James Baldwin's Visions of Racial Issues in America

Pletikosa, Petra

ODSJEK ZA ANGLISTIKU

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

DIPLOMSKI RAD

JAMES BALDWIN'S VISIONS OF RACIAL ISSUES IN AMERICA

(Smjer: književno-kulturološki, amerikanistika)

Kandidatkinja: Petra Pletikosa

Mentorica: prof. dr. sc. Jelena Šesnić

Ak. godina: 2023./2024.

Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

Izjavljujem i svojim potpisom potvrđujem da je ovaj rad rezultat mog vlastitog rada koji se temelji na istraživanjima te objavljenoj i citiranoj literaturi. Izjavljujem da nijedan dio rada nije napisan na nedozvoljen način, odnosno da nije prepisan iz necitiranog rada, te da nijedan dio rada ne krši bilo čija autorska prava. Također izjavljujem da nijedan dio rada nije korišten za bilo koji drugi rad u bilo kojoj drugoj visokoškolskoj, znanstvenoj ili obrazovnoj ustanovi.

Zagreb, 24.7.2024.
(mjesto i datum)

Petra Pletikosa
(potpis)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

James Baldwin was a prolific fiction writer, essayist, playwright, and activist whose writings on racial issues of 20th-century America turned him into one of the most important figures and voices in the fight for the civil rights of African-Americans. Born and raised in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City mainly populated by Black people and once home to a cultural movement known as "Harlem Renaissance," Baldwin witnessed directly the difficulties of his community, such as issues with housing, employment, low income, criminal activities and a lack of safety. Deeply disturbed and filled with rage by enduring dehumanization as a person of color in America, Baldwin moved to and spent a significant time of his life in France which affected his views on race and identity although he felt prompted to return to his homeland to actively participate in the fight that he believed would make the United States of America a better place for the lives of African-Americans. His work also reflects his efforts to find a place in his own country which sees him as inferior in comparison to his white compatriots.

Baldwin wrote: "I don't think anyone can doubt that in this country today we are menaced – intolerably menaced – by a lack of vision" (*The Price* 331), and certainly, Baldwin's visions of racial tensions in America described in his essays provide an opportunity to analyze what is at the core of these issues. Looking at the social criticism that weaves through the essays this paper will focus on – from *Notes of the Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963) to his later works such as *A Rap on Race* (1971) co-authored by an anthropologist Margaret Mead and *The Price of the Ticket* (1985) – one can assess how the country dealt and is dealing with longstanding racial issues engrained in American society. *Notes of A Native Son*, a collection of ten essays divided into three parts is Baldwin's first essay collection that was written during the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Evoking Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* in its title, the collection presents certain events in Baldwin's life that left a deep impression on him as a person of color in America while it also analyses the dynamics of the relationship between black and white people.

Nobody Knows My Name, written as a follow-up to *Notes of a Native Son,* contains an exploration of his position as a writer in turbulent times and examines the question of color and how it partakes in people's identity formation. *The Fire Next Time*, perhaps the most popular non-fiction work of Baldwin's, originally published in *The New York Times,* contains two

essays. The first essay is a letter to Baldwin's nephew written on the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. *A Rap on Race,* a 1971 book that is a transcript of an almost eight-hour-long conversation that happened over the course of two days between James Baldwin and anthropologist Margaret Mead contains an exchange of their thoughts, underpinned by their distinct life experiences.

In Baldwin's unraveling of the American past and problems that have long troubled the country and continue to do so, one can see the effects of racism that denies Black Americans equal opportunities at the educational level and produces various disparities in employment, income, etc. Historical practices such as slavery and segregation have had enduring effects on the American society and the status of African-Americans in it, and Baldwin's work calls to address the ways in which African-Americans have been treated throughout history because of a belief in one race's superiority over another. Various elements participate in the creation of racial tensions in America and Baldwin, through his essays, enables us to envision a different America, one that could exist if barriers placed in front of people of color were removed by the nation's willingness to identify and change their long-engrained beliefs and actions. Since Baldwin's time and the Civil Rights Movement, the United States has challenged discriminatory practices when it comes to race and significant changes have taken place, but we can still find James Baldwin's words relevant and this year's 100th anniversary of Baldwin's birth offers an opportunity to revisit his thoughts and to see how far African-American fight for civil rights came.

In this paper, I put forward the argument that Baldwin's essays present a vision of America as a homogenous nation that can be achieved depending on the responsibility of Americans to examine their country's history and deeply rooted beliefs that cause racial division and inequality. Firstly, I analyze Baldwin's relationship to Harlem and his father, that is, how his early life affected his worldviews. In Harlem, he witnessed the ghetto life as he observed the detrimental effect of racial prejudices and the narrow worldview that they produce. In addition to this, Harlem was the place where he started to preach as a young minister, and it was there he formed his early opinions on the Church and its role in the lives of young Black Americans. The second part of the thesis is concerned with Baldwin's expatriation, the meaning of American identity, and the historical segments that unite Black and white Americans as America's interracial history disrupts the racial categories the country clings to. Furthermore, I will look at Baldwin's participation in the Civil Rights Movement and his emphasis on the psychological effect segregation had on the people in the South. Thirdly, I analyze the role of

African-American protest literature and Baldwin's position as a protest essayist by looking at his criticism of protest novels and their failure to convey a more nuanced representation of the African-American experience, followed by a discussion of whether all African-American literature ought to be considered a form of social protest.

II. LIFE IN HARLEM

James Baldwin dedicated a substantial amount of his writings to Harlem, a place where he was born and raised and a place that ultimately shaped him as a young person. Therefore, Harlem plays an important part in the formation of Baldwin's identity and perspective regarding African-American issues. Talking about the main formative influences in his literary career, Baldwin puts forward three entities: his father, the Church, and Charles Dickens (Dudley 2). William Weatherby notes that even though he left Harlem at eighteen, he is permanently embedded in Harlem through his authorship and is Harlem's "faithful literary son". Highlighting the unbreakable bond between Harlem and Baldwin, Weatherby notes that Baldwin is to Harlem what Dickens was to London (3). Baldwin was fascinated by Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* as a child while the image of the world the opening lines paint can be relevant to both Dickens' and Baldwin's time. Both writers shared an interest in the "alienation of the human condition" along with private and public history which became observed through two polarities: tyranny and freedom (Dudley 18). In *A Rap on Race*, Baldwin makes an assertion that confirms his permanent connection to Harlem, telling Margaret Mead that even thirty years after his departure there is a way in which he never left Harlem although he cannot return there because Harlem has changed so much since his departure. Harlem of his childhood no longer exists, and his life experience changed him so much that he feels he could no longer fit in there completely (41). The rest of this chapter will examine the role of the first two aforementioned influences – his father and the Church – as the two are integral to Baldwin's conceptualization of the world and his place in it as a person of color.

In the "Notes of a Native Son" essay, Baldwin juxtaposes events of his personal life with social changes concerning racial tensions happening on the national level and around him. Specifically, he interweaves the story of his youth spent in New York City with an examination of racial issues arising in his surroundings. Baldwin puts the complicated relationship with his father at the forefront of this essay and through this relationship, he demonstrates the inner rage that acts like a poison and is detrimental to the human spirit. Horace Porter, in his analysis of the significance of the "Notes of a Native Son" essay, argues that the essay's

> ...central theme is the complex legacy his father left him. The son – reflective and troubled – must ponder perpetually the self-destructive black rage and bitterness fueled in his father and then in himself by the prejudice of white Americans. Baldwin examines the capricious nature of the black rage he feels, an anger simultaneously personal and

> collective. His experience is, of course, specific but it is hardly unique; every black American is somehow victimized by racial prejudice. (25)

Through the examination of his father's life and the bitterness and rage he lived with, Baldwin also examines the harmful effects of being absorbed by racial differences. Essentially, Baldwin ruminates on a life lived dealing with racial prejudice which is damaging to human beings, and at the same time, he is aware of the possibility that his life might turn out the same. This fear is justified, as he already experienced a surge of this same rage when white people refused to serve him in restaurants: "And I felt, like a physical sensation, a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut...I don't know what was going on in my mind, either; I certainly had no conscious plan. I wanted to do something to crush these white faces that were crushing me" (*Notes* 97). These kinds of incidents strongly affected him, evoking a bodily reaction and prompting him to act on such negative emotions.

The description of his father's life and behavior toward him and other people offers a chance to analyze how he affected Baldwin's worldviews and relationship with white people. Baldwin describes interactions with his young white school teacher who took him to see plays, gave him books to read, and offered her help during a difficult time for their family, but his father was extremely distrustful of her because she was white: "...he became more explicit and warned me...how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down...none of them were to be trusted and most of them were not even nice. The best thing was to have as little to do with them as possible. I did not feel this way..." (*Notes* 94). Resentment, hostility, and mistrust consumed his father throughout his life as he struggled physically and mentally, affecting his ability to connect with his family and other people (not many people came to his funeral). Observing how this hatred ruined his father, Baldwin fears the same thing might happen to him. This is where the concept of intergenerational trauma comes forth - his father's case is not an isolated one, it is a collective experience shared by African – Americans throughout the country. Baldwin previously mentions how his father's mother was born during slavery and his father was among the first generation of free men. He is aware of this burden that is passed on from his ancestors and of all the disadvantages he will have to face as an African-American. This is what Ron Eyerman describes as the notion of cultural trauma – he mentions the enduring impact of slavery as a memory that is passed on from generation to generation and has a profound effect on how one builds their identity. The memory of slavery affects and is shared by most African-Americans; even if slavery does not have to be directly experienced, it plays a significant role in producing a shared, collective fate through which African-Americans identify

themselves. There is another layer to it, as it also provides a form of unity, with each generation using slavery as a collective memory and reinterpreting it according to the challenges of their own time (15).

His father's funeral was held five days after his death, on the 3rd of August 1943 which was the day a race riot broke out in Harlem (*Notes* 87). A physical change that Baldwin notices in Harlem as a consequence of a race riot can be seen as an externalization of rage that consumed African-Americans as they dealt with daily discrimination, segregation, and oppression. Looking at Harlem as the funeral procession passes through demolished streets appears to be symbolic; the father's life full of bitterness and distrust came to its end, but at the same time, the consequences of that inner turmoil can now be seen on the streets of Harlem. Baldwin recognizes the destructive force of race riots, and the display of this anger brings only more damage, primarily to the African-Americans:

> That bleakly memorable morning I hated the unbelievable streets and the Negroes and whites who had equally made them that way. But I knew it was folly...this bitterness was folly. It was necessary to hold onto things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction. Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law. (*Notes* 114)

Baldwin recognizes that the blame for this state is on both Black and white people while he also highlights the senselessness of hatred and the way it can consume a person – something superficial such as skin color should not be a cause for people to stand against each other.

In "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin vividly describes the contours of this New York City neighborhood as he remembers it, presenting it as a decaying, suffocating place: "All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut" (*Notes* 59). In the same tone, Baldwin reflects on the Harlem he grew up in, describing its hostile and difficult conditions in "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem." Furthermore, Baldwin distinguishes between two kinds of people living in the Harlem ghetto: those who stay in the ghetto and those who manage to get out. Some people who stay appear to have given up on building any kind of a meaningful life while some work all day in a setting that is depriving them of dignity as they face inhumanity on every step. This is not to say that white people do not struggle, which only proves the failure of America as a country. Baldwin

insinuates that getting out of the ghetto is difficult - even if one escapes, one only gets "as far as a more respectable ghetto" but "it is not in the nature of any ghetto to remain respectable long" (*Nobody* 62). Pratt argues that exactly this kind of surrounding made Baldwin understand that he either has to escape it, or he will be overtaken by it which will ultimately result in the abandonment of the search for his identity (15). Baldwin is critical of the role of the police who are going around Harlem in groups as he considers that their role is purely oppressive and that they are installed by white people to control Black people. This kind of oppressiveness and maltreatment is what keeps Black people in the ghetto and perpetuates the hatred and the kind of life in such unfavorable circumstances. Baldwin concludes that the treatment of Black people must be changed in order to overcome these struggles.

2.1. BALDWIN'S RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

In addition to the description of the Harlem street riots, Baldwin touches upon various themes in "The Harlem Ghetto", from describing police presence and violence in Harlem to the meaning of being a Black leader in America, but he also comments on Harlem's religious dimension, that is, a large number of churches in Harlem. He explains how religion works from the point of view of the majority in Harlem, saying that here, people see religion as "a complete and exquisite fantasy revenge: white people own the earth and commit all manner of abomination and injustice on it; the bad will be punished and the good rewarded" and what can be heard in these churches are "sermons thinly coated with spirituality but designed mainly to illustrate the injustice of the white American and anticipate his certain and long overdue punishment" (*Notes* 67). Religion is seen as having a redemptive power, something that will amend all the racial injustice they have faced. In his critical study, Stanley Macebuh calls this inclination an "understandable temptation" and contends that their belief in the final salvation and freedom offers relief in the face of discrimination and social inequality they have to endure (30). Macebuh also adds that "the true strength of the Black church lay rather in the power of its metaphorical evocations than in any actual confrontation it may have had with white oppression" (30).

Concerning Baldwin's early life in Harlem, his direct involvement in the church as a young minister during adolescence is a crucial element of his life trajectory. For three years, Baldwin preached at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly Church, but after two years he realized he wanted to influence people in another way – through his writing. He ceased to see the church as his home - the church would protect him from the outside world, but in return, it would also fail to build his character and would shed his identity (Dudley 5). Certainly, his father's religious

background influenced him in his early years, although he gave up preaching and later on changed his religious outlook. He was fourteen when he underwent, what he called, "a prolonged religious crisis," which helped him understand the role of religion in the lives of Black people and also made him realize the dynamics of the white and Black people's relation within Christianity. Around the time of this religious crisis, Baldwin started to realize what truly interested him – writing. Marc K. Dudley also claims that this part of Baldwin's life had an enormous influence on his art which echoes sermons, scriptures, and religious zeal (5).

In the essay from the collection *The Fire Next Time* called "Down at The Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind", Baldwin thoroughly describes the relationship between church and racism and examines the failure of the church to provide people with messages of love and togetherness – instead, the church is culpable of further dividing black and white people. When he was a teenager, Baldwin thought that church equaled safety because he realized that such an institution could protect him from the terrifying things he witnessed on the streets of Harlem, that is, things he did not want to become or endure. Joining the church was a means of escape from the dangers of being a Black person but this proved to be ineffective as this escape was rooted in fear. Baldwin calls this escape to church "a gimmick" – something that one finds to be preoccupied with in order not to be imprisoned by the white people's system which defines Black people as less important or valuable, limiting their capabilities. The gimmick can be anything, and for a lot of people, it turns out to be related to criminal activities which terrified young Baldwin and made him turn to a career in the church (*The Fire* 35). He started to recognize the danger of growing up in Harlem and did not want to give in to those circumstances. The fact that young Black men in Harlem are presented with the church as the only means of surviving, much less accomplishing something in life shows just how limited their opportunities are. Baldwin also touches upon this subject in another essay from *The Fire Next Time* called "My Dungeon Shook" which is a letter written to his nephew who is also forced to grow up in the ghetto. In the letter, he is warning his nephew not to believe in the image set up by white America that portrays him as worthless. Baldwin denounces white people's belief in their innocence which sustains the limitations that Black people face. Calling it "the root of my dispute with my country," Baldwin recognizes the control white people hold over all domains of African-Americans' lives, as he claims that his nephew "faced the future [he] faced because [he] [was] black and *for no other reason*. The limits of [his] ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever" (*The Fire* 18-19). Jones sees the future of African-Americans unfolding in two ways: if an African-American person has certain ambitions, there are only a

few career paths one can take that will eventually lead him to compete with white people in those potential career fields which might lead to unpleasant situations. Or, an African-American can serve their Black community if they manage to obtain the necessary schooling (110). Baldwin chose the first option, but he initially retreated to the second option, seeing the church as a means to survive the ghetto.

One of the things that led Baldwin away from church is his inability to reconcile God's love and the subjugation of Black people: "And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?" (*The Fire* 41) Moreover, Baldwin witnesses a lack of love, not only between Black and white people but among Black people as well. This proves to him that the church is not what it claims to be – a true community. Instead, Christians are more divided than united, especially when it comes to the racial situation. Religion is seen not as a positive force, but as a generator of prejudice. Baldwin considers the failure of Christians (both black and white) and the church as they are governed by the wrong values – they are governed by "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror" (*The Fire* 42), and he would "love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity but this is clearly not the case for most Christians" (*The Fire* 42). He does not identify morality with the Christian church any longer – moreover, he believes that what is needed is a complete detachment from the church: "whoever wishes to become a truly moral being...must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian church" (*The Fire* 57). If one wants to see where the oppression comes from in the church, one needs to investigate history. Baldwin claims that the Bible was written by white men even though that is not strictly true. He looks into Christians' beliefs, one of them being that Black people are descendants of Ham and so it is their destiny to endure slavery and be mastered by the white people (*The Fire* 51). This indicates that he is setting apart biblical statements to buttress his argument even though the Bible is more complex when it comes to racial questions. Baldwin's insertion possibly points in the direction of criticizing instances when the Bible is interpreted in a way to maintain racial categories and to justify the oppression of African-Americans. Baldwin argues that "to accept one's past – one's history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (*The Fire* 89), so he advocates for the examination of history. For Black people, this might be unpleasant and traumatic but it is necessary to make use of it in order to create better circumstances in the present.

Baldwin questions what is at the core of Christianity, and that is love towards one another, no matter the race. Grant Farred argues that

> Baldwin approaches love, that mode of being in meaningful, tender relation to others to which he aspired his entire life, as saturated by race – the experience of discrimination that has its roots in slavery but continues to make itself manifest in postwar America – as he (felicitously) refuses to let race – his repeated encounters with subjugation, violence, and vulnerability, which derives from his blackness – be philosophically untouched by love. (289)

It seems conflicting to talk about love in the face of racial discrimination witnessed daily, but Baldwin does not let discrimination annihilate his view on love. He is led by that principle, and even though he failed to find it in the church community, he does not repudiate it but believes it can be achieved. Ultimately, Baldwin questions the meaning of God: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him" (*The Fire* 57). His account of the divisive nature of his church, fueled by the hatred for white people which further intensifies the race problem in America makes Baldwin consider how useful the concept of God is in the fight for the rights of African-Americans. What he witnessed in the church community defied what the church presents itself to be – if it is not promoting unity and love among people regardless of race, then its purpose is useless.

III. EXPATRIATION AND ITS AFTERMATH

James Baldwin is one of the numerous artists who were forced to leave their homes to fulfill their potential which was extinguished by the current political situation and oppressive system. His expatriation and distance from America provided him with a different perspective where he is able to outline a new model of the American national identity that recognizes the mutual heritage of blacks and whites, and at the same time, reinforces his American nationality. Baldwin first left America with only forty dollars in his pocket and went to Paris, France in 1948, when he was twenty-four years old, even though he initially felt reluctant to leave his family (Weatherby 62). In the essay "The New Lost Generation," Baldwin delves into a depiction of life in Paris for an American newcomer. Calling this essay a "sketch of Americans abroad," Baldwin also explores his reasons for leaving the United States. He begins his essay with a recollection of his best friend's death by suicide for which he blamed the American conditions. This event is what prompted him to leave America, and his decision was motivated by both fear and the instinct of survival (just like his previous decision to join the church) because Baldwin was certain that the same thing would happen to him if he stayed (*The Price* 307). In *A Rap on Race*, Baldwin expands on his reasons for leaving, saying that he felt that his beliefs could cost him his life. He could not hide what he thought and he "couldn't live in America on the assumptions by which I lived really ... I was in danger of thinking myself out of existence..." (40). Another important thing Baldwin mentions is that his compatriots, that is, his own country made him an exile: "...the fact is that I am an exile because I can't live in America under terms which Americans offer me my life" (*A Rap* 221). The conditions under which Black people lived in America proved to be unbearable for Baldwin, as he sought a different environment in which he would be accepted for who he was.

In "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," Baldwin analyses the dynamics of the relationship between black and white Americans when they interact abroad, in this case, in Paris. This encounter is considered awkward, as they are conditioned to view each other in a certain light - "The white American regards his darker brother through the distorting screen created by a lifetime of conditioning ... he is more than a little intimidated to find this stranger so many miles from home" (*Notes* 121). Removed from the American context, there is an unspoken tension in such interactions and racial differences are still present even though in France "the social climate does not encourage an outward display of racial bigotry" (*Notes* 121). There are no violent scenes, and whites do not intimidate Blacks as much as they do in America,

but there is no special community among Americans abroad. He also notes that the African-Americans in Paris do not stick together but deliberately tend to isolate themselves from their countrymen - in Baldwin's opinion, such a situation makes the American Negro in Paris the invisible man.

Additionally, Baldwin considers another aspect of racial issues considering France's colonialism and the presence of Africans in France. He claims that the African Negro is seen as a colonial, but their life in France is strikingly different from that of an African-American in two respects: the relationship to one's homeland and the relationship to his countrymen. Unlike an African-American who has no connection to their African heritage, an African is connected to their roots and "has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past" (*Notes* 124). Baldwin argues that this need to find a connection to one's past is essentially an American trait and that the "depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience" (*Notes* 125). When it comes to the relationship with their countrymen, there is a sense of belonging and acceptance with Africans, and they tend to stick together in foreign countries, unlike African-Americans. Baldwin returns to the notion of belonging in "A Question of Identity" where he examines the experience of American students living in Paris and their reasons for coming there. He describes the phenomenon of Americans who, after spending a certain amount of time in Paris, start to yearn for America because "the legend of Paris has done its deadly work, which is, perhaps, so to stun the traveler with freedom that he begins to long for the prison of home" (*Notes* 133). Speaking of white Americans, Baldwin asserts that they come to Paris with a preconceived image of the city which does not correspond to reality and, at the same time, they are unable to become fully integrated into Parisian society. They do not want to be treated as Americans, but Europeans cannot recognize them as being anything other than Americans (Miller 56). In discovering how one is similar or different to European ways, one uncovers the reasons for the sense of alienation and can get to know oneself and form one's identity, only if one has the courage not to shun away from the past. Being in another country offers a unique opportunity to see own's country in a different light and observe the differences between the two. According to Miller, what is also crucial is that white Americans recognize that they have more in common with black Americans and not with white Europeans as he argues that "black and white Americans need to recognize the common heritage if they wish to overcome the alienation that defines the American scene" (58). Both black and white Americans have to understand that to be united as a nation, they need to accept their shared past and the things they have in common. In "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin recounts

his experience when visiting a Swiss village and realizing he is the first black person the villagers ever saw - he is empathetic towards the villagers and understands that they mean no harm each time they express their astonishment when they see him, but the way they treat him still produces feelings of isolation and dehumanization in Baldwin. He grapples with the questions of his identity as a Black man while adjusting to villagers' reactions to him. Rob Waters argues that the seeming stability of villagers' identity is a consequence of the fact that they are sheltered from the modern world. Baldwin brought a dimension of modernity that villagers are not able to fully understand. Their presumed innocence contains an additional layer when Baldwin compares them to Africans who watched the arrival of conquerors, placing them in the "premodern phase" (723). This experience leads him back to the American situation as he realizes that he might be a stranger in this village, but he cannot be a stranger in America.

He engages in the discussion of what is at the core of white supremacy – he realizes that the concept was not invented by Americans, but that it came from Europe. What is behind this idea is that white people are considered the creators of civilization and so "it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men" (*Notes* 176). To secure their superior status, whites engage in various practices, and as Freeburg argues "...segregation, racial violence against blacks and other racist practices point to the whites' efforts to feel disconnected from blacks even when they may share local, familial, religious or other connections" (183). Baldwin also criticizes Americans for adhering to the "means of recovering the European innocence", that is, he criticizes them for their belief that somehow, in the attempt to preserve this status, it is possible to go back to a time when black people did not exist (*Notes* 178). Whereas African-Americans are displaced from their past, white Americans cling to the influence of Europe. Miller argues that the white American "must abandon his racially overdetermined self-image as a transplanted European and embrace a much more complex and inclusive national identity (63). This national identity becomes impossible to construct because "Americans maintain between themselves and black men a human separation which could not be bridged" (*Notes* 178).

To create a coherent American identity and unity as a nation, Baldwin contends that Black people cannot be and are not strangers in their own country. He believes that the formation of an American national identity where black and white people have the same rights will prove to be essential and will have an effect on the rest of the world. He wishes to highlight the place of the African-Americans as the citizens of the West and as full-fledged citizens of America. An event indicative of this is described in "Equal in Paris," when he was wrongly

arrested for stealing a hotel bedsheet and spent eight days in prison during Christmas time. He was recognized purely as an American by the French justice system. This incident was a disruption of his newfound freedom in Paris, a moment when he did not know how to act because "That evening in the commissariat I was not a despised black man... For them, I was an American. And here, it was they who had the advantage, for that word, *Américain*, gave them some idea … of what to expect from me" (*Notes* 148). Even though Baldwin describes this event as the lowest point in his life, this experience contributed to his sense of American nationality and provided material for contemplation about that subject. Dudley argues that the physical alienation he felt in prison "becomes the perfect metaphor for his spiritual alienation as an American in Paris, waiting for his condemnation or else his salvation... Baldwin initially sees his American-ness as that potential salvation" but in the end, he realizes that "he was and is not alone; though separated by class, by race, by language, by borders, he notes that he is bound to others by common suffering" (79). In the exploration of his estrangement, Baldwin realizes that despite all the differences, there will always be a component that unites people – in this case, that component is suffering, known to all human beings.

In "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," Baldwin shares his understanding of the reality of being an American writer in Europe and what his relationship to Europe as a writer entails for him to define himself as an American. He starts by asserting how his stay in Europe brings revelations about the complexity of being an American and once again clarifies his reason for leaving, but adds another dimension to the initial disposition: "I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them" (*Nobody* 4). Indeed, Baldwin's experience of Paris is underlined by various connections he makes with people of all classes, statuses, and races which alters his view of the world, as each person he meets brings a different kind of reality – this enables Baldwin to "reconsider many things he has taken for granted" (*Nobody* 9). One of the realizations he makes is how he was "as American as any Texas G.I." and how the lives of black and white Americans are interwoven but still separate as "Europe had formed us both, was part of our identity and part of our inheritance" (*Nobody* 5) – this leads Miller to conclude that "such difference can be preserved within a common nationality. Self-discovery promises to overcome the determinations of racial essence" (64). Moreover, these encounters abroad gave him what Lloyd Kramer calls "a new account of the inescapable 'hybridity' of the wider American culture." European and African cultures are related and these "cross-cultural connections" are a part of Baldwin and American society in general which is what he is finally

able to comprehend from a European setting (41). Once again highlighting the need for a more united nation, Kramer concludes that African-Americans' contributions to American culture produced "a distinctive, hybrid national identity. Although America's interracial historical experience had been marked by racism and painful conflicts, it had also given the United States a unique advantage in the emerging multicultural, postcolonial world of the twentieth century" (42). What Baldwin is trying to advocate is the unity of the Old World which has a "sense of the mysterious and inexorable limits of life" and the New World which has "a new sense of life's possibilities." The two complement each other in this way and it is the task of the writer to tie these two visions together (*Nobody* 12). At this point he also realizes that each country has its troubles and, as Miller argues, "...his European 'sojourn' is cast as a preparatory stage" because freedom found in Europe brings him back to himself which also brings him back to America (65). What he finds in Europe brings immense value to the process of self-discovery and denotes his American nationality but, ultimately, the way he builds his identity is his responsibility because he is aware of the fluidity of American society "in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity" (*Nobody* 11). By distancing himself from the racial tensions in America, Baldwin is able to gain a unique perspective on the racial issues that trouble America and is able to gain a new understanding of the realities of both black and white people and how the two could work together to achieve homogeneity as a nation. This period therefore marks a transitional stage of Baldwin's thinking about race relations. In the next section I will outline some other elements that came to influence his thinking at the time.

IV. THE SOUTH, THE NORTH AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

One of the locations apart from Harlem and France that Baldwin is most associated with is the American South. Taking on the role of a reporter as he travels through the region, Baldwin takes into consideration both Black and white Americans' perspectives on the issues of segregation as he observes how the conditions of the American South affect him and the people who live there. What Baldwin wishes to highlight once again is the common past that Black and white Americans share, claiming that the insistence on racial categories and the North versus South distinction only deepens the divide in America. Despite his newfound life in Europe, Baldwin felt compelled to return to the United States during the height of the Civil Rights Movement to actively participate in the nation's turbulent times, becoming one of the most powerful voices of the movement. On the reasons for Baldwin's return after nine years in Europe, Campbell claims that it was "...his recognition that for better or worse, it was never going to be the same. If it was an opportunity to witness the formation of a new South, it was also a chance to see the old" (126). The American South is a place that saw great challenges and violence during the fight for civil rights. His journeys to the South stand out as he writes about the major issues Southern African-Americans were dealing with, how the South is different from the North, and the reasons why the nation is unable to move forward when it comes to the racial divide.

One of the burning issues in the South was the question of segregation, that is, a system that separates Black people from white people. Baldwin takes up the question of segregation in education in "A Fly in the Buttermilk", interviewing a black boy "G," his mother "Mrs. R.," and the white principal of the school the boy goes to in Charlotte, North Carolina. With his questions, Baldwin is trying to delve into their states of mind to try to see what is at the core of the integrated schools issue. The title of the essay evokes the position of Black people against the backdrop of a predominately white society, or in this case, black children in all-white schools. In the South, racial problems in education were particularly difficult because "Although segregation in schools had been ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court in 1956, most Southern states were purposefully slow in putting the Court's decision into practice" (Campbell 126). Charlotte was the first city Baldwin visited in the South at the time when integrated education was being implemented and where "...of 50,000 blacks in the town, four had been assigned formerly all-white schools, each one to a separate establishment" (Campbell 128). This circumstance makes black children's school experience incredibly isolating and alienating,

which is shown in the example of G. with whom other children are reluctant to socialize (in case they do, they are being judged).

Baldwin is astonished at the turmoil the presence of these children in integrated schools can cause and takes on the role of a reporter as he aims to find out how this affects the black children by interviewing G, who is a fifteen-year-old boy. Baldwin is also amazed at the mental strength of these children who have to go through barricades, threats, and name-calling just to get to school and acquire their right to education. The boy was silent and withdrawn, and Baldwin thought that he was not revealing all that was happening to him in school, so he began to "suspect that the boy managed to support the extreme tension of his situation by means of a nearly fanatical concentration on his school work... Pride and silence were his weapons... For what was all this doing to him really" (*Nobody* 92)? Baldwin is trying to examine their psychological state and get the answers they are unable to produce, or as Edmonds claims: "The silent speech he encounters from black southerners and his necessary reliance on reading their flesh – their eyes, their gestures, their sounds – produce a kind of secular reckoning for Baldwin... Baldwin employs an almost mythic register to capture this otherworldliness, this excess" (131).

Baldwin is also trying to show the perspective of white Southerners by interviewing the school principal who showed himself to be supportive, escorting the boy through the halls when a group of students would not let the boy enter the school. In the principal's responses, Baldwin recognized bewilderment and a degree of delusion, primarily when he told him that "race relations in his city were 'excellent' and had not been strained by recent developments" (*Nobody* 95). In Baldwin's interview with the principal, Ed Pavlić finds "evidence of perceptions avoided, feeling pre-empted, and speech silenced." Commenting on "Black Southerners' complex use of silence," Pavlić argues that this family "maintained a steely silence and protective distance between themselves and their dangerous predicament" ("Baldwin's Dispatch"). The principal also claims that he sees no difference in the quality of education between colored schools and white schools which can be regarded as an inaccurate view because G. is willing to transfer to an integrated school to get a better education despite risking his "...present well-being and his future psychological and mental health in order to bring about a change in his environment" (*Nobody* 96). G and his family are willing to risk their lives to initiate a change that would, hopefully, spread outside school limits. Pavlić argues that G and Mrs. R "had steeled themselves to navigate verbal abuse and psychological torture ... Gus and his mother were ready to fight, which at the time pretty much meant they were ready to die" ("Baldwin's Dispatches"). Their

decision demonstrates their courage and the distance they were willing to go to overcome racial barriers. In his later essay on the South called "They Can't Turn Back," Baldwin further examines the segregated school system which he sees "as a means of controlling Negroes," with the South putting in a lot of effort "to prevent the Negro from ever becoming, or even feeling like, an equal..." (*The Price* 219). Yet, writing about student activism in Tallahassee, Florida, Baldwin is very hopeful about their determination and their belief that freedom and equality can be achieved. With the "reign of terror in the 1920s that drove Negroes out of the South," Baldwin considers that "not enough freedom has happened" since then, but with students' awareness of their history and their activism, there is a chance that their fight will translate to the national level only if the nation is ready for such freedom (*The Price* 228).

Segregation, not just in the South, but on the national level as well, has served to create an image of the Negro constructed by the white Americans and once they are able to let go of that image, the nation will be able to move forward – this may be a painful process, but it is necessary. These are the problems that plague the North too, and Baldwin ends "A Fly in the Buttermilk" with a prediction that states that they need to be "swift and honest" because "...what is happening in the South to-day will be happening in the North tomorrow" (*Nobody* 97). Baldwin expands on this statement in "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South" commenting on the racial set-up of the North that is not significantly different from the one in the South: "...segregation is unofficial in the North and official in the South, a crucial difference that does nothing, nevertheless, to alleviate the lot of Northern Negroes" (*Nobody* 108). Each region faces different difficulties, but those difficulties concerning binary categories such as black and white are what plague the nation as a whole and are what America needs to prevail over. Baldwin opens the essay by claiming that "The Northern Negro in the South sees, whatever he or anyone else may wish to believe, that his ancestors are both black and white. The white men, flesh of his flesh, hate him for that very reason" (*Nobody* 99). White people do not want to be associated with Black people, but history testifies otherwise with "...the vast, unspoken history of sexual intermingling between whites and blacks (especially in the South) that so irrevocably muddies and casts doubt upon the supposedly ironclad American categories of 'Black and 'White'..." (Fallis 12). This fact disrupts the racial division and puts forward an inescapable connection between the two races despite the hatred. According to Campbell, Baldwin's ancestors were Africans who came to the South, and on the other side, he had ancestors who were white – this mixing of the races in the South was an unspeakable fact and was a particularly important point when it comes to the 'Negro problem' (129). Campbell also

calls Baldwin's reporting "not action-packed, but reflective" because "true to himself, therefore, he wrote about the internal effects of the violence he saw happening all around him" (131). One particular moment in the essay that testifies to this statement is Baldwin's meeting with a man who showed him directions to a segregated bus (something Baldwin never experienced before). That experience had a profound effect on Baldwin as he felt a connection with the old black men who looked him in the eyes:

> I cannot describe the look which passed between us... And it was perhaps, because I was getting on a segregated bus, and wondering how Negroes had borne this and other indignities for so long, that this man so struck me. He seemed to know what I was feeling. His eyes seemed to say that what I was feeling he had been feeling, at much higher pressure, all his life... And for the rest of the time that I was in the South I watched the eyes of old black men. (*Nobody* 110)

This encounter reveals to Baldwin a connection in enduring the same pain (but at different levels) caused by a lifetime of indignities that the color problem brings. Looking into the man's eyes, Baldwin is sensible of the past burdens of black men, believing that the eyes of old black men in the South could tell him so much about the history of this region. Baldwin's landing in Atlanta, a place of great importance for the Civil Rights Movement, is marked by his disturbance at seeing the "rust-red earth of Georgia" for the first time in his life. This sight creates an image of the pain and torture his ancestors went through in the South, specifically images of hanging and mutilation: "I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its colour from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife" (*Nobody* 100). For the most part, Baldwin is trying to examine people's innermost selves in his writings, but here the readers get a chance to look into Baldwin's psyche where this striking image finds its place. Jeff Fallis claims that "In the very color of the earth...Baldwin sees manifest of Southern bloodlust and hatred, an indication of how emotionally fraught the territory already was for him. . .Baldwin self-identifies with the mutilated figure, emphasizing both the emotional vulnerability he felt and the physical danger that threatened him as he entered the deep South..." (13).

When it comes to Baldwin's travels through the South, he met many prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement along the way, one of whom was Martin Luther King Jr. King was considered the leader of the movement, and the South was his home. Because he was a Christian preacher, Campbell argues that "It was out of this background that his policy and his

strategy emerged – that all men were created equal, and that black people should pursue their right to equality via the path of nonviolent resistance" (160). Baldwin writes of his meeting with King in "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," and of the effect he had on the African-American community. Baldwin went to hear King preach at his church and this experience was unlike any other church experience Baldwin have had in his life: "Unlike Montgomery, the Negro church, which has always been the place where protest and condemnation could be most vividly articulated, also operated as a kind of a sanctuary," with the minister hardly having any power over churchgoers (*The Price* 250). There was a major contrast between the church in the North where Baldwin witnessed a sense of estrangement among the church community where there was an expectation of punishment for white people and a reward for the suffering of African-Americans, whereas in Montgomery people could recognize a real leader speaking from the pulpit who could convince them that the power to change lies in themselves, and not in the blaming of the white people. Pavlić contends that "The way King and his community mobilized their power presented to Baldwin a model for creative, collective human purpose... Baldwin had witnessed evidence of a truly new (but also ages-old) sense of possibility in the making" ("Baldwin's Dispatches"). Baldwin notices that King's power within the church community lies in the fact that "He suffered with them and, thus, he helped them to suffer. The joy which filled this church, therefore, was the joy achieved by people who have ceased to delude themselves about an intolerable situation.., and who now know that they can change their situation, if they will" (*The Price* 250). Baldwin placed great hope in King and his power to positively influence people to change. In *A Rap on Race* he explains what was their role in the movement: "...we hoped to bring about some kind of revolution in the American conscience, which is, after all, where everything in some sense has to begin. Of course, that's gone now. It's gone because the Republic never had the courage or the ability or whatever it was that was needed to apprehend the nature of Martin's dream" (10). One can see a shift in Baldwin's thinking about the nation as a whole and its failure to live up to King's words, believing that the change first starts inward. Ten years after writing about the possibility of change for the better in the Montgomery church, Baldwin's hope diminished after King's death - he disclosed that he once believed "...that this country could become what it has always presented as what it wanted to become. But I am sorry, no matter how this may sound: when Martin was murdered for me that hope ended" (*A Rap* 224). This statement shows just how much Baldwin appreciated King and how immense his role was in the civil rights fight. The optimistic and pacifistic view was replaced with a darker outlook on the future of the country when it came to African-American rights, as non-violent policies turned out to lack sufficient

effect. After King's assassination, "the new political mood required a new set of voices, and Baldwin was no longer recognized as being in the front row" (Campbell 250) – his involvement lessened and his voice was not heard as much.

V. BALDWIN AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN (PROTEST) LITERATURE

In the light of African-American literature, we can analyze whether all Black writers fall under the premise that everything they produce can be considered as a form of social protest because they are limited by race. Kenneth Warren describes African-American literature as "...a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation. . . African American literature took shape in the context of this challenge to the enforcement and justification of racial subordination and exploitation represented by Jim Crow" (1-2). Warren examines how African-American literature changed in the aftermath of the end of segregation and gaining of the civil rights, arguing that African-American literature lost its coherence in the post-civil rights era. This argument brings to the fore the question of whether African-American literature is simply "protest literature", concerned solely with addressing racial issues in American society or can it be defined differently, as Warren claims that "...had African-American literature not been viewed 'as essentially just one more front of the race's war against racism,' it would not have existed as a literature" (15). Black Americans' struggles caused by racial oppression poured into literary expression, creating African-American literary tradition and serving as an important component of social change. Looking at the Black artists' work and its position in society, Warren argues that "The recognition of African-American art simply as art would depend on society's achievement of racial equality" (13), suggesting that looking at African-American art in the light of racial context instead of looking at it its artistic value devoid of race will not be possible until a certain degree of racial equality is achieved. This statement reinforces Black authors' position of protest writers as American society is still struggling with racial differences.

John Stauffer found that a clear definition of protest literature was lacking, so he defined it as follows: "I define protest literature broadly to mean the uses of language to transform the self and change society...Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills" (xii). It is a record of the contemporary social conditions and the potential advancements, and it is an opportunity for oppressed groups to voice their struggles and propose a shift in the current narrative. In connection to this, Stauffer argues that "The difference between literature and protest literature is that while the former empowers and transforms individuals, the latter strives to give voice to a collective consciousness, uniting isolated or inchoate discontent" (xii). Protest literature then is a response to the reality that surrounds African-Americans and enables them to challenge the present state of affairs. It is a

way to connect their experiences and unite them in overcoming inequalities that label them as less than human. As far as the protest essays go, their aim is similar – Hopper argues that personal protest essays, such as Baldwin's are exploring "...intersections between individual experience and structures of injustice. . .they have tried to write a significance for their lives that extends beyond themselves, and to turn an individual experience into a collective one," putting own experiences against the political background to challenge shared difficulties (254). How can James Baldwin's work then be viewed in the context of African-American protest literature and how does his work speak to the racial challenges America faced and is still facing? Certainly, Baldwin as an essayist is able to "...fuse political insight with literary artistry" (Hopper 247), addressing the obstacles that are in the way of achieving equality in the multiracial country that is the United States, not restraining to bare America's history and the wrongdoings of its people. Baldwin is a visionary, a writer who is capable of unraveling what the citizens of America are not ready to face and to challenge people's beliefs that keep the status quo when it comes to the racial divide, exploring "...the ways race is at once historical and embedded in social structures and yet continually renewed and remade in the moment, between people. His attentiveness in both his fiction and his critical essays to the iterative and interpersonal nature of this process allows him both to diagnose the persistence of racism and to imagine the potential for social change" (Elam 7).

Baldwin's literary work deals foremostly with racial issues and their impact on people regardless of color. In his analysis of protest literature, a few elements were lacking in presenting the issues of the African-American experience more truthfully in literature. Namely, the lack of complexity of Black characters that are devoid of humanity and white people's lack of introspection and denial of responsibility which in turn maintains their privilege and protects their innocence. These issues are also what obstruct the way to a new, righteous society free of racial categorization. The following pages are dedicated to analyzing James Baldwin as a protest essayist, in the light of his criticism of protest fiction and the discussion on what African-American literature is. In this context, we can first look into Baldwin's identification of issues within African-American literature in addressing the racial divide.

One common way of looking at African-American literature is as a form of social protest, and in "Everybody's Protest Novel", Baldwin identifies two issues within the genre. The first limitation is related to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - despite being considered a major achievement on the path towards racial progress and one of the most important texts of American protest literature, Baldwin criticizes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an

unsuccessful attempt at social protest. In "Everybody's Protest Novel", Baldwin contends that Stowe's novel is badly written in that it lacks the depth of characters and rather resorts to oversimplified "medieval morality," a fight between good and evil and between heaven and hell (this attitude might have been influenced by his religious inclinations at the time). As an abolitionist text, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served as an example for all future writings on this subject - Zoe Trodd argues that American civil rights literature draws on abolitionist texts which could enable writers to "challenge racist imagery, reassign the meanings of white supremacist symbols, and undermine narratives of the past that shaped power dynamics in the present..." as writers were able to use "abolitionist aesthetics to claim a literary heritage of dissent and to argue that America had not fulfilled the promises of Emancipation" (17). The Emancipation Proclamation happened almost a hundred years before the Civil Rights Movement began, and although Black people were no longer slaves, dreams of freedom were far from achieved. Stowe published this novel eleven years before the Emancipation Proclamation and so Baldwin wonders "How is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than that made by Mrs. Stowe to discover and reveal something a little closer to truth" (*Notes* 15)? Baldwin believes that when it comes to the representation of race relations in protest literature, major progress has not been made since the Emancipation as he suggests another approach to such texts.

Baldwin simplifies *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s message to fit his criticism, pointing out that the issue that he finds crucial and that the novel does not answer is what is white people's motivation behind their oppressive deeds. It can be said that a lot of Baldwin's non-fiction is dedicated to such a matter, analyzing people's psyche and discovering motivations behind the racial divide in the United States. There is more complexity behind this novel than Baldwin gives it credit, e.g. its examination of attitudes to slavery and people's investment in it, but Baldwin believes that if protest novels use the same rhetoric as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (employing overt sentimentality and stereotypical characters resulting in superficial social critique), then such novels do not have a concrete purpose in the civil rights fight because they tend to assure people of the positive end of this fight. They evoke feelings of morality and righteousness in the reader without challenging beliefs behind racial oppression, giving a false sense of progress and reinforcing Black's sense of inferiority: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (*Notes* 23). Baldwin calls for the end of the categorization of people because "Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos"

(*Notes* 19), as society continues to convince Black people of their inferior status. The persistence of categorization with the tendency to make Black people believe they are less than human for having black skin is one of the reasons why America has made little progress toward these issues from the time of Emancipation to the Civil Rights Movement. Categories must be transcended as there is more to this issue than Stowe's good versus evil concept because we are all members of the same society: "...the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality" (*Notes* 21).

Baldwin also criticizes Richard Wright's *Native Son* and its protagonist Bigger Thomas whom he calls "Uncle Tom's descendant," calling Wright out for creating a character that accepts "a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth" (*Notes* 24). Bigger, as a black character, is reduced to his skin color and dehumanized for the same reason, and he also displays hatred and violence towards white people – this makes him a one-dimensional character instead of making him complex and genuine as Wright leans on a stereotypical portrayal of a Black protagonist. Kim argues that Baldwin's criticism has to do with his vision of a Black man in America, the one whose life is governed by oppression which curbs his potential:

> Baldwin's charge against the protest novelists is not so much that they had failed to give a faithful account of the actual conditions of man, but rather that they had failed to be steadfast in their devotion to a certain ideal vision of man, that is to say, to what man might and ought to be. Such a man, needless to say, will not only survive oppression, but will be strengthened by it. . . it is precisely because Baldwin is so conscious of the multitude of those unfulfilled and unfreed that he is so passionate in his affirmation of their potential. (394)

This argument is in accordance with one of the initial reasons why Baldwin left the United States – not wanting to succumb to the oppression and ideology that would diminish his potential which he was able to reach in another country. What is more, Bigger is a representation of what every African-American, invigorated by hate and subjugation, might have the potential to do – Baldwin himself wrote about incidents where he was prompted to act on his angst. The image of Bigger's character supports the view that African - Americans must grow up and live according to the rules that were imposed upon them since birth and that keep them in a disadvantaged position, while Baldwin believes that there is much more to include in the

creation of these characters to show the possibilities outside the narrow societal expectations. These novels that Baldwin criticizes do succeed in painting a picture of violence and dehumanization endured by Black people, but what they lack is the complexity of the characters and they fail to set forth a vision that is outside the stereotypical framework, a vision that would show the complexity of African-American experience.

The disagreement in the artistic visions of Baldwin and Wright, respectively, can be observed through the differentiation between an artist and a protest writer - an artist would be the one whose writing reflects life and humanity while protest writers' literature is viewed as an aspect of dissent and opposition. On the other hand, writing about Black people's rage and all they have endured throughout history and are still enduring naturally implies resistance to that set of conditions. In this respect, Richard Wright's stance was that all literature can be seen as protest literature and that by criticizing the notion of protest literature, Baldwin condemns all Black Americans (*Nobody* 196-197). Horace Porter argues that Baldwin's quarrel with Richard Wright stems from seeing him as a writer "...who has been compromised creatively and professionally by race," whereas Baldwin, at the time of writing these essays was an "unfulfilled novelist" who wanted "...to avoid becoming 'merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer' " (83). What Baldwin wants to declare with this statement is his wish to be recognized for his art and avoid limitations placed by society based on his race which in turn might restrict the scope of his contributions to literature, as he once highlighted that "Artists are the only people in a society who can tell that society the truth about itself" (*Price* 397).

Baldwin expands on his criticism of Wright's *Native Son* in "Many Thousands Gone" - he sees the failure of the novel in its insistence on the myths about the experience of being a Black person in America. What is missing from the novel is "the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" (*Notes* 36). Such an atmosphere that the novel creates and that is common to protest literature "has led us to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse...But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate" (*Notes* 36). What Baldwin suggests is that there is much more richness behind representing the African-American experience instead of just focusing on the black rage. Such an articulation of African-American tradition is able to highlight the collective experience and show their struggle to create and maintain their identity and humanity. Both Baldwin and Wright represent and speak up for their oppressed Black compatriots, but what differentiates

them is Baldwin's faith in the "...possibility of widespread interracial communication, harmony and love. When he uses 'we' or 'our' in referring to the racial situation in the United States, he suggests the profound and unacknowledged interconnections of America's interracial past as well as the inexorability of its complex interracial fate" (Porter 82).

There is also another layer to Baldwin's criticism – with his new perspectives, he wishes to differentiate himself from the poetics of Wright's generation and establish himself as a member of the new generation of writers. Wright focuses on the way social context shapes people whereas Baldwin is more focused on the psychological elements in his writing. Even though they never got a chance to settle their quarrel caused by this criticism, Baldwin greatly respected Wright and admired his success, while he also acknowledged that he was twenty years younger than Wright and that a different set of circumstances produced them as writers, saying that "...the world which produced Richard Wright has vanished and will never be seen again" (*Nobody* 199), taking note of the ever-shifting American society. Baldwin's essays on protest novels might have been controversial at the time they were published, but from this point in time, it might seem that his criticism was exaggerated – novels such as Stowe and Wright's were needed at the time they were published because they spurred conversation and put forward the injustices Black Americans were dealing with, but now, more than seventy years later, African-American literature explores diverse themes and is able to present African-American experience and engage with the question of social changes that still need to happen.

Baldwin's issue with protest literature lies in the presumed innocence of America, and in his non-fiction, he dissected this myth to uncover America's continual denial of its faults. Eddie Glaude identifies this as "the lie" which is "...the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of black people and how it deforms the soul of the country. The lie cuts deep into the American psyche. It secures our national innocence in the face of ugliness and evil we have done" (*Begin* 9). Baldwin's aim in his writing was to demonstrate this lie and make sure that Black people do not believe those lies as they do irreversible damage to their lives, preventing them from creating individual identities. Baldwin stresses the importance of building an identity as a Black man, knowing that many Black Americans "...believed that it was better to be white than black, whose lives were ruined or ended by this belief, and I, myself, carried the seeds of this destruction for a long time" (*The Price* 411). It takes inner strength to not believe the narrative about oneself that is built by a society that is constantly trying to keep African-Americans in a subordinate position, and it is going to take a continuous effort to change this narrative to achieve equality. Glaude

concludes that Baldwin's vision is that of a "democratic perfectionism" and that "He also insists on a vibrant and complex black interiority in a world that reduces us to flat and predictable characters and narrates its history to corroborate such descriptions" (*Political Companion* ch. 13). To release itself of this lie, America needs to confront its history, and with the messages coming through his essays, Baldwin "wanted to free us from the shackles of a particular national story in order that we might create ourselves anew. For this to happen, white Americans needed to shatter the myths that secured its innocence. This required discarding the histories that trapped us in the categories of race" (Glaude, *Begin* 82).

In his essays, Baldwin studied the themes he found lacking in protest novels - he emphasized the complexity of Black Americans' lives and he analyzed white people's motivations for the immoral and unjust deeds toward African-Americans. In "White Man's Guilt", Baldwin argues that white Americans absolve themselves of blame by saying: "Do not blame *me*. I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade" (*Price* 409). Baldwin's visions of the future are linked with the past as he calls for the responsibility of the white people of America in addressing the crimes of their ancestors because they are "...responsible not for what has happened but for what can happen" (*A Rap* 59). Denial and avoidance of blame can only bring stagnancy as there is no going forward without knowledge of the past when it comes to white supremacy. Throughout history, dehumanizing and degrading crimes have been committed under the concept of white supremacy while the belief in the superiority of the white race has been used to justify these crimes. White supremacy in America has manifested itself through enslavement and the antebellum South, to the Civil War and Jim Crow policies. The past is inextricably linked to the future while the future is ruled by the actions we take in the present. Even as society reshapes itself, racist beliefs in modern America can be found on different levels such as in culture, higher education, employment, etc. in the, for example, lack of representation of ethnic groups. There is also racially motivated violence and police brutality that has resulted in the deaths of African-Americans, causing demonstrations and protests throughout the country.

VI. CONCLUSION

In his non-fiction, James Baldwin merged personal experience with larger social themes that troubled American society. His early life in Harlem constituted a large part of his identity – it was a place where he witnessed the difficulties of the African-American community and was himself raised in such circumstances which were exacerbated by a difficult relationship with his father. Through the examination of his father's life, he observes the harmful effect of living with bitterness and hatred caused by racial prejudice. Prompted by the fear of living such a life and experiencing the same negative emotions, Baldwin sought refuge in the church. Becoming a young preacher did not bring him the salvation he was looking for as he was disappointed by the Black church's understanding of religion that suggests reward for Black people and punishment for white people. This experience was the beginning of his realization about the moral failings of his country. This inner turmoil characteristic of all African-Americans who share the burden of being subjugated individuals translated to the streets of American cities in the form of race riots – seeing the ravaged streets of Harlem, Baldwin determines that violence never brought any good and that this turmoil destroys not only the streets but also the people who hold onto the hatred.

Seeing it as the only way to survive and to escape the oppression that places boundaries on his identity, Baldwin left America for France. His European sojourn brought new dimensions to his American identity – distancing himself from the domestic context gave him a unique perspective on how black and white people must work together to achieve equality and mutual acceptance. Baldwin realizes that white supremacy came from Europe and at its core lies the fear of endangering white people's privileged status which is what enforces the separation between the two races. Exploring the dynamics of black and white Americans abroad, he discovers that racial tensions are still present and he also finds that alienation from one's past is a characteristic of being an American. Knowing one's identity means getting to the bottom of this alienation – this also connotes digging into national history. He is concerned with the question of belonging and a spatial distance from America provides him with the affirmation of his identity as an American. Baldwin insists on togetherness, that is, on recognizing the common traits shared by both black and white Americans and their intertwined history.

Baldwin's engagement with the segregated South during the Civil Rights Movement enabled him to witness the transformation of that region. He is interested in the internal effects of racism, that is, how segregation mentally affects Black families and their children who are being integrated into all-white schools. They seem to hold back information in their responses

to this situation which can be recognized as a sort of caution in the face of a dangerous situation they found themselves in. Baldwin's view of the Black church also changed in the South, with Martin Luther King's preaching that managed to convince people of the change that lies within them – the church was not focused on blaming the other but on achieving potential progress. What he witnessed there gave him hope but the hope was diminished after King's death which also caused Baldwin's engagement to fall into the background. Both North and South were struggling with racial issues despite segregation being official only in the South. Again, Baldwin reminds us of the history of the South and the fact that his ancestors were both black and white which attests to the connection of the two races and undermines the racial categories that are so firmly set in American society.

When it comes to African-American literature, Baldwin notices some faults within the protest literature genre. He criticizes novels that lack complexity in the representation of Black characters and the lack of looking into the reasoning behind the oppression. Baldwin wants African-American literature to affirm the humanity of African-Americans and express the nuances of their collective experience, showing not just their struggles but also their triumph over them. Protest literature is seen as a potential instrument for change, but simplistic categories of good versus evil and the us versus them mentality need to be overcome.

Baldwin's writing suggests that the American nation should re-examine its beliefs while it urges for the awareness of what has been done in the past – one cannot be responsible for what others have done, but Baldwin advocates for the responsibility in the form of putting in the effort for the betterment of society, no matter the race. Even though one might not have been a part of it, it is their duty to actively participate in the creation of a better future for all the citizens of America. Baldwin's vision of the future of American society is tightly linked to the past – what will take to achieve an equal society is the examination and acceptance of history that will enable black and white people to realize that there is much more that connects them than what divides them. His vision of an equal and righteous society might be idealistic, but Americans should continuously strive to reach it.

VII. WORKS CITED

Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name*. Dial Press, 1961.

---. *Notes of a Native Son.* Beacon Press, 1955.

---. *The Price of the Ticket*. St.Martin's/Marek, 1985.

---. *The Fire Next Time*. Michael Joseph, 1963.

Baldwin, James, and Margaret Mead. *A Rap on Race*. J. B. Lippincott Company, 1971.

Campbell, James. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. University of California Press, 1991.

Dudley, Marc K. *Understanding James Baldwin*. University of South Carolina Press, 2019.

Edmonds, Brittany Michele. "On Witnessing: James Baldwin's Southern Experience and the Quareness of Black Sociality." *South: A Scholarly Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 115-134.

Elam, Michele. Introduction. *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by M. Elam, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 1-25.

Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity.* Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Fallis, Jeff. " 'So sensual, so languid, so private': James Baldwin's American South." *James Baldwin Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 8-29.

Freeburg, Christopher. "Baldwin and the Occasion of Love." *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Michele Elam, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 180-194.

Farred, Grant. "Love is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*." *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 284-304.

Glaude Jr, Eddie S. *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Crown New York, 2020.

---. "James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter." *A Political Companion to James Baldwin,* edited by Susan J. McWilliams, eBook, University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

Hopper, Briallen. "Everybody's Protest Essay: Personal Protest Prose on the American Internet." *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, edited by Mario Aquilina, Bob Cowser Jr and Nicole B. Wallack, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, pp. 245-251.

Jones, Beau Fly. "James Baldwin: The Struggle for Identity." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.17, no.2, 1966, pp. 107-121.

Kim, Kichung. "Wright, the Protest Novel, and Baldwin's Faith." *CLA Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1974, pp. 387-396.

Kramer, Lloyd. "James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual." *Historical Reflections*, vol. 27, no.1, 2001, pp. 27-47.

Miller, James. "What Does It Mean to Be an American? The Dialectics of Self-Discovery in Baldwin's 'Paris Essays' (1950—1961)." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, pp. 51-66.

Macebuh, Stanley. *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*. Third Press, 1973.

Pavlić, Ed. " On James Baldwin's Dispatches from the Heart of the Civil Rights Movement." Literary Hub, 10 December 2018, https://lithub.com/on-james-baldwins-dispatches-from-the-heart-of-the-civil-rights-movement/. Accessed 31 May 2024.

Porter, Horace. *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*. Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

Pratt, Louis H. *James Baldwin*. Twayne Publishers, 1978.

Stauffer, John. Foreword. *American Protest Literature*, by Zoe Trodd, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. xi-xix.

Trodd, Zoe. "The Civil Rights Movement and Literature of Social Protest." *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature*, edited by Julie Buckner Armstrong, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Weatherby, William. *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*. Donald I Fine, 1989.

Warren, Kenneth. *What was African American Literature?* Harvard University Press, 2011.

Waters, Rob. " 'Britain is no longer white': James Baldwin as a Witness to Postcolonial Britain." *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 715-730.

VIII. ABSTRACT AND KEY WORDS

This year's centennial of James Baldwin's birth (1924) provides an opportunity to revisit his work and see how his words hold up to this day as America continues to grapple with racial issues. This paper aims to show that according to Baldwin's essays, the homogeneity of the American nation as a multiracial country depends on the responsibility of its citizens to examine their country's complex history and myths that perpetuate the racial divide. By mixing personal and political in his examination of various myths and notions that constitute his homeland, Baldwin provides new visions and standards for American society and America as a nation that would disregard skin color and recognize its individual citizens for their humanity. His early life in Harlem acquainted him with the difficult circumstances black Americans faced, from which he tried to find refuge in the church, but instead found it abroad. His stay in Europe provided Baldwin with a unique perspective and underpinned his identity as an American, while his newfound life on European soil was interrupted by visits to the United States, which was in the process of ending racial inequality and bringing civil rights to African-Americans. With his frequent journeys to the segregated South and witnessing the struggle there, Baldwin took note of the mental toll segregation and discrimination made on people. Lastly, this paper also shows the significance of African-American literature, Baldwin's criticism of it, and his place in it. Baldwin's emphasis in his non-fiction has been on the things that surpass racial categories and that unite instead of divide people while he believed that collective American identity can only be achieved with individuals discovering their own identities first.

Key words: James Baldwin, essay, racial issues, Harlem, African-American literature, American history