter with Eric, Vivaldo lets himself fall into passivity, which he understands as a "luxury" (Baldwin, *Another* 377). Sexual passivity is not equated to homosexuality in the novel, but rather, as Lynch notes, it is the site to express sympathy for another person. Transposing on a literal plane the metaphorical one, Vivaldo is penetrated by Rufus's experience, and therefore "inhabited by another body" (Gordon 88). For Baldwin then,

Gordon proposes, sympathy is not expressed by putting oneself into another's shoes, but rather that to truly experience sympathy one has to be entered by another's experience, which allows one to feel sympathy by "absorb[ing] pain" (88). On a different interpretation, Barry Gross instead notes that Vivaldo "suppresses a strong sexual attachment to Rufus," and in order for him to truly love Ida and overcome his guilt, he has to "consummate his love for Rufus," with Eric, who had also loved Rufus (117). By overcoming his heterosexual disgust of homosexuality, Vivaldo is also able to confront his exploitation and fetishization of blackness, which, although at times unwillingly, had hindered all his relationships. By their intercourse, both Vivaldo and Eric are able to "lay Rufus's ghost to rest" (Gross 117). Although different scholars approach the subject from different perspectives, it is clear that the sex between the two men is liberating on multiple levels exactly because it blurs gender and racial identities and rather than putting different identities in stark opposition, it lets them dialogue freely. Through Eric, it may be said, Vivaldo finally understands "another way of existing" (Hogue 24).

As Vivaldo is taking steps toward a more comprehensive understanding of his masculinity, Ida is taken to the breaking point by Steve Ellis. The reader learns from the narration from Cass's point of view, that, after having watched the movie, Cass and Ida went to a nightclub in Harlem, where they met Steve Ellis and two couples. Later, in Ida's confession to Vivaldo, we find out that after Cass's departure she had been forced by Ellis to sing on stage, receiving serious insults from the black musicians there, and, feeling completely lost, she had gone to Ellis's apartment to have sex with him, as she had done in past months. Ida's relationship with Ellis is described as particularly exploitative and deeply immersed in nauseating power dynamics. Cass describes Ida and Ellis dancing as an extremely unbalanced pair, with Ellis being a "square figure swooping and breaking, and his little boy's face trying hard to seem abandoned" while Ida, with her usual haughty grace, "savagely shamed him," clearly showing her superiority in terms of physical beauty (Baldwin, *Another* 352). Yet this same dynamic is later reversed when Ellis forces Ida to perform when she knows she is not welcome to, making her the butt of the joke for being the mistress of a white man, but especially in the intercourse between the two. Ida's feeling regarding sex with Ellis is disgust: it makes her feel "dirty" (Baldwin, *Another* 414). In an agonizing description Ida recalls the feeling of Ellis's hands on her body as making her want "to scream" and "vomit," and the sexual act itself as "being pumped full of—I don't know what, not poison exactly, but dirt, waste, filth, and I'd never be able to get it out of me, never be able to get that stink out of me" (Baldwin, *Another* 413). Ida has, in a sense,

become a victim of her own game: she admits to having accepted closeness with Ellis to further her career and her closeness with Vivaldo because he offered her a chance to escape her parents' home, thinking, finally, that she could not possibly truly care for a white man. She describes her relationships to white men before Vivaldo, whom she compares to "dogs," as purely vindictive, knowing that white men wanted her, as a black woman, because "they wanted to do something dirty and they knew that you knew how" (Baldwin, *Another* 409). Nonetheless, with Vivaldo, who approached her with respect and adoration, Ida learns what it would feel like to be with someone she actually loves, and she learns that that someone could be a white man.

Ida finds it fundamentally unimaginable to be able to be in a serious, committed, long-term relationship with a white man, even if that man is Vivaldo, partly because her relationships with men have been too entrenched in racially informed sexual categories. When Cass asks her why she cannot envision being married to Vivaldo she says that "Love doesn't have as much to do with [marriage] as everybody seems to think" and rather that their partnership "would be the end of him, and the end of me." (Baldwin, *Another* 340). If, on the one hand, her anxiety about loving Vivaldo is therefore explained by the impossibility of imagining a future where they are together, it is also, on the other hand, a result "of her ability to correctly discern a constitutive feature of her social world" (Martínez 784). As Ida explains to Cass, she has had to become "the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around" to survive "the big whorehouse" that is the world she experiences, and therefore she has no space to feel the vulnerability necessary to love anyone (Baldwin, *Another* 341). While surely Vivaldo has good intentions in her regards, as it has been widely explored, that is not nearly enough to truly love Ida, or her brother for that matter. Therefore, when Ida understands that there is not a perfect correspondence between love and healthy relationships, she has ample reasons to do so. Looking more closely at Ida's relationship with Vivaldo, Leeming notes that it could be read, along with Ruth's in "Come Out the Wilderness,"[16] as a representation of the white man's inability or unwillingness to "say yes to life, to the 'stink' of love" (149). Such a failure, Leeming proposes, is "a metaphor for a larger social failure, the failure of the white world to move beyond the level of guilt, stereotyping, and the boyish need for sympathy in its relations with the black world" (149). Ida's anger and vindictiveness towards Vivaldo is a direct reaction to such a

[16] This is a short story first published in Baldwin's 1965 collection of short stories titled *Going to Meet the Man*, narrating a black woman's failed relationship with a white man.

failure, which is perfectly captured by the observation of the narrator of "Come Out the Wilderness" that "the sons of the masters were roaming the world, looking for arms to hold them. And the arms that might have held them - could not forgive" (Baldwin, *Going* 197). Therefore, just as Vivaldo has had to negotiate his hypermasculinity to have the courage to face Ida's confessions, Ida also has to renegotiate how she defines herself and how she is defined by others in order to be with him. As Ernesto Javier Martínez proposes, a "'true' commitment to staying with Vivaldo [...] would require [...] challenging the sociopolitical circumstances that undergird [Ida's and Vivaldo's relationship]" and that "to the extent that these circumstances form key aspects of their own self-conceptions and interpretive horizons, committing to a life together in this radical way would imply, in certain instances and to certain degrees, ending their former ideas of self" (785). In other words, in order for Ida to finally enter fully and responsibly into her relationship with Vivaldo she will have to accept the changes to her identity that being a proud black woman in a committed relationship to a white man would make, in a 1950s New York City. In accepting her relationship with Vivaldo, and therefore "adopt[ing] a new sense of self," Ida might well be renouncing her place in the black community and mediating her identity as a black woman, which is why admitting her love to Vivaldo is so painful and her expression of it is hateful.

Ida's new-found courage to let Vivaldo see all the anger and love inside her and Vivaldo's new-found courage to face them head on, bring the couple to a seemingly new level of knowledge of each other. Their respective vulnerability seems to imply that they have finally become able to love each other fully, all parts of each other, even those one may wish to keep hidden. Indeed, Vivaldo realizes that loving Ida is not an easy feat, but at last he can love her because he has gotten what he wanted, "the truth of Ida, or the true Ida; and he did not know how he was going to live with it" (Baldwin, *Another* 420). Vivaldo and Ida's story suggests most prominently that love, in a Baldwinian sense, is not in the least a utopian force, it cannot perform miracles, rather it is a force that demands engagement. When Vivaldo keeps professing his love for Ida, Ida rightfully asks him, "How can you love somebody you don't know anything about? You don't know where I've been. You don't know what life is like for me" (Baldwin, *Another* 319). It is only by allowing and gaining such a knowledge, that love in Baldwinian terms can happen. If, following his Ethics of Love, hate is a damaging, and in this case even suicidal, force for Rufus and Ida, Baldwin's love demands an embodied engagement with the Other to truly be performed, which is what Vivaldo experiences most starkly.

When Ida's confession is over the characters embrace each other, "like two weary children," with Ida comforting Vivaldo as "her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him" (Baldwin, *Another* 420). Vivaldo is finally willing to admit to, and take part in, Ida's immense pain and he does so with a physical response, again stressing how the embodied quality of engagement is a necessary quality of love. What Vivaldo leaves behind is his innocence, in favor, as Lynch proposes, of experience. Vivaldo's position in the novel shows most evidently Baldwin's paradox "that the individual who strives to maintain or believe in his innocence will also undergo and cause terrible suffering" (Lynch, "Beyond" 13). Only by letting the innocence go can Vivaldo act as a lover, as Baldwin later proposed, and reach a new point of vulnerability that can only be obtained through experience. On Ida's part, the woman significantly takes off the snake ring that Rufus had gifted her. The ring functions as a visible sign of Ida's narrative function, which is to be an extension of Rufus within the evolution of these events. As if the ring was a banner of her vengeance in Rufus's name, she is only able to overcome such vengeance when she finally takes it off. Whereas Rufus's death functions as the underlying cause for his friends' self-discovery, Ida's vindictive behavior towards them actively pushes the events of the novel forward. Lynch agrees on this particular point, and even proposes that "her agitation of them, although it threatens her development, performs a kind of service for those individuals," by providing them the pain necessary to grow ("Beyond" 10). For Ida to reach her own self-growth, she has to let go of her anger, which, although justified, is ultimately a way to avoid confronting her own guilt, by pouring it on others. Differently from Rufus, Ida does manage to confront, openly and emotionally, her mistreatment of Vivaldo and not to be eaten up by her own guilt.

After listening to Ida's confession, "a detail that [Vivaldo] needed for his novel, which he had been searching for months, fell neatly and vividly, like the tumblers of a lock, into place in his mind [...] it illuminated, justified, clarified everything" (Baldwin, *Another* 417). Baldwin clearly suggests that the ideal writer, like Vivaldo, must be willing to risk his sense of self to listen to and identify with his characters. If before, Vivaldo had felt like he did not know the characters, and that he had to force them "to surrender up to him their privacy," just like he had felt of Ida, now the characters are willingly illuminating their own story to the receptive author (Baldwin, *Another*, 130). As with Vivaldo, the need for honest, and painful, self-knowledge to create beautiful art is a recurring theme within *Another*

Country, and it is a theme that is surely vital in upsetting Richard and Cass's relationship, as will be explored in the following section.

3.3 Cass, Richard and the disruption of safety

Cass and Richard are a white, middle-class couple, socially on the rise after the successful publication of Richard's first book. Richard, who had been Vivaldo's English teacher, is a man of Polish descent, coming from the working class, while Cass comes from a wealthy New England family, which she left to be with Richard. At the start of the novel, although acutely observant, and at times unusually wise, Cass is mostly an innocent, satisfied woman, living in the safety of her whiteness, and of her normative heterosexual relationship. She sees herself as bohemian and liberal because she has friends who are mostly poor artists, and some of them, like Rufus, are also black, but while she is willing to appreciate their art, she does not truly engage with their lives. Rufus's suicide, on the one hand, and the publication of her husband's first novel, on the other, have a profound impact on everything Cass holds true of herself, and of the world and precipitate the dissatisfaction she feels in her relationship with Richard. She starts to realize how much she had ignored her dreams and ambitions in order to make room in her life for Richard:

> He had been absolutely necessary to her - or so she had believed; [...] and so she had attached herself to him and her life had taken shape around him. She did not regret this for herself. I want him, something in her had said, years ago. And she had bound him to her; he had been her salvation; [...] She did not regret it for herself and yet she began to wonder if there were not something in it to be regretted, something she had done to Richard which Richard did not see. (Baldwin, *Another* 111)

As Cass's world comes suddenly crashing down, she realizes that the safety she had shrouded herself in was actually a screen that had kept her from the world and, most importantly, from getting to know herself, to mature. Her issue is, at the core, that she "had to try to fit [herself] around [Richard] and not try to make [Richard] fit around [her]," and when she becomes doubtful about who Richard is, she must question herself as well (Baldwin *Another* 112). As Hogue notes, by ignoring her desires and ambitions Cass creates a "void" within herself and, in discovering it, she "realizes and admits that the image of Richard, which she has fashioned, is a false one" (24). Cass finds Richard's first book unoriginal and uninspired and the most "absolute limit of [Richard's] talent," and while she tries to tell herself that it does not matter and that it is not her husband's fault "if he's not

Dostoyevsky," she cannot shake the feeling that her perception of him has forever changed (Baldwin, *Another* 116). As Lynch suggests, throughout the novel "the artistic achievements of the other characters [...] are based partly on talent but more significantly on their individual willingness to face themselves and to encounter the reality of other individuals' lives" ("Beyond" 5); Richard's lack of artistry, it is suggested, is tied exactly to his inability to look outside of his perspective and engage deeply with the reality around him. Cass's realization that Richard's art is not in any way remarkable is a fundamental critique of the depth of feeling that the man she has fashioned herself around is able to achieve. Therefore, it does actually matter that she cannot approve of Richard's book, not only for her, having renounced her ambitions to be a supporter of her husband's success, but also to her husband himself, who has become dependent on Cass's uncritical, unwavering support and now finds his efforts to be critically insufficient.

Following Rufus's suicide, Cass and Richard embark on two radically different paths: while Richard enjoys the commercial success of his book, working to possibly make it into a motion picture, Cass starts a journey of self-discovery. The central moments of her personal growth are to be found in her two trips to Harlem and in her extramarital relationship with Eric. During the first trip, Cass reaches Harlem for Rufus's funeral and realizing she has forgotten to bring a scarf to cover her head in church, she ventures into Harlem looking for a store. This is the first instance where Cass experiences being under the black gaze, the feeling of being the Other, and she feels "afraid of these people, these streets, the chapel to which she must return" (Baldwin, *Another* 121). The trip forces her to admit "the limits of her white, liberal narrative, how it has insulated her from the world, forcing her to devalue people who are different" (Hogue 24). Following this trip, Cass is still not ready to admit to the limits of her lived experience and seek new boundaries but is aware that something must change. The dissatisfaction with her way of life is most expressed, at this point, in her marriage to Richard. Cass describes her dissatisfaction within her marriage, poignantly, in physical terms: the disconnect between her and her husband, which had, at first been, psychological, comes to be expressed through the lack of physical contact among them. Cass is touch-starved, and she wishes she "could get drunk and go out and pick up a truck driver or a taxi driver or anybody who'd touch [her] and make [her] feel like a woman again" (Baldwin, *Another* 267). Yet, she does not seek just anybody's touch, but she seeks Eric's, whom she had noticed as matured and self-aware after his return from France. The two begin an affair which for Cass is particularly risky, as she stands to lose her family for what is a relationship with a clear expiration date, since Eric makes it

clear that his love will remain with Yves, who is going to eventually join him in the USA. By entering into her relationship with Eric willingly and rationally, and not as a result of a bout of passion, and by accepting the transient nature of the relationship, Cass is truly putting into question the entire safe, respectable, heteronormative structure that had shielded her from the world. After Cass and Eric have sex for the first time, the woman does not feel guilty but rather she feels that a "weight had rolled away, and that she was herself again, in her own skin, for the first time in a long time" (Baldwin, *Another* 287). If beforehand she had fashioned herself around Richard, with Eric, a secure and independent lover, she is free to take all the room to fashion herself around her own wishes and desires.

The hot, asphyxiating night that makes Ida and Vivaldo confront their fears corresponds to Cass's second trip to Harlem. Having now been in the relationship with Eric for some time and having used Vivaldo and Ida as smoke screens with her husband often, Cass is confronted by Ida, who in turn maliciously uses Cass as an unwilling witness to her own relationship with Ellis. During a heated taxi ride to Harlem, Ida confronts Cass over her relationship with Eric and her liberal views. While Cass protests against Ida's black and white worldview, Ida, coldly, confronts her with her fundamental safety and normativity. When Cass asks Ida to give her some credit for renouncing her wealthy, New England life to be with Richard, Ida uncovers Cass's insecurities by highlighting how hers had not been a true, proactive rebellion to her upbringing, but rather she had relied on Richard to take her away. Like Elizabeth's absolute reliance on Richard to leave her abusive aunt in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ida clearly shows how Cass failed to take actual responsibility to exit a life she did not want, and simply let herself be carried by the desires of her partner. Yet, Ida recognizes in Cass's decision to have an extramarital affair Cass's only original trait, because it will lead her to pain and suffering. Indeed, whilst Ida is also heavily judged by the black community for her relationship with Ellis, the narrator clearly acknowledges that "the world's judgment, should it ever be necessary to face it, would condemn Cass yet more cruelly than Ida. For Ida was not white, nor married, nor a mother. The world assumed Ida's sins to be natural, whereas those of Cass were perverse" (Baldwin, *Another* 339). Therefore, Ida rightly recognizes the importance of Cass's risk, as Cass "stand[s] to lose everything— [her] home, [her] husband, even [her] children," in order for Cass to reach any real knowledge of herself and the world that surrounds her (Baldwin, *Another* 344). Even if Ida's judgment of Cass could be deemed, at times, unfair, her anger has a major role, as Jacqueline Orsagh proposes, in "the shattering of [Cass's] tight and idyllic world" (Orsagh 59). The two women represent two opposite sides of a spectrum, going from

experience to innocence, with Cass being essentially innocent, and both need to let go of their extremes to be able to grow.

Having confronted her racial innocence with Ida in Harlem, Cass finally has to face the weight of her choices with her husband. As her husband confronts her on her frequent late nights and Cass realizes that she must confess her deeds, memories of her first sexual encounter with Richard rise up to her mind. Cass recalls a flowered field, the strong sexual desire she had felt for Richard and the young man's insistence to her reticence, and the smell of the field is now mixed with present-day Richard, tired, drunk. Sensorially, Cass becomes aware of how she had allowed Richard's desires to stir her and move her, which in turn further cements the need for her affair in order for Cass to gain a sense of self. It is at this point that Cass realizes that she had underestimated Richard's love for her and his pain at her revelation, yet she must face them, because if they are to truly love each other as a couple, "Richard had a right to know his wife" (Baldwin, *Another* 365). Richard's position, although mostly ignored within the novel, is not an easy one. While, surely, he benefits from traditional gender roles and has had the room to work on his self-actualization, patriarchy has not served Richard either, in allowing him to think that materially providing for his family would be enough to keep Cass's love forever. Richard is starkly aware that Cass is fundamentally "smarter" than him and yet asks of her "how are we going to eat, baby, what else can I do?" (Baldwin, *Another* 364). Richard's character is the most evident proof that the safe, white, heteronormative zone of being is limited and limiting: one does not have to realize he is in a cage to be in one. Richard's tragedy, if it may be called as such, is that Baldwin never allows the reader to gauge at Richard's self-discovery. His violent reaction to Cass's confession is his last act in the novel and he is not given any further action or relief.

While Gross argues that "of all the characters, [Cass] alone ends up empty-handed, [...] in the dungeon of her barely conscious wishes, never quite brave enough to make them part of the world's experience" (120), Hogue on the contrary sees Cass's destiny much more positively. Cass's character arc has shown a character in deep crisis who has found the courage to face herself and the world, and most importantly has come to accept pain. When, after having confessed her affair to Richard, Cass meets Eric and they end their relationship, Cass rightly notes that "growing just means learning more and more about anguish" (Baldwin, *Another* 397). For Cass, growth has meant to realize that pain must be accepted, and at times even welcomed, as a necessary force in human life. The end of the novel leaves Cass with what she had not had the strength to do before: the freedom to choose for herself

her own destiny. The last information given of her is a possible trip back to New England, to confront her past, which, for Baldwin, is "a prerequisite of moving forward" (Hogue 27). Differently from Cass and Richard, Eric's journey of self-discovery completes a full arc throughout the novel to reach the most complete level of maturity, out of all characters in the novel

3.4 Fluidity and choice: Eric and Yves

Most scholars understand the character of Eric as the key to the novel, as he is, after all, the agent who allows Cass, Vivaldo and indirectly Ida to finally achieve a level of self-knowledge and balance. Eric does not appear in the narrated present until the second Part of the novel, where he is described in what much resembles an Edenic sort of environment, in Southern France. Eric escaped New York City after his failed relationship with Rufus and in Paris underwent a profound process of self-discovery, by challenging and accepting the bounds of his identity. Eric, it is made quite clear, is openly homosexual, but has struggled to accept his sexuality, finding comfort in empty sexual meetings with men. This all changed when Eric met Yves, a young French man, who had become a "home" for him, or, rather, "each was, for the other, the dwelling place that each had despaired of finding" (Baldwin, *Another* 184). As Eric starts his journey in the novel, he has already reached the other country the novel's title proposes, not only literally but also figuratively, as his love for Yves is even described in spatial terms. The couple, when it first appears in the narrated present, is taking a vacation in Southern France before Eric has to move back to the USA for an exciting acting job. Eric is worried that, by going back to the USA he will jeopardize what he has gained in his "other country," and most importantly he is worried that he will lose Yves. Eric, as Yves aptly notes, "is afraid of trouble in New York," and he is, in sum, afraid of facing his past choices and of upsetting his newfound self-balance by meeting again his friends, Cass, Richard and Vivaldo (Baldwin, *Another* 190). Nonetheless, Eric, more than the other characters of the book, realizes that facing the open wounds of his past is necessary to progress.

In establishing a strong, healthy relationship with Yves, Eric had already had to face his feelings towards Rufus and his upbringing. Indeed, he recognizes that perhaps what he had understood as love for Rufus had instead been a reflection on Rufus of the feelings Eric had had for the black men he had loved growing up. While, as explored before, Rufus's masculinity had impeded their relationship, Eric's fetishization of blackness had also been

a clear limit to their relationship. As Eric notes, "he had never succeeded in making Rufus believe he loved him. Perhaps Rufus had looked into his eyes and seen those dark men Eric saw, and had hated him for it" (Baldwin, *Another* 193). Eric grew up in Alabama, in a rich, well-known family, who, nonetheless, was incapable of showing him love, which is why Eric turned to the black household staff as a major source of support. As Eric discovered his sexual attraction towards male subjects, he came more and more to identify with the oppressed category of blackness, that allowed him to explore his sexuality much more freely than his white community would. While fundamentally using black men as a means to explore his sexuality, Eric was unable to understand just how risky those relationships were for himself, and for the black men he came into contact with. LeRoy, Eric's first lover, was the first one to confront Eric with the crude reality of things: "Your Daddy owns half the folks in this town, ain't but so much they can do to you, but what they can do to me – !" (Baldwin, *Another* 204). When Eric finally reaches the comparatively liberal environment of New York City, blackness is still understood as a cover for queer desire. As Marlon Ross, notes "white homosexuals, like bohemians and hipsters, saw African American communities as hip places to tests their avant-garde status," since there they were free of "the puritanism and commercialism of middle-class white society" (499). Rufus, just as he had hated Leona for presumably only desiring him for his black sexual prowess, and not individually as a person, so does he hate Eric because Eric uses him "as a vehicle for his own sexual self-discovery" (Gordon 86). Differently from Leona and even Vivaldo, Eric starts off in the novel with the realization of his skewed conception of blackness and, while during the novel he has no sexual or otherwise affectionate relationships with any black character, it is clear that such a realization has been central in allowing him to open up to love and being loved. In facing his conflation of homosexuality with blackness, Eric is able to free his sexual desire for men from the constraints of respectability, and to establish a relationship with Yves. The profound level of self-knowledge that Eric is able to reach, is ultimately also the factor that furthers his career, as, being the "the artist most open to the wounds in others [...] Eric has the most potential for creating art that will encounter suffering honestly," therefore producing original and moving performances, as opposed to Richard's unoriginal, commercial novel (Lynch, "Beyond" 5).

Once back in New York, Eric's growth and security starkly contrasts with the fundamental confusion all other characters are facing. Indeed, as Hogue proposes, Eric's "ability to come to terms with himself, to know that growth entails discovery and recognition of limitations, to approach life with equanimity, and to view life in a totally

new way" allow him to become particularly "attractive to his friends" (12). Interestingly, Eric's psychological attractiveness is reflected in his looks, which have an androgynous quality:

> Yet, in precisely the way that great music depends, ultimately, on great silence, this masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine, either, and something in Vivaldo resisted the word androgynous. It was a quality to which great numbers of people would respond without knowing to what it was they were responding. There was great force in the face, and great gentleness. But, as most women are not gentle, nor most men strong, it was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures. (Baldwin, *Another* 324)

With the character of Eric the theme of sexual and gender fluidity is made most clear, and, considering his relative success within the novel it is also suggested as an identity to be striven for. Baldwin understood androgyny as a necessary component of human identity, albeit one that is rarely accepted. In an essay on the ideals on manhood, titled "Here Be Dragons" and ironically first published in *Playboy* in 1985, Baldwin wrote that "there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man" and that "love between a man and a woman, or love between any two human beings, would not be possible did we not have available to us the spiritual resources of both sexes" (Baldwin, *Price* 677). As Marc Lombardo notes, male and female identities are constructed, for Baldwin, through "the constant reference to, and the constant presence of, one's opposite" and therefore, for Baldwin, "the identity that we negate in the process of becoming ourselves is never simply external to us" but rather it is necessarily contained in our constructed female or male identity (43). Although "Here Be Dragons" was written over twenty years after *Another Country*, the idea that, in order to be able to relate to another human being enough to love them, it is necessary to embody both masculinity and femininity is already very clearly expressed in the novel. Eric, who is clearly described as attractive exactly because he is androgynous, is able to act as a bridge between characters such as Ida and Vivaldo who would otherwise never be able to truly see each other, as they hide behind their respective identity categories. Eric can receive Vivaldo's confession of guilt over Rufus's death exactly because within the category of perceived masculinity he took an active sexual role, allowing Vivaldo to be penetrated by Rufus's experience, but he also took, within the category of perceived femininity, a caretaking, comforting role, making Vivaldo feel safe to experience his own femininity. Furthermore, just as Baldwin argues in "Here Be Dragons," also in *Another Country* "the simple truth of this universal duality, this perpetual

possibility of communion and completion, seems so alarming that I have watched it lead to addiction, despair, death and madness" (Baldwin, *Price* 678). Being the Other is understood by Baldwin, both in his essay and in the novel at hand, as fundamentally menacing towards sanctioned identity categories, which is exactly why all characters battle so hard against self-acceptance and self-love. What Eric is able to do most visibly is to "evolve into the complexity of manhood" which is exactly what is "virtually forbidden- as an unpatriotic act" to "the American boy" (Baldwin, *Price* 678). On the contrary, Rufus is the character who is unable to understand and accept the complexity and, arguably, the multiplicity of his manhood, and this is exactly why he perishes. Yet the pain his experience provokes is exactly the push all the remaining characters need to question themselves and to discover the meaning of labels, which, once accepted, "may seem to define you for others, but [do] not have the power to define you to yourself" (Baldwin, *Price* 681).

Nonetheless, while it seems that sexual and gender fluidity are understood by Baldwin as inevitable and necessary truths of human nature, it is also true that the character of Eric most clearly represents the importance of choice. When Vivaldo and Eric finally have a chance to discuss their sexuality and partners of choice, it becomes clear that they share a state of confusion. While Eric clearly understands that he is not in love with Cass, that she is not "all tangled up in [his] guts," yet his relationship with her, and even more the need he had felt for her, lead him to question his homosexuality, which he had come to accept as his identity. Vivaldo envies Eric because he "can make it with both men and women," and therefore understands as desirable a sexual identity that requires no label at all, but rather thrives in uncertainty (Baldwin, *Another* 329). On the contrary, Eric, after having spent years wishing that he would be freed from the "torment" of his homosexuality, feels that he has got "to accept - or decide - some very strange things. Right away," signaling that uncertainty for him is not an option (Baldwin, *Another* 329). This is perhaps because, while for Eric relationships are intimately tied with his identity, since loving or desiring men has made him into a homosexual in the eyes of society, instead, Vivaldo, as a white, heterosexual, cis man, has never had to define his identity through his sexual desires, he simply was a man. Yet, as Martínez notes, "how one identifies oneself and how one is seen in the world indeed influence how one desires and how one practices that desire with others," and this is a thesis that is abundantly supported by *Another Country* (788). When Eric tells Vivaldo that whether he is sure or not of what his sexual desire truly entails he must decide who he is, he recognizes that presenting himself as a queer person as opposed to a heterosexual makes a fundamental difference in how he navigates life and how he

understands his relationships. Eric is not trying to deny his desire for women, but rather is not hiding behind it as a "safe" alternative, while Vivaldo, on the contrary, frames his desire for men as something that he would do to appease or satisfy another man, without fully implicating himself in the encounter. As someone who has lived as a homosexual, Eric understands, differently from Vivaldo, that the "uncertainty about his sexuality and sexual identity is more than a matter of psychological interiority or individual sexual preference. His uncertainty is, in fact, shaped by social forces" (Martínez 788). Vivaldo is not so different, in his inability to implicate his sexual desire for men with homosexuality, to all the men, as Baldwin describes in "Here Be Dragons," who would sleep with him one day and beat him up for being a homosexual the next, or even the men who sexually exploit Rufus at the start of the novel. *Another Country*, therefore, is not proposing sexual and gender fluidity as completely opposed to identity categories, but rather is recognizing the importance of the two coupled together. Therefore, Vivaldo's liberal openness to the possibility of loving a man, and consequently the understanding of his sexual fluidity is not enough to attribute him the ability to subvert heterosexuality. Rather, it is Eric's courageous stance in his queer identity that has the strength to "illuminate [...] aspects of the social world" (Martínez 791). Within the character of Eric, the reader can clearly see expressed the importance of identity categories to take a politically conscious stance towards social issues, while still openly admitting to the fluidity of sexual desire.

Eric's insistence on taking a stance is finally also expressed in the person he chooses as his primary partner, Yves, who is given the last few pages of the novel. The closing with the young French man, reaching, at last, "that city which the people from heaven had made their home," quite literally another country, seems to propose that perhaps the upheaval that all characters experienced will lead them to better, conscious, and loving relationships (Baldwin, *Another* 426). Nonetheless, as Dunning notes, "the novel has taught us to be skeptical" of any possible utopian force solving all issues and the critic rightly reads the ending not so much as an "happy ever after" but rather the beginning of a new, sometimes painful, journey of reciprocal knowledge and love (Dunning 110). Indeed, anyone who has ever ventured into a move across countries, or even continents, can find herself or himself into Yves's "excitement which was close to panic" (Baldwin, *Another* 423). All characters are, some symbolically and some more literally, on the verge of a great change, but nothing has been settled yet, the new country must be made into a home.

3.5 Facing pain, finding love

Another Country is a choral, layered novel that centers on a community of artistic people mediating their positions in a violent New York City. In one way or another, all characters, as Leeming notes, are reflections of Baldwin's life experiences and fears (202). Just like Rufus, Baldwin had been to the depths of isolation and self-despair, that had led him to attempt suicide, but, just like Ida, he also had to deal with the consequences of the suicide of someone dear, and he had made himself the witness of the loved one's anguish. In writing *Another Country,* he had felt, like Vivaldo, that "the characters in the novel seemed to be insisting on holding back the truth" (Leeming 133), and just like Richard he had feared his work to be unremarkable. Even Cass, being a white woman and therefore the character who is perhaps the furthest from Baldwin's positionality, often offers remarks about the racial and sexual reality that encloses the cast of the novel that are markedly Baldwinian in their pointedness and clear-sightedness. Most of all perhaps, Baldwin is reflected in the self-exiled homosexual artist Eric, who, just like Baldwin, seeks relief from the suffocating tensions of the USA in France, and that, most of all, understands erotic desire as a key to self-knowledge and love of others. This cast of characters that so closely resembles aspects of its author is also, importantly, predominantly white. The major theme of finding a way to communicate the hurt and pain of a racialized and sexualized existence and finding healing across racial and gender boundaries is fundamentally reflected in the relationship between the characters and their author. As Gordon remarks, "*Another Country* [...] is itself an instance of interracial sympathy," whereby, just as Vivaldo needs to sympathize with Rufus and Ida, so must Baldwin sympathize with Vivaldo (91). Indeed, sympathy, and importantly not empathy, is the necessary emotion that the novel seems to suggest is necessary to act as lovers, as Baldwin's Ethics of Love would purport. The Merriam Webster Dictionary notes that sympathy, "which comes from the Greek sym, meaning "together," and pathos, referring to feelings or emotion, is used when one person shares the feelings of another" while with empathy "you can imagine or understand how someone might feel, without necessarily having those feelings yourself" ("Difference"). *Another Country* suggests most strongly that understanding, or thinking that one is understanding, the pain of the Other is simply not enough, and, rather, points to being penetrated by the Other's pain, and experiencing it fully with the Other as key to the intimate knowledge necessary to love. Interracial sympathy within the novel requires visceral entanglement with the other because "as long as the other can be kept at arm's

length, we can continue to maintain the illusion that he/she truly is other," but "as soon as he/she comes closer to us and starts to appear as too near or neighborly, we will be faced with the ethical choice that Levinas captures as the face-to-face encounter" (Lombardo 44). Baldwin is staging an ethical encounter between opposed subjectivities and showing how the encounter can be mediated.

In effect, the Levinasian concept of face-to-face encounter is particularly useful in interpreting Baldwin's Ethics of Love within *Another Country*. According to the Lithuanian philosopher Levinas, human interaction begins with the encounter of the Face of the Other. When encountering the Other the "I" has no agency: the Face commands and takes the self as "hostage", and, based on this encounter, the self must take responsibility for the Other (Levinas, *Righteous* 216). In other words, within an ethical encounter with the face of the Other the "I" has no choice but to take responsibility for the Other. This obligation then entails that freedom is not for-the-self, but for-the-other, as responsibility for the Other questions the self before the exercise of its own freedom (Levinas, *Otherwise* 109). The characters of *Another Country* find themselves repeatedly in situations where they cannot just be witnesses to society's oppression, but they have to learn how to take responsibility towards others, not only for their own actions, but for the role that society has assigned to them. For Levinas, this idea of Face-to-Face encountering is pivotal, as subjectivity is not recognized in the being but in the encounter with the Other, which is exactly what happens in *Another Country*: all characters find that they lack in self-knowledge when they are faced with the encounter with difference, which forces them to find their own subjectivity. In Levinasian terms responsibility means substitution, not as appropriation, but as seeing and providing for the Other's needs. Through the enfleshed sharing of pain enacted via the erotic touching of the characters in the novel, the white and straight characters are able to acknowledge the historical pain of the oppressed Other. In ways not wholly dissimilar to Sarah Ahmed's experience of living with her mother's pain, the characters in the novel, in being penetrated by the Other's experience, can grant the Other's pain "the status of an event, a happening in the world," something that "has a life outside the fragile borders of [their] vulnerable and much loved body" (23). Interracial sympathy, as expressed within the novel is exactly this type of face-to-face ethical encounter, which requires a facing of the Other's pain that is so profound that allows one to become "open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel" (Ahmed 24). In accepting such pain, it fosters active involvement, which could be understood not only as private but also, on a larger scale, societal. In "Ethics and Politics" Levinas asks, "if your neighbor attacks another neighbor

or treats him unjustly, what can you do?" (294). By asking this question, Levinas recognizes the problem of justice, but rather than highlighting the positions of victim and attacker, which, as the novel shows, are most often overlapping, he is questioning the position of the witness, which in many respects is exactly what the novel is asking the reader and its characters to do. It is up to those witnessing the calls of the different faces present to decide how to respond and to "distinguish which face is in greater need of protection" and to "come to the aid of the one being persecuted" (Rae 289). This, the moment in which the viewer is asked to act, is the point in which an ethical analysis can turn political. By implying that taking an active part, or facing in Levinasian terms, in African American pain is the only way to truly express love in a healthy way, the novel seems to suggest that acting like lovers may indeed be the most direct way to act politically and consciously within the context of racism. As opposed to Arendt's strict separation of politics and love, *Another Country* shows that love and politics cannot exist without each other: the personal is political and the political is personal.

Towards the ending of the novel Vivaldo, while drinking a cup of coffee, reflects on the strict opposition of black and white that the racialized world he lives in has made him believe: "He stared into his cup, noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire" (Baldwin, Another 419). Vivaldo's epiphany finally leads him to understand that the colors that had shaped his and his friends' experience so deeply and painfully do not actually exist in simple, stark opposition, but are much more nuanced. This is exactly the kind of realization that the act of facing, of taking responsibility for another being entails. In taking all of Ida, Vivaldo realizes contemporarily that he has to accept that the woman he wants to love is fundamentally identified by the labels that society has imposed on her, meaning a black, heterosexual woman, but at the same time he has to understand that she is not limited to those categories, she is much more nuanced than that. Before being able to face Ida, Vivaldo has most of all to face himself, to understand and accept that he, himself, and not just Ida, is much more than a heterosexual, white male. In a 1975 conversation with black writer Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin affirmed that "people invent categories to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity [...] Straight cats invented faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves" (Baldwin and Giovanni pp. 88-89). For Baldwin, no identity is ever complete in and of itself, but must always contain its opposite in order to truly exist, as was

explained in the case of androgyny. Racial and sexual innocence are upheld by exactly these categories because they shield the ethical face, meaning they do not allow to properly see oneself and others, in a metaphorical sense, and therefore impede the ethical encounter of facing. In facing each other Vivaldo, Ida, Eric and Cass are able to act on what Cass describes as the necessary action of "laboriously" dragging secrets "into the light of the world" to "[impose] them on the world, and [make] them a part of the world's experience" (Baldwin, *Another* 116). Otherwise put, going back to Ahmed's understanding of the contingency of pain, we might say that the action of loving through interracial sympathy is "a call not just for an attentive listening, but for a different kind of inhabitance […] and a demand for politics, a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with its impossibility" (32).

The character who fosters such a laborious act of new and radical inhabitance, or otherwise said, the painful facing that takes place in the novel, is the black martyr-figure of Rufus. The only black man in the novel, Rufus is destroyed in avoiding the act of facing: he is submerged, crushed even, by the weight of the categories that frame his dangerous and endangered body. Bell hooks, in her book on black masculinity, deftly notes that American culture "does not love black males, [...] they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls or boys" and "especially most black men do not love themselves" (IX). This is most clearly the case of Rufus, who, cannot find a way out of a system that oppresses him to the point of becoming internalized and making it impossible for him to even understand what love is, since the culture of domination he lives in makes "desire for that which is despised take on the appearance of care, of love" (hooks IX). Nonetheless, Rufus's sacrifice is necessary for the growth and development of a mostly white cast, who would otherwise be unable to do the necessary work of love. While in a sense then Rufus is "used" to further the growth of others, at the same time it is impossible to make him into the stock figure of the Magical Negro, for example. In works where black characters are used for their spirituality or folk wisdom, "the white characters' dilemma, not the black character's gifts of spirituality, serve as the primary focus" (Glenn and Cunningham 138). *Another Country* seems to reverse this dynamic by putting the black experience at the forefront of the white dilemma. Rufus is in no way a magical being, rather, like the religious figure of Jesus Christ, he is revolutionary exactly because he is fully, painfully human. Just as Jesus Christ set an example for the rest of humanity to follow, so, in many respects does Rufus. The pain he vulnerably shares with his friends turns into a love that functions by allowing room for everyone to be more than one, single, unchanging

identity while also respecting and acknowledging how one's starting identity may be a source of pervasive privilege or oppression. As hooks notes, "if black males were loved they could hope for more than a life locked down, caged, confined; they could imagine themselves beyond containment," and the escape from containment is exactly what Rufus provides for the novel (IX).

This chapter proposed an analysis of *Another Country* which has brought forth some main themes such as black and white masculinity, androgyny, interracial sexual desire and sympathy and, as always, love. Rufus is crushed by the internalization of society's racism and the hate he pours on the female white body, while Leona is mostly excluded from the sympathy the novel so clearly understands as central to love. Vivaldo must learn how to overcome his fetishization of blackness, which is intimately connected to his strict masculinity, while Ida must also agree to let go of her hate to be vulnerable to love. Cass needs to take responsibility for herself and allow her husband to finally know the real Cass. Eric must overcome his conflation of blackness with homosexuality to accept and love himself fully and allow that same growth to happen in others. All characters, this chapter has argued, must undergo a process of ethical facing of each other in order to open themselves up to the possibility of love, which is a force that is primarily personal but has the power to become societal.

Conclusion

I started this thesis wondering if it would be possible to truly define what love was, at least within the limited scope of James Baldwin's work, but in fairness I do not think I succeeded, or rather, I think I learned, in the process, that I was asking my object of analysis the wrong question. Baldwin, it could be argued, rightfully never gave a final, definitive definition of what love was for him. This is, most likely, because a concept such as love cannot possibly be pinned down, and, on the contrary, it can only be a powerful concept exactly because it shuns clear-cut definitions. What Baldwin and my research have shown me, and hopefully my readers, is that love more than "being," "does." Therefore, the most accurate question to be answered by this thesis is not so much what love is, but rather what love does. The thesis questions I reportedly set to answer within this research work then, notably to define Baldwin's Ethics of Love and its application in the author's earlier novels, have, in sum, been answered phenomenologically rather than ontologically. Love, as claimed by popular culture, is most often understood in strictly sentimental terms, as an attachment that someone either feels or does not, therefore as something that can either exist or does not. In Christian terms, love is understood as the obligation towards God in its translation towards one's relationship towards other beings, with no exceptions, therefore love must, simply, exist. Baldwin's understanding of love, while not questioning its existence per se, questions how exactly one can love, or how one can fail to love, and opens up to the possibility of various forms and nuances of love that are not sustained by popular or religious culture. Baldwin's understanding of love as something that can exist in various forms and intensities, as something that continuously evolves rather than something that simply exists immanently and, most importantly, as something that surfaces most virulently exactly when it is negated, are all, arguably, ways that we all, at some point, might have recognized love, experientially. In a way, Baldwin's merit, in conceptualizing love, is exactly to have been able to put his extremely rich experiences into words. Perhaps, in a sense, that is the merit of all great theory: the ability to voice in more universal terms what is intimately felt as true.

In general terms, Baldwin's Ethics of Love, this work has striven to show, works in two directions: firstly, it works to invalidate hate's effectiveness as an emotive response, whilst recognizing its importance and, to a certain degree justifying it; secondly, it works to show how love should function as a fundamental bearing of responsibility in the Other's

regards, an action which is understood not as merely sentimental, but rather as a complex balance of pleasure and pain. In overcoming hate and turning to love, as Baldwin's Ethics of Love goes to show, it is fundamental to gain familiarity with and awareness of one's own identity and boundaries. In this sense, Baldwinian love is to be understood as a force that, while originating within the subject, requires the fundamental condition of relation: there can be no love without contact with the Other, and one becomes aware of oneself only when he or she has sought and accepted his or her closeness to the Other. Situating Baldwin's ideas within their specific context, Baldwin maintains that in order not only to thrive, but also, most simply, to survive, the black American subject must forsake the image that white America has forged of him, "the nigger." Starting from the example of Richard Wright's character Bigger Thomas, this image is to be understood as the internalization of white supremacy into a self-hating personal perception. Such an internalization fractures not only one's own perception of oneself but also, just as importantly, one's relation to one's own community and to others most generally. Baldwin sees reflected in the fictional figure of Bigger Thomas the most blatant representation of the destructiveness of hate: while the author clearly understands and justifies such a reaction, he sees as necessary what he calls a "paradoxical adjustment" (*Notes*, 43) and later a "gimmick" (*Fire*, 29). Rather than being consumed by hate, Baldwin's Ethics of Love requires not so much an acceptance as much as an active overcoming of hate.

For the author the "gimmick" came in the form of religion, which allowed him to find a sense of community and a guiding philosophy. During the author's time as a Baptist preacher, he came to realize that the religious duty to love everyone indistinctly was twisted by the reality of race relations in the USA: black worshippers did not truly feel a duty to love white people and the opposite was also, quite obviously, true. A vital moment in the definition of the Ethics of Love is therefore the rejection of religion in favor of a personal adherence to the values of universal love of the scriptures. If God asks his or her believers to love everyone, then Baldwin believes we have a duty, collectively, to truly engage with everybody, blacks with whites and whites with blacks. Baldwin's Ethics of Love though, differently from Christian understandings of love, does not imply that hate or anger are wrong, rather, it implies they are unproductive, and that to truly live together Americans need each other. Starting from this dangerous and complex love, Baldwin calls for "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" to act "like lovers" to "insist on, or create, the consciousness of others" in order to effect change in the country (Baldwin, *Fire* 89). This is perhaps the central structuring call of Baldwin's Ethics of Love,

as well as the passage which lends the title to this very thesis, the idea that to mend, but, importantly not to forget or erase, broken racial relations we must act "as lovers." In proposing that we act as lovers, Baldwin is implying a clear erotic overtone to the engagement that must take place between whites and blacks, which is ultimately where his Ethics of Love departs most clearly from Christian faith. Overcoming the sexual anxiety inherent in puritanism, which would see love as purely moral, Baldwin frames love within the human body, which stands not as a site of depravity but as a site of liberation, where categories of gender, sex and race meet in their naked truth. In understanding love as erotic, Baldwin's thought meets Audre Lorde's, who had also explored the value of eros in *Sister Outsider*, and, just like Baldwin, understood the physical reality of the touching of bodies as the most potent way to create bridges between experiences.

Baldwin's Ethics of Love, is, following his thought, political exactly because it is deeply entangled with the personal. This is exactly what prompted Hannah Arendt to criticize Baldwin' *The Fire Next Time*, claiming that love, if understood as political, could only be considered as a corruptible force. Indeed, in Arendt's philosophy, love, understood within Christian terms, is part of the Private Realm, and, by definition, is no longer love once it is made public. In this sense then, Arendt would see, as a more valid political force, the desire to build something lasting, and therefore a desire of glory, rather than love. Baldwin, on the contrary, clearly saw love as a force that, starting from the private, must and can withstand the trials of the public realm and, therefore, a force that can create community rather than isolation. Indeed, love was part of the political discourse of 50s and 60s USA because another notable figure, Martin Luther King, made it part of his political agenda. A Baptist minister, King's love, much more than Baldwin's, is fundamentally asymmetrical and demands forgiveness even for those who would hurt you, which is where his Christianity met Gandhi's nonviolence. In opposition to this nonviolent approach based on Christian love, Malcolm X accused King of being an Uncle Tom and saw the necessity and even perhaps a duty to anger and violent reaction. As compared to King, Baldwin's love was much more unforgiving and gave much more room and justification to anger, and was also fundamentally erotic in nature, but as opposed to Malcom X's view of the present and future, Baldwin also fundamentally believed that Americans deeply needed each other and could not possibly separate or commit further violence towards each other. On this point, Baldwin's Ethics of Love is also fundamentally opposed to Frantz Fanon's theory of the necessity of a violent revolution, as expressed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Whereas the two authors see eye to eye in outlining a black double consciousness and the underlying

conditions of their existence, they see the resolution to the race problem that they describe in opposite terms. The first chapter of this thesis worked, therefore, to pinpoint the main movements of Baldwin's Ethics of Love, and, having shown a particular potential for an analysis of such an Ethics into action, the remainder of this thesis proposed an analysis of Baldwin's fiction works though the frame of his Ethics of Love. The premise of such an analysis is that, in building fictional worlds that are closely linked to his own lived experience, Baldwin mediates his Ethics of Love through his characters, therefore showing what such a guiding philosophy might result in.

The second chapter of this thesis proposed an analysis of Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953. Briefly, the novel follows the story of protagonist John, a black boy of fourteen, as he experiences a mystical experience of conversion on the threshing floor of his church. The novel provides extensive flashbacks into the lives of his relatives, his father Gabriel, his mother Elizabeth, and his aunt Florence and builds up an intricate world around John, who remains unaware of the lives that had led up to the moment of his conversion. The main body of the analysis has rested on the four main characters and notably on the idea that, while John's relatives serve to prove the multiple ways in which love can fail, and hate triumph, John himself, arguably a fictional double of Baldwin, shows instead how the triumph of love, in this case self-love, constitutes the only viable solution to not only survive, but also to find solace and liberation. The novel is set in a 1940s Harlem and the atmosphere is haunted by dirtiness both physical and moral. The novel has strong religious overtones, and the God it references is an Old Testament God, the God of the final judgment and not the Christ of forgiveness. John's father, Gabriel, metaphorically God's representative on earth, makes sure to uphold, within the family, a regime of fear and shame. John, while he is no stranger to this environment, which leads him to deny his physical, sexual desires, which would be the cause of his perdition, is also not entirely willing to truly believe in the inherent evil of himself and his body; rather John is curious and is therefore willing and ready to rebel to his father's and God's authority.

Within this oppressive context, Baldwin then takes the reader to the multilayered past of John's relatives. Florence, John's aunt and Gabriel's sister, is an old woman who knows she is close to the ending of her life, and she is, therefore, terribly scared of death. Not having been religious for most of her life, the novel finds her kneeling on God's altar, but her heart is clouded by hate for her brother and by a totalizing quest for revenge in his regards. An exploration of her past life shows how Florence hates her brother so strongly because their mother's sole focus on him had hindered her own self-development and self-

acceptance, and therefore she had spent her life trying to prove that she was somebody, without ever being able to convince the most important person, herself. Her hate for Gabriel does, nonetheless, make her the only character who can stand up to the overbearing man. Gabriel is shown over and over as a character who is incapable of listening, most importantly to God's message, which he constantly misinterprets, and that often stands as an ironic commentary on the character's behavior. Gabriel tends to take God's supposed predilection for him as justification for his thirst for power and for his righteous and imposing attitude. At the same time though, Gabriel's demeanor is also acutely informed by fear: the fear that the vengeful God he preaches cannot truly have forgiven him for his unholy early life and for the rejection of his illegitimate son. His fear of God is mostly exposed by his inability to form a "royal" line of God-chosen male children, since his own biological male children tend to be faithless and flighty. Therefore, when John, and not any of his biological children, is the most saintly and devout young boy of the household, Gabriel must perceive him as the most obvious contradiction to his reading of God's signs, and, finally, as the sign that he has not truly been forgiven or saved. Gabriel's inability to love himself enough to believe that he has been saved makes it impossible for him to love anyone else and determines the mistreatment of his family. Elizabeth, Gabriel's wife, is shown as a woman who is fundamentally unable to stand her ground. Though she loves John deeply she is unable to defend him from Gabriel's abuse, and it is, rather, Florence who is more combatively active in defending him. Elizabeth's flashback takes the reader back to the woman's childhood, with the loss of her mother first and the loss of her father later as an aunt teared her off from him on grounds of her father's unrespectability. The flashback continues with her upbringing in a strictly religious household and with her own love rebellion through Richard, a young man who led her to New York and left her, unknowingly, upon his suicide, pregnant and alone. While the woman never exhibits guilt over her love for Richard, or her past ways of life, she most certainly feels regret. Elizabeth is unable to live steadfastly in her own convictions, but rather she lets social forces and pressure lead her to forsake the love she knows, in the deepest parts of herself, to be the only truth in her life. For Elizabeth, therefore, love fails because of a lack of courage, therefore showing how love is not an easy or obvious choice.

John's conversion takes place on the threshing floor, which symbolically points to a place where a separation of sorts takes place: where grains are separated from chaff, John leaves behind hate to find the source of love within himself. If John's experience on the threshing floor starts as a rebellion towards God and his father, the actual mystical journey

he partakes in is a journey of unpredicted intensity, that is effective exactly because it turns into an act of self-discovery rather than a single-minded rebellion. In the self-discovery John undertakes, he is able to do exactly what his relatives where not able to do: he was able to let go of hate and face his fear, with courage. At the apex of his conversion, John is able to see how light and darkness are not fundamentally opposed but rather are part of each other, and in this realization comes an essential self-acceptance. After his conversion, John's life is not miraculously changed for the better, but the ending of the novel rather suggests that John will have to learn how to live with what he has learned about himself on the threshing floor and keep choosing to love every single day. The ending of the novel, therefore, rather than providing a solution to the conditions of black life in America, proposes a different way of responding to them. In this sense then, connecting John's ending to Baldwin's real life, it is interesting to note that the author himself had to find different outlets to receive the love and acceptance, that his father was unable to provide, in different black male figures that populated his life. These figures could be understood as otherfathers, as a spin on Patricia Hill Collins conception of othermothers as female figures who take responsibility for the physical and psychological growth of children that are not biologically related to them. Beauford Delaney encouraged Baldwin to pursue his art and showed him, with his own life, that a black man could aspire to live of his art, and Richard Wright not only set a literary precedent against which Baldwin would later rebel, but also allowed the material conditions that kickstarted Baldwin's career.

The second and final novel that was analyzed within the framework of Baldwin's Ethics of Love is the author's third novel: *Another Country*, published in 1962. Briefly, the novel follows a group of friends in 1950s New York, namely it first portrays the tragic suicide of Rufus, a young black musician, after a failed relationship with a white Southern woman, Leona, and then follows the reaction to his suicide by his friends and family. Rufus's best friend Vivaldo starts a relationship with Rufus's sister Ida, who cheats on him and mistreats him; Rufus's friend and former lover Eric comes back to the USA from France and starts an affair with Cass, who is in a deep marital crisis following the publication of her husband Richard's first novel; Eric himself finally decides to stay in his homosexual relationship with French man Yves. The analysis of this novel has been built on the novel's main couples to show how they are either able or unable to overcome racial and sexual innocence. With racial innocence this chapter has referred to Baldwin's observation, as expressed within *The Fire Next Time*, that white Americans make an active effort to ignore and deny the racial divide. With sexual innocence then, the third chapter

has referred to the active effort to ignore and deny unsanctioned sexual desires, such as interracial and homosexual desires. Where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had been built on an impressive structure of religious references and was narrated in a King James Bible voice, *Another Country* veers towards a blues sensibility, both as a final aspiration for the novel and as a structure of knowledge within the novel.

Rufus and Leona have a tense and violent relationship, which consumes both of them, finally leading her to lose reason and him to suicide. On Rufus's part, his sexual desire for Leona is not directed towards Leona herself, as an independently bodied and minded subject, but rather to the body of the white Southern woman. Rufus pours on Leona his hate for white people and by raping her, he is, in a sense, avenging himself on the white man through the body of the white woman. Rufus's violent desire for the white female body functions in similar ways to Eldridge Cleaver's desire, as expressed in his work *Soul on Ice*. On Leona's part, while it is made clear that she is no stranger to racial innocence, as she tries to appease Rufus by denying the importance of skin color, she is also a victim of gender and sexual violence, and not only at the hands of Rufus. The novel, the third chapter has remarked, seems to have little to no interest in displaying sympathy for the oppressed white woman, whose pain must be somewhat erased in order for Rufus to be made into a sort of Christ figure, that, through the expression of his pain, leads the other characters to confront theirs. Following Rufus's suicide Vivaldo, mostly motivated by guilt over his inability to save Rufus, starts a relationship with Ida. His guilt, coupled with his fetishization of blackness, taint his relationship with Ida, who attacks and mistreats him, while Vivaldo is unable to defend himself. At the breaking point of his relationship with Ida, Vivaldo has a sexual encounter with his friend Eric, and through the encounter he is able to blur the bounds of his masculinity. In accepting his homosexual desire, Vivaldo is also finally able to accept, overcoming his racial innocence, his difficult feelings towards blackness, and towards Ida, that he had tried so hard to deny. At the same time, Ida is forced to admit that, though it pushes her to question her identity, she does indeed love Vivaldo and is therefore ready to confess her pain and anger to him. By the end of the novel, while the two have not reached any sort of happy ending, they have finally found a way to communicate and to get to know each other deeply, which the novel seems to point to as the possibility of finally loving each other fully. Eric, who plays such a major role in Vivaldo's transformation, is equally important for Cass, who through him is able to actively explore the bounds of herself. In a deep crisis with her husband, whom she perceives as untalented and unintelligent, Cass realizes that she has leaned on him too much and had

denied herself the possibility of exploring what she wanted to be like. Through the affair and the confession of her affair to Richard, Cass is finally willing to allow her husband to get to know her for who she really is. Finally, Eric himself is faced with the choice of turning to the safety of a heterosexual relationship with Cass or to stand by his male lover Yves, finally showing how sexual fluidity makes him free but also how deliberate positioning is a necessary act within the sexually fraught society that the novel is set within. Finally, *Another Country*, as a work, is read as an act of interracial sympathy, where the author tried to express the importance of sharing deeply the pain of others across bounds of identity. The act of feeling the Other's pain with them, my analysis has proposed, could be read through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas ethical face-to-face encounter. The act of love, as read through the facing of another's pain, is the fundamental act of taking responsibility for another being, by recognizing their pain through bodily contact. The novel's action is set off through the facing of Rufus's pain, a pain which is able to change those around him exactly because, through it, they learn how to love.

This work has analyzed Baldwin's early works through the frame of the Ethics of Love and has reached a nuanced vision of what love can do in social settings and how it can be a political force for good. The political turn in Baldwin's scholarship is a definite trend of the past few years, and this thesis proposes to give a contribution to such political readings by dissecting Baldwin's vision for the future of race relationships through the concept of love. This research has been ripe with stimulating reflections regarding how personal relationships, and especially human connection through sexual contact, can inform the way humans react to the present conditions of the world. In this sense, further exploration, starting from this thesis, would open up to a reading of relationships and sexual desires, and of course how these inform an Ethics, and politics, of Love, in coeval black male authors, such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright or, interestingly, to a comparison between the different ways sexual desire acts in works written by coeval black female authors such as Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison. The investigation of the way relationships and sexual desire shape politics is an object of research that will always provide new questions as much as it will provide new answers, exactly because the political will keep being informed by the personal and vice versa.

Summary

Nella presente tesi si propone che James Baldwin abbia elaborato, nel corso della sua carriera, un'Etica dell'Amore. Con la parola "etica" si intende indicare, seguendo il dizionario Merriam Webster, una “guiding philosophy,” ossia una serie di norme alla guida del senso morale della persona, che, nel caso di Baldwin, trovano risposta nell’amore. Questo è un tema ricorrente nelle opere di Baldwin che, in effetti, ha cercato ripetutamente, nelle sue numerose opere di narrativa e saggistica, di stabilire come sia possibile amare persino coloro che ti portano odio. Questa tesi, dunque, si rivolge alle opere di Baldwin non solo per analizzarne il valore letterario, ma anche in termini filosofici e culturali, per vagliare il tipo di domande che l'autore ha sollevato sulla vita umana, sulla comunità e sulle relazioni. In particolare, questa tesi si propone di affrontare le seguenti domande: Quali sono le caratteristiche dell'Etica dell'Amore di Baldwin? Come viene interpretata l'Etica dell'Amore di Baldwin nelle opere di narrativa dell’autore stesso? Considerando l'incredibile quantità di scritti prodotti dall'autore e l’evoluzione del suo pensiero nel corso della carriera, lo scopo di questa tesi è di analizzare, in particolare, le prime opere di Baldwin, specialmente quelle pubblicate tra il 1955 e il 1963. Nonostante il periodo di produzione letteraria specifico che questa tesi si propone di analizzare, si fa riferimento, occasionalmente, a opere, articoli e interviste rilasciate dall'autore in anni successivi. Questa tesi propone dunque un primo capitolo che analizza e definisce i momenti principali dell’Etica dell’Amore, in particolare attraverso le raccolte di saggi *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) e *The Fire Next Time* (1963)[17]. Successivamente, attraverso le osservazioni formulate nel primo capitolo, propone l’analisi di due opere di narrativa dell’autore: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1955) e *Another Country* (1962)[18].

Il presente lavoro di tesi si colloca all'intersezione tra gli studi letterari e gli studi afroamericani. Si tratta di un'intersezione particolarmente ricca per esplorare la complessa produzione degli afro-discendenti in Nord America, che permette anche di ampliare la ricerca verso altre aree di studio correlate, come gli studi culturali e la filosofia. In particolare, questa tesi propone una riflessione di tipo filosofico-culturale sulla saggistica di Baldwin per produrre una cornice interpretativa che sarà utilizzata per poi indagare le

[17] I titoli delle raccolte sono stati tradotti in italiano rispettivamente come *Il mondo non è più bianco* e *La prossima volta il fuoco*.
[18] I titoli dei romanzi sono stati tradotti in italiano rispettivamente come *Gridalo forte* e *Un altro mondo*.

opere di narrativa dell'autore stesso. La scelta di lavorare sulla letteratura afroamericana non è dovuta solo alla vasta sperimentazione del genere con diverse modalità espressive, ma anche e soprattutto all'abbondanza e alla profondità di idee sociali e filosofiche che queste opere forniscono.

Il primo capitolo di questa tesi si propone di delineare l'Etica dell'Amore di Baldwin, attraverso l'analisi dei suoi scritti e il confronto con altre figure politiche e accademiche coeve. In primo luogo, il lavoro si propone di stabilire perché l'amore sia un argomento di discussione rilevante nel trattare questioni politiche e sociali passate e presenti. Prendendo come punto di partenza la promozione di Baldwin a padre fondatore e precursore di Black Lives Matter, si illustra come i movimenti sociali e politici contemporanei condividano la risposta di Baldwin all'oppressione razziale, sessuale e di genere all'interno di un'Etica dell'Amore, rendendo quindi rilevante un'indagine sul significato più profondo dell'amore. Per creare un lessico comune per un'analisi incentrata sui vari significati attribuiti all'amore, il primo capitolo definisce, prima di tutto, i concetti greci di amore: *eros*, *philia* e *agape*. Partendo da questi concetti di base, l'Etica dell'Amore di Baldwin veiene definita, come stabilito in *Notes of a Native Son* e *The Fire Next Time*, attraverso due punti principali: il primo richiede il rifiuto dell'odio a favore della resistenza e della resilienza, da trovarsi attraverso l'amore; il secondo punto richiede lo sforzo cosciente e continuo di accettare il dovere di amare il prossimo, assumendo dunque una responsabilità, a volte dolorosa, verso tutti gli esseri umani, a prescindere dalle loro specifiche categorie identitarie. L'amore nei termini di Baldwin, come si spiega in una sezione successiva, non ha solo elementi di *philia* e *agape* ma ha anche rilevanti elementi di *eros*. L'amore di Baldwin richiede un coinvolgimento fisico e viscerale per consentire la rottura di opposizioni binarie di stampo epistemologico strettamente occidentale, per ottenere un vero e proprio ingresso nella pelle dell'altro. Nel comprendere l'amore come erotico, questo capitolo si riferisce anche alla comprensione di Audre Lorde dell'amore erotico come necessario per creare un tipo di immanenza fisica che a sua volta porterà all'azione personale e politica. Di seguito a questa analisi, il primo capitolo esplora la possibilità che l'amore possa essere effettivamente considerato una forza politica, contrapponendo il pensiero di Baldwin alla rigida separazione tra pubblico e privato di Hannah Arendt. Mentre Arendt vedeva l'amore come un tipo di emozione che può esistere solo quando è privata e che, per definizione, si corrompe quando viene resa pubblica, Baldwin credeva che l'amore potesse essere reale solo nella comunione delle persone, rendendolo, quindi, una forza creatrice di comunità piuttosto che di isolamento. Avendo

stabilito il potenziale politico dell'amore, si passerà a considerare l'amore come interpretato da Martin Luther King e Malcolm X, entrambi conosciuti personalmente da Baldwin e impegnati nella lotta per i diritti civili. Questa sezione colloca Baldwin a metà di uno ideale spettro del concetto di amore tra King e Malcom X e mostrerà infine come entrambe le figure abbiano teso verso il centro di tale spettro verso la fine della loro vita. La sezione finale del capitolo esplora le somiglianze e le differenze tra i concetti di liberazione di Baldwin e di Frantz Fanon. In particolare, l'Etica dell'amore di Baldwin viene confrontata con la concezione di Fanon della violenza come necessaria in un rovesciamento delle relazioni razziali.

Il secondo capitolo della tesi propone un'analisi del primo romanzo di Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, incentrata sul tema della ribellione contro le figure paterne, intese come Dio e padre, in carne ed ossa. In primo luogo, viene esaminato il contesto religioso in cui è ambientato il romanzo: da una parte l'angoscia creata da un Dio vendicativo, ispirato al Vecchio Testamento, trasforma i desideri sessuali dei personaggi in sporcizia fisica e morale, dall'altra, Dio, immaginato come bianco, rende fondamentalmente impossibile lo sviluppo di un sano amor proprio per i soggetti di pelle nera. Dopo aver definito la cornice in cui si svolge l'azione del romanzo, viene proposta un'analisi approfondita dei quattro personaggi principali del romanzo. Il personaggio di Florence mette in luce il fallimento dell'amore nell'odio, che consuma la donna e la porta a vivere la sua vita in cerca di vendetta. Il personaggio di Gabriel evidenzia il fallimento dell'amore nell'ipocrisia e negli eccessi dell'ego, che vengono infine interpretati come espressione di paura. Il personaggio di Elizabeth evidenzia il fallimento dell'amore nella mancanza di una presa di posizione coraggiosa di fronte alla possibilità reale dell'amore stesso, che porta la donna a rimpiangere le sue scelte. Infine, il personaggio di John, il protagonista, permetterà all'autore di mostrare come, nonostante una storia familiare di fallimenti dell'amore, un giovane ragazzo nero possa ribellarsi all'odio e alla vendetta e amare profondamente sé stesso, ponendo così fine al ciclo di dolore in cui è avvolta la sua famiglia. La sezione finale del capitolo si sposta a considerare la ribellione personale di Baldwin alla figura paterna, per trovare l'amore in figure paterne alternative, che possono essere intese come *otherfathers*, in una rielaborazione del concetto di *othermother* di Patricia Hill Collins.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo di questa tesi si concentrerà sul terzo romanzo pubblicato da Baldwin, *Another Country*, la cui analisi sarà incentrata, in particolare, su come i desideri sessuali taboo, sia omosessuali che interrazziali, servano come esperienze necessarie a

spingere i personaggi a superare la loro innocenza razziale e sessuale. Questo capitolo si articola intorno alle quattro coppie principali del romanzo e analizza le relazioni sentimentali come modalità principale di impegno personale e comunitario. Partendo dalla coppia interrazziale composta da Leona e Rufus, questa sezione esplora nozioni di mascolinità nera e nazionalismo nero e la feticizzazione della figura femminile bianca nella lotta per la supremazia maschile. Passando alla seconda coppia interrazziale del romanzo, Vivaldo e Ida, vengono esplorate nozioni di mascolinità bianca e si inquadra l'accettazione del desiderio omosessuale come un'azione vitale per aprirsi all'esperienza dell'amore, che richiede, appunto, il superamento dell'innocenza razziale e sessuale. Per la coppia composta da Cass e Richard, si osserva come la sicurezza data dell'eteronormatività bianca agisca da scudo alla possibilità di una reale conoscenza reciproca nella coppia e quindi la necessità per Cass di tradire tale sicurezza avendo una relazione con Eric, per permettere alla coppia di restare insieme. Infine, si osserva nella coppia di Eric e Yves, e soprattutto nel personaggio di Eric, l'espressione del sottile equilibrio tra fluidità sessuale e di genere e la scelta di posizionamento sociale attivo e consapevole. Questo romanzo, infine, sottolinea come, per amare, si debba prima di tutto simpatizzare con il dolore dell'altro, ovvero imparare a farsi carico del dolore dell'altro. Pertanto, seguendo la concettualizzazione del filosofo Emmanuel Levinas del Volto etico, il terzo capitolo sostiene che la compassione interrazziale sia un atto necessario di assunzione di responsabilità verso il prossimo.

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