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Black Art, Rage, and Self-Making: Suppression, Oppression, and Sublimation in James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and "Sonny's Blues"

Belo Horizonte

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We had a lot to say to each other, far too much to know how to begin.

—James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Despair: perhaps it is this despair which we should attempt to examine if we hope to bring water to this desert.

—James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal”

Abstract

Black people in the United States have been historically subjected to oppression, such as slavery, segregation, and lynching, so they have been developing mechanisms to cope with racism in order to avoid violence and reach social and emotional balance. Considering that, this dissertation examines Black art, rage, and self-formation through mechanisms of suppression, oppression and sublimation in the novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and the short story "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin. It discusses suppression of emotions and behaviors, firstly imposed by the dominating power, then appropriated by the Black subjects. Chapter One studies suppression based on the concepts of "Black rage," as formulated by Myisha Cherry, "appropriated racial oppression," by Kira Banks and Jadah Stephens, and researches by Stephen Oliver, Joshua Stone, and Marie Johansson. Chapter Two analyses examples of oppression depicted in the literary works, such as inter-racial marriage, police brutality, and drug addiction, based on the concept of oppression presented by Marylyn Frye and expanded by Serene Khader; on researches by Adam Dawson about coming of age among African Americans; and on David Jones's studies on invisibility. Chapter Three examines Baldwin's perspective about sublimation in music and theatre, departing from Sigmund Freud's concept to a broader view of what Baldwin considers "acting truthfully," which reaches sublimation when it involves empathy, honesty, and channeling rage and fear into articulated artistic language. Baldwinian characters show strong agential capacities and symbolize endurance against rage and persistence as artists, according to Myisha Cherry and Monika Gehlawat. This dissertation demonstrates the importance of family and community support for Black individuals in general and Black artists in particular, relying on Baldwin's reflections on art as a mechanism of resistance against oppression.

Keywords: suppression; oppression; sublimation; Black rage; Black art; James Baldwin.

Resumo

Pessoas negras nos Estados Unidos foram historicamente submetidas à opressão, como escravidão, segregação e linchamento, e então vêm desenvolvendo mecanismos para lidar com o racismo, visando evitar violência e alcançar equilíbrio social e emocional. Considerando isso, esta dissertação examina a arte negra, a raiva e a autoformação por mecanismos de supressão, opressão e sublimação no romance *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* e no conto "Sonny's Blues", de James Baldwin. Discutem-se mecanismos de supressão de emoções e comportamentos, inicialmente impostos pelo sistema escravista e depois adotados pelos sujeitos oprimidos. O capítulo 1 estuda a supressão com base nos conceitos de "raiva negra", formulado por Myisha Cherry, e de "apropriação da opressão racial", de Kira Banks e Jadah Stephens, incluindo pesquisas de Stephen Oliver, Joshua Stone e Marie Johansson. O capítulo 2 analisa exemplos de opressão retratados nas obras literárias, como casamento inter-racial, brutalidade policial e vício em drogas, com base no conceito de opressão definido por Marylyn Frye e ampliado por Serene Khader; nas pesquisas de Adam Dawson sobre a passagem para a idade adulta entre afro-americanos; e nos estudos de David Jones sobre invisibilidade. O capítulo 3 examina a perspectiva de Baldwin sobre sublimação na música e no teatro, partindo do conceito de Sigmund Freud para uma visão mais ampla do que Baldwin considera "atuação autêntica", que atinge a sublimação quando envolve empatia, honestidade e canalização da raiva e do medo em linguagem artística articulada. Os personagens de Baldwin demonstram forte capacidade de ação e simbolizam resistência à raiva e persistência como artistas, de acordo com Myisha Cherry e Monika Gehlawat. Essa dissertação demonstra a importância do apoio familiar e comunitário para indivíduos negros em geral e artistas negros em particular, com base nas reflexões de Baldwin sobre a arte como mecanismo de resistência contra a opressão.

Palavras-chave: supressão; opressão; sublimação; raiva negra; arte negra; James Baldwin.

Contents

Introduction

James Baldwin (1924-1987) is regarded as one of the most expressive African American writers of the twentieth century, acclaimed for his talent as an essayist as well as a creative writer. Baldwin's works have been widely revisited in 2024, due to the celebration of his centenary, in August 2, 2024, with new translations, re-editions, and the inclusion of less known books in the publishing lists, as can be read, for instance, in the articles "On the centennial of his birth, James Baldwin remains relevant today" (Limbong) and "Celebrating James Baldwin's 100th birthday two ways" (Katsikopoulou). In 2020, Baldwin's essays, particularly those addressing police brutality, have been reviewed as supporting claims to the movement Black Lives Matter (BLM), created after the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida, in 2012, and intensified after the killing of George Floyd, in Minnesota, in 2020, by the white policeman Derek Chauvin, a crime that raised protests against racism and violence all around the world.

Also, recent audiovisual productions have brought Baldwin back to the limelight. The film *If Beale Street Could Talk,* directed by Barry Jenkins and released in 2018, is an adaptation of Baldwin's novel of the same title. The documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*[1], in 2016, directed by Raoul Peck, based mainly on Baldwin's unfinished paper *Remember This House*, has revived his writings on racism, police violence, sexuality, and minorities. A *New-York-Times* review of the film states that "Baldwin could not have known about Ferguson and Black Lives Matter, about the presidency of Barack Obama and the recrudescence of white nationalism in its wake, but in a sense *he explained it all in advance*" (Scott, A. O. 2; emphasis added). Indeed, Baldwin has been repeatedly defined as a prophet,

[1] The present dissertation follows the resolution of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), released in 2007, towards the adoption of the terms "Black," with capitalized B, and "African American," to refer to Black individuals and communities in the United States. In Baldwin's works, the term "Negro" is currently used, written in uppercase, in correspondence with the formal pattern adopted in USA in general and by NAACP during the Baldwin's life (1924-1987). Other occurrences of the N-word, in uppercase or in lowercase, may appear exclusively in quotes and are revealing of the historicality and/or intentionality of the cultural productions.

mainly for his abilities as a former preacher, for his admonitions taken from the Bible and from verses of gospel songs, and for his role as a spokesperson against racism in the United States. In Harold Bloom's words:

> Baldwin is of the authentic lineage of Jeremiah, most inward of prophets. What Baldwin opposes is what might be called, in Jeremiah's language, the injustice of outwardness, which means that Baldwin always must protest, even in the rather unlikely event that his country ever were to turn from selfishness and cruelty to justice and compassion in confronting its underclass of the exploited poor, whether Blacks, Hispanics, or others cast out by the Reagan Revolution. (Bloom 1-2).

The paper *The Fire Next Time* is a milestone for Baldwin's prophetic status, with the epigraph being repeated as a closing sentence, a narrative strategy of tying the beginning to the end: "*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!*" This piece of work is composed of two open letters: "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." This second letter presents Baldwin's concernings about the increasing racism and violence in the United States, foreshadowing even more suffering and violence for both white and Black citizens: "Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become" (*Collected Essays* 311), urging social justice, empathy, and love—living up to the previously mentioned *New York Times* statement that "he explained it all in advance."

In the eulogy written on the occasion of Baldwin's funeral and published on December 20, 1987, Toni Morrison mentioned the 6,895 pages of Baldwin's published work "to acknowledge the debt and thank you for the credit." Addressing Baldwin directly, she declares: "You made American English honest—genuinely international." The paper

continues: “You stripped it of ease and false comfort and fake innocence and evasion and hypocrisy… In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called “exasperating egocentricity,” you gave us undecorated truth.” The eulogy also mentions his defense of love, elegant style and pioneering art: “You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it… and un-gated it for black people,” (Morrison) reinforcing the idea that Baldwin marked the presence of Black people in the USA and in literature.

Beyond prophetic and truth-seeking, Baldwin’s writings, especially the essays, have become valuable historical sources by providing descriptions of important events, such as the Civil Rights Movement, discussions and decisions among the members, and meetings with writers and leading activists, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Lorraine Hansberry, Aimé Cesaire, Marlon Brando, Richard Wright, and others, as in “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King” (1961), “The American Dream and the American Negro” (1965), “Sweet Lorraine” (1969), “Princes and Powers,” “No Name in The Street” (1967-1971), among others. For example, “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King” (1961) contains reports of meetings with King and his family, witnessing King preach in Alabama and identifying the strategies through which King’s speeches connected to the agency of each individual in benefit of the Civil Rights Movement.

Baldwin’s theoretical set addresses: a) racism in the USA, with branches directing to the myth of white supremacy; the denial of the slavery past and, as a consequence, of reality itself; the ideology around the American Dream and the “land of the free.” Some examples are in the collective essays of *The Fire Next Time*; “The American Dream and The American Negro,” as well as in public speeches and debates; b) racial oppression, splitting into themes of segregation and integration, as in *No Name in the Street*; police brutality; violence, social context of Harlem, as can be read in “A Report From Occupied Country;” “The Harlem Ghetto,” “Negros Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White;” c) reports from events and

commissioned articles on specific subjects, tributes, and replicas, with examples in "Princes and Powers," "Sweet Lorraine," "Alas, Poor Richard," "On the painter Beauford Delaney;" d) critics and reviews of films, plays, and books, with the famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," where a heavy criticism is posed over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and James M. Cain's books in general. Also, in "Many Thousands Gone," a strong criticism is put on *Native Son*, a prominent novel published in 1940, by Richard Wright. Baldwin sees the depiction of the leading character Bigger Thomas as a failure, since the novel and the character are "trapped by the American image of Negro life" (*Collected Essays* 31). The ground-breaking criticism presented on those essays reframed the scope of protest novels and, although it drifted Wright and Baldwin apart, it put a birthmark in Baldwin's career.

Baldwin dedicated his writing and speaking skills to debunk myths concerning Black citizens and the history of the nation. Many essays present a pattern by first cataloguing racist concepts about the Black American citizen, followed by counterarguments against the illogicity and inhumanity of the USA ideology; and finally turning the mirror towards racist people, calling for self-reflection and claiming for empathy and love. In the essay "Many Thousands Gone," for example, he states that USA society sees the presence of a Black person among them as a disease, "as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured" (*Collected Essays* 19). He fictionalizes racism as a disease in the novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (*Train*, from now on), again turning the mirror so that it reflects that the disease is on the racists, not on the victims: "They got some kind of disease" (47) was the answer Caleb gave to his younger brother Leo in face of the question "what for" would police officers beat them and why white people hated them.

The wide theoretical production and literary work of Baldwin has been studied under multiple perspectives. In general lines, race, gender, identity, sexuality, and art are the most

examined aspects in Baldwin's writings. Inevitably, all the works approach racism, connecting it to black men identity, social class, and to the autobiographical aspects of Baldwin's narratives. There is a consensus among researchers about the strong connection between the essays and the fictional works of James Baldwin; between the author and the characters; between public and private; and between real-life in the USA and in Harlem.

Beyond that, many comparative studies usually associate the literature of protest of James Baldwin with those of Richard Wright for two main reasons. Firstly, because Baldwin's debut as an essayist and writer was marked by the release of the aforementioned essays criticizing the conceptual strategies of protest novels. Secondly, because Baldwin himself took possession of Wright's title, *Native Son*, by incorporating it into his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955 and including the aforementioned "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone."

A deep exam into race, gender and criminalization can be observed in the dissertation *Black Manhood in Richard Wright's* Native Son *and James Baldwin's* If Beale Street Could Talk*: Racial Criminalization, Death, and the Myth of the Black Rapist*, in which Isadora Castro investigates the oppression resulting from race and gender bias related to Black and male individuals and the criminalization of Black manhood in the American society. Castro examines the history of racialization of crime, arguing that mass incarceration is a result of the structural racism that sustains the criminal justice system in the United States.

In the book *Mirrors Can Only Lie: The Search for Masked Self-Knowledge in the Work of James Baldwin*, Chloe Fields defines Baldwin as an existentialist author and explores the impact of political as well as psychological matters in Baldwin's literary works. Fields regards the concepts of "mirror" and "masks" as distortions of reality and, by extension, of self-knowledge, and aligns them with Baldwin's claims about the problem of identity in the United States, where white people refuse to accept Black people as part of the nation's

identity and structure. Fields even raises an issue very dear to Baldwin: love—and the lack of it. In Fields' words, "Baldwin believes that the absence of love is America's most dangerous and fundamental problem that divides communities and promotes injustice" (4). Baldwin repeatedly pointed out the illogicality, the rebound, and the injustice of racism, to which love could serve as an antidote.

Aligned to love, the motif of empathy can also be found in Baldwin's works. In *An Investigation of Empathy in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues,"* Marie Johansson comprises a review of affect studies and defines empathy as "an emotional response to someone's emotional state or condition" (9). Johansson identifies empathy and pity in Baldwin's works both as an ideology and a narrative strategy to create a bond with the reader. This bond can be established by Baldwin's ability to provide insights about poverty, addiction, loneliness, the struggles of the artists and their claim to be heard.

Baldwin's literary works inevitably converge to the individual sufferings in face of political, cultural, and religious oppression and in relation to the "other," mainly represented by a brother, white people, and employers. In the dissertation *Fruits of Love: Self and Social Criticism in James Baldwin and Howard Thurman*, Clifton Granby focuses on love and social criticism in Baldwin as a writer, defending that "Baldwin speaks the truth in love throughout his essays" (22), making use of his abilities as a former preacher, a spokesperson, and a writer while trying to widen the scope of his artistic creativity. Baldwin's friend and biographer David Leeming declares that "Baldwin was a film enthusiast" (36) and did not want to be confined to writing essays and fiction. He even wrote screenplays and plays, longing to see his works on screen and onstage.

In the article "The Method and the Means: James Baldwin at the Actors Studio," Shonni Enelow discusses the method acting in the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, performed on Broadway in 1964, and in the novel *Train*, published in 1968. Method acting consisted of a

training system created by the Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky in the early 1900s and developed in America in the 1920s and 1930s by Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan. Baldwin was invited by Kazan to write a play about the murder of Emmett Till, and "*Blues for Mister Charlie* represents Baldwin's attempt to introduce a counterhegemonic realism: a realism from a black perspective" (Enelow 88). However, Baldwin was not content with the method applied in the play and, later, tried a new perspective in a scene described in *Train*, in which the leading character, the Black actor Leo Proudhammer, avoids playing stereotyped Black characters and wants "just be an artist" (100).

The article focuses on method acting, touching on its psychological aspects and on Baldwin's attempt to find alternative techniques for the theater in the United States, specially for plays acted by Black characters, as he disavowed methods that could reinforce stereotypes or that could overact psychological traits, and he sought authenticity and aesthetic. According to Enelow, this authenticity is pursued in *Train*. In this novel, Leo had to miss "the train"—his family—in order to be successful onstage, as Lynn Orilla Scott points out in the article "Excerpt from 'The Celebrity's Return,'" presenting a comparative study of *Train* with *Go Tell It* and with *Another Country* and arguing that *Train* is a revision of Baldwin's previous literary works.

Scott investigates the origins of Baldwin's religious quotes, epigraphs, and book titles. She also comments on Black artists and prejudice in America and racism against interracial marriage, while carefully examines the incestuous event occurred between Leo and his brother Caleb in *Train,* considering it an act of transgression and of defiance by the author against Freudian psychology, "that read homosexuality as evidence of an unresolved Oedipus complex, a sign of arrested development, and a failure of maturity" (Scott, L. O. 193), and also against a society which refuses to acknowledge and respect homoaffectivity.

These studies have explored multiple aspects of Baldwin's works. Most of them address oppression of race, religion, and sexuality, attesting the predominance of homosexual and bisexual characters in Baldwin's novels as a protest against heteronormalcy, allowing researches on gender and race stereotypes, sexual harassment, incest, rape, and lynching. Many works cover oppression in terms of racism, poverty, police brutality, and work exploitation. Some investigate the function of art and the artistic roles attributed to the characters, involved with music, art, writing, and public speaking. However, there is a shortage of studies about self-suppression and sublimation as strategic mechanisms marking Black artistic characters in Baldwin's literary works. Few studies specifically address the novel *Train*. Besides, there is an important aspect of Baldwin's life related to his productions as screenwriter and director that is underexplored. It is worth noting that Baldwin developed many theoretical concepts about art, theatre, cinema, and screenplays, as can be read in reviews, essays, speeches, and in the plays *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Amen Corner*.

Most of the characters are artists coping with conflicts involving social violence and psychic trauma; they use their artistic skills both to release pain and to reach professional success. As Baldwin put it, "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without" (*Collected Essays* 296). This conflict reverberates in the characters, divided by the desire to become artists and by the fear of the oppression they will have to face.

As examples, John Grimes, the leading character in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, has been trained to be a preacher since childhood, a predestination he only realized he did not want to fulfill when he was fourteen, but he felt it was already too late to refuse that burden. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Fonny is an aspirant sculptor who is arrested on charges of a rape he did not commit. The novel *Just Above My Head* portrays Arthur as a talented gospel singer, an ability he developed while being raised in a religious environment,

but he ended up dead in a filthy bathroom in France, allegedly by a heart attack. In *Train*, Leo is an acclaimed actor, but fame and success has cost him a heart attack and an estrangement from his family. The plot of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" presents an actor/singer who reached fame and prosperity in France, where he took refuge from his racist and violent home country, the United States. "Sonny's Blues," "Baldwin's most anthologized story" (Field 94), shows the conflicts of Sonny, a pianist coping with drug addiction along with the struggles to become a professional musician.

Taking into account personal and social conflicts and the oppressive forces over Black artists, I decided to explore aspects related to suppression, oppression, and sublimation in *Train* and in "Sonny's Blues." These works were selected because of their artistic perspective, which allows us to follow the characters' trajectory and to examine how they cope with oppression, namely racism, in the pursuit of artistic careers.

Train presents the trajectory of Leo Proudhammer, a famous theater actor who suffers a heart attack onstage and is taken to the hospital. In this first-person narrative, Leo reflects about his recent and past life, trying to understand the steps that took him to that present condition and figuring out new meanings to his future life. The novel is composed of three books. The first one presents Leo's hospitalization and recollections of his childhood in Harlem, with his parents and his brother Caleb, to whom he is strongly attached. His infancy is marked by Sundays at theater houses, where he acquired the taste for plays and decided to become an actor. The violence approaches him as he witnesses the effects of police brutality on Caleb and experiences violence himself as he grows up. The second book relates Leo's internship at The Actors' Means Workshop, and his youth, a time of intense activity and dedication, as he worked as a singer/waiter, took voice and guitar classes, and acted at small theatres. This phase is marked by ruptures with tradition, reflections about the inauthenticity of the plays, and abuses as a Black artist. The third book shows Leo's professional success

and his new love, a young man he calls "Black Christopher." It depicts his recent life, the reconnection with Caleb, and his plans for the future. The third part represents the sublimation of the artist, who could act truthfully, articulating his rage into the plays and mastering language against injustice.

The short story "Sonny's Blues," published in 1957, explores the relationship between two brothers: Sonny, the younger one, jailed for peddling and using heroin, and the narrator, who feels guilty because he never really played the role of big brother and did not protect Sonny. The brother-narrator became a professor of algebra, got married, had three children, and lived in a housing project. Sonny, in turn, was struggling to become a professional pianist, but he got involved with drugs and was arrested. As an orphan, a teenager, and an aspiring artist, Sonny had to face many forms of prejudice, including his own brother's biases against blues musicians. After he left prison, Sonny went to live with his brother, who, by this time, did his best to support and *listen* to him. Both understood the importance of honesty and the necessity to plainly speak about painful memories and truths if they wanted to rebuild their connection. Sonny is aware of the permanent struggle he must face to keep his addiction under control and to succeed as a pianist. The support of his brother, symbolizing family support, and the band support, representing the support of the Black artistic community, are essential in the process of protecting Sonny from the oppression derived from drugs and social isolation and helping him keep balance.

With this dissertation, I intend to offer a contribution to African American and Psychoanalytical studies applied to the above-mentioned literary works. The analysis starts with a study of the characters, comparing and contrasting Sigmund Freud's concept of repression with the psychological definition of suppression. I examine social practices of oppression in order to understand in which ways such practices induce self-suppression and interfere with individual attitudes – especially in the pursuit of artistic careers. Also, I aim to

provide a fresh perspective on studies of sublimation, under Baldwin's view of "an examined life" and "acting truthfully," which includes transmitting authenticity and honesty to the plays. The study departs from the concept of sublimation to demonstrate that being a Black artist requires abilities beyond the stage; it demands mastering Black rage, turning it into an articulated language capable of representing the artist as a person and as a citizen, with an "examined life" in order to "act truthfully." In turn, "acting truthfully" demands from artists the ability to find points of connection with the characters while finding some truthness amid delusional screenplays, written to please white audiences and keep them inside the myth of white supremacy. I also investigate the effect of support—and the lack of it—over Black individuals in situations of vulnerability and instability, as is the case of Sonny as his drug addiction, a social problem with devastating consequences over whole communities across the globe.

David Jones offers theoretical support to the present dissertation with the concept of "closeted epistemology," presented in the third chapter, "'Something Unspeakable': James Baldwin and the Closets of American Power" of the thesis *Apart and a Part: Dissonance, Double Consciousness, and the Politics of Black Identity in African American Literature, 1946-1964*. It provides a broad understanding to the idea of the unspeakable in Baldwin's works, aiming to convey the world of marginalized individuals, groups, and cultures, in a racist system that chooses to exclude minorities by silencing and erasing their existence. White supremacy establishes the patterns of what is "official" in language, behavior, religion, sexuality, and so forth. Relying on Eve Sedgewich's paper "The Epistemology of the Closet," Jones examines how Baldwin used language to mean silence and absence, describing shades and darkness to convey familiarity, coziness, and safety, but also fear, danger, and violence.

Jones also works with the concept of "double consciousness," as developed by W. E. B. Du Bois, which refers, in general lines, to the consciousness of Black individuals and

consists of what they consider to be their true essence, in contrast with what they consider to be the perception of white people about them. Connecting double consciousness with the epistemology of the closet, Jones addresses Baldwin's racial politics of Black presence, reinforcing the need to acknowledge and to reconcile the presence of Black people in the past and present of the nation.

Since duality, paradox, and ambiguities are part of all individuals, Baldwin made use of this ambiguity to address dual traits in Black artists and their endeavours to establish an artistic personality while "resisting the peripheral role" (Bigsby 327) imposed by white supremacy. Along the same lines of Jones, C. Bigsby traces dualities in Baldwin's works and characters in "The Divided Mind of James Baldwin." As Bigsby sees it, Baldwin's writings contain a self that is "sometimes a series of improvisational gestures and sometimes a moral constant" (327). There is also an underlying idea of "unexamined confidence in the possibility of action and the recovery of ethical purpose" (327). The individual consciousness maintains a preserved moral essence but also contains the transformational power to derive meaning from social chaos. The only way to reconcile the divided mind is through love and its power "to annihilate the primal space between the self and its perception of itself, between the individual and the group" (327). Such love requires empathy, as studied by Granby, Johansson, and Franklin.

The dissertation is also supported by the concept of "Black rage" as formulated by Myisha Cherry in the paper "On James Baldwin and Black Rage." According to Cherry, Black rage against racism as a killing force is addressed in *Notes of a Native Son*, with Baldwin's autobiographical descriptions of his attempt to be served and his expulsion from a segregated restaurant, and the discovery that he "hated and feared white people" (*Collected Essays* 8) and "had been ready to commit murder" (72), acknowledging the existence of Black rage and reflecting on mechanisms to cope with anger and fear. The concept refers to "the

anger *of* Black folk *at* racism and racists" (Cherry 2, italics in original). The essay covers aspects of Black rage, such as useless and useful rage. Useless rage is the one that can lead a victim of racism to kill or to be killed; useful rage can have pragmatic applications to anti-racist struggle. The agential capacities of useful rage are important for individuals with an "examined life," a term used by Baldwin to express the individual consciousness of the struggle against racism and inequality.

Back in 1981, Audre Lorde had approached the idea of useful and useless anger in the lecture "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," delivered at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut. Lorde speaks about her personal experience as a Black lesbian university professor while asking women in general to set differences aside and attentively watch each others' face, listening carefully to the anger manifested by other women. Lorde defends the abandonment of judgment and objectification and recommends the adoption of empathic attitudes in defense of people oppressed by racism. Lorde rejects the idea that oppressed individuals should suppress their anger to spare white people of guilt and fear. Where Cherry works on useful and useless rage, Lorde works also with guilt, which can be useful if it leads to change; if it does not, then "it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness" (Lorde 130). In the same way, Baldwin says that guilt has been used as a convenient excuse that hides the real intention of maintaining privileges, as can be read in "The White Man's Guilt."

In Chapter One, I investigate how the concept of suppression affects the Black characters' identity. To do that, I examine how they learn to suppress emotions, behaviors, and language, taking into account Garssen's review of repression and how it differs from the Freudian idea of repression. An overview of Baldwin's characters allows us to observe suppression operating in the characters. I am particularly interested in demonstrating the

transition from self-suppression to the mastering of fear and rage and its transformation into articulated language. Cherry argues that "Baldwin's theoretical account of Black rage … dignifies Blacks by centering them as people with agential capacities;" I believe that his fictional characters were dignified as well, especially because Baldwin wished to detach his protest novels from those he discredited as such. As an example, the characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* show strong agential capacities, relying mostly on their individual action toward the collective goal of proving Fonny's innocence and releasing him from jail. As noted by Trudier Harris in "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," "they are people who are secure in themselves and what they can do for each other. They recognize no power other than themselves" (65). Also, "they are not haunted by self-hatred" (65), and this enables them to work collaboratively and use their rage *strategically*.

Fear and rage are natural parts of the formation of every individual; however, for Black children, coming of age in racist environments forces them to develop strategies in which rage must be mastered into articulated language. I observe a growing complexity in the strategies as the social violence becomes more prominent with the coming of age. In *Train*, Leo is a child coping with fear and rage, and the strategies become more complex along with the process of growing up and becoming an artist. Leo's narrative represents the saga of the Black artist struggling with poverty, lack of background, and social violence. In Sonny's saga, the almost impossible challenge is to become an adult and survive the streets of Harlem unharmed, a challenge he fails and that almost kills him.

In Chapter Two, I investigate oppression to demonstrate how it is portrayed in the selected literary works; how it is different from suppression; and how it affects the characters' psyche, art, and work. These conflicts are analysed under literary portrayals of inter-racial relationships, social violence, police brutality, and drug problems, based on Serene Khader's reframing of the concept of oppression. Khader presents an important conceptual review of

the term, stating that it goes beyond the scope of limiting freedom: it favors inequality, begetting negative social and economic consequences for individuals and for nations as a whole. Khader examined the actions, the agents, and the consequences of oppression, stating that it can be committed with or without the intermediary of agents, since "social structures can themselves *be* oppressive" (664, italics in original). As is widely known, oppression is morally wrong; but Khader investigates the reasons and contests the prevailing version that oppression is wrong because it reduces freedom. In her view, "the characteristic wrong of oppression can be framed in terms of its inequalitarian effects" (665). The Black characters of the novel suffer this unequal and even inhumane treatment firsthand, and I aim to demonstrate the mechanisms and the negative effects of oppression.

In Chapter Three, I describe the struggle of Black characters to succeed as actors, seeking to demonstrate what Baldwin meant by "acting truthfully." I present, then, an overview of his theoretical formulations, especially those presented in the essays "Theater: The Negro In and Out;" "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity;" and "The Creative Process." Fulfilling the desire to become an artist is a dream coming true, but the whole process is painful. Leo managed to become an actor even under unfavourable circumstances. He enrolled in an artist project only to realize that the directors had no intention of giving him an opportunity as an actor, but just as a driver. With strong persistence and proactivity, Leo demonstrated the agential capacity to take action, which corresponds to Baldwin's principles and writing style.

Baldwin made use of human ambiguity to address dual traits in Black artists and their endeavours to establish an artistic personality while "resisting the peripheral role" (Bigsby 327) imposed by white supremacy. Leo despises fake screenplays and wishes to act with meaning. Sonny refuses to be a jazz musician as Louis Armstrong; his model is Charlie "Bird" Parker, for what he represents in the Black music scenario and its significance "to the

African American struggle for freedom," as Stephen Oliver puts it in *Backwards Saints: The Jazz Musician as Hero-Figure in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and John Clellon Holmes' "The Horn*." The individual consciousness maintains a preserved moral essence but also contains the transformational power to derive meaning from social chaos, a duality traced by Bigsby in "The Divided Mind of James Baldwin." As Bigsby sees it, Baldwin's writings contain a self that is "sometimes a series of improvisational gestures and sometimes a moral constant" (327). There is also an underlying idea of "unexamined confidence in the possibility of action and the recovery of ethical purpose" (327). The only way to reconcile the divided mind is through love and its power "to annihilate the primal space between the self and its perception of itself, between the individual and the group" (327). Such love requires empathy, as studied by Marie Johansson, and self-knowledge, as studied by Seven Franklin.

Franklin addresses self-knowledge in *James Baldwin: Creating Vs. Inventing Oneself*, reviewing Baldwin's essays on art and the self. The study encompasses a) negative forces against the self—self-destruction, self-hatred, self-loathing, b) the process of learning, with self-reflection, self-inquiry, self-examination; and c) the discovery, with self-consciousness, self-discovery, and self-righteousness. Franklin's analysis of self-hatred covers Baldwin's autobiographical trajectory as a self-educated artist and highlights the importance Baldwin gave, for individuals and for America as a nation, of self-knowledge and self-acceptance as a condition to self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and social harmony. Self-acceptance requires courage and honesty to face the facts; self-esteem is necessary to acknowledge that pain is part of the process and to use this pain to reach self-satisfaction and harmony.

The artist's fight against oppression continues onstage, where art reflects myths about white supremacy. As I defend, Baldwin's theories on "acting truthfully," authenticity, and perseverance are literally represented in Leo's and Sonny's lives as Black artists struggling with loneliness, isolation, and lack of support. Both individuals go through the artist's saga,

suppressing rage and fear, coping with oppression, and finally reaching sublimation, by mastering rage into articulated musical or theatrical language.

In this dissertation, I argue that in *Train* and in "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin portrays the journey of the Black artist from imposed silence to creative expression, in which the processes of suppression, oppression, and sublimation trace a movement from psychic restraint to artistic truth, denoting the trajectory of the Black artist towards self-achievement and professional success.

Chapter One—"The Evil Within and the Evil Without:" Suppression and Self-Formation in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and "Sonny's Blues"

> *You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out—that storm inside.*
>
> —James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

> *But my rage was there, it was there, it pretended to sleep but it never slept, the merest touch of a feather was enough to bring it howling, roaring out.*
>
> —James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*

In the present chapter, I review and compare the concepts of repression and suppression, presenting distinctions between repression in the common sense and Freudian repression. I defend that the characters develop strategies of self-suppression in oppressive contexts, and the complexity of the strategies increases along with the growing risk of violence. Also, I believe that, despite oppression, the characters seek sublimation through art, endeavouring to become professional artists and channel their rage into creative productions. Their success can be attributed to their strong endurance, perseverance, and the agential capacity Baldwin wanted to represent in Black characters, in agreement with Myisha Cherry and C. Bigsby's arguments that Baldwin valued Black individuals' activism and responsibility, refusing roles associated with passivity, subalternity, and victimization. So, I

examine the characters' context of coming of age and the processes by which they learn to suppress emotions, behaviors, and language.

Garssen's review of repression is helpful to demonstrate how the characters were raised to be too self-conscious of their actions and to behave "properly," which is, to behave in a way as to avert violence. To the parents, "behave properly" aims to please white masters, landowners, employers, landlords, teachers, and others, all these characters representing white supremacy. To the children, as they come of age, "behave properly" acquires new meanings and starts to include the appropriation of white language and behavior to their self-benefit and self-protection.

A study of the characters is presented with the aim to to reveal suppressive attitudes in the novel. I am particularly interested in demonstrating the transition from self-suppression to the mastering of fear and rage and its transformation into articulated language, relying on the concept of Black rage as formulated by Cherry in the paper "On James Baldwin and Black Rage," studying useless and useful rage and their relation to activism that reinforce individual agential capacity as well as collective movements.

1.1. A Brief Review of the Concepts

In the field of Psychoanalysis, the term "repression" was firstly developed as a concept by Sigmund Freud in the work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1915. This book is composed of the essays "The Sexual Aberrations," "The Infantile Sexuality," and "The Transformation of Puberty," in which infantile sexuality, repression, and sublimation are discussed. In topic "4. The sexual impulse in neurotics" of the first essay, "The Sexual Aberrations," Freud states that repression is a "special process" which impedes the satisfaction of wishes and desires. A synthesis of what he means by repression is also presented in the "Summary" of "The Transformation of Puberty." In it, Freud states that infantile sexuality starts with perversion, but the action of repression leads the person to grow

up as a neurotic, a term opposed to psychotic. It is relevant to read the full context in which the concept is discussed:

> Repression.—Another issue results if in the course of development certain powerful components experience a repression—which we must carefully note is not a suspension. The excitations in question are produced as usual but are prevented from attaining their aim by psychic hindrances, and are driven off into many other paths until they express themselves in a symptom. The result can be an almost normal sexual life—usually a limited one—but supplemented by psychoneurotic disease. It is these cases that become so familiar to us through the psychoanalytic investigation of neurotics. The sexual life of such persons begins like that of perverts, a considerable part of their childhood is filled up with perverse sexual activity which occasionally extends far beyond the period of maturity, but owing to inner reasons a repressive change then results—usually before puberty, but now and then even much later—and from this point on without any extinction of the old feelings there appears a neurosis instead of a perversion. One may recall here the saying, "Junge Hure, alte Betschwester[2]."—only here youth has turned out to be much too short. The relieving of the perversion by the neurosis in the life of the same person, as well as the above mentioned distribution of perversion and hysteria in different persons of the same family, must be placed side by side with the fact that the neurosis is the negative of the perversion." (70-1).

Plausible criticisms have been made about the flaws of Freud's theories, especially those concerning gender bias (Dollard; Horney; Lanz, Kaur, and Ray; Millett; Woodworth). In general lines, critics point to a) problems of methodology and assessment, considering the low accessibility to the unconscious and repressed material, as posed by Freud himself

[2] "A young whore makes an old nun," as translated by Catherine L. Dollard in the book *The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany*, *1871–1918*. Berghahn Books, 2018. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/downloads/OpenAccess/DollardSurplus/9781785336621_OA.pdf

(Woodworth). The repeated reliance on case studies emphasizes the subjectivity of the field and the difficulties in establishing patterns that accomplish cultural variables (Woodworth); b) lack of social and economical context, considering that Oedipus Complex is a theory based on an ideal of family with the presence of both a mother and a father figure. Such idealization disregards a wide variety of contexts in which children are raised without a father or a mother figure, or are economically sustained by widows or sole mothers, for example, not to mention children raised by homosexuals parents that identify themselves both as fathers or mothers (Horney; Millet); c) the idea that the girl lacks and therefore envies the penis is defined is a paternalistic theory that perpetrates stereotypes of inferiority and reinforces oppression over women. As Kate Millett puts it, "the effect of Freud's work … was to rationalize the invidious relationship between the sexes, to ratify traditional roles, and to validate temperamental differences (178). Finally, d) Freud's overemphasis on sexuality as determinant in the development of human psyche, driving children to envy and jealousy, has been contested for sounding overly simplified and subjective (Irawan, Hadi, and Abdurrahman). The German doctor and psychoanalyst Karen Horney rejected notions as penis envy and other male bias and counterargumented that "the source of much female psychiatric disturbance is located in the very male-dominated culture that had produced Freudian theory" ("Kate Hourney"); she opposed the notion of "penis envy" with the counterargument of "womb envy," as an evidence of the misogynistic bases over which Freud's theories were founded.

Nevertheless, it is relevant to emphasize the groundbreaking contributions of Freud's studies about the human mind, emotions and behaviors. His endeavours culminated in the creation of Psychoanalysis as a new field of studies about the psyche, reshaping the 20th century understanding of mind, sexuality, and establishing new methodologies in the care of people with mental distress, especially traumas derived from wars. So, the present research focuses on the fundamental concepts of repression and sublimation in James Baldwin's

characters in situations of systemic racism, poverty, and social exclusion. For the characters, art is a way to release pain and anger, a path to social ascension, a symbol of resistance.

In an essay entitled *Repression* [*Verdrängung*] published in 1915, Freud drew some general lines in order to formulate the understanding of action of repression over an impulse. These lines can be summarized as: 1. An instinctual impulse always seeks pleasure, never displeasure. However, an instinct can be repressed when the pleasure derived from it is weaker than the unpleasure derived from non-instinctive sources. 2. Hunger and pain are imperative forces over which repression has no power. 3. Repression aims at avoiding unpleasure: "*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*" (2978, italics in original). 4. Repression does not eliminate or kill an instinct; it continues to exist in the unconscious, but it "exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious" (2982).

Translations of the Freudian works usually adopt the term "unpleasure" instead of "displeasure." The word "unpleasure" contrasts with "displeasure" and it means that something pleasurable has not achieved its aim, and it is not the case that something unpleasant has actually happened. Unpleasure is related to the "pleasure principle," in which pleasure is the greatest aim of each individual, but it faces repression (unpleasure, unlust) along the way. Repression interferes with the instinct right before pleasure.

Freud had used the terms "repression" and "suppression" interchangeably in great parts of his papers until he worked more deeply in the study of repression, which he defined as something strictly unconscious. Later, in 1923, in the paper "The Ego and the Id," he expanded the study of conscious and unconscious by including the concept of preconscious between them. Also, he explored the idea of id, ego, and superego and their respective relation to unconscious, preconscious, and conscious. At this point, the concept of repression could be better understood in relation to external influences. It is precisely the influence of repression

at the conscious level that is relevant to this dissertation. To Freud, repression operates mainly internally, over instincts. However, the development of Psychoanalysis and Psychology has led to a new range and concepts and distinctions. In the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary of Psychology, repression presents three main definitions:

> 1. in classical psychoanalytic theory and other forms of depth psychology, the basic defense mechanism that excludes painful experiences and unacceptable impulses from consciousness. Repression operates on an unconscious level as a protection against anxiety produced by objectionable sexual wishes, feelings of hostility, and ego-threatening experiences and memories of all kinds. It also comes into play in many other forms of defense, as in denial, in which individuals avoid unpleasant realities by first trying to repress them and then negating them when repression fails. See primary repression; repression proper.
>
> 2. the oppression or exclusion of individuals or groups through limitations on their personal rights and liberties.
>
> 3. more generally, the process of restricting, restraining, or subduing something or someone. Compare suppression. —**repress** *vb*. ("Repression," emphasis in original).

Sense 1 summarizes the Freudian concept of repression and presents the following ramifications: "primary repression" and "repression proper." According to the same APA Dictionary, primary repression is,

> in psychoanalytic theory, the first phase of repression, in which ideas associated with instinctual wishes are screened out and prevented from becoming conscious. Primary repression contrasts with repression proper, in which the repressed material has already been in the realm of consciousness. Also called **primal repression**. ("Primary Repression," bold in original).

In turn, repression proper, or secondary repression, is "a form of repression that acts on conscious experiences and wishes in order to make them unconscious" ("Repression Proper").

Sense 2 aligns repression and oppression as synonyms. Sense 3 defines repression as a process and recommends a comparison with "suppression." Still according to APA Dictionary of Psychology, suppression is "a conscious effort to put disturbing thoughts and experiences out of mind, or to control and inhibit the expression of unacceptable impulses and feelings. It is distinct from the unconscious defense mechanism of repression in psychoanalytic theory" ("Suppression").

It is precisely this last concept, *suppression*, among all, the one which aligns with the focus of this dissertation, since it represents "a conscious effort" to control emotions and emphasizes the intentionality of the repression, in opposition to Freudian repression, which operates mainly in the unconscious. So, suppression complements the idea of repression in the fictional world when it refers to Black characters repressing emotions of fear and rage, injustice and humiliation, an act of self-protection against the violence of the supposed "white supremacy."

In the paper "Repression: Finding Our Way in the Maze of Concepts," Bert Garssen compares two defense mechanisms: repression and anxious defensiveness. Repression seeks the non-expression of negative emotions; it can be "personally-related" and "socially-related." This notion parallels with Baldwinian metaphor of "the evil within and the evil without:" "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without," as published in "Down at the Cross," part of *The Fire Next Time* (*Collected Essays* 296). This notion also means that individuals repress negative emotions from themselves or from others, which may result in self-deception and other-deception. In Garssen's terms, "repressors" (repressed individuals) are more optimistic and "report relatively low distress levels, whereas anxious defensive persons report relatively

high distress levels" (479). This description of a repressed person as somebody more optimistic, hiding negative emotions and denying the effects of negative outcomings does not comply with this research in the definition of "repressed characters," because what Garssen means is that repressors are much more to optimistic people, sometimes in denial with painful facts of reality than to those who suffer because they must repress fear and anger on a daily basis, mainly due to racism and inequality.

Therefore, the distinctions pointed out by Garseen between *repressed* versus *anxious defensive* only reinforces our choice of not adopting the term "repression," since the characters under analysis would be wrongly understood as adopting optimist behaviors—and that would be paradoxical, considering that they are mostly pessimistic, and face despair and isolation. Furthermore, I avoid entering the classification of the characters as "anxious defensive," since this is beyond the scope of the research. In view of what has been discussed, the aforementioned concept of "suppression" matches our belief that the characters transform unconscious repression into conscious mechanisms of suppression in order to cope with oppression and the final aim to reach sublimation as artists.

Considering that, this chapter focuses on suppression in Baldwin's characters, since it deals with their conscious decisions to control emotions and attitudes in situations of oppression. To extend the Baldwinian metaphor, "suppression" refers to "the evil within," and "oppression" to "the evil without." I avoid the term "repression" because it could be ambiguously associated with "suppression" as well as with "oppression." Repression, in this paper, will be restricted to the Freudian perspective, which is, every human being is subjected to repression since birth, and all the repressed material that becomes unconscious are components of "infantile amnesia," described by Freud as "a peculiar amnesia which veils from most people (not from all!) the first years of their childhood, usually the first six or eight years" (34). Since the characters in this study are older than that, they experience secondary

repression, or suppression, in a conscious decision to master emotions, behaviors, and speech in seek of self-protection.

1.2. The Black Characters in Harlem

Most of James Baldwin's main characters are portrayed as Black, bisexual men living in poverty, in Harlem, struggling to escape vices and violence and to survive—emotionally and professionally—as artists. Since early childhood, those characters must learn a kind of "proper behavior" to avoid drawing further violence upon themselves, in a world dominated by white supremacy. What "proper behavior" consists of will be analysed in the next topics.

To some extent, the repressive forces experienced by a Black child are not different from that to which every human being is submitted. However, when the differences do appear, they can be remarkable enough to determine the path each character will follow, the level of difficulty they must endure in order to reach adulthood with safety and stability. Many Baldwinian characters reflect autobiographical traits. In C. Ramya's words: "Baldwin was born a Black and to a large extent, this accidental birth dictated his course of life and writing" (11). Put together, the expressions "accidental birth" and "course of life" may sound deterministic, but the whole sentence provides insights about the connections between Baldwin's autobiographical characters, especially the ones analysed here: Leo and Sonny.

In the novel *Train*, when I firstly meet Leo Proudhammer, he is 39 years old, a play actor, hospitalized after a heart attack, during which he narrates the path that led him to this condition. Most of his recollections about childhood are related in "Book One: The House Nigger." The Proudhammer family is constituted by the firstborn Caleb, seven years older than Leo; three daughters who died; Leo; and the parents, whose names are not given. The mother dies by the end of the narrative. Concerning "Sonny's Blues," we firstly hear about Sonny through his older brother, an algebra professor whose name is not provided; however, he is the narrator and the closest relative of Sonny, a pianist. Their parents, already dead, offer

important lessons through the recollections of the sons. Brotherhood, a dear theme to Baldwin, is deeply explored in these works, as well as in his general oeuvre.

Leo and Sonny share traits with Baldwin and other Baldwinian characters: both are Black artists and both are the youngest brothers. Both face isolation and loneliness, struggling with rage and fear, abandoning their families and coming home at times. "Sonny's Blues" focuses on the drug addiction of Sonny and his musical language, while *Train* focuses more on Leo's strategies to succeed as an actor. The violent environment, aligned with the experience of growing up, denote two important aspects in Baldwin's writings: transition and instability. The meaning of these terms are intertwined with natural changes, typical of biological life, and social conflicts, typical of powerful oppressive societies, whose aim is to cause dissidence among minorities and reinforce individual vulnerability.

David Jones presents a study on division in the thesis *Apart and a Part: Dissonance, Double Consciousness, and the Politics of Black Identity in African American Literature, 1946-1964*. Jones analyzes the scope of the unspeakable in Baldwin's works, including the titles, and discusses the binarism and categorization that Baldwin so much repudiated. The weaker forces of that binarism were, in fact, politically used to the reinforcement of the dominant power: "The result of such categories, he [Baldwin] suggests, is a polarised understanding of racial, gender, sexual, and national identity, wherein rigidly demarcated binarisms of black and white, male and female, gay and straight, and American and un-American are framed as self contained entities that are closed off from one another, as opposed to mutually constitutive" (117). From this quote, it is possible to notice that binarism and categories are mechanisms to build opposition instead of union, dissidence instead of collective support. In this system of division, Jones explains, the unspeakable corresponds to the divergent forces that do not fit into the prevalent categories. It encompasses not only the repressed sexualities, but also the repressed minorities, as poor individuals and communities,

women, immigrants, children, mentally incapable people, and others. This sense of division as a mechanism of oppression is also present in Michael Broyles' research about the blues in Baldwin: "Through his examination of blues morality, Baldwin revealed what he contended was one of the universal moral flaws of humanity: the inclination to use categorical labels in order to assert one's sense of superiority and dominance over another" (Broyles 97).

Jones coined the expression "closeted epistemology," extending the metaphor of the gay in the "closet," based on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Epistemology of the Closet*, published in 1990, thereby applying it to the study of minorities. Closeted epistemology encompasses the idea of domination over minorities by silencing and suppressing them, maintaining them in the closet: "In the America that Baldwin describes, it is a white, heterosexual, patriarchal presence that is affirmed, creating the conditions that render blackness 'unspeakable' (118).

Also, Jones states that Baldwin refused every kind of categorization, be it related to his writings or to his sexuality, and that ambivalence is projected in the characters: "This refusal to disentangle race and sexuality is consistent with Baldwin's broader disdain for categorisation and his concomitant refusal to wed himself to a one-dimensional, monolithic identity" (144). Jones analyzed how Baldwin's transatlantic travels influenced his personality and intensified in him a sense of ambiguity, in-between, non-categorization. He demonstrates the projection of non-categorization in the personality of the characters, specifically commenting on Eric, "a white actor from a wealthy Alabama family" (148) in the novel *Another Country*. Jones argues that Eric lost much of his power for being white just because he was queer, and that resembles Baldwin's attempt to expose how dominant power can make use of categories and hierarchies to dictate social rules:

> In LeRoy's formulation, Eric's queerness divests him of his whiteness. As a result, he becomes susceptible to the same obscene, supplementary violence that is used to

> preserve white hegemony. … Moreover, by demonstrating how this process is contingent on a logic of disavowal where that which is unsaid is as potent as what is, Baldwin illustrates once more how ignorance may underwrite power as much as knowledge (149).

As in Eric, artistic abilities are frequently pictured in Baldwin's characters, most of them born or trained artists dealing with personal, familial, and social conflicts and finding a way to escape oppressive social environments. These conflicts reverberate in the characters, divided by the desire to become artists, the fear of the racism they will face and the risk of failure. However, as Baldwinian characters are designed by Baldwin's image and likeness, they do not hesitate in their choices. At around 14, Leo proudly confesses to his brother: "I'm going to be an actor" (*Train* 172); similarly, Sonny declared: "I'm going to be a musician" (Early Novels & Stories 845). There is no hesitation regarding what they want to be, only towards the odds against them: racism, poverty, and lack of background.

In the dissertation *Discursive Divide: (Re)Covering African American Male Subjectivity in the Works of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison*, Aaron Oforlea states that "Leo Proudhammer leaves Harlem to pursue a life as an actor, much as James Baldwin left Harlem to pursue a life as a writer" (130). Specifically in Chapter Five, "Mimicry as Subjectivity: The Ambiguous Performance of Black Male Subjectivity in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*," Oforlea defends that Leo is Baldwin's alter ego, in the sense that both are artists from African American communities and their art is read by larger audiences; much like Leo, "who performs the expected role of the Black actor onstage, Baldwin the expatriate writer reflected on the rhetorical strategies of African American identity" (132), considering that *Train* was written in Turkey. As I will study deeply in Chapter Three, Oforlea defends that Leo is acting as an actor and mimics—in correspondence with the title—the act of performing so that he could attend to the white audience's expectations. Leo has been pretending all his life, trying

to put his rage under control, to meet expectations, to "walk the line." The double meaning of this last expression conveys the idea that Leo followed the lines of the script and of life. However, Leo's behavior must not be confused with obedience: it is a strategic mimicry. Oforlea based his concept in the paper "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," written by Homi Kharshedji Bhabha in 1984 and later included in the book *The Location of Culture*. Reporting Oforlea's synthesis: "For Bhabha, mimicry is not about individuals copying, mimicking, or parodying the behaviors of others; instead mimicry articulates how oppressed people construct a subjectivity within the context of competing discourses about culture" (136). This statement reinforces the idea that Baldwin's characters had to train their skills to control "the evil within" so that they could endure "the evil without."

In the short-story "Sonny's Blues," Sonny struggles with drug addiction and his wish to become a jazz musician. Heroin, as well as the piano, represents a mental escape from the "evil within" and "the evil without." Baldwin defines his own adolescent conflicts as "the evil within" and refers to the oppressive forces of Harlem as "the evil without," where it is difficult to maintain the integrity of the self. In a moment of self-discovery, an adolescent can feel both menaced and represented by the "…whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue… It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances" (*Collected Essays* 296). The social context of the USA accounts for the circumstances that produced "whores and pimps and racketeers" and were reflected in many literary characters involved with violence and accusations of crime, like Bigger Thomas, a Chicago citizen from Wright's *Native Son* (1940) living in an impoverished area known as the Black Belt; the nameless Southern character from *Invisible Man* (1952), by Ralph Ellison, and Baldwinian characters in general, most of

them from Harlem: Fonny, in *If Beale Street Could Talk*; Arthur Montana, his family and friends, in *Just Above My Head*, and Leo and Sonny themselves, just to mention a few.

Sonny wishes to turn his piano abilities into something endurable, a profession. His wishes to be a jazz musician and his addiction to heroin posits him a nebulous dimension, where he cannot yet identify himself as emotionally stable to become a professional musician and does not feel strong enough to quit the addiction. This non-categorical, ambivalent personality—since Baldwin avoided the limitation of categorizations—marks Sonny's dangerous trajectory: he is always in the tightrope, and the story reveals that his safety depended on emotional and financial support, which, after many twists and turns, are provided by his brother. In the thesis *Backwards Saints: The Jazz Musician as Hero-Figure in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" and John Clellon Holmes "The Horn*," Stephen Oliver defends that, in the story, Baldwin built the jazz musician as a hero, not the one who meets the standards of an acceptable Blackness imposed by the white society, but a hero to his own community, by exposing his weaknesses and strengths, building identification and empathy. In turn, Sonny's brother "chose to take a path out of the ghetto that was supported by middle-class America; he joined the army, went to school, and got married" (39). Oliver considers that the narrator's "route, then, was a relatively easy one when compared to Sonny's, who lost both his parents before he was full-grown, and who had to justify his choice of music as a career to a critical world" (39). The narrator seems to choose tradition and live near Harlem, similarly to Caleb's decision to live near his parents so that he can assist them.

The quartet Sonny, his brother; Leo, and Caleb present some similarities. Leo and Sonny are the ones who leave their families and seek artistic careers; they miss the support of their family, especially of their brothers, and go through many difficulties alone until they achieve some stability. Sonny's brother and Caleb are the ones who, after some journeys, come back and live near their parents' houses. Sonny's brother teaches algebra and Caleb

becomes a preacher. Their stories are interwoven with complex brotherhood relationships, encompassing rupture and tradition with family and community.

Sonny, one of Baldwin's most sensitive characters, stands out for his delicate profile. His inner pain, "the evil within," can be analysed under two main aspects: 1) the artistic pain, an intense emotion that the symbolism of art can trigger in its spectators; 2) the pain of the learning process, which involves acquiring technical skills and polishing artistic drafts. When it comes to "the evil without," it is necessary to consider 1) the pain of being a Black artist without any financial or emotional support; 2) the pain of drug addiction, which collides and interacts with Sonny's obsessive and artistic sensitivity, along with his "solitary nature" (Oliver 42). Sonny directed his obsession for drugs to the practice of the piano, both releasing emotional pain and seeking professional balance, as his brother reports: "…even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life" (850). With his parents dead and his brother in the Army, Sonny started to live with Isabel's family, his brother's fiancée. He was still a teenager, were supposed to finish high school, but abandonment, loneliness, and despair to leave Harlem led him to addiction and obsession, depicted by resource of repetition:

> But I thought I'd never hear the end of that piano. At first, Isabel would write me, saying how nice it was that Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, or wherever he had been when he was supposed to be at school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime. And, after supper, he went back to that piano and stayed there until everybody went to bed. He was at the piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Then he bought a record player and started playing records. He'd play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes, and he'd improvise along with it on the piano. Or he'd play one section of

> the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano (849-50).

In Oliver's words: "… Sonny is nonetheless a hero-figure for his struggle to survive—and to identify—as a jazz musician" (34). Oliver defends that Sonny can be defined as a hero, not in the sense that he "fits one of White America's stereotypes of the African American," but because, in his singular honesty and simplicity, he is able to establish a dialogue with his community. Furthermore, through music, he speaks a universal language to universal listeners: "Sonny is not only playing or communicating his own suffering, but the suffering of an entire people" (Johansson 32). Oliver discusses the imposed stereotypes of identity over African American, comparing Ralph Elison' *Invisible Man* with James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues:"

> While Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, concentrates on identifying those who did not fit one of the many representations of the African American that society had come to expect, an equally famous African American writer, James Baldwin, in his short story "Sonny's Blues," tackles a prevalent African American stereotype: the jazz musician (33).

By depicting the complexity of Sonny's life and personality, Baldwin emphasizes the complexity of a human being, again refusing to oversimplify his characters into separated categories such as jazz-musician, drug addicted, or Black; Baldwin shows the communication of a wide multiplicity of factors, combined with traits of personality, developing, changing and being changed by personal and social relationships, social environment, wars and economic forces. Again, Baldwin breaks down stereotypes and highlights the "transitory" in life and in human beings. In Oliver's words, referring to the Invisible Man, "These 'transitory' ones are those who do not act as a type, but simply exist as humans trying to fulfil the potential of their lives. The simplicity of this act, however, leaves them in a terrible

isolation" (31). In order to succeed as artists, Sonny and Leo experience "terrible isolation," breaking away from family and suppressing emotions and behaviors in social circles.

1.3. Suppression of Emotions

The formation of any personality comprises daily suppression of emotions and behaviors, starting at birth and remaining throughout life. For Black children, hiding fear and rage are questions of survival. Baldwin's literary works expose the inner struggle of the characters in managing behavior so that their bodies could not betray their feelings. In "Down at the Cross," part of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin declares: "Negroes in this country … are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black. …the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared" (*Collected Essays* 302). In the literary works at study, "fear" and "rage" are the most recurrent words concerning emotions, sometimes with synonyms as scare, appallment, and terror, for fear; and anger, hatred, outrage, and indignancy, for rage. The aforementioned quote continues so:

> Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. Every effort made by the child's elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment (302).

By situating reaction "long before" perception, Baldwin alludes to a very early phase in infancy, when instincts prevail and personality is being formed, with repressive mechanisms operating in the unconscious mind, according to psychoanalytic theories. It is expected that parents, in general, have concerns and protect children, mainly in the first infancy, from any kind of accident. To Black parents, in particular, to the natural concerns are added those related to racism, which tends to increase as children enter socialization. The child feels the

fear of the parents and may start to adopt attitudes of vigilance and guilt—expressed by Baldwin in terms of "await" and "punishment." In his words: "He [the child] must be "good" not only in order to please his parents and not only to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel" (*Collected Essays* 302). The "nameless and impersonal" authority corresponds to the world outside, in the so neatly-designed scene of a child among adults in a Sunday afternoon in "Sonny's Blues," in which that child starts to feel that the time of innocence and domestic safety is about to finish:

> Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the lad's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.
>
> But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending (*Early Novels & Stories* 841).

In the process of coming of age, Sonny and Leo feel their fear grow at the same measure as their understanding of the menaces of racism. Fear is the dominant emotion in the first moment, derived from a sense of unprotection and misguidance, for they are still learning what to do and how to behave in society, most of the time ignoring or being unable to anticipate risks.

In *Train*, the ten-year-old Leo needs the escort of Caleb to go to the movie theater on Sunday afternoons, but he is repeatedly abandoned as soon as they leave home: "In short, to

remain on the block after Caleb's dismissal was to put myself at the mercy of the block and to put Caleb the the mercy of our parents" (24). The statement shows the vulnerability of the teenager character in an unsafe block in Harlem; the same feeling of unsafety is portrayed in the streets where Sonny and his brother lived. The quote continues: "This was surely the most terrible moment. The moment I turned away I was committed, I was trapped, and I then had miles to walk, so it seemed to me, before I would be out of sight, before the block ended and I could turn on to the avenue" (24). After turning the avenue, Leo fears being attacked and robbed: "These eyes were the eyes of children stronger than me, who would steal my movie money" (24). Here, we can sense that although very young, Leo is aware of the dangers of the block and of the avenue, transitioning from familiar risks to greater violences, already including police brutality: "these eyes were the eyes of white cops, whom I feared, whom I hated with a literally murderous hatred" (24), and contempt for the those who mock him, but do nothing to protect him: "these eyes were the eyes of old folks who also thought I was a sissy and who might wonder what I was doing on this avenue by myself" (24).

Even in his own neighbourhood, Leo fears being bullied by Caleb's friends: "I forced myself to walk very slowly, … feeling that all the block was watching me, and feeling—which was odd—that I deserved it" (*Train* 24). The *unconscious* guilt undermines his self-esteem and raises doubts about his right to transit, to exist. It is only in retrospect that Leo is able to recognize the heaviness of the situation. Due to his condition of vulnerability as a Black child, Leo feels threatened by all kinds of people: older bullies, white police officers, and neighbours. He experiences unsafety and hostility instead of comfort and protection in his own neighbourhood, among his own community.

Since unaccompanied children are not allowed in the movie house, Leo must approach unknown adults he judges trustworthy to let him in. A stronger fear usually takes hold of him, and yet he must wait for Caleb before entering home. The weekly cycle of fear grows into

despair and then into rage, marking the process of growing up. First, his rage is addressed to Caleb, then to (white) police, and then to white racist people.

Despite fear and rage, it is noticeable the development of strategies adopted by Leo to reach the house theater; to manage to enter it; to find Caleb and reach home while keeping himself safe in the process. Leo never gives up going to the movie house: he loves movies and wishes to become an actor. The fears he hides and the dangers he runs denote the influence of social violence over Black young boys. It reminds one of a hero's saga. According to Oliver, Baldwin depicts a hero that defies common sense; becoming a hero in a Black community implies taking risks since early childhood, with precocious awareness of the power of racism, to which he reacts with self-suppression of emotions and behaviors.

The transition from childhood to puberty is generally a natural cause of anxiety, not only for biological reasons, but for the fear of the unknown and of the coming responsibilities. In Baldwin's works, this anxiety is increased by the danger outside. The American Dream is the Black children nightmare, with the approach of adult life and urban violence. Baldwin exposes the vulnerability of the characters in the process of growing up and adding rage to their fears. Although fear never leaves a human being, it may be subdued by rage, hatred, sense of injustice, and wishes of revenge; those feelings are counterbalanced, though, by needs of self-preservation and self-sustenance.

In the article "On James Baldwin and Black Rage," the philosopher Myisha Cherry elucidates "Baldwin's moral psychology of anger in general, and Black rage in particular" and presents a reformulation of the concept of Black rage based on Baldwin views presented in his nonfiction. Cherry concedes that "[a]nger at moral injury can arise in response to a variety of wrongdoings, regardless of its racial nature" and that "Baldwin moves from simply giving an account of anger at moral injury to an account of Black rage" (3). As she argues, according to Baldwin, "Black rage has several causes," and racial mistreatment is the first one. In the

following excerpt, Cherry gives an account of Baldwin's body of sociological writings concerning Harlem and the oppressive racism imposed on its inhabitants by institutionalized racism. Cherry's study on Baldwin's nonfictional papers can be applied in our study of fictional works, since it presents insightful analyses on rage:

> This rage hangs over the streets of Harlem like storm clouds as the outraged witness police officers populate their neighborhoods. Black inhabitants have this rage not only because they are surveilled but because they are also disenfranchised, forced to live in unlivable conditions, and presented with few to no opportunities to escape (3).

Sonny manifests rage and fury against the precarious living conditions: "He slammed the window so hard I thought the glass would fly out, and turned back to me. "And I'm sick of the stink of these garbage cans!" (*Early Novels & Stories* 849). He wants to leave Harlem immediately, but his brother asks him to at least finish school. A similar representation is given in *Train*, with descriptions of hanger, cold, noise, insalubrity, precarious public services, and property speculation:

> Neither Rabinowitz [the landlord] nor the city were alert about collecting garbage or shovelling away snow; … we caught and killed the rats; a great chunk of the kitchen ceiling fell one winter, narrowly missing our mother. We all hated Rabinowitz with a perfectly exquisite hatred, great, gross, abject liar of a Jew—and this word in our father's mouth was terrible, as dripping with venom a mango is with juice—and we would have been happy to see our proud father kill him. We would have been glad to help. But our father did nothing of the sort (*Train* 13).

In the paper "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," Baldwin addresses the relationship between Jews and Blacks in America, more specifically in Harlem, exploring many perspectives of the supposed anti-semitism presented in the title. In the first part, Baldwin argues that what Black people hate in their oppressors is not the fact that they are

Jews, considering that not all Jews are oppressors. They hate being exploited, humiliated, and bullied by school teachers, police officers, shopkeepers, artists, be them Jews or not. The second part opens with the straightforward argument: "The root of anti-Semitism among Negroes is, ironically, the relationship of colored peoples—all over the globe—to the Christian world. This is a fact which may be difficult to grasp," Baldwin continues, a fact "aggravated by the adoption, on the part of colored people now, of the most devastating of the Christian vices" (741), encompassing prejudices of religion among Black protestants. Another source of hatred lies in the fact that native or immigrant Jews have managed to thrive in the USA by opening businesses in Blacks communities and so being able to provide some safety and comfort for their children: "It is bitter to watch the Jewish storekeeper locking up his store for the night, and going home. Going, with *your* money in his pocket, to a clean neighborhood, miles from you, which you will not be allowed to enter" (741, italics in original). Inequality and economic disparities are contributing factors to social division.

Another important factor concerns the history of the Jews in the world in comparison with the history of Blacks in the USA: "Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honored, is certainly known: the black history has been blasted, maligned, and despised" (742). Also, Baldwin reminds us that, for the most part, Jews descend from Europe and are white: "The Jew is a white man, and when white men rise up against oppression, they are heroes: when black men rise, they have reverted to their native savagery" (742). It is also mentioned that the native Black citizen is mistreated in his own country and has no embassy to resource to.

In the last part of the essay, Baldwin declares: "All racist positions baffle and appall me. None of us are that different from one another, neither that much better nor that much worse" (748). He advises against envy and anger, saying that he personally refuses to hate people, a lesson he learned from Christians: "I ceased to practice what the Christians

practiced" (748), meaning that he adopted the lesson of love and abandoned practices of hatred and hostility. So, the "supposed" anti-semitism in the title of the essay refers not to anti-semitism, but to anti-oppression. In *Train*, when Leo says he would gladly help his father kill the Jew landlord, it is not because he is Jew, since Leo's family are not obsessive religious Christian people; it refers to the oppression and inequality imposed by the economic exploitation, the lack of empathy, and the religious hypocrisy of Jews in the neighbourhood.

Cherry emphasizes that Black rage is not merely self-referential, since it encompasses indignancy about mistreatments against other Blacks. Sonny and Caleb hate Rabinowitz not only because of injustice—he is impertinent when collecting rent and indifferent when it comes to building maintenance—, but primarily because of the humiliation imposed on their father, who decidedly submitted to threats of eviction. Beyond that, it is possible to consider that more empathy was expected from Jews by Blacks, but that is not what happens: what they receive from Jews is exploitation and oppression based on racism. To Leo's father, an experienced old man who has lived through repeated intimidations, submission is a survival strategy. He has learned to master rage in front of landlords, employers, creditors, police officers. Children's contempt for his supposed cowardice does not shake him, for he knows that their permanence depended on submission.

In "The Devil Finds Work," Baldwin writes: "One of the necessities of being black, and knowing it, is to accept the hard discipline of learning to avoid useless anger, and needless loss of life: every mother and his mother's mother's mother's brother is needed" (*Collected Essays* 562). While reviewing that essay, Cherry argues that Baldwinian Black rage dignifies Blacks "as people with agential capacities" (2), associating agential capacity with leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.

Cherry's book *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*, published in 2021, represents the continuation of a legacy started by Lorde in the lecture delivered in June 1981 and published under the title "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." Lorde's speech breaks taboos about anger, shame, and guilt. She denounces that white women usually suppress anger and keep silent in face of racism; also, they fear and avoid Black women anger. In turn, Black women are taught to behave as to suppress anger and adopt submission, a behavior that fits the purposes of oppressors:

> So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the Angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people - against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving towards coalition and effective action (Lorde 128).

Then Lorde asks the audience to set fear, guilt, and differences aside and unite anger against the strong oppressive forces of patriarchy and racism. "Anger is loaded with information and energy" (127). "Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes" (129). With those powerful sentences, Lorde motivated activists and academics towards a new understanding of anger as a powerful source of energy. In *The Case for Rage*, Cherry expanded Lorde's insights of anger and came up with the classification of "Lordean rage" to identify the rage "that is both virtuous and productive" (Rosner). Other classifications include "rogue rage" and "narcissistic rage," this last one collected from bell hooks and meaning a selfish feeling that does not aim transformation, only self-satisfaction.

Cherry distinguishes useful from useless rage and their connection to love and hatred; to put it simply, Black rage is useless when it contains hate and useful when it contains love. The complexity of that statement lies on the multiple layers it aggregates: Black rage is individual; the union of the individualities "can lead to collective action" (6) and the surge of

social movements, in which case it tends to be useful. In order to distinguish rage (or anger) from hatred, Cherry explains that, in general, rage is useless when it includes hatred; for Blacks, such hate can cause self-destruction, physical and existential death. In Baldwin's personal case, useless hatred usually led him to a "self-destroying limbo of hatred and fear from which he could not write" (*Collected Essays* 16). In turn, useful Black rage encompasses creativeness, solidarity, criticality, empathy, support, and love.

When Cherry (and Baldwin) declares that useless Black rage leads to self-destruction, we cannot help but remember that Leo's father turns to drinking as a way to soothe bitterness and becomes an alcoholic. Sonny's addiction to heroin is a similar case of a misguided rage leading to self-destruction. Leo, by observing the limbo in which his father lived, chooses a different path. Instead of embracing passivity and submission, he carries his Black rage with him in search of a brighter future. In the process of coming of age, however, he experiences instabilities in his attempts to cope with rage; sometimes he failed, other times he succeeded.

The novel presents a number of strategies developed or simply improvised to disguise rage and fury. Leo alternates rude answers and hostile silences in face of racist questions. Because of that, people stick labels to his personality, which enrages him even more. An important scene is key to understanding Leo's rage and strategy to subdue it: by accompanying Barbara to a party, he is introduced to Lola and Saul Saint-Marquand, owners of The Actors Studio. Usually too defensive and self-conscious, Leo understands that Saul is undervaluing him because of his lack of education when Saul asks if he knew Ethel Waters. He then elaborates a strategy:

> I choked on my food, which now seemed, as, in a way it was, stolen, and my scotch burned me. But of course I was going to be cool, and, in any case, I needed time to calculate, and so I used my splutter and my cough to make my statement impeccably

> ingenuous and juvenile: 'I hear she's a marvellous actress, too, but I've never seen her (*Train* 71).

Because Leo is aware of the importance of that meeting to his career, he acts cheerfully, until Saul provoques him with the statement: "But our methods at the Workshop are extremely severe and not everyone can bring to the Workshop the necessary background, the background which will enable them to achieve the necessary *discipline*" (italics in original), and asks what Leo considered his qualifications to be. At this point, Leo answers: "I think you're looking at them. …I can't be as definite as Miss King because of the great difference in our backgrounds" (75). Then Leo reflects on the loss of self-command and reproaches himself. The following passage highlights the deep rage and Leo's attempts to master instead of surrender to it:

> I was bitter, I was twisted out of shape with rage; and I raged at myself for being enraged. … I was not,—was I?—stupidly and servilely to do the worlds' dirty work for it and permit its tangled blind and merciless reaction to the fact of my color also to become my own? How could I hope for, how could I deserve my liberation, if I became my own jailer and myself turned the key which locked the mighty doors? But my rage was there, it was there, it pretended to sleep but it never slept, the nearest touch of a feather was enough to bring it howling, roaring out. It had no sight, no measure, no precision, and no justice: and it was my master still (76-77).

Cherry uses the term "surrender" in opposition to "resist:" "Consciously living with anger (i.e., controlling it) *requires* us to avoid useless anger. Surrendering to anger (i.e., allowing it to control you) can result in a loss of Black life" (8, italics in original). Awareness is a necessary ability to survive and even succeed. This awareness is pointed out in Baldwin's essays, where he describes personal experiences with boiling rage and the growing understanding that self-control was necessary to transform boiling rage into articulate rage.

The abovementioned literary quote reveals that Leo is conscious of the importance of rage control, although he is still unable to articulate it.

As the narrative unfolds, we notice developments in Leo's process of self-control via strategies such as irony, mimicry, and silence. Those strategies function externally, in social interactions, as outlets of rage, but they work also internally, via creativity, cognitive elaboration. Leo starts to apply those fabricated strategies to self-benefit, making use of oppressive situations to improve his acting skills. In Oforlea's words: "By using mimicry to perform how discourses function socially and culturally, Leo hopes to achieve a sense of self articulation just as Baldwin sought to write beyond the limits of what he called the social protest novel" (135). As this dissertation defends, this process of control and articulation ends up in sublimation, to be discussed in Chapter Three.

1.4. Suppression of Behavior

Baldwinian Black characters, especially children, teenagers and young adults, soon learn, from their older brothers and parents, by speech, by imitation, or by intuition, how they should behave in order to avoid violence. In the literary works analysed, self-protection requires suppression of attitudes, making the characters become too self-conscious. In this sense, inter-racial contact must be avoided, and it is up to Black people to follow implicit rules, as noted in the literary works, such as a) never staring at white people; b) never sitting near them on buses; c) never dancing, touching, having sex or marrying whites. The attitude of never staring at white people contains reminiscences of slavery and violent methods of domination, as discussed by Dawson. In the following excerpt, from *Train*, Leo describes a scene in which he and Caleb are in a bus transitioning from Harlem to downtown. The scene is key to the analysis because it provides a rich description of the child's awareness about environmental racism, social inequality, and oppression over Black bodies:

> The bus rolled on, turned west at 116th Street, rolled alongside Morningside Park for a while, turned again on 110th Street, and started rolling out of Harlem. This was (in those days) a kind of transition neighbourhood; white boys and black boys were in the streets, and white girls and black girls, some carrying books; and we whirled past black and white figures sitting on the benches outside of Central Park, or walking up and down the pathetic green. Now the buildings began to be higher and cleaner, canopies and doormen appeared, and black and white messengers, on bicycles. More and more white people got on the bus, in furs and perfumes and hats, carrying newspapers and expensive looking packages. **Instinctively, Caleb and I sat closer together. I kept my eyes on the streets, in order not to look at the people on the bus.** I wondered how we were to fox them if we couldn't even bear to look at them. I looked up, into the eyes of a red-faced, black-haired, corpulent man, who had, briefly and idly, looked up from his newspaper. … He glanced at my brother. Then he returned to his newspaper. Then all of my ambitions seemed flat and ridiculous. How could we fox them if we could neither bear to look at them, nor bear it when they looked at us? And *who* are they, anyway? Which was the really terrible, the boomeranging question. And one always felt: maybe they're right. Maybe you *are* nothing but a nigger, and the life you lead, or the life they make you lead, is the only life you deserve. (173-4, italics in original, bold added).

The self-suppressive behavior of "not looking at the people on the bus" hides an unconscious attitude, expressed by the word "Instinctively." Caleb and Leo are strongly immersed in a racist society and aware of its dangers, and their reaction to this society is an instinct of self-protection. After sitting "closer together," the next attitude—this one more conscious—is to avoid looking and, consequently, confrontation. Leo defies the implicit rules, but he also understands that the forces against Black boys are powerful. As Baldwin writes in "Sonny's

Blues:" "These boys, now, … were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage" (*Early Novels & Stories* 832). However, it is an unmastered rage, useless and, for this reason, dangerous. The scene recalls anti-segregation movements in the United States. Published in 1969, the novel contemplates a victory, on the part of Black communities, implied by the fact that the Black boys could travel undisturbed. Subtly, however, the scene reveals the boy's fear and defiance. Baldwin reserved to Leo the role of defying the white passenger; regardless Leo had or not solid knowledge about segregation and bus boycotts, he is aware of and intimidated by class distinction, increased by environmental racism. The exchange of glances in the scene does not allude to curiosity or human connection; beyond alluding to segregation, Leo's staring lay claims to equality and territorial accessibility. Leo transits from self-suppression to defiance. The term "transition," symbolized by the bus movement, is a strong motif in the excerpt, representing the character's growing social-political awareness, growing cognitive complexity in formulating strategies, and the increasing oppression against Black teenagers. For a moment, Leo tests his courage to defend his right to be in the territory, unconsciously contesting the so-called "proper behavior" by staring at a white passenger.

In the thesis *American Ethni/Cities: Critical Geography, Subject Formation, and the Urban Representations of Abraham Cahan, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin*, Joshua Stone presents a study articulating cultural, human and critic geography with literary works, aiming to widen the understanding of subject formation resulting from the relationship and the dynamics of space and place, environment, nature and culture. Stone dedicates Chapter Four, "James Baldwin and the Urban Production of American Masculinity" to analyze "the discursive and spatial production of race, nationality, religion, and class" (11), choosing the novels *Another Country* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, for their descriptive spatiality, to meet his purpose. He states that "the domestic, urban, and parochial spaces that collectively

constitute Harlem as the overarching medium through which John develops as a subject" (205). The name "John" could be replaced by "Leo," "Sonny," "Caleb" and other Baldwinian characters, since Stone's analysis perfectly captures the essence of Baldwinian spatiality:

> An examination of these spaces in Baldwin's novel shows how Harlem emerges simultaneously as a catalyst of resistance, creativity, and spiritual transcendence, as well as an engine of internalized oppression that powerfully compels its residents to comply with the delusory and short-sighted norms perpetuated by the dominant culture" (206).

In another scene in a public transport, Leo describes a situation in which he got lost and the panic he felt for being alone among white people:

> I rushed off the train, terrified of what these white people might do to me with no coloured person around to protect me—even to scold me, even to beat me; at least their touch was familiar, and I knew that they did not, after all, intend to kill me—and got to another train only because I saw a black man on it (*Train* 27).

This passage offers important insights. First, the author makes use of autobiographical elements to depict the fears of the character in the development from childhood to adolescence; it portrays the strategic attitudes developed by the narrator in order to return home safely; finally, it shows racism under a Black child's perspective, in this way demystifying and rectifying the misconception that Black people, especially youngs, are violent and dangerous, and denouncing the repeated violence committed by whites against Black individuals.

In another passage, walking Madison Square Garden, Leo and Caleb behave as to pass unnoticed:

> I **kept my hands in my pockets** (and so did Caleb) so I could not be accused of molesting any of the women who jostled past, and **kept my eyes carefully**

> **expressionless** so I could not be accused of lusting after the women, or desiring the death of the men. … And I was aware—for the first time, though not for the last—that I was with Caleb, whose danger, since he was so much more visible, was greater than mine (*Train* 175, bold added).

At this point, self-suppression grows in importance and transcends the meaning of "proper behavior." The boys find themselves in such an oppressive situation that self-suppression acquires the importance—but not the power—of preventing accusations of sexual crimes. In many essays and fiction, Baldwin has tackled myths concerning the Black man as a rapist, enticing, well-endowed, highlighting how those myths can be destructive to Black communities and nations in general.

Isadora Castro explores those myths in *Black Manhood in Richard Wright's* Native Son *and James Baldwin's* If Beale Street Could Talk*: Racial Criminalization, Death, and the Myth of the Black Rapist*. The work approaches the controversy between Baldwin and Richard Wright in relation to the strategies each one applies to portray Black characters. Much of Baldwin's essays and fiction derive from *Native Son*. Baldwin strongly opposed Wright's depiction of Black men, claiming that it reinforced "stereotypes and caricatures offered by white supremacy" (Castro 137). Baldwin's career became, in a way, tied to his strong criticism of Wright's Bigger Thomas (Castro; Stone). Indeed, Baldwinian characters tend to be more *aware* of their condition and, as I have been trying to show, more active in suppressing emotions and behavior, in developing strategies of self-security and, finally, in reaching sublimation by investing their Black rage into artistic careers.

In Book Two of *Train*, which marks the transition of Leo into adulthood, job market and artistic careers, a replication of "the myth of the Black rapist," as investigated by Castro in "Chapter Three—Rape and the Myth of the Black Rapist," is presented in a scene with Madeleine, a thirty-year-old white actress with whom the nineteen-year-old Leo has sexual

intercourse. Baldwin even depicts the weight of the white feminine body over the Black young man, in a scene that alludes to Bigger putting Mary Dalton to bed: "Madeleine's head was on my chest. She snored very lightly, and drooled a little bit. Her weight was intolerable, and I hated it. I was terribly, terribly afraid. I knew that something awful was going to happen" (*Train* 155). When Madeleine goes to work, Leo feels guilt and fears the consequences of their conjunction. After years of self-suppression, he is now about to get an opportunity as a play-actor, and an act like that could put himself and his career at risk: "Leo. You are more than nineteen years old. What the fuck do you think you're doing, with your *life*?" (156, italics in original). Again, he reprimands himself for having failed self-suppression, which he has been training since childhood. Also, he feels remorse for having abandoned and disappointed his parents. The mother figure here appears as a censor: "I listened to the river; but I saw my mother's face" (156). From what has been exposed, Blackness encompasses the suppression of emotions, such as fear and rage, and of behavior, decisions, and attitudes, a suppression imposed by oppression and used as strategies of self-protection. Now, it is worth discussing the suppression of language and its multiple meanings.

1.5. Suppression of Language

Both in *Train* and in "Sonny's Blues," inarticulation and struggles with language are conveyed by body language descriptions and expressions like "I couldn't speak," "impenetrable truth" (*Train* 7), and "speechless communication" (71). The narrative strategies carry multiple meanings of silence. This section aims to discuss some of those meanings by approaching self-suppression, inarticulation, and self-expression, in light of Cherry's studies on Black rage. I argue that, for Baldwin, language can be used strategically and with a purpose, and one must learn how to transform anger and inarticulateness into artistic expression.

Jones highlights the duality of presence/absence in the titles of Baldwin's oeuvre, which evokes absence and loss, "positing a sense of making manifest … which exceeds the representational boundaries of the existing status quo. Each affirms, in other words, the presence of the 'unspeakable'" (117). Such paradox is a resource to represent literary absences; beyond that, it encompasses the symbolic binarism resulting from implicit segregations. In Jones's definition: "Rather than being two discrete categories that are wholly separate from one another, presence and absence are reframed as contingent terms, in which each only exists as a function of the other" (117). In that sense, speech and silence forms a duality in which the characters are in the process of learning how to transform inarticulated silence into purposeful silence or assertive speech, depending on the goals, the context, and the social circle.

In the first part of *Train*, Book One: "The House Nigger," Leo presents difficulties in speaking, mostly because he is recovering from a heart attack and is appalled by the experience: "I was trying to speak, but I couldn't speak" (4). He confesses he is afraid to die: "My own panic, at once stifling like a cloak, and distant like the wind, made me realize how frightened Barbara was, and how gallant" (6). Three times he tries to speak, but Barbara impedes him, so the reader is not told what were the words he wanted to say; the meaning is conveyed by the context: "'Barbara?–' 'Be quiet, Leo. There'll be time for talking later. Don't try to talk now.' 'I have something to say.' 'Later, my dear. Later'" (7). Her attitude symbolizes taboos concerning death and speech. The imminence of death interferes with the value of speech. Apparently, she wants him to save energy and seems to be sure about his recovery. Yet, she avoids listening to what could be his last words, as if dismissing undesirable thoughts of departure and loss.

The novel depicts the infancy of Leo and his discoveries about the importance of balancing speech and silence, of selecting words and restraining gestures and looks. When he

was informed that family's relatives and friends were coming to visit, he resented the fact that his parents bought for the visitors an amount of food they would not buy for themselves: "How come we could do all this for others and not for ourselves? But I knew better than to give tongue to this question" (*Train* 20).

Leo feels contempt for his father, especially because of his drinking habit, while he admires the mother for her beauty, vivacity, energy, and resilience, but he keeps those feelings to himself. In a first reading, it might seem obvious enough that there is an Oedipus Complex operating here:

> I am not being coy or colloquial but bluntly and sadly matter of fact when I say that I will now never know what she saw in him. … I used to wonder how she took it, how she bore it—his rages, his tears, his cowardice. On Saturday nights he was almost always evil, drunk and maudlin (15).

However, there are complex issues, such as self-development and rupture with the past, just to name a few. Firstly, Baldwin contested Psychoanalysis in the same measure that he contested Wright's *Native Son*. In the article "James Baldwin's Psychoanalysis," Dorothy Stringer traces back the connection between Baldwin and Psychoanalysis, presenting a review of his writings and interviews on the theme and contextualizing psychotherapy and the prevailing idea of "adjustment," especially concerning homo and bisexuality, in the 1950s.

It is possible to list many reasons for Baldwin's contempt of Psychoanalysis: he refused categorizations, which contrasted with rigid and excluding psychotherapy concepts and practices. The expected result of "adjustment" from a queer individual after years of sections of expensive talking cure was strongly criticized by Baldwin. Stringer explains that "adjustment" was the project of adapting the individual to the conventional social demands of their broader community" (113).

Beyond that, Freud's racist and homophobic statements only served to reinforce this aversion. Baldwin frequently stated that "introspection can be a lie and psychoanalysis a Potemkin village of the mind" (Stringer 112), meaning that a social and universal problem so important as racism cannot be treated by blaming Black people and restricting their existence by telling them how to feel, behave, and speak. At this point, Baldwin's view converges into his fiction, in characters that, firstly, feel fear and rage, lower their heads and gaze, and are unable to express clearly. Gradually, however, they make progress in terms of social consciousness and self-knowledge.

The aforementioned excerpt, beyond Oedipus Complex, can be understood as happenings from childhood which represent ruptures with the past, a past of slavery and oppression that led many Black citizens to addiction in alcohol and other drugs. Baldwin contrasts Leo's father's choice to drinking with his mother's endurance, showing the limited individual choices in a geopolitical environment of violence, exploitation, pollution, and lack of leisure. As a way to demonstrate the break with tradition, the mother's death coincides with Leo's starring night as an actor: "while she was dressing to my opening, she had a stroke and fell into a coma from which she never recovered consciousness, and she died two days later" (339), symbolizing Leo's final rupture with tradition and the flourishing of his career.

I believe that there are differences between the unspeakable in the general sense and in the Baldwinian sense. In the first case, it encompasses a wide range of perspectives, imposed by repression (in the Freudian line), education, religion, taboos, myths, hierarchy, and others. In the Baldwinian case, the unspeakable encompasses lack of education, inarticulation, and social subjugation; on the other side, it also depicts intentionality, when the characters decide to remain silent, be it to protect the self, the other, or the relationship. According to Freud, civilization is only possible because of repression since childhood. Every person is educated to a certain expected behavior concerning manners and speech. A child learns when and what

is proper to say in each situation; learns to repress love and anger, to be polite, to follow rules, to obey hierarchy, to renounce instincts, as can be read in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he writes: "civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct."

All those repressive standards are stronger over a Black child, for the coercion against a Black and a white child or teenager have different measures. Repression of language is firstly imposed by mother-figures and plays an important role in the Black community. The characters must know how to balance speech and silence, for silence is also considered punishable, especially among white authorities, namely white police officers. However, it is still safer to be silent, which requires a self-control so strong that it must be trained from early childhood. In Baldwin's words: "It could scarcely be otherwise, since a child's major attention has to be concentrated on how to fit into a world which, with every passing hour, reveals itself as merciless" (*Collective Essays* 12). The unspeakable works as self-defense against family authority, but it also represents social oppression: "I have lived long enough to see my language stolen" (*Train* 91).

In "Sonny's Blues," inarticulation denotes ambivalent feelings between the brothers and their personal struggles to reach an agreement. Byerman calls attention to the absence of the narrator's name, which does not mean he plays a secondary role. Critics "differ on whether the story is primarily Sonny's or the narrator's" (367). The brother-narrator struggles with language to make sense of his recollections while reflecting about his attitudes toward Sonny. He transmits a sense of guilt and shame for having neglected Sonny's need for caring and listening. Also, the narrator avoids naming his feelings when he receives Sonny's letter. He felt "like a bastard" (836), not explaining why, apparently relying on the readers' empathy to understand his meanings. The letter represents a turning point to the narrator, who perceived the depth of his loneliness through the comfort Sonny's words provided, evidencing that the fraternal connection was lacking much of his counterpart of support and listening.

David Jones states that "Baldwin frequently gestures towards the realm of non-speech and deploys imagery that evokes a sense of concealment and restriction" (125), making use of body language, gestures, and silences to that purpose. Some corporal expressions are deliberately intentional, alternating with instinctual reactions. Baldwin artfully depicts body language to transmit emotions and thoughts without words, since the interlocutors share cultural aspects of communication. Inarticulate, Sonny speaks with music and body language:

> "…I don't want to be a classical pianist. That isn't what interests me. I mean"—he paused, looking hard at me, as though his eyes would help me to understand, and then gestured helplessly, as though perhaps his hand would help—"I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study *everything*, but, I mean, I want to play *with*—jazz musicians." He stopped. "I want to play jazz," he said" (*Early Novels and Stories* 846, italics in original).

Sonny's gestures and eye contact reveals a struggle with language and a particular difficulty to say the word *jazz*, maybe because misconceptions around *jazz* turn this term a taboo built over bias and prejudice, according to Jones. "Indeed, for all his obvious eloquence," Jones argues, "Baldwin repeatedly makes reference to the limitations of language and the compulsion placed on non-white and non-heteronormative persons to occupy a territory beyond the boundaries of representation" (125). Sonny has no difficulty in telling what he does not want: "I don't want to be a classical pianist. That isn't what interests me," easily rejecting the stereotype of the elitist white artist. His struggle with language derives from the bias within his own community, since the jazz musician "represents only a small segment of the African American population" (Oliver 31). Oliver argues that, although the jazz musician is superficially accepted by the White America, his Black humanity is not. So, Sonny rejects the elitist stereotype, but remains trapped in the figure of the Black artist that "fits one of White America's stereotypes" (31).

As seen, eye contact plays a relevant part in the dialogue, since Sonny looked hard at the narrator, trying to make his eyes speak for himself. Trudier Harris dedicates the essay "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*" to analyzing how eyes could be revealing, encouraging or discouraging, establishing communication without the mediation of language, being language themselves. She expands the symbology of the eyes to explore family issues, such as abandonment and refuge, in the study of Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The article approaches the support and the effort put by the members of Tish's family to release her fiancé, Fonny, from jail, where he faces a false accusation of rape, contrasting with the hostility and coldness of Fonny's mother and sisters. For the present dissertation, what stands out is Harris's insights about "Baldwin's attention to the Black family" (65), where love is a new religion. She points out the transition from the authoritarian religion in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to the sacred family love in *If Beale Street Could Talk*; the first novel marks Baldwin's debut and the other is the third to last. In Harris's words: "*If Beale Street Could Talk* is the realization of the family relationship Baldwin has been struggling for years to portray. Family members give freely but expect nothing in return" (65). The same pattern is noticed by David Leeming, Baldwin's friend and biographer, concerning *Train*: "The Proudhammer family as a whole has autobiographical as well as larger symbolic significance. More idealized than real, it is the cohesive Black family, a sociological power base that will take more complex form later, in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head* (375). Together with *Train*, those novels form what critics classified as Baldwin's later novels, written during travels to different countries and continents, reflecting transition, change, and rupture, especially with religion, since, as Harris noted, the characters put their faith in each other, in love and family bonds, not on religion, church or unaccessible gods.

Family and brotherhood represent a strong motif in the works studied. A common ground is found in the importance of emotional and financial support provided by family

members. The unspeakable in "Sonny" is more connected with conflictual feelings, denoting the relevance of the reconciliation with family and community. As stated by Oliver, "…Sonny wants to transcend his condition on his own terms, without the help of anyone… Unfortunately, Sonny is not able to achieve the transcendence he hopes for by himself, and he falls into the trap of relying on heroin to keep from suffering" (40-1). Studying silence in the story, Johansson states: "Sonny lives and breathes music. Through music, he can speak to his brother, which leaves his brother in tears" (32). She continues: "Sonny is not only playing or communicating his own suffering, but the suffering of an entire people" (32), a statement that aligns with Oliver's insights on the jazz-hero and the Black community and their means of art and expression.

Fear and rage can cause anguish that impedes speaking and articulation. An example can be observed in *Train*, after a police raid which triggered indignation and raised questions on justice and injustice:

> "They [white police] got some kind of disease. I hope to God it kills them soon. … But it is liable to kill us before it kills them."
>
> I said nothing. I said nothing because what he said was true, and I knew it. It seemed, now, that I had always known it, though I had never been able to say it. But I did not understand it. I was filled with an awful wonder, it hurt my chest and paralysed my tongue. *Because you're black* (47, italics in original).

Standing for "racism," the word "disease" is an extended metaphor of something that kills. Caleb's words: "But it is liable to kill us before it kills them" would sound prophetic, since it affected Leo with symptoms that would culminate in a heart attack when he was 39. The excerpt points to the paradoxical idea of a disease that kills not the haters, but the hated, and is key in expressing the extent to which racism causes undeniable damage to society in general. The presence of racism as the agent of a disease hosted by racists and spread among Black

people means the moral destruction of the whole society, with damage for both sides, as Baldwin stated: "It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality" (*Collected Essays* 17), which means that peace and safety cannot be flourish where violence and brutality abound.

Leo's description of "an awful wonder" that "hurt my chest and paralysed my tongue" (47) is similar to heart attack symptoms and can be connected to the opening lines of the novel: "The heart attack was strange—fear is strange. I knew I had been working too hard. I had been warned. But I have always worked too hard" (3). Hard working is the *apparent* cause of the heart attack, but the novel subtly undermines this idea by tracing back Leo's infancy and all the oppression and self-suppression he underwent until he reached the spotlight. Seconding Cherry, Black rage is useless when it kills; instead, it must be made useful, with strategic balance between speech, language, and silence.

Over time, the characters become aware of the importance of silence as well as of well-articulated language, and the use of strategies becomes more prominent. In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin declares: "my technique had been silence" (*Collected Essays* 79), referring to the fights with his father. In "Many Thousands Gone," he presents a critique to the portrayal of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, arguing that "[t]hose Negroes who surround him [when visiting Bigger in jail] … might be considered as far richer and far more subtle and accurate illustrations of the ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and **the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival** (27, bold added).

This criticism had put Baldwin in the limelight. As shown by Castro, Baldwinian characters tend to present features that emphasize Baldwin's beliefs and contrast with Bigger Thomas. What we see in Leo, Caleb, Sonny, and the brother-narrator are Black characters in their singularities and complexities, developing strategies and aware of the importance of

speech: Caleb becomes a priest and must convince through religious discourse. Sonny knows that he must reestablish his communication with the world (family, friends, professional partners) if he wants to succeed as a jazz musician. The brother-narrator managed to become a teacher of Algebra, purchase an apartment in a housing project and leave Harlem. His search for emotional stability involves marrying Isabel and having three children, although his idealized stability is shaken by the death of his daughter Grace, which led him to admit that Sonny was his emotional support as well. Leo is ashamed of his lack of background and makes the most of every opportunity to acquire cultural knowledge, especially by studying plays and techniques. Beyond that, he understands that communication is one of the most important abilities for actors and, in order to master it, he must reach some emotional balance, which requires self-knowledge, connection with inner pain and self-control of rage and fear. The following excerpt shows the benefits of mastering language, both professionally and personally:

> And this possibility, the possibility of creating my language out of my pain, of using my pain to create myself, while cruelly locked in the depths of me, like the beginning of life and the beginning of death, yet seemed, for an instant, to be on the very tip of my tongue. My pain was the horse that I must learn to ride. I flickered my cigarette out of the window and watched it drop and die. I thought of throwing myself after it. I was no rider and pain was no horse (*Train* 77).

The Greek idea of emotions as a horse and humans being riders (Plato) is dismantled by the unmotivated aspiring actor, in a moment of rage, triggered by a humiliating conversation with a white director. Leo is in the process of self-control, trying to strategically suppress his rage every time he was humiliated by white company; as it occurred frequently, controlling rage was more difficult than disguising fear or contempt. Over time, Leo manages to give vent to rage through the characters onstage, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

When Leo finally expresses himself freely, the context presented to be very specific: he was by then a wealthy and acclaimed actor, owned a mansion, and was the host of Barbara's family. After a heated discussion over racism, Barbara's mother, Mrs King, said:

> "Why, we're embarrassing Mr Proudhammer." And she finished her drink, and set it down; the girl could drink.
>
> I rose to give her a refill. I said, "You're not embarrassing me. But there's no point in pretending that Negroes are treated like white people in this country because they're not, and we all know that" (*Train* 362).

This apparently simple statement could not be delivered at any other point in the character's life: not when he was an apprentice actor, a driver, or a waiter; and not in his parents' house; also, by that time, he hadn't yet mastered Black rage and directed self-suppression into artistic expression.

To conclude with, the journey of the Black artists in Harlem is marked by violence, lack of background, and police brutality. As the characters grow up, they get familiar with violence and are triggered by it. Sonny falls to drug abuse, Leo witnesses trauma. As teenagers, they make their first incursions into crimes, feel the weight of oppression, and start to experience loneliness and despair.

Chapter Two—Beyond Freedom: The Social Mechanics of Oppression in Baldwin's Fiction

> *We was already in jail, you understand, but they had a jail inside the jail.*
>
> —James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*

> *And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.*
>
> —James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

In the present chapter, I aim to investigate how oppression is portrayed in Baldwin's literary works *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and "Sonny's Blues" and how it affects the characters in their individual lives, art, and work. With the purpose of studying how oppression operates, I have selected three mechanisms presented in the works: racism against inter-racial marriage and relationships, which encompasses prejudices and bias based on misconceptions and myths; police brutality, which causes physical and deep physical damages; and drug issues, which causes dependence and death; engenders public health problems; divide communities, destroy families, and increases criminality.

Structural oppression has racism as one of its ramifications. According to Serene Khader, structural oppression refers to systemic oppression, rooted in society's ways of functioning; in turn, agential oppression corresponds to oppression perpetrated by individuals on a daily basis, affecting interpersonal relationships in general, professionally, socially, and personally. All these kinds of oppression, reinforced by racism, are portrayed in Baldwin's

fiction, offering a broad view on the damages it triggers. Another obstacle is the lack of family support, which leads to isolation and lower levels of individual protection. Feeling lonely, the Black artist must face inner conflicts as well as social dangers in order to make a living out of his art.

2.1. Oppression: Beyond Lack of Freedom

The birdcage has been used as a metaphor to represent oppression in many contexts. To start with, it comes to mind the poem "Caged Bird," in which Maya Angelou portrays two birds: one is free and enjoys a green sunny life, "and he names the sky his own," while the other "sings of freedom." Marylyn Frye portrays that same metaphor in the seminal paper "Oppression," part of the book *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. The article discusses oppression over women, emphasizing the double binds women must face in their condition of just being women, defining double binds as "situations in which options are reduced to a very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation" (Frye 11). For example, an oppressed woman must "smile and be cheerful" even when submitted to oppression; on the contrary, she will be targeted as "mean," bitter, angry, or dangerous" (11). Frye comments on the complex system of oppression, in which each bar of the cage represents a barrier to women. Although she mentions structural inequalities, she associates oppression primarily with lack of freedom, reinforced by the caged-bird metaphor. So, both Frye and Angelou associate oppression with *lack of freedom*.

Another important reflection on oppression is provided by Serene Khader in the paper "Why Is Oppression Wrong?," bringing a fresh perspective to the consequences of oppression other than only reducing freedom. Khader wants "to suggest that the characteristic wrong of oppression can be framed in terms of its inegalitarian effects" (665). To make her point, she starts by contesting logical statements that have been perpetrated by theorists of decolonial, feminist, and antiracist studies. Firstly, Khader claims that not all restrictions of freedom are

oppressive, and some are even beneficial, like traffic regulations. Secondly, she defends that theorizing only about the option reduction derived from oppression may not clearly represent the structural problem associated with it. Those problems go beyond having little options: a limited "array of choices" will most likely trap oppressed individuals within their social group (660). She relies on Marxist concepts of structure to develop the idea of inequality associated with oppression. For this purpose, she moves beyond the analysis of oppressors as individual agents to oppressive structures, which encompasses social injustice and inequality towards groups to which a person is associated or simply labeled by social stereotypes.

As Khader puts it, oppressive structural systems are built over prejudices and lead to social inequality toward minorities, covering up injustice with arguments endorsing white supremacy and subordinating vulnerable groups. The end of slavery, in 1865 in the USA and in 1888 in Brazil, is an example of oppressive structure related to inequality: it gave freedom to the slaves, who, notwithstanding, continued to live under severe oppression, since the system did not provide social equality, which resulted in poverty, misery, and starvation (Maciel 53).

Such inequality and injustice persist until today and are strongly represented in Baldwin's works, with Black characters struggling to survive in a world dominated by white supremacy. Aware of the importance of social equality, Baldwin proposed a reformulation in which whites should stop being in denial and Blacks should use their rage in an articulated way, in order to restart a Reconstruction, this time based on love, which became a strong motif in his works. He demystified wrong conceptions and false guilt imposed over Black people under arguments so false as: a) poor Black people do not put enough effort to get over poverty; b) racism is linked to poverty, so wealthiness annuls racism; c) lack of background is solely a question of choice. Some examples of Baldwin's attempts of desmystification are depicted in the narratives and will be presented in the next topics, in agreement with Frye and

Khader's views that "oppression requires the presence of (a) social structures that (b) select members of social groups for (c) treatment that disadvantages them relative to members of other groups" (Khader 653). To refute supremacist arguments that every social body is oppressed, Frye proposes the following guidelines:

> From what have already been said here, it is clear that if one wants to determine whether a particular suffering, harm, or limitation is part of someone's being oppressed, one has to look at it *in context* in order to tell whether it is an element in an oppressive structure: one has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure: one has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people. One has to look at how the barrier or force fits with others and to whose benefit or detriment it works. As soon as one looks at examples, it becomes obvious that not everything which frustrates or limits a person is oppressive, and not every harm or damage is due to or contributes to oppression. (13-4, italics in original).

Frye gives indications that not all daily exasperating situations can be considered oppressive. She presents conditions as examples of what could be easily confounded with oppression, but refers to discrepancies derived solely from painful human relationships. The relevance of her suggestions lies in its power to dismiss fallacious assumptions made by oppressors, which aim to give themselves the status of people in power without a choice, oppressed or victimized by their own power, since they are tied to the systemic oppression themselves, or by capitalist forces that are beyond their power to battle.

In *All About Love*, bell hooks claims citizens to take full responsibility for their acts, adopt moral ethics, and reject passivity and guilt; believing that social improvement will be achieved by the action of others is associated with a pessimism derived from cognitive perceptions of society as incurable and dangerous. In her words: "Refusal to stand up for what

you believe in weakens individual morality and ethics as well as those of the culture" (hooks 66). As Baldwin, hooks defends love as an antidote to ignorance, apathy, and omission. In the same that Baldwin believed that "*The unexamined life is not worth living*" (*Collected Essays* 391), referring to social awareness, hooks argues in favor of self-examination: "Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn" (hooks 68).

In face of hooks' words, it is noticeable that systemic oppression is perpetuated by the interests of privileged people, who avoid losing privileges by simply denying their responsibility in the systemic oppression causes inequality, poverty, and violence, which negatively affects society as a whole. As hooks writes:

> Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. In our society we make much of love and say little about fear. Yet we are all terribly afraid most of the time. As a culture we are obsessed with the notion of safety. Yet we do not question why we live in states of extreme anxiety and dread. Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other (hooks 68).

The quote presents important ideas concerning oppression and its antidote: love. The mention of "sameness," followed by "difference," directs us to the origins of hostility between individuals, human groups, tribes, races. The use of fear to delineate differences and distances is a starting point of conflict and hostility and has devastating effects over oppressed groups. Love as force of empathy and moral ethic is another important insight derived from hooks' reflections. To work as an antidote, love must include courage, responsibility, awareness and

must reject mass-media notions of love as mysterious, shameful, dominant, patriarchal. Also, hooks asks us to consider the following condition: "If all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction" (71). The mention of addiction as one of the most challenging social problems reminds us of Baldwin's concerns with the heavy drug traffic that destroyed lives in the USA in his years and continues until today. Hooks' powerful words confirm Khader's argument that oppression is wrong because it limits freedom and causes inequality; it aligns with Frye's ideas against patriarchy and violence against women. Finally, it aligns with Baldwin's views that talking about love is not talking about mass-media productions that represent relationships of patriarchy, dominance, violence, mystery, guilt, and pretended forgiveness. Instead, it symbolizes empathy, resistance, and full acceptance of painful realities of oppression and racism, so that individuals and society can move towards social awareness and act with maturity, responsibility, tolerance, and mutual support.

The next topics will discuss inter-racial marriage, police brutality, and drug addiction, observing mechanisms of micro and macro aggression as perpetrators of structural oppression and taking into account that most of the choices made by the characters aimed for safety and professional success.

2.2. Inter-Racial Relationships

Oppression concerning inter-racial marriage permeates the narrative in *Train*. The love between Leo and Barbara, a white rich aspiring actress, must be hidden so that both can live in safety. Their friendship endures their whole lives since when both were models at the Art Students' League on 57th Street and after Leo's heart attack onstage. During his hospitalization, Leo recollected those days when he and Barbara were models and could barely afford rent and food. He declares that the situation was much more difficult to him than to her, due to their differences of color, gender, and background. As a curly brown-haired

white woman with "a very boyish figure" (*Train* 59) and "a big voice for such a little girl," (59) Barbara hides her vulnerability and claims Leo to do the same. They used to steal food and milk and go to bars in the Village to seduce clients and "see to it that we ate meat" (59). Although they faced scarce livelihood, Barbara refused allowances from her rich family. She was a white heiress, "daughter of proud Kentucky landowners" (59). Leo, in turn, was the son of poor Harlem tenants and could not count on the family's financial support.

Leo and Barbara could not be seen together in a subway without being persecuted, but they couldn't always afford to pay for a taxi: "we had had terrible trouble, many times, trying to get through the streets of my hometown together, black and white. Nothing would ever induce us to take a subway again together, for example" (60). The possessive adjective "my," in the sentence, reinforces the hostility of the city toward its own citizens. In Baldwin' words, the American Negro "is a pariah in his own country and a stranger in the world" (*Collected Essays* 745). Then, "my hometown" defines a place of segregation, where a white young woman should not be escorted by a young Black man.

Since the situation is more dangerous for Leo in his own hometown, he reflects: "But I admired Barbara for her unsentimental clarity. Lots of girls I had known before her had been very sentimental indeed, and had almost got me killed" (60). What Leo calls "unsentimental" can be read as "socially conscious," while "sentimental" refers to young Black people to whom racism remains as a taboo, a nebulous practice undefined and not strategically faced. As Leo and Barbara are aware of the risks of being seen together, taking a taxi is one of the strategic mechanisms they adopt to avoid racist attacks. Khader highlights the importance of consciousness-raising and its emancipatory role: "Understanding instances of structurally caused oppression as genuine cases of oppression was critical for the concept of oppression to serve its desired diagnostic—or, in critical theoretical terms—*emancipatory* role" (653, italics in original). The excerpts presented here give prominence to Baldwin's role as a conscious

writer and activist, who claimed that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Collected Essays* 136), referring to his responsibility as a protest writer and social/class consciousness.

After examining their minds and hearts, but also the social context, Leo and Barbara try to suppress love and jealousy and focus on straightening their friendship instead. The "myth of the Black rapist," studied by Isadora Castro and presented in Chapter One, is portrayed in many scenes of *Train*, serving Baldwin's purposes to deconstruct myths about Black men and expose his activism, style, and perspective on how should those myths be characterized, in order to be demystified, and not reinforced—in contrast with the portrayal of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, by Richard Wright, which Baldwin criticized. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," for example, Baldwin declares: "Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy," presenting his view on what a protest novel should (and should not) represent: "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" (*Collected Essays* 18). With those words, Baldwin wanted to emphasize the necessity, on the part of creative writers and artists, to avoid repeating literary patterns based on stereotypes and start creating a strongly representative literature that could manifest life and culture, authentic daily routines foreshadowing fears, angers, and joys of Black individuals, poor or wealthy, making a living or starving, studying and working, failing and succeeding, arguing and loving, with an authenticity that could resound in the readers.

Baldwin refuses racist myths in the same breath that he defies categorization or labels concerning race and gender. Thus, he tries to infuse "life" and social awareness in his characters in order to detach them from the figure of Bigger Thomas and what it represents to Baldwin: the consolidation of the myths it aimed to destroy. Also, in *Train*, multiple connections between Black, white, men and women are designed to avoid labels.

Beyond portraying the "examined life" of the characters, Baldwin's works denounce the structural racism and its damages to the characters' lives. A scene portraying a dance exposes Leo's passion for Barbara competing with his fear of the oppressive consequences:

> I was afraid to dance. This realization came as a shock, for I had never been afraid to dance before. But I had never danced with a white woman. In that youth, so swiftly receding, vanishing behind me, I had only danced with black girls; and we danced among the dancers and we had, in effect, no audience. But now there was an audience, a black audience watching a black boy dancing with a white woman: and they would know, from the dance, whether the woman was really his or not" (*Train* 149).

The scene depicts the thoughts of a young man in the process of entering adulthood. If, in "Book One," Leo is transitioning from childhood to teenagehood, in "Book Two" he is raising awareness of the political consequences of his social acts, such as a single dance with a white woman he loves and trusts. His previous strategies of self-suppression, such as lowering the eyes or keeping the hands in the pocket, are no longer enough to avoid calling undesired attention: "It is not a matter merely of walking straight, eyes straight ahead" (*Train* 218). Now that Leo is 19, he "has become an incitement," subject to the utmost kind of oppression. When he says: "I knew that I could never dance with Madeleine" (149), he acknowledges the risks implied in the simple action of dancing with a white woman he barely knew and did not trust, let alone having sexual intercourse with her. The novel addresses inter-racial marriage, between Leo and Barbara, and inter-racial sexuality, between Leo and Madeleine.

The dance scene allows an investigation on oppression under three main perspectives. Firstly, Leo is aware of the taboos concerning body contact between Black men and white women; secondly, Leo is Black and is surrounded by a Black audience—a more plausible situation for the dance to take place than around a white audience; thirdly, Leo is self-conscious and fears the judgment of the Black audience. The passage does not mention

the word "lynching," which is subtlety suggested by Leo's apprehension and, mostly, by the author's concerns on the topic, which becomes more evident as the inter-racial relationship gets more intense. Leo has been learning to suppress emotions and behavior, but he still cannot repress sexual instincts toward Barbara, so he feels guilt and shame.

Another important information conveyed by the excerpt is that it is him, Leo, who is self-conscious, since his companions are at ease. The group is composed of three white people: Barbara, Madeleine, and Jerry; and three Black people: Leo, Matthew, and Fowler. All of them are aware of the racist environment, but they were not as upset as Leo, mainly because Leo is emotionally involved with Barbara and knows he cannot marry her.

Baldwin's portrayal of more conscious characters is evident in their conversations. They talk openly about myths defining Black men as being, by nature, rapists of white women. A full account of the myth in the imaginary of the country is given by Barbara:

> Everybody's always told you that the old Black man who mows the lawn…, well, he's old, … and everybody likes him. … But there's something wrong with his son. … He's not nice, like his father, and he's not like other men at all. No. He is a rapist. And not only is he a rapist, but he only rapes white women. And not only that, but he's got something in his underwear big and Black and *always* hard and it will change you *forever* if it ever touches you. You won't even be white any more. You'll just belong to him (*Train* 215-6, italics in original).

The hyperbole represented in the words italicized serve the narrative strategy of mocking the absurdity of the racist myths, while denouncing the noxiousness in the narrative built by white supremacy, with disastrous consequences to inter-racial relationships and, worse, to Black lives, surrounded by malicious jokes and menaced by the fear of (and actual) lynchings.

The issue of inter-racial marriage in this novel is studied in the thesis *Politics, Aesthetics and Diverse Sexualities in the work of James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni*

Morrison, where Kathryn Sussman dedicates Chapter Three: "Debunking Normalcy: Bisexuality, Group Sex and Incest in James Baldwin's Fiction" to analyse Baldwin's view on sexuality, directly expressed on essays and portrayed in his literary works. Sussman observes that Baldwin repeatedly emphasized his views on the androgynous sexuality of every human being, repelling every kind of label or limitation imposed by society. In Sussman words: "This androgynous vision is predicated upon the universality of the human experience, and signals Baldwin's belief in non-racial and ungendered humanism: the catalyst for his struggle against racial and sexual injustice" (85).

Concerning Baldwin's views on androgyny and sexuality, there is a clear correspondence between Baldwin's own sexuality, his essays and his characters. In the aforementioned Chapter Three, Sussman also discusses the inter-racial bonding in *Train*. Leo, who is bisexual, and Barbara, a rich white woman, are aware of the consequences of their sexual involvement, since they are many times subjected to insults and even physical aggression just for being seen together. In Sussman's words:

> While the racial prejudices the couple face do succeed in preventing them from having a life with one another, Leo is unapologetic in his love for her. In fact, both Leo and Barbara are adamant that they are happier being apart and loving each other than they would be having denied their love (85).

The first part of her statement, "the racial prejudices the couple face **do succeed** in preventing them from having a life with one another" (bold added) presents a veritable correspondence with the narrative. However, a different perspective can be presented to the statement that "they are happier **being apart** and loving each other than they would be having denied their love." They make the *conscious* decision of "being apart and loving each other," driven not only by racist impediments, but also by class distinctions, as Barbara admits: "I knew, when I thought about it, that we couldn't beat the two of them together" (*Train* 215). The couple

knew and even quoted some inter-racial couples in the artistic scenario; however, the more they thought of it, the more they felt discouraged to make a commitment. Back to Khader's argument, oppression is wrong, it indeed limits freedom of choice, but one must never forget the social inequality it perpetrates by reinforcing the privileges of white supremacy by promoting injustice, poverty, and misery to minorities.

The issue of inter-racial sexual intercourse also appears in the narrative and deserves a close look. Leo spends a romantic night with Barbara in an abandoned hotel in the mountains, a place chosen for giving them privacy and security against the racist inhabitants. But it is with Madeleine that Leo really puts himself at risk. To present a fresh and larger perspective of the scene, discussed in Chapter One, it is necessary to summarize the context in which it happened. After dancing with Barbara, who dates Matthew, Leo felt lonely and decided to accept Madeleine's advances. He spent the night in her house, aware of the risks of being seen with her, as he confesses: "Part of me felt, Leo, you're nothing but a goddamn sex-fiend and you'll never get out of this house, let alone this town, alive" (*Train* 154). Indeed, this act of transgression had its costs: Madeleine's neighbours called the police, taking Leo for a burglar (or a rapist) when they saw him leaving her apartment. At the police department, Leo was harassed by the investigator, who, after disguised physical assaults and racist-sexist jokes, declared: "You see my point, Leo? You stay with *your own people* and you're sure to stay out of trouble" (202, italics in original). His speech represents the oppression imposed on Black people concerning inter-racial relationships. As David Jones puts it:

> In other words, by transmuting the "threat" of miscegenation into something abject, it keeps blackness just beyond the representational domain in which meaning is articulated. Legible borders of identity are maintained, thus preserving the harmony of the existing social order. It is these borders that Baldwin sets about deconstructing (147).

The preservation of the status quo depends on the maintenance of differences that sets Blacks and whites apart. Being so, the police officer seems to be unconsciously threatened by the possibility that racial boundaries be erased; if this happened, his authority over Black individuals would be weakened by the union of whites with Blacks; then his task of admonishing Black men to stay away from white women would be completely pointless. The works of many police officers would have to be reframed if racism stopped to exist. Hooks help us understand how white male dominance works as an oppressive systemic force:

> Patriarchy, like any system of domination (for example, racism), relies on socializing everyone to believe that in all human relations there is an inferior and a superior party, one person is strong, the other weak, and that it is therefore **natural** for the powerful to rule over the powerless. To those who support patriarchal thinking, maintaining power and control is acceptable by whatever means (hooks 70, bold added).

Hooks reports that, when she lectures about ending racism, audiences become agitated and pessimistic, in an attitude of resistance that only serves the purposes of strengthening white supremacy. Baldwin demonstrates that racism is so strongly internalized among police officers that they believe they have *natural* superiority over Black people; to demonstrate this, he not only designed characters as the aforementioned police officer and sheriff Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man," for example, but also wrote essays refuting white supremacy.

Concerning oppression related to sexuality, the novel portrays a remarkable scene which deserves a careful investigation, for the following reasons: 1) it contains autobiographical elements and approaches sexual harassment endorsed by white supremacy; 2) it presents a new strategy and depicts Black artists' endurance. It is necessary to give a full account of the scene in order to discuss those reasons:

> I made my first professional stage appearance, inevitably, carrying a tray. I was on for about a minute, and I had to carry the tray over to some fucked up, broken-down

> British faggot, who was one of the great lights of the theatre. I had to serve this zombie his breakfast about five hundred fucking times, and every single time I went upstage to uncover his eggs and pour his coffee, Britannia came up behind me and lovingly stroked my balls. Nobody could see it, because he had his wide velvet stretched out behind him; but if he had done it in the sight of the entire audience, I don't think anybody would have noticed it, or cared; people won't see what they can't afford to see. Well, I took it as long as I could—the point is, I took it too long: and I did it, as I kept saying to myself, because I was being exposed—indeed, I was—and it *was* a Broadway show, and it would look good in my resumé. The end between me and Britannia—and the show—came during a matinée when I reached behind me a second before he reached and pulled on his balls like I was Quasimodo ringing the bells of Notre Dame (266, italics in original).

The analysis of the scene will be made in two parts. Firstly, a similar event occurred to Baldwin himself during a visit to the South of the USA in 1957, after living in France since 1948. In "Take Me to the Water," part of *No Name in the Street*, he reports the event:

> I have written elsewhere about those early days in the South, but from a distance more or less impersonal. I have never, for example, written about my unbelieving shock when I realized that I was being groped by one of the most powerful men in one of the states I visited. He had got himself sweating drunk in order to arrive at this despairing titillation. With his wet eyes staring up at my face, and his wet hands groping for my cock, we were both, abruptly, in history's ass pocket (*Collected Essays* 390).

In his recollection, Baldwin declares: "as my identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies" (390). Baldwin laments that such a powerful Black ally could act in such an *unexamined way*, saying that "any loveless touch is a violation," adding: "And it is absolutely certain that white men, who invented the nigger's big

black prick, are still at the mercy of this nightmare …" (392). In "History's Ass Pocket: The Sources of Baldwinian Diaspora," Kevin Birmingham uses the analogy in the title to explain that the most important facts of the past are not those officially presented by history; they are those which happened off the record, with abuses of power. The duality of what is visible and invisible in history is similar to the analogy of the "closeted epistemology" proposed by Jones. Both refers to oppression, which includes abuses of power and sexual harassment, masked by menaces, complicity and silencing; it aims at self-satisfaction of fantasies regardless the others' right to privacy. As Birmingham puts it, Baldwin did not let go unnoticed the multiple violations of privacy committed on a daily basis, "through an elaborate system of small gestures and groping hands that is far subtler and far more pervasive than the lynch mob" (142).

Concerning micro and macro oppression, Khader defines it in terms of "structural" and "agential" (committed by agents). It is noticeable how Baldwin could denounce both kinds of oppression in his literary works. In the scene onstage, for example, structural oppression is perpetrated by the agency of Brittania, in an attempt to maintain oppression over Black actors. The "wide velvet robe" represents "history's ass pocket," and the author goes beyond, denouncing the complicity and omission of the audience in defense of their own interests, since the audience represents complacent authorities, public sphere and conniving white people in general.

The second part of the analysis refers to strategy and catharsis as key elements. The term "catharsis" was used by Aristotle in the work *Poetics* as a metaphor to describe "the peculiar tragic pleasure, the feeling of being washed or cleansed" (Sachs). A decade had passed since Baldwin's visit to the South, in 1957, to the publication of *Train*, in 1968, and *No Name in the Street*, in 1972. The cathartic moment in the scene aforementioned translates how much the character (and why not the author?) had to bear before he took action. The humor of

the scene is conveyed by the mention of an enraged Quasimodo from *Notre-Dame de Paris*, written by Victor Hugo, the hyperbolic association balls/bells, and the fury which transposed Leo's mind into a classic play somewhere else. Beyond all those narrative strategies, though, the emphasis on action/reaction put us back into Leo's route to the stage and his strategies to endure oppression and reach success. As mentioned in the excerpt, it was his first appearance, it was on Broadway Theatre, it was good for his resumée, although he only appeared for one minute. The adverb in "inevitably, carrying a tray" demonstrates Leo's awareness of the difficulties to be offered leading roles; for this reason, he keeps low expectations and high persistence. His difficulties are not Barbara's difficulties: he faces hostilities and is assigned minor papers only for being part of an oppressed group. As proposed by Khader and Frye, by benefitting only a determined group, the others remain "in the closet," to use Jones' words.

2.3. Police Violence

Oppression related to racism encompasses the entire criminal justice system, a point carefully examined by Baldwin under multiple perspectives. The present topic intends to discuss police brutality with emphasis on events concerning the character Caleb in *Train*. White police officers are important elements in Baldwin's portrayal, representing white supremacy, abuse of power, and injustice.

Firstly, though, it is necessary to briefly present an overview of Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man," published in 1965. The protagonist is Jesse, a forty-two-year-old white deputy sheriff. After a sudden sexual impotence, he lies in bed, "silent, angry, and helpless." His wife, Grace, attributes his impotence to overwork and suggests he should try to sleep; instead, Jesse starts to talk about his job and to vociferate: "Goddamn the niggers" (*Early Novels & Stories* 933). Grace falls asleep, but Jesse keeps talking and his mind takes him back to an event in his childhood, when his father took him to watch the lynching and

castration of a Black man. Jesse remembers that seeing the man being beaten and castrated gave him his first erection, and his body reacted to that memory by bringing back the erection.

The connection between those two events are studied under a psychoanalytical approach by Alexandra Cassel in the essay "Circulating Emotions in James Baldwin's 'Going to Meet the Man' and in American Society." She argues that "racism is linked to a circulation of emotions that unconsciously generates a xenophobic nation affecting even those who implicitly are regarded as genuine citizens of that community" (1). She relies on Sarah Ahmed's studies on Affective Economies, which states that emotions are not circumscribed to the body; they circulate and build economic patterns similar to those related to capital and finances. The surplus value of that circulation is the consolidation of microviolences into a complex structure of hierarchies, with white supremacy imposing unjust rules and triggering feelings of inferiority into minority groups (4).

In the essay "James Baldwin's 'Going to Meet the Man' and Police Brutality in The United States," Sinai Akpan writes that "As the memory progresses, Jesse ends up in the cell with the young African American protestor," and that sentence reveals the inextricable reality in a country that insists in a Black-white division—and here we recall the officer who threatened Leo by saying: "You stay with *your own people* and you're sure to stay out of trouble" (*Train* 202, italics in original). As Baldwin repeatedly declared, the "white problem" in the United States will only be overcome by the recognition of the basis and standards over which the country has been built. That thought is stated in the following excerpt, transcripted from a speech delivered to the Non-Violent-Action-Committee in 1964 and entitled as "The White Problem," published in the book *The Cross of Redemption* in 2010:

> The people who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't—I mean *you can tell*, they knew he wasn't—anything *else* but a man; but since they were Christian, and since they had

> already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he *was not* a man. For if he wasn't a man, then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble. It is an extremely complex lie. If, on the one hand, one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the black man in captivity, and treated like an animal, and told that he was, *knew* that *he* was, a man being oppressed by other men who did not even have the courage to admit what they were doing. When the African, in Africa, enslaved other men, he did not pretend that he was merely breaking in oxen (101, italics in original).

This piece of speech proposes a reflection on the foundational myths and ideologies of the USA. It also reveals Baldwin's conceptual resources to dive deep into the issue, in an attempt to understand the roots of misconceptions such as "white supremacy" and "black problem," which Baldwin reinterpreted and entitled as "the white problem." Akpan considers that, by portraying a white deputy sheriff as Jesse, Baldwin "demonstrated what transpires in white minds," remarking that "Going to Meet the Man" was written in the context of the Black Art movement: "It was the job of the Black artist to create politically engaged content that expressed the new anger and discontentment regarding police brutality in the 1960s" (1-2).

Baldwin's demonstration of the Black rage against white police officers stands out in *Train*, published in 1968, and continues in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, in 1974. In *Train*, it describes, through Caleb's reports and behavior, traumas derived from violence in prison; in *Beale Street*, the white police officer Bell includes a photograph of Fonny among the roll of suspects of raping a Puerto-Rican woman. Vulnerable and traumatized, the victim wrongly points Fonny as the rapist, and he ends up arrested. The racism and the injustice of the entire system is unveiled at each move Fonny's fiancée, Tish, makes, aiming for the release of Fonny. The novel has become one of Baldwin's most known works approaching the injustices

of the prison system, especially after the release of the film with the same title in 2018, directed by Barry Jenkins. To this point, the imagery of white racist officers such as Jesse and the racist justice system against Fonny aligns with the experiences of Caleb and Leo in *Train* and portrays strong representations of police brutality.

The first time Leo was raided by the police, he was coming back from the cinema with Caleb. The episode represents Leo's initiation into the racist system and the conversion of his fear into rage, as his older brother Caleb instructs him: "All black people are shit to them. You remember that. You black like me and they going to hate you as long as you live just because you're black. There's something wrong with them" (*Train* 47). At home, the initiation continues with instructions from their father: "But don't let them make you afraid. You hear?" (51), and Leo is initiated into alcohol: "'Reckon we can give Leo a little bit, too?' our father asked" (51). The scenario expresses the parents' emotional support after a raid and also reveals the use of alcohol as a way to deal emotionally with oppression.

The coming-of-age narrative tells about Leo's dreams of becoming an actor. His transition into adulthood has been marked by the raid, since the white officers had already started "doing it to little Leo," in the words of Caleb (158), an allusion to unfair law enforcement and racist procedures, such as visible policing, raids, and brutality (Thompson).

In the dissertation *Growing Up Black: Coming of Age and the Afterlife of Slavery in Contemporary African American Literature*, Adam Dawson establishes a distinction between the concepts of coming-of-age in African American literature and Bindungsroman. The social context and background of young adults having a life of growing knowledge and experience, commonly related in European narratives, does not apply to Black characters in African American literature, since their rights to healthcare, education and relevant social experiences are denied by white supremacy. Dawson states that Black adults are repeatedly targeted as immature and uneducated; actually, the appointed "immaturity" and the lack of education can

be traced back to the inequality imposed by racial capitalism, which deviates the Black child from teenage study and leisure and drives them towards the job market. The afterlife of slavery inherited by Black individuals is one of "limited access to healthcare and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," as defined by Saidiya Hartman and quoted by Dawson (10). Baldwin's characters usually figure as heirs of slavery, poverty, and lack of background.

Caleb went to prison when Leo was 14, and the event redefined their relationship. A store had been robbed and a man had been stabbed half to death. A friend of Caleb named Arthur was accused of the crime and said that Caleb was there. According to Leo and Caleb's mother, "look like they was a regular gang, and the cops say—the cops say—they used that store for a hiding place" (*Train* 95). Leo remembers that he "had seen the cops in the store many times; they had always been perfectly friendly with the owner" (95). In the essay "A Report from Occupied Country," Balwin denounces the "arrogant autonomy," corruption, and impunity of the police in Harlem: "I have witnessed and endured the brutality of the police many more times than once—but, of course, I cannot prove it. I cannot prove it because the Police Department investigates itself, quite as though it were answerable only to itself" (*Collected Essays* 736). Also, he emphasizes the unproven accusations of police officers in crime scenes pointing to Black young men as scapegoats. The lack of clarity in the report demonstrates the little importance given to investigation and the high speed in filing charges.

When Caleb came home from prison, Leo observed his disturbance and privately refused to be like him or their father: "I was old enough to understand how their lives had happened, but rage and pity are not love, and the determination to outwit one's situation means that one has no models, only object-lessons" (*Train* 159). In his recollections, Leo confesses that he judged his brother ("But it is also hard to love the beaten"), who had become "lonely and sad, shrinking and hysterical" for "he had been beaten too hard" (159). Leo

reflects that the events had altered both of them, “and the question one faces is how to live with time’s brutal alterations” (159). As the days passed, Caleb started to give scattered details of the sufferings in prison, reporting that “they just fed us so we could work, you know—like you feed a mule. And they beat us like that, too” (161). This revelation corresponds to what Frye names as “an element in an oppressive structure” (13), with an apparently single case both hiding and revealing the workings of the whole system.

As the days pass, Caleb’s mother tries to help him restore his own *self* by reassuring him: “You just make up your mind that you can do anything you want to do” and “that we just as good as they is” (*Train* 161). Her reassuring words, however, sounded empty to Caleb, who grew up without knowing, hearing or experiencing anything like self-esteem and was deeply hurt at that time. Her advice on how to cope with oppression had no effect on him, although it may have resonated with Leo and perhaps serves to explain his persistence in the artistic career: “You just make up your mind that you can do anything you want to do (161). Caleb, however, was being pressed by his mother to regain emotional balance and by his father to apply for a job, and relied on Leo for emotional support and outlet. It is significant that it is to Leo, and not to the adults, that Caleb becomes able to express the events that traumatized him while jailed in a farm. The description of the tortures is key to the novel and to the topic in discussion:

> The ringleader had red hair, his name was Martin Howell. Big, dumb Irishman, sometimes he used to make the colored guys beat each other. And he’d stand there, watching, with his lips dropping, his lips wet, laughing, until the poor guy dropped to the ground. And he’d say, that’s just so you won’t forget that you is niggers and niggers ain’t worth a shit. And he’d make the coloured guys say it. He’d say, you ain’t worth shit, are you? And they’d say, No, Mr Howell, we ain’t worth shit. The first time I heard it, saw it, I vomited. But he made me say it, too. It took a while, but I said

> it, too, he made me say it, too. That hurt me, hurt me more than his whip, more than his rifle butt, more than his fists. Oh. that hurt me. (180)

Caleb's report exposes a strong contradiction with his mother's words and reveals why her advice sounded meaningless to him. To say that "we just as good as they is" brings up many implications: firstly, "we" stands for "Black people" and "they" for "white people;" for Caleb, "we" means "the bullied" and "they," the "bullies," in the figure of Mr Howell. Although the mother's advice means well and reveals her own strategies to tackle oppression, For Caleb it only reinforces racist patterns of thought by leveling down oppressed and oppressors. Her perspective represents the racism "appropriated" by the oppressed, to use the term suggested by Kira Hudson Banks and Jadah Stephens in the essay "Reframing Internalized Racial Oppression and Charting a Way Forward." Based on studies of Griffin, the authors define racial oppression as "the ways in which a member of a target group is in relationship with the dominant group's ideology and the extent to which they accept their subordinate status as deserved, natural, and inevitable" (92).

Racist practices affect individuals in many ways, causing psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, self-degradation, and can lead to heart diseases—as is the case of Leo. The article presents studies comparing the effects of high and low self-esteem in the process of copying with oppression related to racism. The authors consider that "internalized racial oppression has direct and indirect effects on mental health in addition to playing a role in the experience of racism" (Banks and Stephens 94).

They present objections to the concept "internalized," since it carries the negative connotation that the oppressed simply accepted the oppression imposed to them; as they see, internalization does not correspond to a total submission to the oppressors; it represents that there are mechanisms of copying with oppression which lead to the adoption of certain cultural aspects of the oppressors. Since oppression involves daily relationships with implicit

and explicit aggressions, oppressed agents build daily strategies to deal with such violence in order to relieve stress and preserve mental health. Some strategies include passing incognito or imitating white patterns of beauty and behavior. Relying on Tappan's research, the authors state that "what is known as internalized oppression, an internal process, is actually appropriated oppression, a mediated process by which people in oppressed groups learn to use and master the tools of their oppressors" (Banks and Stephens 95). In face of the continuous changes in society, it is necessary to reframe the terminology in order to give a more accurate account of oppression from the view of the oppressed; the terminology "internalized" has been leading researchers to the misinterpretation that, beyond being oppressed, the individual had no agency at all and did not take action to change the status quo. As the title of the essay informs, "Reframing" establishes a new terminology that takes into consideration the fact that oppression inevitably involves relationships; that oppressed individuals inevitably have to build personal strategies; and that there is room for studies focusing on the agency of the oppressed—and here I hope to be giving a contribution, since the present study focuses on presenting the strategies built by the characters to cope with oppression.

Oppression related to annulment of identity is an important topic in Caleb's imprisonment. The initial psychological damages are manifested in his confession to Leo after a long interval of outbursts, silences, and self-seclusion: "That hurt me, hurt me more than his whip, more than his rifle butt, more than his fists. Oh. That hurt me" (*Train* 180). Also, the narrative depicts an event when the oppressor, Mr Howell, called him "Sam" and he refused to answer to that by standing out and declaring: "My name is Caleb Proudhammer, mister, and I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get on with my work" (181). This simple sentence resounded like a death sentence to Caleb the minute he realized the price of it. The consequences involved: the transference of Caleb from the work in the field (which he did not dislike) to the kitchen, commanded by a cruel white German woman; sexual harrassment; torture; starving,

and solitary confinement: “We was already in jail, you understand, but they had a jail inside the jail” (182). On two occasions Caleb fought for his life and dignity, and was determined to kill the oppressor; the fights resulted in many weeks of solitary confinement and almost made him blind. If, in “Going to Meet the Man,” Baldwin portrayed Jesse as a white protagonist whose sexuality was connected with racism and torture, and the victim is being publicly castrated, in *Train* he choose a different approach, with Black characters reacting to physical abuse while trying to understand how to deal with fear, rage, and pain. Caleb discovered that his pride and hatred almost killed him. Useless rage risked his life. In Baldwin’s words: “The difference between a boy and a man is that a boy imagines there is some way to get through life safely, and a man knows he’s got to pay his dues” (*The Cross of Redemption* 102).

After some time of recovery in his parents’ house, Caleb left Harlem. Leo, who was 14 then, left Harlem as soon as he could and started to recognize that “his rage was there” and could be useful in his career as an actor, as he says: “Because I could love, I realized I could hate. And I realized that I would feed my hatred, feed it every day and every hour. I would keep it healthy, I would make it strong, and I would find a use for it one day” (Baldwin, *Train* 186). In Cherry’s reading, “Rather than containing hate, useful Black rage contains love. It involves and expresses love for Black people (a love that also involves affirming and valuing Black life)” (14), such as the love of Leo for his brother. As Leo matures, we observe the adoption of new ways of channeling anger into acting in the theater, in a process of transition from useless rage to calculated articulation.

2.4. Drugs as a “conspiracy to destroy black people”

In “Sonny’s Blues,” drugs are presented as a branch of social oppression in Harlem, along with crime, confining housing projects, police brutality, deliberate neglect of the State, and others. In the 1950s, Harlem was composed of 98% of Black people. Illegal gambling and

drugs were part of the context and attracted citizens both to addiction and traffic (Pasquini; Kautz; Courtwright).

Heroin had been "the drug of choice" of addicts since 1915, being illegal since the 1920s, according to the report *Drug Addiction*, by Marie Nyswander, and with its spread escalating after World War II, with "much of the drug's distribution centered in New York, specifically Harlem" as related by Matt Kautz in "The State Versus Harlem." The drug problem would only worsen in the next decades, with increasing drug trade wars and easy availability of drugs: "Adulterated or pure, heroin could be sniffed, a bonus for those who shunned the needle," as David Courtwright writes in "When Gotham Was Heroin's Capital."

So, Baldwin did not overstate when he declared: "You buy drugs in the ghetto like you buy whisky in the deep South from the sheriff. It's part of a criminal conspiracy to destroy black people" (*A Dialogue* 87). This declaration was given to Nikki Giovanni in the television program *Soul*, in 1971. Baldwin denounces the intentionality of those in power to set a division among Black communities, when the truth is that both users and non-users are victims of a criminal profitable policy. He goes on: It's the same way the great powers can use a tribal war in some unknown country. Set them against each other, then blame both parties and put the money in Switzerland, and they—the great powers—still own the country" (87-8).

This is the context where Sonny, as a teenager, gets involved with drugs, first as a user and then as a peddler, which led him to be jailed. His trajectory, since he was a teenager until he became a young adult, is marked by the death of his parents, the abandonment of his older brother, the escape from Harlem to the navy, the relapse into drug addiction, the incursion in crime, and the prison. Amid all these conflicts, Sonny struggles to become a professional jazz pianist. His mind combines the obsession with piano practices with drug addiction, forming a vicious circle.

In the next topics, I address two mechanisms of oppression operating in "Sonny's Blues:" vulnerability, including drug relapse; and lack of background.

2.4.1. Social Vulnerability and Drug Relapse

Firstly, the social environment where Sonny is raised favours the involvement with drugs. Some scenes portray the Harlem of Sonny's childhood as a place of vulnerability, with limited possibilities of security, background, income, and quality of life. It is a context where personal choices have less to do with character and integrity than with lack of equality derived from racial oppression. In a dialogue between the narrator and his mother, she shows concern about Sonny's coming of age in such a violent place: "It ain't a question of his being a good boy," Mama said, "nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under" (*Early Novels & Stories* 842).

United Nations' (UN) reports indicate that drug trade brings huge profits to organized criminal groups, and the profits increase in contexts of global instability, such as wars, local conflicts, competitions between traffickers, and others, reaching "startling levels of violence" (*Special Points of Interest* 13). The report reads: "In some countries, illicit financial flows generated by the cocaine trade can reach levels comparable to those of the value of total national agricultural exports" (13). Still according to the UN: "Vulnerable people are more likely to experience greater negative health and social impacts as a result of drug use" (10). Besides, "drug use disorders make people who use drugs, their families and communities more vulnerable" (19), reinforcing the vicious circle of drug addiction, drug dealing, prison, rehabilitation, and drug relapse.

The issue of drug relapse is addressed in "Sonny's Blues" by a friend of Sonny and is manifested by a persistent sense of insecurity, especially in the brother-narrator, but also in the mother, as discussed before, and in Sonny himself. In the next paragraphs, I am going to

discuss the presence of Sonny's friend as a representative aspect of identity; and the insecurity of the brother towards Sonny's relapse, representing families affected by addicted members.

The appearance of Sonny's friend in the narrative is revealing of stigmas and prejudices associated with drug addiction. Baldwin brings this character from the shadows with powerful imagery:

> I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it wasn't Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block. He'd been Sonny's friend. He'd never been mine, having been too young for me, and, anyway, I'd never liked him. And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy. I used to run into him from time to time and he'd often work around to asking me for a quarter or fifty cents. He always had some real good excuse, too, and I always gave it to him. I don't know why (*Early Novels & Stories* 833).

The obscure presence of a boy who looks "just like Sonny" brings issues of identity and prejudice about Black young men in the USA. According to Kautz, there were so many heroin dependents during the 1950s and 1960s, throughout the country, that it "sparked concerns similar to those today." In 1964, the number of "active addicts" in the country were around 48,525, "half of whom were believed to live in New York City," and Harlem as one of the biggest centers of distribution, as Kautz reports from The Federal Bureau of Narcotics.

Drug problems affected daily life in the streets of Harlem, where drug addicteds could be seen in deplorable health conditions. So, the boy "standing in the shadow" and "looking just like Sonny" is representative of many Black young individuals who have fallen victim to a "conspiracy to destroy black people," to reinforce Baldwin's indications of the complexity of drug issues in contexts of vulnerability and his callings for love and empathy.

Baldwin's defense of empathy is registered in many publications. In the aforementioned interview to Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin denounces the destructive power of drugs over the individuals, be them users, non-users, or sellers, since they are "in the same trap." He talked about choices: "One of my brothers got robbed by a junkie years ago. He was very hot, very angry; then he realized the junkie didn't have any choice but to rob him" (87), and he manifested empathy: "I decided after that the junkie is a victim like me, a brother like me" (87). As brotherhood is also a topic dear to Baldwin, he uses an autobiographical example to demonstrate a triad in which all the three individuals—his brother, the junkie, and himself—deserve empathy.

In a research on empathy in "Sonny's Blues," Johansson writes: "By giving the reader both brothers' experience with drug addiction, Baldwin is able to provide the bigger picture through two perspectives, subsequently opening for a broader audience to be able to identify with either the drug addict or his relatives" (18). Johansson defends that Baldwin's narrative techniques aim at reaching the empathy of the readers towards the short story, to Sonny's sufferings and struggles with drug addiction and language limitations. From a reader-response perspective, the research highlights the reading techniques applied by Baldwin especially in the first paragraphs of the story, to capture the readers' attention: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again" (*Early Novels & Stories* 831). Baldwin plays with the reader's curiosity and emotions, using mystery and a nameless narrator to convey the idea, according to Johansson, that his anonymity could represent any of us, readers, and that younger brother, who is a drug addict, could be one of ours'. Baldwin's choice to depict a judgmental narrator, who feels disgust toward drug addicts, shows Baldwin's empathy in his capacity to put himself in the shoes of the readers. The effect he aims to achieve is to convince the reader to keep on reading, in the same way that Sonny invited his brother to *listen*. Since the characters are fictional, it is

empathy that permits the readers to understand the characters and deal with the emotions described in the story, as reported from Djikic and Oatley (502): “it is we ourselves—not any fictional character—who experience the emotions of the story” (Johansson 16). The author points out that “[b]eing in a situation that does not change or is difficult to change is a major topic in the short story. As a result, his character is only able to change within the limitations that society has put on him” (20). Sonny represents the silenced victim of drug addiction, the brother who needs solidarity.

Insecurities about drug relapse are constant in families with members addicted to drugs. The issue is brought up when the narrator asks Sonny’s friend about the legal proceedings following Sonny’s arrest and he says: “They’ll send him away some place and they’ll try to cure him. … Maybe he’ll even think he’s kicked the habit. Then they’ll let him loose”—he gestured, throwing his cigarette into the gutter. “That's all.” (835). This answer implies disbelief in the rehabilitation process (which sounds familiar to him) and indicates that relapse is unavoidable. The development of the dialogue only reinforces this perspective:

> “Listen. They’ll let him out and then it’ll just start all over again. That’s what I mean.”
>
> “You mean—they’ll let him out. And then he’ll just start working his way back in again. You mean he’ll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?”
>
> “That’s right,” he said, cheerfully. “*You* see what I mean.” (835, italics in original).

In relation to the drug addicted, the narrator symbolizes the family, to whom upsets about the member in addiction and the unexpected necessity to learn legal proceedings overlap. Also, his repetitive questions uncovers feelings of denial and fear of relapses ending in death. Baldwin’s political view of drugs as “part of a criminal conspiracy to destroy black people” collides with the narrator’s view that drug users want to kill themselves. The narrator seems to be trapped by the conspiracy itself, since it is part of a big web that profits over vulnerables. Baldwin instills in the narrator the misconception that doing drugs is a deliberate choice of

self-destruction and consequent death and gives Sonny's friend the task of demystifying taboos by explaining: "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever" (835). With an affirmative sentence mediating two negative ones, the friend reinforces the point that drugs are a desperate attempt to keep alive, to seek pleasure and avoid unpleasure, as stated by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

The reasons why one seeks drugs to keep alive is provided by Sonny himself, in a moment of open conversation, with the active listening and avoidance of hasty judgments. He confesses that, sometimes, heroin "makes you feel—in control," in a point where loneliness, abandonment, and vulnerability leads one to desperately seek comfort in drugs to avoid suffering. Sonny's account of experiences with drugs also plays a part in desmystifying taboos. In conversation with his brother, he mentions an important topic: the singularity of each person, which derives singular experiences in relation to drugs. Factors such as the reasons to seek drugs, the senses it provides, and the levels of dependency must be considered in respect to each organism and personality. Part of the "conspiracy" is to blend individuals into a melting pot, resulting in distortions of belonging and identity. Sonny also demystifies expectations about safety from drugs: "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. Then he turned to me. "It can come again," he repeated. "I just want you to know that" (859). The change of attitude of the brother, from distant and disinterested to welcoming and supportive, seals their reconciliation, based on honesty and confidence.

Listening is essential in "Sonny's Blues," for it symbolizes a way to union and mutual help. When a member of a family and a community give in to a drug problem, honest conversations, with active listening and support, might work better than taboos, misconceptions, isolation, and separation, considering that, as Baldwin says, those in power, profiting from drug market, aims to set people apart and undermine collective movements.

2.4.2. Lack of Background

Oppression imposed noise over Sonny's musicality: his talents were not valued at school, and this fact led him to despise formal education: "I ain't learning nothing in school, he said. Even when I go" (849); neither were his talents valued at home, since his brother discredited his plans to become a professional musician. When their mother died, he was a teenager and was already addicted to drugs, but he could not count on his brother, because he could not articulate the words and mostly because his brother was unable to listen. In retrospect, Sonny confesses: "the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get from drugs. … When I came back, nothing had changed" (859). The vicious circle keeps making victims to drug addiction, as his brother admits: "and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more to them than algebra could" (831-2).

Here, there is a glimpse of Baldwin's strong criticism against the oppressive educational system in the USA, a point he developed in many essays and under many perspectives: formal education x professional education; integration; American History x American myths; silencing and erasing of Blacks and Natives in History books, and others.

I have selected the following excerpt from the paper "A Talk to Teachers" to expose Baldwin's views on education and his intentionality in demonstrating that oppression is an external force with damages mainly Black individuals and requires much endurance:

> Now if I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school, and I was dealing with Negro children, who were in my care only a few hours of every day and would then return to their homes and to the streets, children who have an apprehension of their future which with every hour grows grimmer and darker, I would teach them—I would try to make them know— that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agonies by which they are surrounded, are criminal. I would try to make each child know that

> these things are the results of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him. I would teach him that if he intends to get to be a man, he must at once decide that he is stronger than this conspiracy and that he must never make his peace with it (*Collected Essays* 685).

The replication of the word "conspiracy" points to a malign intentionality, involving public and private policies based on all forms of oppression, mainly racism, aiming power and profit at the cost of minorities, then aggravating inequalities. Sonny's brother's declaration that the students "were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of possibilities" (832), denounces the wrongs caused by racial oppression, since it reinforces inequalities, as Khader argues, and the "low ceiling" metaphorically impedes their professional growth while oppressing their minds and self-expression.

The first part of the sentence, "they were growing in a rush," corroborates Dawson's arguments that innocence and childhood is denied to Black children, since the concept of innocence has been associated with white children. Sonny's coming of age represents a passage from a teenager initiating in smoking and drugs to a young adult being raided for "peddling and using heroin" (831). Dawson summarizes the argument in the following way: "The racialisation of the subject positions 'child' and 'adult'—and the exclusion of Black people from these subject positions in the afterlife of slavery—makes passing from one subject position to the other extremely difficult" (20), and Baldwin valued changes in characters' lives. Leo Proudhammer and Sonny share the fear of circle of oppression closing around them; Leo becomes alert of the risks of lynchings as he gives vent to sexual involvements with white women, and Sonny feels the growing menaces of drug disorders suffocating him and trying to silence his voice. He internalizes this anguish in isolation and loneliness.

In the paper "Theater: The Negro In and Out," Baldwin criticizes screenplays that could not show the changes in characters' life because, by doing so, they could not connect

with the audience: “we must be enabled to see them as they have been or as they might become; otherwise, we merely judge them as specimens and feel nothing for them as human beings” (*The Cross of Redemption* 43). Arlene Wilner points “to the dramatic change in the narrator, a change crucial to the theme of the story and powerfully portrayed through the first-person narrative consciousness” (183), an interpretation she built with students and reported in the paper “Confronting Resistance: Sonny’s Blues—and Mine,” highlighting how Baldwin “both endorsed and critiqued the boundaries of tradition and conventional morality” (184). She notes that “the plot arrives at no resolution; instead, it powerfully manifests an existential truth that, by the time we come to it, we feel we already know: suffering is both universal and excruciatingly particular” (191).

Due to the ability to address social oppression and internal suppression simultaneously, Baldwin is described as an existentialist author by Chloe Fields in *Mirrors Can Only Lie: The Search for Masked Self-Knowledge in the Work of James Baldwin*. Fields regards the concepts of “mirror” and “masks” as distortions of reality and, by extension, of self-knowledge, and aligns them with Baldwin’s claims about the problem of identity in the United States, where white people refuse to accept Black people as part of USA’s identity and structure. Fields even raises an issue very dear to Baldwin: love—and the lack of it. In Fields’ words, “Baldwin believes that the absence of love is America’s most dangerous and fundamental problem that divides communities and promotes injustice” (4). As Baldwin stated, drug disorders can divide communities, leading to school dropout, family abandonment, and isolation, which, in turn, triggers psychic and emotional instability. In “Sonny’s Blues,” drug abuse is metaphorically depicted as drowning: “He [Creole] was Sonny’s witness that deep water and drawing were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew” (861). As I have been arguing, Baldwin’s characters face internal and external struggles derived from racial oppression in their seek of professional artistic careers.

Chapter Three—From Rage to Articulation: Sublimation and the Ethics of Performance in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and "Sonny's Blues"

> *For the very first time, the very first time, I realized the fabulous extent of my luck: I could, I could, if I kept the faith, transform my sorrow into life and joy.*
>
> —James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*

> *Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others.*
>
> —James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

In the present chapter, I start by presenting the concept of sublimation as developed by Sigmund Freud, extending it to the idea of "acting truthfully" and articulation according to James Baldwin. I defend that, in *Train*, sublimation is a result, not only of an outlet of sexual impulses, but of Black rage articulated into language, as strategies of perseverance and endurance against racism. In "Sonny's Blues," I argue that sublimation is achieved when Sonny is able to speak and his brother is open to listening. Musical language is a way of sublimation, and Sonny speaks through music; however, as a drug addict, he needs family and community support to keep some balance so that he can reach sublimation in playing piano. The study provides a new understanding of sublimation under Baldwin's view of "an examined life" and "acting truthfully."

The expression "an examined life" appears in the "Introduction" of *No Name in the Street*, published in 1961: "But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Collected Essays* 135), in a context where he defends that a writer must "look on himself and the world as they are," be realistic and seek self-knowledge, since autobiographical elements

will inevitably be transmitted to the writings (135-6). It is also mentioned in the essay "The New Lost Generation," published in *Esquire* magazine in July 1, 1961: "I had meant what I had said, and my unexamined life would not allow me to speak otherwise," recollecting a conversation about love when he proffered: "You'd better forget about that, my friend. That train has *gone*" to his best friend, who latter committed suicide (*Collected Essays* 660). The expression reappears in *No Name in the Street*, published in 1972: "I watched his eyes, thinking, with great sorrow, *The unexamined life is not worth living*," in the moment he was being abused by an activist leader in the South (*Collected Essays* 391, italics in original).

In turn, "acting truthfully" demands the ability to connect with the characters while finding some truthness amid delusional screenplays, written to please white audiences and keep them inside the myth of white supremacy. This Baldwinian theory is implied in many essays about art, as in the following statement, from "The Price May Be Too High:" "It is very strange to be a black artist in this country—strange and dangerous. He must attempt to reach something of the truth, and to tell it—to use his instrument as truthfully as he knows how" (*The Cross of Redemption* 111), which includes transmitting authenticity to the plays.

I depart from the concept of sublimation to demonstrate that being a Black artist requires abilities beyond stage; it demands mastering Black rage, turning it into articulated language capable of representing the artist as a person and as a citizen, with an "examined life," in order to "act truthfully." Sublimation also demands that families and artistic communities listen and support Black artists.

3.1. A Brief Review of the Concept of Sublimation

In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," first published in 1905, Sigmund Freud presented insights of a new concept that had been arising from his studies on repression and sexuality. Freud wanted to know what happened to the sexual energy that was not repressed nor driven to sexual activities such as intercourse, masturbation, fetish, and others. He

focused only on neurosis, setting psychosis aside, in order to investigate how extra sexual energies find expression and which channels they use. Neurosis and psychosis are mental conditions differentiated mainly in terms of connection with reality; neurosis preserves connection with reality and has anxiety and obsession as primary characteristics; psychosis refers to mental states severely affected by loss of contact with reality, through manifested by hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech, and other behaviors, according to APA Dictionary ("Neurosis;" "Psychosis").

Freud came up with the term "sublimation," a word that had been used since around 1600 with the general meaning of "elevation," "purification," "refinement." In the field of Alchemy, sublimation was the resulting part of an alchemical process in which "to sublimate" was to "'heat a solid into vapor and allow it to cool again' as a way of extracting a pure substance from dross," according to Etymonline Dictionary ("Sublimation"). In modern chemistry, sublimation represents the transition from the solid to the gaseous state without passing through the liquid phase. The Romantics also adopted the word to represent a movement of elevation, with spiritual and moral connotation (Morley).

The Freudian concept of sublimation leads the attention to the energy related to sexual drive that is channelled to endeavours like art and sport. Such energy could be released without the intermediation of language, in which case it is diluted in the process of producing art within the body. Freud's initial accounts on what could mean "sublimation" appears in the "Summary" of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, explaining that sublimation is a process "through which the powerful excitations from individual sources of sexuality are discharged and utilized in other spheres, so that a considerable increase of psychic capacity results from an, in itself dangerous, predisposition" (*Three Essays* 71).

This process leads to the formation of traits of personality and artistic activities: "What we call the character of a person is built up to a great extent from the material of sexual

excitations; it is composed of impulses fixed since infancy and won through sublimation, and of such constructions as are destined to suppress effectually those perverse feelings which are recognized as useless" (71). The word "useless" means that the so-called "sexual excitations" are not used in sexual activities per se, but find their way, through sublimation, to art and creativity: "The general perverse sexual disposition of childhood can therefore be esteemed as a source of a number of our virtues, insofar as it incites their creation through the formation of reactions" (71). From this idea derives the concept of "reaction-formation," a process in which repressed impulses that could evoke unpleasant feelings are replaced by contrary forces and find outlet in disguised outward behaviors (36).

Freud and Baldwin coincide in the thought that art, as sexuality, is in the body. To begin with, in *Train*, there is a scene in which Leo presents his own body as the qualification required to be an actor. When the director asked him what his qualifications were, he answered: "I think you're looking at them" (75).

Beyond that, as presented in Chapter Two, Baldwin establishes associations between sexual energy and racism by carefully portraying the sexuality of Jesse, in "Going to Meet the Man," being directed to an obsessive racism that drained lust and caused impotence. The short story allows a psychoanalytical association between the return of Jesse's erection with the remembrance of an event that caused his first erection as a child: the lynching and castration of a Black man.

Besides, in *Train*, Baldwin demonstrates Black rage being channeled in different ways, depending on characters' personalities. Caleb mixed rage with hate derived from the traumatic experience of violence in prison. Leo ran a long journey trying to master rage into art. Both reactions reveal two branches of rage originating from the same source: racism.

The examples provided show that, in Baldwin's fiction, the relation between self-destruction and self-construction is nonlinear, blurred by daily events and dependent on

the context, the mechanisms, and the emotions available at the moment, in agreement with Freudian conceptions that "sublimation depends on the reality principle," with "redirection of libidinal energy towards a necessary adaptation to reality" (Appignanesi and Zárate 144).

In the next topics, I move from the notion of Freudian sublimation to a broader understanding of sublimation in Baldwinian terms. In *Train*, sublimation, for Leo, represents not only an outlet of sexual drive into art; it includes the development of abilities to control rage and fear; to cope with oppression; and, finally, to articulate Black rage with an "examined life" in order to achieve assertiveness in verbal and non-verbal language. In "Sonny's Blues," Sonny seeks refuge in drugs, from which he aims to take comfort against suffering and energy to play piano. However, instead of sublimation, drugs developed an obsession that almost killed him. It is through music that Sonny achieves sublimation, but not without the support of brotherhood.

3.2. Baldwin's Views on "Acting Truthfully"

In the context of Baldwin's literary works, much is demanded from Black characters to become artists. Such demands are connected with "a sense of reality" that requires fundamental tools to be accomplished, such as self-knowledge, honesty, and integrity. In order to clarify the point, I am bringing a discussion based on Baldwin's paper "Theater: The Negro In and Out" and the short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," since both provide clear examples of Baldwin's defense of honesty and what he considered to be "acting truthfully."

In "Theater: The Negro In and Out," Baldwin defends the thesis that Americans would rather live in an endless phantasy than have the courage to face reality and seek self-knowledge. That choice implies: a) denial of identity, derived from the partiality of formal History, written and registered by the dominant part: the Europeans; b) the illusionary image white Americans form of themselves, an illusion called "white supremacy," which

affects the production and consumption of education, culture, and art. The essay starts with: "It is a sad fact that I have rarely seen a Negro actor really well used on the American stage or screen, or on television" (*The Cross of Redemption* 37). Baldwin criticizes the mannerisms of the actors and cites Henry Fonda's "halting honesty" used by "mediocre playwrights" to "justify the bankruptcy of the American male" in the play *Two for the Seesaw* (37).

Referring to Broadway plays in general, Baldwin declares: "The spectacle on the stage does not attempt to re-create our experience—thus helping us to deal with it. The attempt is almost always in the opposite direction: to justify our fantasies, thus locking us within them" (37). Denial in American History starts to appear as Badwin narrows down the point: "Now, the figure of the Negro is at the very heart of the American confusion. Much of the American confusion, if not most of it, is a direct result of the American effort to avoid dealing with the Negro as a man" (37). So, playwrights portray white characters not as they are, but as they would like to be seen, and this unreality reflects onstage, where white actors do their best to support this "wishful fantasy." Baldwin goes on saying that tremendous efforts are put to "justify" the fantasy, and such waisted energy could be properly directed—sublimated—into a much more honest and, consequently, artful and engaging play.

When it comes to Black characters, Baldwin comments on the secondary roles assigned to them and the escalating challenges they must face in order to get major roles. Another problem is: "White people do not know enough about Negro life to know which details to look for, or how to interpret such details as may have been forced on their attention" (38), which results in poorly written scripts and, inevitably, poor performances. As a Negro actress observed to Baldwin, "not only does the white world impose the most intolerable conditions on Negro life, they also presume to dictate the mode, manner, terms, and style of one's reaction against these conditions" (41), criticizing the maintenance, onstage, of the oppression imposed offstage.

In the following passage, Baldwin makes a synthesis of how difficult the journey is for Black actors; such difficulties are neatly designed in his literary works and have been discussed here in reference to Leo in *Train*:

> Now the Negro actor, after all, is also a person and was not born two seconds before he enters the casting office. By the time he gets to that office, he has probably been an elevator boy, a cab driver, a dishwasher, a porter, a longshoreman. His blood is already thick with humiliations, and if he has any sense at all, he knows how small are his chances of making it in the theater. He does a great deal of acting in the casting office—more, probably, than he will ever be allowed to do onstage. And, whatever his training, he is not there to get a role he really wants to play: he is there to get a role which will allow him to be seen. (40)

This excerpt implies that the Black actor, in order to fit in, must not necessarily give his best to the play; on the contrary, he must act in the way white audiences and playwrights would like him to act, an acting which falls short of vitality and restricts to dull performances. As a result, theatre in general lacks life: "Vitality, humanly and artistically speaking, has only one source, and that source is life" (41). The cure for lethargy inevitably calls, firstly, for truth, which includes honesty and self-acceptance of Americans' identity; and, secondly, for progression. It is not enough to present characters as they would like to be or as they are; "we must be enabled to see them as they have been or as they might become; otherwise, we merely judge them as specimens and feel nothing for them as human beings" (43).

Baldwin defends that honesty is essential for a play to be real and sublime. A strong example of his argument is presented in the short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," in which the French film director, Jean Luc Vidal, personifies Baldwin's views on how acting should be: full of real life. Not by chance, "Vidal" derives from Latin *vitalis* and is associated with life and vitality ("Vital"). Vidal is directing the film *Les Fauves Nous*

Attendent (something like *The Wild Beasts Await Us*). A plot summary is provided in the own story and quoted here in order to contextualize Baldwin's point:

> Chico, in the film, is the son of a Martinique woman and a French *colon* who hates both his mother and his father. He flees from the island to the capital, carrying his hatred with him. This hatred has now grown, naturally, to include all dark women and all white men, in a word, everyone. He descends into the underworld of Paris, where he dies. *Leus fauves*—the wild beasts—refers to the life he has fled and to the life which engulfs him (*Early Novels & Stories* 885, italics in original).

When the Black actor is assigned the role of Chico, he bears in mind "the North Africans I [he] had watched in Paris for so long," distancing himself from the character. The director feels that the actor is giving a poor performance because he is not acting the truth and tells it to his face. Despite the feeling of humiliation and anger, the actor also feels "a certain relief, an unwilling respect" (885). In Cherry's view, only individuals "with a certain level of consciousness have this rage" and might be "willing to be pierced by the sword of truth" (Cherry 4). This view aligns with Franklin's study of the creation and invention of the self in Baldwin's artistic theoretical and literary writings, highlighting that, for Baldwin, "the artist's ability to be completely honest and vulnerable is what makes him a hero" (Franklin 54). Finally, it is worth adding that the actor's relief and respect for Vidal's honesty was a demonstration of what directing should be and of what the performance had been missing.

Vidal and the actor's frank conversation reveals aspects of identity and of acting truthfully. Vidal denounces the actor's intention to dissociate himself from Chico, the Martinican: "You come from America. The situation is not pretty there for boys like you. I know you may not have been as poor as—as some—but is it really impossible for you to understand what a boy like Chico feels? Have you never, yourself, been in a similar position?" The actor only mentalizes an answer: "I would have had to be a very lucky black

man not to have been in such a position," but Vidal verbalizes it: "You would have had to be a very lucky *man*," to which the actor retorts: "please don't give me any of this equality-in-anguish business," and Vidal sharply replies: "It is perfectly possible … that there is not another kind" (*Early Novels & Stories* 886, italics in original).

From this conversation, it is possible to notice Baldwin's own view about acting truthfully and identity, adding elements related to otherness, history, and honesty. The actor of the short story started to act truthfully only after being confronted by a director who respected him and valued his skills. He verbalized that, as Chico, he too hated all white people and despised Vidal in the same measure that he despised the white Americans he had left twelve years ago: "I've never understood why, if *I* have to pay for the history written in the color of my skin, *you* should get off scot-free!" (886, italics in original). This vehement declaration was exactly what the director was expecting, since he wanted to deconstruct the stereotypes of white supremacy—and wishes of revenge—projected on him.

Vidal also represents Baldwin's voice when he declares: "So you are not playing Chico **truthfully**, you are **lying** about him, and I will not let you do it" (887, bolds added). Then he guides the actor in making strategic use of rage in search of authentic performances: "You brought your past into this room. That is what Chico does when he walks into the dance hall. The Frenchman whom he begs for a job is not merely a Frenchman—he is the father who disowned and betrayed him and all the Frenchmen whom he hates" (887). The direction worked: the actor/singer became a star.

3.3. From Rage to Articulated Language in *Train*

In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Leo shares the same rage as the Black actor/singer in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." However, a different perspective is presented in relation to acting and to the literary genre. The novel contains more elements of

acting and directing along the life of Leo. In turn, the short story focuses on the apprehensions of a Black actor who is about to depart from France back to the USA with his family and is afraid of the racism they, especially his son, will encounter there. The plot contains autobiographical aspects of Baldwin's escape from the United States to France in 1948 and the return to New York in 1952, as reported in *No Name in the Street*: the return "was frightening in many ways, and for many reasons" (*Collected Essays* 370), with racism and homophobia heading the list.

In "The Divided Mind of James Baldwin," C. Bigsby presents a study on "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" and its autobiographical aspects. The author highlights that the effects of racism can be long-lasting and have "the power to distort the psyche, to warp personal and private history" (Bigsby 334). In the same path, Ushedo researches autobiographical elements in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and points out "Baldwin's habit of seeing his private difficulties as being analogous to or synonymous with the sufferings of African Americans" (Ushedo 27). Biography served Baldwin not as ingredients for a good story: it conveyed the writer's intention to tell the truth. Ushedo calls attention to the strategic use of persons and events of Baldwin's own life. Comparing Baldwin's biography with the narrative of John Grimes, Ushedo observes: "Baldwin, through a careful manipulation of time with its implications to the past, present and the future, uses family life and religion to connect the characters to their socio-political environment" (28). Baldwin portrayed them beyond what they meant to him, relocating their social and historical position and modeling them as representational characters.

In *Train*, Leo departs from Harlem, a place where he witnessed the long-lasting damage of violence in his brother's psyche after prison. Leo and Barbara go to New Jersey to work as student handymen at the Workshop, organized by the directors Saul and Lola. Leo worked as a driver and barely saw the directors, who had no intention of directing him. At the

end of the Workshop, Leo returned to New York, found a job as a waiter and enrolled in guitar and voice lessons, in a lonely journey to the stage, told mainly in "Book Three: Black Christopher."

Along the novel, it is possible to observe what Leo is *becoming*, reflecting Baldwin's view that the portrayal of characters must include moves in face of difficulties. As Baldwin states: "But the solution is not, to my mind, to present these people as they see themselves or as they are; we must be enabled to see them as they have been or as they might become" (*The Cross of Redemption* 43).

As seen in Chapter One, since childhood Leo has been learning how to suppress emotions and behavior; in Chapter Two, he witnessed Caleb's trauma after prison, which reinforced his decision to leave Harlem in pursuit of an artistic career. From now on, I will discuss his improvement in the process of seeking self-knowledge, defining a personality and articulating language.

3.3.1. Practicing Acting and Articulation

The novel presents many situations in which Leo struggles with language, as discussed in the topic "1.5. Suppression of language." In "Book Three," though, he manifests some maturity in mastering language as he gets experience in interacting with white people. His language becomes more articulated while he seeks self-knowledge. As Bigsby observes: "Indeed, Baldwin has always been aware of the special problem of language for the black writer" (331). Bigsby analyzes the dual mind of Baldwin in search of the perfect balance between the preservation of the self and its projection into social structures. Such balance requires mastering of language, and Leo soon becomes aware of that, starting to use language—especially body language—for his own benefit. Differently from those times when Leo and his brother had to lower their eyes in the buses and keep their hands in their pockets,

now he is even more conscious and must measure each word. He starts to mimic white modes of speech in daily situations in order to become an actor. “Initially, experience intervenes between the self and the articulation of that experience, but in turn language intervenes between the self and the experience” (Bigsby 331).

Leo represents the self in conflict with articulation and experience, and his attempts to master language and to mimic acting are presented in a scene in Madeleine’s house. She is a 28-years-old white actress, mother of a 7-year-old girl. Leo spends one night in her house and they have sexual intercourse, although he is aware and afraid of the risks of being lynched. Madeleine leaves him in the morning, when he receives a phone call from Lola telling that Saul is able to watch his first rehearsal the next morning. Leo has been anxious for this opportunity and gets excited by the news. He is leaving the house in a good mood when he bumps into Madeleine’s neighbours and gently says: “You can keep coming up the stairs, you know. I don’t bite,” but the man sternly retorts: “What are you doing in this building, boy?” And here Leo starts the mimicry: “I was looking for a file, so I could sharpen my teeth. Suh. But I couldn’t find none. … Oh, dat old man ribber, he sure do keep rolling along! Ain’t it de truf! Laws-a-massy[3], hush my mouf, he he he and yuk yuk yuk! And I tap danced down the stairs” (*Train* 194).[4]

Leo mocks the neighbours by mimicking Southern US Black dialect; he alludes to *Show Boat*, a play in which the leading character points out the indifference of the Mississippi River to the sufferings of Black people. The mockery, though, does not persuade the neighbours to remain indifferent: they call the police and Leo is arrested. With the police officers, Leo chooses a different approach, still with some mockering, but no dialect: “What is

[3] Lord have mercy. “Laws” is a corruption of “Lawks,” UK old-fashioned alteration of “Lord,” according to Cambridge Dictionary, Green’s Dictionary of Slang, and Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (“Lawks”).

[4] “Oh, dat old man ribber, he sure do keep rolling along!” alludes to verses of “Ol’ Man River,” a song written by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern to be sung by the actor and activist Paul Robeson in the play *Show Boat* in 1928. It is “part anthem, part prayer and part commentary on the narrative,” with the leading character, Joe, a stevedore, observing the flow of the Mississippi River and its indifference to the sufferings of Black Americans. Since then, “the song has become an American standard” (“Ol’ Man River”).

it that you imagine me to have done?" (195). On the way to the police station, Leo makes a plan of action: he studies the officers and prepares the next moves, as if playing a game, in order to *act* properly and convincingly:

> I had to walk a tightrope **between grovelling and shouting**, and had to hope that a faintly mocking amusement would be sufficiently unexpected to confound their reflexes and immobilize their impulses, at least until I got to the station, where I would have to begin to calculate again (*Train* 196, bold added).

"To walk a tightrope between grovelling and shouting" requires a strong command of verbal language, eye contact, and gestures. As an actor, Leo is channeling his rage and fear into a plan of action, in the Freudian sense of sublimation; in Baldwin's sense, the concept can be expanded to speaking and acting strategically, properly, both to avoid violence and to put the acting into practice.

At the station, Leo is taken to a room where he starts to recalculate, always checking his rage and fear so that they would not betray him. In this key passage, he declares:

> And, not altogether consciously, I began to evolve a trick which was to help me, later, in the theatre: Leo, I said, you can't know what is going to happen, and, until it happens, you can't know what to do. You're going to be surprised—so *be* surprised. That's the only way you'll be ready (198, italics in original).

According to Bigsby, "Baldwin's characters are highly self-conscious, reflecting not only upon their social situation but on the nature of their consciousness itself" (328). Alone in the room, Leo does not know what awaits him, and his self-admonition to "be surprised" reveals consciousness about the whole paradigm without knowing which specific fact will happen. As if in theatre, Leo is ready to improvise. According to Bigsby, Baldwinian characters present what he calls "a resistant self." In his words, "what matters to him [Baldwin] is the altered consciousness of the individual. He is interested in process, in the interplay between the

experiential and the given" (328). Bigsby's analysis agrees with the examples provided before: the actor must walk a tightrope, which means to be careful with words and acts, and get ready to "be surprised," since he is dealing with an arbitrary legal system and, for this reason, unpredictable.

At that time, Leo's language is still mixed with rage, mockery, boldness, and fear, for he is in the middle of the journey and has not fully mastered language yet. During the inquiry, Leo manifests some anger and indignation, an act he considered "foolish," but he soon regains composure and adopts a formal tone to answer if he has the keys of Madeleine's house on him: "I refuse to answer any questions until I have been allowed to make a phone call, which is my right by law, or unless my lawyer is present" (199). Leo admits that his words might have sounded "funny" and unconvincing, but they raised doubts among the detectives as to what to do in light of that information. A third man, though, came by and was less baffled; he performed the task of harassing Leo with racist jokes and painful jabs. Then, Leo opted for silence, afraid to vociferate now and have to beg for mercy later. Madeleine, Lola, and Saul released him, but he felt humiliated by Saul's attempt to impose guilt on him. It became clear that he was nothing but a driver to Saul. After the first rehearsal and a meaningless feedback, Leo went back to New York, promoting ruptures and hiding his pain from family and friends. Rage worked as energy to polish professional skills and find acting positions. His first role was "inevitably, carrying a tray" (266).

Secondary and subaltern roles assigned to Black actors were a focus of Baldwin's criticism. In the essay "Theater: The Negro In and Out," Baldwin reviews *Black Monday*, a play from 1962 written by Reginald Rose. In it, a janitor in the Deep South who is opposed to integration is beaten to death. Baldwin says that his tone is false because "[h]owever servile they may appear to be, there is always a murderous rage, or a murderous fear, or both, not quite sleeping at the very bottom of their hearts and minds" (*The Cross of Redemption* 39).

After denouncing the fakeness of the servility, Baldwin tells what he considers to be the truth: "The truth is that they do not have any real respect for white people: they despise them and they fear them. They certainly do not trust them" (39). The critic falls on the fact that "[w]hite people do not know enough about Negro life to know which details to look for," and the result is a fake portrayal of characters and their feelings and attitudes.

A similar reflection is presented in *Train* by Leo's distaste of screenplays which were far from representing the lives of whites—and especially of Blacks; white screenplayers barely know and are not interested in understanding what goes on in Blacks' heart and mind. In Baldwin's words: "White men are not what they take themselves to be, and Negroes are very different—to say the very least—from the popular image of them" (*The Cross of Redemption* 41). That is why Leo is led to the conclusion that "I don't think I'd have minded if I could have found a role which had some relation with the life I lived, the life I knew, some role which did not traduce entirely my own sense of life, of my own life" (*Train* 266). Such a statement agrees with Baldwin's theoretical views about the misrepresentation of Black lives in plays and the consequent fakeness onstage. Since Leo is in the path of self-knowledge, in the process of articulating rage and fear into acting, he feels frustrated for not being allowed to represent the truth onstage: "But I played waiters, butlers, porters, clowns; since they had never existed in life, there was no conceivable way to play them" (266).

Another important point concerns the audience. Among the skills required from the Black actor is the ability to please the audience, composed mainly by whites, and Leo confesses: "And one learned, therefore, and long before one had learned anything else, the most abject reliance on the most shameful tricks, one learned before one learned anything else that contempt for the audience which is death to art" (*Train* 266-7). Baldwin argues in defense of the art and against condescending plays, massively dominated by white people and their

wish to perpetrate myths of supremacy in art in general. To please the audience means to betray art and its representational role of inclusion and diversity.

Baldwin expands this idea of American identity in many essays and lectures. In "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes," he begins with the statement that "people in general cannot bear very much reality. … they prefer fantasy to a truthful re-creation of their experience," and endorses it by saying that "people have quite enough reality to bear" (*The Cross of Redemption* 23). He also concedes that mass media is made for relaxing and entertainment. However, by taking *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Defiant Ones* as examples, Baldwin states: "These movies are designed not to trouble, but to reassure; they do not reflect reality, they merely rearrange its elements into something we can bear" (25). A similar process occurs in those plays designed solely to please the audience. Two problems emerge from the production of mass media movies: they lack seriousness, and "serious things are handled (and received) with the same essential lack of seriousness;" also, "they weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are" (25).

A similar point is made in "The Uses of the Blues;" Baldwin declares that Americans, liberal or not liberal, "still prefer to read statistics, charts, Gallup polls, rather than deal with the reality" (*The Cross of Redemption* 86), in an interminable denial of the slavery past, a denial which increases guilt and results in the creation of myths concerning Blackness and race, in a fruitless attempt to justify the oppressive present and the menacing future. The consequences of denial and guilt, of avoiding reality and embracing fantasy, are dangerous: "The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it's very serious, that people who have had no experience have no compassion" (88).

Also, in "The White Problem," Baldwin approaches American History and argues that the problem is not the violence committed against the Indians and the slavery, but the denial

of those crimes, as if they never existed, or worse, as if they were not crimes: “What I am trying to say is that the crime is not the most important thing here. What makes our situation serious is that we have spent so many generations pretending that it did not happen” (*The Cross of Redemption* 102). The conciliatory way requires self-acceptance from whites and endurance from Blacks in order to reach honesty and harmony.

To conclude this point, when Leo says that “contempt for the audience is death to art,” manifesting hostility, he claims that, when it tried to be sympathetic, American theatre was even more demoralizing, due to its illusory aims of educational drive. Playing a part in *The Abraham’s Bosom*, “I found absolutely no way to play the scene in which the hero, having struck down a white man, loudly and sincerely repents. He sounded as though he had struck down the son of God. The white man had beaten him with a whip: why was the nigger supposed to moan because he reacted … ?” (*Train* 267). Bigsby considers that “both American and Negro search endlessly for identity. Only Baldwin, in the eye of the storm, realizes that it resides in stillness, in an acceptance, not of injustice nor of public roles, but of the authenticity of the self” (335).

Leo put his acting skills to test again to escape the Army draft. He previously studied their rites and prepared himself for action. Although many people risk tactics to be deferred, Leo took it to a professional level and was determined to succeed, since he had a strong reason: “I was not going to defend my murderers” (*Train* 270). He gave, as he says, “a great performance” and was deferred. It is interesting to notice his improvement in dealing with white people and authorities while he polishes his skills: “I have known that … if I pressed the right buttons, they would have no choice but to defer me” (271). The positive self-evaluation denotes progress in appropriation and proper articulation of white language, combined with calculated acting.

3.3.2. The Fantasies of White Screenwriters and of White Audience

In the beginning of the career, Leo worked in little experimental theatres and played some pieces with which he identified. He showed strong persistence, but he admits that "It was very hard to persist in learning what would almost certainly prove to be a useless language" (*Train* 268), but he continues learning, aiming to be prepared if some good opportunity arrives. In the play *Winterset*, he feels a connection with the character Mio, for Leo "too had a father cruelly wronged" (268). Playing the character made him "feel old," which implies maturity and empathy. On the other hand, Leo "was more and more struck by this numb passivity on the part of characters who, after all, were part of one of the most active and optimistic nations in the world" (269). The critic falls on the characters' lack of social consciousness and of self-knowledge, obliterated by religious myths, "unable utterly to suspect any connection between their personal fortunes and the fortunes of the state of which they were a part" (269).

As a person growing in awareness of the social problems of his country, Leo demonstrates indignancy against the passivity of the characters in a nation built over their shoulders. In a debate entitled *Has the American Dream been achieved at the expense of the American negro?*, performed between Baldwin and the conservative writer William Buckley at Cambridge Union on February 18th, 1965, Baldwin builds an answer far beyond "yes" or "no" by exposing the complexities of European culture and history; the colonization of the United States; the violence against the natives (Indians); the process of slavery; the laws concerning segregation and integration; and labor force. He emphasizes the need for America to stop denying the undeniable fact that the history of the country has been formed by miscegenation and it is impossible to tell Black from white. He so synthetizes the arguments:

> If the American Negro had not been present in America, I am convinced that the history of the American labor movement would be much more edifying than it is. It is

> a terrible thing for an entire people to surrender to the notion that one-ninth of its population is beneath them (Regas).

Leo is in the process of learning: reading plays and practicing theatrical performance—even in real situations, as I have demonstrated; and he grows shocked as he discovers how deeply the myth of white supremacy has affected screenplays and actors. The word "tricks" is repeatedly mentioned, in various situations: "Most of the roles played by white people could only be played by means of tricks, tricks which would never help one to come closer to life" (*Train* 269). The white characters on play were performing not real whites, but a fantasy designed to satisfy the white audience and feed their self-denial of history and identity. The following quote denotes Baldwin's voice and summarizes the argument about denial: "I was discovering what some American blacks must discover: that the people who destroyed my history had also destroyed their own" (269). So, white people's distorted view of themselves is as unscripted as Black history.

Onstage, representing the Black artistic community, Leo must play with an eye on *absence*, on *what is not*. As Jones put it, "Baldwin frequently gestures towards the realm of non-speech and deploys imagery that evokes a sense of concealment and restriction," in order to symbolize, by the unspeakable in literature, the erasing and silencing of the minorities. "Baldwin repeatedly makes reference to the limitations of language and the compulsion placed on non-white and non-heteronormative persons to occupy a territory beyond the boundaries of representation" (Jones 125). As presented in Chapter One, Jones' concept of "closeted epistemology," derived from the *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Sedgwick, defends that the non-representation affects groups other than non-heteronormatives and expands the discussion to non-represented language.

However, to use Toni Morrison insights, "invisible things are not necessarily not-there." In her words, "certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call

attention to themselves" (136). Taken from the lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison's reflections on the absence/presence of African American literature aligns with Jones's studies on visibility/invisibility. Both depart from an investigation of the term "unspeakable" in relation to social practices and literary production in society in general and in literature in particular. Morrison examines the systemic racism reflected in the literature produced by whites, a racism that tries to ignore the presence of African Americans in the culture. Such absence is metaphorically referred to as "the ghost in the machine," paradoxically evidencing a presence that the canonical literature tried so hard to erase—and Baldwin endeavoured to delineate.

Baldwin strives to evince the non-represented history of one of the "most optimistic nations in the world" (*Train* 269), and the irony in the adjective "optimistic" conveys the "vacuum" in which actors must operate, since there is no *reality* in the screenplays. Leo's criticism of the delusional state of the characters echoes Baldwin's defense of the necessity of individual self-examination as well and the nation's acknowledgement of history, "for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and always begin with the person" (*Collected Essays* 208). This quote, from "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," synthesizes the individual responsibility of self-examination and moral correction without neglecting the responsibilities of the representatives of the nation in accepting reality and seeking equality for the citizens, as Baldwin conveys in the following statement: "This failure to look reality in the face diminishes a nation as it diminishes a person" (208). The essay is part of the collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, headed by an "Introduction" where Baldwin declares: "But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford" (136). Baldwin's criticism of an "unexamined life" includes his own writings, but can be extended to the screenwriters of the plays Leo acted, and the audience.

3.3.3. Getting a Voice

A turning point in Leo's career happens when he acknowledges the value of his own voice, and this self-recognition came only after the reassurances of Barbara. In the thesis *James Baldwin: Creating Vs. Inventing Oneself*, Seven Franklin highlights the importance Baldwin gave, for individuals and for America as a nation, of self-knowledge and self-acceptance as a condition to self-esteem, then self-satisfaction and social harmony. Self-acceptance requires courage and honesty to face the facts; self-esteem is necessary to acknowledge pain as part of the process and use it to reach self-expression. This web of feelings is neatly represented in Leo's learning journey. As part of the process, pain comes from various sources: rage and fear, but also loneliness, confusion, and uncertainty. In Leo's words: "It's hard, after all, for a boy to find out who he is, or what he wants, if he is always afraid and always acting, and especially when this fear invades his most private life" (272).

In a moment of transition and uncertainty, Barbara believed in Leo's talents and encouraged him to take a step from self-acceptance towards self-esteem. She says that his voice is "an asset" and he should use it to sing and gain visibility, a hypothesis he had already considered, but to which he only gives attention after Barbara's encouragement. In "The Creative Process," Baldwin states that "the one face which one can never see is one's own face" (*Collected Essays* 671). So, in the creative process, Barbara represents the other who sees and listens to Leo; she is the symbolic mirror to whom he is not able to lie, then forcing him to confront his own self and find his truth. As Sonny, in "Sonny's Blues," Leo manages to have his voice heard. With his voice as a new asset at play, Leo takes a bigger step into the artistic scenario, and it uncovers a new element: an identity. He got a job as a waiter at the West Indian restaurant, and the owner, Hilda, let him sing some songs. "And the job had an effect, obliquely, on my career. A singing Black waiter in the Village in those days was bound

to be noticed, and so, without realizing it, I became what I was later able to sell: a personality" (*Train* 285).

In the essay "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," Baldwin compares European and USA civilizations in terms of hierarchy and status, mentioning that "European society has always been divided into classes in a way that American society never has been," and considering it a paradox that "though American society is more mobile than Europe's, it is easier to cut across social and occupational lines there than it is here." The reasons for this, according to him, are: a) Europeans are used to hierarchy and status, with marked positions; b) in the USA, status is a problem, for it is more arbitrary and subjective, so "a man may become uneasy as to just what his status is" (*Collected Essays* 139). Baldwin provides the following example:

> A man can be as proud o f being a good waiter as of being a good actor, and, in neither case, feel threatened. And this means that the actor and the waiter can have a freer and more genuinely friendly relationship in Europe than they are likely to have here. The waiter does not feel, with obscure resentment, that the actor has "made it," and the actor is not tormented by the fear that he may find himself, tomorrow, once again a waiter (*Collected Essays* 140).

This example denotes Baldwin's efforts to establish some guidelines in the definition of what it means to be American. What is relevant for this study is not whether the statement "the actor is not tormented by the fear that he may find himself, tomorrow, once again a waiter" is valid or not, since it may sound abstract and subjective. What calls attention is Baldwin's power of observation and the freedom he found "beneath the open sky of Europe" to make connections with a wide variety of peoples and cultures and improve his active listening skills, since "almost everyone, as I hope we still know, loves a man who loves to listen" (140). The European experience led him to shatter preconceptions, and "this reassessment, which

can be very painful, is also very valuable" (140). France provided him some freedom from the "social paranoia" of the USA, but this freedom posed new dangers and responsibilities as a writer, which he concludes to be the following:

> Every society is really governed by **hidden** laws, by **unspoken** but profound assumptions on the part of the people, and ours is no exception. It is up to the American writer to find out what these laws and assumptions are. In a society much given to smashing taboos without thereby managing to be liberated from them, it will be no easy matter (*Collected Essays* 142).

This autobiographical aspect of the writer's life and views exposes the underlying structure of his works, with the words "hidden" and "unspoken" attesting Jones' argument that Baldwin's writings exposes what America tries to hide in the closet (120). More importantly, the example of the actor/waiter, together with Baldwin's field research and self-discovery as a protest writer, channels into the trajectory of the actor/waiter Leo Proudhammer. The double function as waiter/singer at the West Indian restaurant challenged his abilities of conciliation: "One of the things I learned, without realizing that I was learning it, was how to dominate a room. I certainly dominated that one. If I hadn't, I would have been trampled to death" (*Train* 286-7). As Sonny, Leo was "playing for his life" (*Early Novels & Stories* 850), and the room could work as a stage.

Leo's struggle to succeed in the artistic career involved strenuous efforts to conciliate work and study, ruptures with the family and the community, and the resulting loneliness. With time, Leo took voice and guitar classes and started to be noticed. He took to his parents the poster of his first show as a singer, seeking "the deeply desired approbation" (*Train* 317). After that, he became too busy. It was a moment of many ruptures: he split up with Barbara, who was already performing on Broadway; Sally (an actress, his affair); Steve (an affair); and Caleb, who got married. Now he was 25; feelings of envy and stagnation came around,

resulting from comparisons with his close ones. Although Leo kept active, the splits would cost him isolation and loneliness. Baldwin talks about the necessity of the artist to be supported by the community in the essay "Sweet Lorraine," in which he pays a posthumous tribute to Lorraine Hansberry, author of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play epitomizes Baldwin's idea of a truthful screenplay, with the responsibility and the aesthetic the Black community deserves. The declaration about the support of the community is as follows:

> This country's concept of art and artists has the effect, scarcely worth mentioning by now, of isolating the artist from the people. One can see the effect of this in the irrelevance of so much of the work produced by celebrated white artists; but the effect of this isolation on a black artist is absolutely fatal. He is, already, as a black American citizen, isolated from most of his white countrymen. At the crucial hour, he can hardly look to his artistic peers for help, for they do not know enough about him to be able to correct him. To continue to grow, to remain in touch with himself, he needs the support of that community from which, however, all of the pressures of American life incessantly conspire to remove him. And when he is effectively removed, he falls silent—and the people have lost another hope (*Collected Essays* 759).

Among "the pressures of American life" to remove the Black artist from the community are racism, poverty, social violence, and drugs. Taking Sonny as an example, he was estranged from the community by the addiction to drugs, and that was almost fatal to him. His brother and the band represent the supporting community who rescued him from being silenced. In *Train*, ruptures with the community had a negative effect on Leo's morale. To Sonny, it was even worse: it led to drug dealing and drug abuse. Baldwin believed in the power of collective and family bonds as financial assistance, but mainly as emotional support.

In "Baldwin and the Role of the Citizen Artist," Monika Gehlawat reflects on Baldwin's biographical elements as a citizen artist, an activist, and a spokesperson,

commenting on the need to articulate privacy to produce creative works with public life to demand for civil rights. She reports an interview to Joe Walker when Baldwin was "asked to define the role of the artist in the Black liberation fight," and he responded: "First of all, the hardest thing he has to do is to remain an artist" (116), since the multiple duties could deviate the artist from his/her utmost important mission. To remain an artist requires a balance between privacy and public life: "Aloneness *alone*, then, does not sufficiently heal the debilitating effects of racial trauma and alienation suffered by the Black citizen artist. He must balance his need for privacy with compassionate outreach to those who walk their own path of artistic freedom (121). We notice a lack of balance in Leo's life, since the rupture with family, friends, and the network of actors made him sad.

To conclude this topic, it is worth noting the power of endurance of the characters, even lonely and estranged from the community. Leo was in a moment of hard working, as a waiter, a singer, an actor and a student of guitar and voice when an unexpected event occurred, described in the following scene. Although there is no explicit mention of religion, that period of Leo's life reminds one of a limbo, and the unexpected appearance of a white man resembles the visit of God:

> and I was very low because I knew my mother wasn't well.
>
> This man came over to me, a white man, very friendly, and said his name was Ray Fisher. He asked me how I was, and what I was doing. I didn't know the man, and I hated people to ask me questions like that, I was ashamed to tell people what I was doing. But I was too proud to lie. This man had heard me sing, somewhere, and he had seen me on the stage; which caused me, I must say, enormously to respect his powers of observation (*Train* 318).

The elements which direct to a spiritual reading of the excerpt are: a) the abrupt change of subject to b) the sudden appearance of a mysterious man interested in Leo's life; c) the name

Ray Fisher, considering that Jesus is the fisher par excellence. In retrospect, Leo admits: "I kept staring at Ray, whom I didn't yet recognize as the hand of God" (319). The visit had the aim to invite Leo to play the leading character of *The Corner is Green*, since he could act and sing. The director, Ray says, "had also seen me, and had a hunch about me" (319). The visit symbolizes a revelation with both spiritual and artistic meaning: Leo had been seen by the director, standing for God, whose face and name are not to be known yet; Ray Fisher, the friend of the director, represents Jesus and carries the good message; and "green corn" means, literally, the young sweet corn that is suitable for eating. Symbolically, "the corn is green" indicates that Leo has been cultivated and is ready to be harvested, but also, that it is time for him to harvest the fruits of his endeavours. It is worth remembering what Leo had said during those busy moments of preparation: "It was very hard to persist in learning what would almost certainly prove to be a useless language. And yet one had to learn, one had to; for how shameful to be judged unready should the great day of one's opportunity arrive!" (268). His endurance manifests hope in the revelation that "should the great day of one's opportunity arrive" and conveys the message, not of miracle or luck, but of persistence as an act of personal and political resistance, in a long journey of preparation, a revelation which Baldwin depicted with great mastering of intratextuality.

3.3.4. The Artist Finally Speaks

Baldwin believed in the power of articulated speech and defended the development of strategies and skills in mastering language so that it could benefit the individual and the collective representation of the Black community. In the essay "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," he argues: "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that

they cannot articulate" (*Collected Essays* 780). Language, then, becomes a question of survival.

The struggle with language appears in many Baldwinian works. In *Train*, Leo's process in mastering language included, first of all, self-control over rage and fear; appropriateness of the white language; articulated and honest answers and speeches, facing both openly racist discourses and subtle racist statements, questions, and jokes. At this point of the analysis, I argue that Leo's statements developed from inarticulatedness to assertive language.

Leo's career reaches a new path when he meets Konstantine Rafaeleto (Connie), a Greek director, a "nice man," about forty, and Leo "liked him right away, liked his handshake, liked his eyes" (*Train* 320), in contrast with his "deep aversion" to the American director Saul San-Marquand when they first met (69). After asking Leo's name, the first question from the Greek director was: "Do you know the script?" (320), differing from Saul's attempts to intimidate Leo for his lack of educational and cultural background.

When Connie criticizes the implicit conspiracy in the scripts, translating Baldwin's reflections on the lack of truth in protest plays and books, his simple and honest mentoring answers to what Leo had been looking for. Konstantine's argument: "I don't think that any of these problem books and plays and pictures *do* anything … I don't think that they even *intended* to do anything. They just keep the myths alive" (*Train* 320, italics in original). Among the many myths that Baldwin discussed in essays and destroyed in literary works are those structured over racist assumptions and reproduced in art in general. Such myths are rooted in "guilts and aggressions and desires," as Baldwin describes in "The Uses of The Blues;" and, for those who still doubt, he poses another question: Ask yourself why Negroes until today are, in the popular imagination, at once the most depraved people under heaven and the most saintly (*Collected Essays* 86). The popular imagination is perpetrated in scenes

criticized by Leo, for example, *In Abraham's Bosom*: "The white man had beaten him with a whip: why was the nigger supposed to moan because he reacted—and, at that, belatedly—as the duelling codes of Europe assume a man should act?" (*Train* 267). In face of that, it is no wonder that the director's fresh perspective brought relief to Leo.

The Greek director wanted to make new experiments to offer more "truthful," "touching," and "exciting" plays, and his wish established a connection with Leo's needs of being directed by someone who had "real convictions" and "tried to live by his convictions" (321). It is worth mentioning the relationship between Black actors and European directors, as the actor/singer and the French director Vidal in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," and Leo and the Greek director Connie in *Train*. Leo felt a great shock and relief for being treated, for the first time, like a professional, after years hearing false promises from Saul without having a say in projects in general and in roles and scripts in particular:

> I might have a judgment on the clown or porter I was playing. They could not risk hearing it. Of course I couldn't risk stating it, though there were also times when I couldn't resist stating it. But this tension, created by the common knowledge of an unspeakable and unspoken lie, was not present in Konstantine's office that morning. He was the first director I'd met with whom I really wanted to work. For that matter, he was the first director I've met who talked to me as though I could (*Train* 323).

Leo's inarticulation cannot be attributed only to his young age and immaturity. It is also due to oppressive and authoritarian relationships with directors, especially Saul, who would never value him beyond the role of a driver, silencing his voice and talent for years. In their first meeting, Saul praised Barbara while treating Leo with coldness and hostility, referring to him as Barbara's *friend* and avoiding pronouncing his name. A great sense of self-conceit could be heard in Saul's words:

> "But our methods at the Workshop are extremely severe and not everyone can bring to the Workshop the necessary background, the background which will enable them to achieve the necessary *discipline*. We have a responsibility, as we have said, not only to the theatrical community at large, but to all those who work with us and who try to learn from us." I was silent, for Barbara's sake. (*Train* 75).

The discourse on "background" and "discipline" reinforces the contrast between the directors. Connie's words show a deeper knowledge and empathy to the history and the struggles of Black people in the USA: "One of the things that's most impressed me in this country is the struggle of Black people to get an education. I always think it's one of the great stories, and nobody knows anything about it" (*Train* 322). Metadiscoursively, the theme Connie would like to approach is the very history of Leo, a poor Black artist who had to face inquisitions about his educational background from Saul, who showed no empathy for Black artists and used to woo white actresses.

When Saul asked what Leo considered to be his qualifications, a resentful Leo answered: "I think you're looking at them. … But I'm sure you realize already that I can't be as definite as Miss King because of the great difference in our backgrounds" (*Train* 75). This statement exemplifies Baldwin's arguments that performative art is in the body, in the same measure that Freud defended that sexuality is the body. Leo understood and respected the importance of cultural background, and he took every opportunity to read the most possible varieties of plays. However, for him, reflecting Baldwin's theories, to act truthfully requires affinity, empathy, and connection with the character, along with a coherent and meaningful screenplay and the guidance of an open-minded director. This explains the surprise and joy derived from the meeting with Connie and the peace of mind it brought to Leo. For the first time in his life, he was being treated and trained like an actor: "It was the first time I was

treated with that demanding respect which is due every artist, simply because of the nature of his effort, and without which he finds it almost impossible to function" (*Train* 324).

At this first great play, Leo reached sublimation onstage, devoting his body and soul to the play and to the audience, which seemed to be composed by "a lot of Negroes," since "you can always tell if you know the way Negroes react and the kind of things they react to" (*Train* 336). Sublimation could happen only when the actor was able to connect his pain—rage and fear—with the individuals in the audience, in the community. Baldwin's theory is that:

> What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. This is all you have to do it with. You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain;and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less (*The Cross of Redemption* 65).

This time, "to please the audience" came with a new meaning: it meant the actors' full immersion into the play, in communion with the characters they are representing. In this case, "pleasing the audience" does not mean submitting to inauthentic screenplays in order to keep the white audience happy. The following excerpt contains Leo's description of this first and unforgettable experience onstage:

> I played that scene for all that was in it, for all that was in me, and for all the coloured kids in the audience—who held their breath, they really did, it was the unmistakable silence in which you and the audience recreate each other—and for the vanished Little Leo, and for my mother and father, and all the hope and pain that were in me. For the very first time, the very first time, I realized the fabulous extent of my luck: I could, I *could*, if I kept the faith, transform my sorrow into life and joy. I might live in pain and

> sorrow forever, but, if I kept the faith, I would never be useless. If I kept the faith, I could do for others what I felt had not been done for me, and I could do that, if I could give, I could live (336, italics in original).

The play restored Leo's confidence and opened doors. He reached fame and wealthiness, found love in a Black young man named Christopher, and strengthened his friendship with Barbara. With time, he became more articulated, but never lost the habit of being defensive.

To close the topic, two important scenes reveal his progress in controlling rage and then mastering language, involving abilities of synthesis, silence, honesty, and self-control. The first scene happens in Leo's mansion, during a dinner with Barbara's family. Christopher is present and, unlike Leo, he speaks his mind and doesn't give up on an argument. So, when Mrs King, Barbara's mother, asks why most of Black people come out of the church, she hears: "'The reason that so many of us come out of the church', said Christopher, 'is that the church is the only thing we had—the only thing the white man *let* us have'" (*Train* 359). Mrs King attempts to drop the subject by saying: "Hush, children …, we didn't come here to fight. Why, we're embarrassing Mr Proudhammer." Then, finally, Leo replies: "You're not embarrassing me. But there's no point in pretending that Negroes are treated like white people in this country because they are not, and we all know that" (362). But the argument would not be over. Barbara's brother, Ken, representing white people who strongly believe and defend the American dream, argues about Leo's fame and richness as proof that the USA is a place of inclusion and prosperity for everyone. At this point, Leo has no choice but to speak. He then delivers a little speech summarizing his journey to the stage and all the battles reserved for Black artists:

> "You can't imagine my life, and I won't discuss it. I don't make as much money as you think I do, and I don't work as often as I would if I were white. Those are just facts. The point is that the Negroes of this country are treated as none of you would

> dream of treating a dog or a cat. What Christopher's trying to tell you is perfectly true. If you don't want to believe it, well, that's your problem. And I don't feel like talking about it any more, and I won't." I looked at Ken. "This *is* my house" (*Train* 363).

After being exposed to this vehement speech, the white guests were "angry themselves now, uneasy, and trapped" (363), and their feelings represent a shift of balance; Leo, who grew up accustomed to suppress language and behavior and to act in order to please white audiences, now speaks. He completes the speech with a symbolic gesture: he puts on the record "Strange Fruit," a protest poem written by Abel Meeropol (pseudonym: Lewis Allan) in 1937, against racism and lynching of African Americans (Sottosanti). In 1939, the American jazz singer Billie Holliday included the song in her repertoire and created a special performance to sing it. She repeatedly broke contracts that forbade her of singing that music, which became a powerful protest song against racism, lynching, and segregation and in favor of Civil Rights Movement.

Leo's symbolic gesture of making the white audience listen to "Strange Fruit" represents a break with the intimidating silence white people had imposed over him all his life, both onstage and offstage. The scene ends with a song, and the same happens in "Sonny's Blues," when the band plays "Am I Blue." For a moment, Leo, as well as Sonny and the brother-narrator, experience some peace of mind, although they cannot forget that oppression continues its cycles of racism and violence: "the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" ("Sonny's Blues" 963). The actor articulates language and acting and finally speaks.

3.4. Sublimation in "Sonny's Blues"

In "Sonny's Blues," sublimation, in the Freudian sense, occurs through music. I argue that the ambiguous mind of Sonny channels rage and pain through two branches: music and drugs. I rely on Cherry's distinction between useless rage and useful rage to defend that Sonny does

drugs to release pain. At the same time, he uses music not only as an outlet for pain, but as a refuge from drug addiction, and, hopefully, a source of income. Sonny's balance demands active listening and family and community support, as defended by John Reilly in "Sonny's Blues: James Baldwin's Image of Black Community."

In the paper "On James Baldwin and Black Rage," Cherry's declaration that "Baldwin had lots to say about anger" echoes one of the most emblematic statements in "Sonny's Blues:" "We had a lot to say to each other, far too much to know how to begin" (*Early Novels & Stories* 838). This sentence marks the meeting of the brothers after Sonny's release from jail. It reveals personal battles with communication and self-expression, with taboos and conflicts between the brothers causing interference in communication and obstructing sublimation.

In "Sonny's Blues," language articulation depends on the effective communication between the brothers. If we consider Roman Jakobson's Model of Communication and its six factors: sender, receiver, context, message, channel, and code ("Jakobson's…"), the older brother is supposed to be an active listener (receiver), while Sonny should be the speaker (sender). The context is drugs, which represents a taboo that set the brothers apart and made communication so difficult. The message is Sonny's blues, both referring to musical style and state of mind. The channel includes voice, eye contact, body language, and piano. The code includes family stories, shared memories of childhood, and the social environment of Harlem. Interferences/noises can occur in acts of communication and hinder comprehension. The challenge remains in identifying which factor is causing interference and finding a solution. "Sonny's Blues" presents communication problems derived from many sources, which makes the story strategically complex in order to reflect the complexities of relationships, drug issues, and life itself.

As Leo Proudhammer, Sonny is not articulate. Representing the speaker in Jakobson's Model, he speaks through body language, eye contact, and music. While Leo channels rage to theatrical representations, Sonny channels it to music, trying to master the piano so that it speaks an articulated language; his rage is metaphorized in "blues" and differs from Leo's temper and personality. His inarticulation is partly associated with lack of background, loneliness after the parents' death, addiction, isolation, and partly with invisibility and inaudibility, since he represents Harlem teenagers socially forgotten and silenced.

We learn from the brother-narrator that "Sonny has never been talkative" (*Early Novels & Stories* 840). Isabel's family hosted Sonny for a while, and "it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound." No matter how noisy the piano could be, Isabel's parents were so disturbed by the noise that they could not perceive the despair in the message: "And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them," (850) since Sonny was completely unable to establish a connection with them. His behavior reveals obsession with music as a mechanism of sublimation from drug addiction, as the narrator tells us. "It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster," the description continues, as Sonny regards himself the decision to be silent, and drugs starting to detach him from human contact and reality. Sonny "was still a child" and "wasn't nasty or unpleasant or rude. Sonny isn't any of those things;" however, his presence became a nuisance, since "there wasn't any way to reach him" (850). These accounts reveal Sonny's profound loneliness, grief, obsession, and despair to leave Harlem, actually meaning to escape drugs. However, leaving the city proved to be insufficient without public policies and self-care, with self-examination, medical help, and family support. When Sonny returned, nothing had changed, he had not changed, he just felt older (859).

Sonny manifests rage against oppression in Harlem by symbolic gestures: "He slammed the window so hard I thought the glass would fly out, and turned back to me. 'And

I'm sick of the stink of these garbage cans!'" (849). Pronounced in a moment of anger, the word "sick" is delivered with vehemency, denoting rage and indignation against the social conditions of a place neglected by the State. In Cherry's words:

> This rage hangs over the streets of Harlem like storm clouds as the outraged witness police officers populate their neighborhoods. Black inhabitants have this rage not only because they are surveilled but because they are also disenfranchised, forced to live in unlivable conditions, and presented with few to no opportunities to escape (3).

The same idea is presented by Baldwin in an interview conceded to Nikki Giovanni, when he reflects about oppression, identity, and self-formation. The quote starts (and will be analyzed in parts): "You know, it's not the world that was my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself" (Baldwin and Giovanni 17). Cherry's study on Baldwin and Blackness highlights two important points: 1) each individual experiences anger in a particular way and develops particular mechanisms to cope with it. 2) in non-fictional writings, Baldwin's reiterated that individuals must learn how to control anger, not be controlled by it.

By the study of "Sonny's Blues," I have been trying to demonstrate that Baldwin's characters manifest strong agential capacities in the process of seeking artistic careers amid strong oppression in order to reach sublimation. However, they are unavoidably affected by misconceptions about racial identity, civil rights, and capability. Parental and formal education usually reinforces oppressive patterns of inequality. The effects of those misconceptions become more evident as we continue to read Baldwin's interview: "You become a collaborator, an accomplice of your own murderers, because you believe the same things they do." This sentence reflects the power of oppression over individuals' psyche and self-perception. In Sonny, such oppression leads him to surrender to drugs in a moment of

vulnerability and transition, a teenager avid to experiment the pleasures of social life and to develop artistic skills, but lacking family support and meaningful education.

The interview goes on: "And you have no corroboration around you of any other sense of life. … you get so rigid you can't dance; you can hardly move by the time you're fourteen" (16-7). The term "rigid" reminds one of Leo's rigidity while dancing with a white woman, Barbara, for he was afraid of the judgment of the Blacks watching them, aware of the inter-racial implications. It also refers to lack of spontaneity and acute self-consciousness, since the patterns of behavior are imposed by white supremacy. Lastly, "you can hardly move by the time you're fourteen" corroborates the idea of self-suppression and the growing oppression already stalking Black adolescents.

In light of what has been exposed, I turn to Cherry's concept of useless rage to argue that Sonny's rage led to self-destruction. Cherry adverts that we should not define Black rage in terms of group emotions; I repeat that it is individual and varies from person to person. So, it is important to bear in mind that sublimation, for Sonny, required the counterpart of his brother, and the support of the Black community, with Creole and the band reassuring his status as an artist and providing a context of emotional comfort and security.

Such a context is not dark as the dangerous streets, nor white as heroin: it is indigo, blue, as observed by Benedict Ohaegbu Ushedo in *Poetics of Selfhood: From Critical Theory to Spiritual Autobiography in James Baldwin's Short Stories*. Ushedo observes that the contrast between light and dark represents a battle, permeated by Sonny's struggles with the piano; when the battle is over, the musicians relax and talk in the "indigo light" (Ushedo 963). The blues of Sonny, following him during an adolescence marked by "the darkness outside" and white supremacy, turns into an indigo light, suggesting a mid-term in the conflicts with his brother, with drugs, and with the world outside, "as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" (*Early Novels & Stories* 863). This in-between place

permeates Sonny's duality and indicates continuity, requiring endurance against oppression and self-suppression.

Sublimation, finally, is presented at the end of the story. It unfolds cathartic feelings in the brother-narrator, the listener, and is simultaneously achieved by Sonny, as can read in the climax scene:

> Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, and what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting (*Early Novels & Stories* 863).

As aforementioned, Sonny speaks through music, and he achieves sublimation when he masters the piano into articulated language, a language that "was no longer a lament." Oliver analyses "that life contained many others" as Baldwin's ideals of Black representation and the importance of the union of the Black community as a source of mutual support. Ghelawat discusses Baldwin's autobiographical reports about the support he received from the Black artistic community and his further recommendations towards community and union. As she puts it, "Baldwin emphasizes that the working artist also needs a robust connection to a tribe of contemporaries" (120), and we can notice how important these connections proved to be in Sonny's reintegration into the artistic, professional, social and familial scenario. The essay "Sweet Lorraine" contains Baldwin's insights about artists and communities. When he writes: "To continue to grow, to remain in touch with himself, he needs the support of that community from which, however, all of the pressures of American life incessantly conspire to remove him" (*Collected Essays* 759). Again, the verb "to conspire" serves to claim Black

artists and communities to maintain union and solidarity, strengthening the social support system.

The first line of the essay "The Creative Process" reads: "Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone" (*Collected Essays* 669), an allusion to a verse from "Genesis:" "And Jehovah God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him" (*ASV Bible*, Gen. 2.18). Baldwin concedes that the demands of the physical world gives little importance and leaves little room for individuals to explore their own "aloneness," but the role of the artist is to help individuals reach self-knowledge. By "aloneness," he means "extreme, universal, and inescapable" states, like birth and death, love and suffering. As "a disturber of the peace," the artist must convey the truth necessary to an honest understanding of the self. The authentic artist goes against mass culture whose delusional purpose is to build a wall between audience and reality. The artist, on the contrary, carries the responsibility to expose to the audience its own face, the one they cannot see; truth, honesty, and self-knowledge must form the basis of art, so that it functions as a mirror to audiences, societies, and nations. The concluding sentence: "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real" (*Collected Essays* 672) carries a message of love and revelation, mixing the idea of war as a necessary act of facing painful realities, departing from self-acceptance toward real freedom, the one provided by the courage to abandon hostilities and fakeness and face truth.

Sonny represents the lonely and isolated Black artist who avoids painful realities through drug addiction and needs others as mirrors for *self-reflection* and self-acceptance before himself becomes a mirror to the audience. Seconding Johansson, "Sonny" is a name "connected to affection," "is a term of endearment… . It could be anybody's son, daughter,

brother or friend" (21). It is the responsibility of the family and the community to help individuals in the way of self-knowledge and identity, offering support against the "conspiracy to destroy black people," which is drugs, and against the isolation of Black artists, helping overcome social and political barriers and offering active *listening*.

In conclusion, sublimation acts as a cathartic force over the characters, involving art as a representation and expression of pain, fear, and anger. Both literary works present scenes in which music plays an important part in delivering a message; music is a language used by the characters to express their anguish, loneliness, and wishes. While Leo chose "Strange Fruit," Sonny's band started with "Am I Blue" and let Sonny play the piano, having a moment of sublimation, even knowing that the world outside continues its cycle of oppression and that it is necessary to go on resisting, making art, seeking love and being solidary.

Final Remarks

From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, James Baldwin has been always present, be it through his acclaimed essays against racism and the myth of white supremacy or through literary writings restating the presence of Black characters, especially artists. Baldwin's essays have become valuable historical, cultural, and theoretical sources, and his literary works have been examined under a wide range of new perspectives.

Baldwin denounced the illusion in which USA society has been living, both in real and fictional life. Since reality is denied in American History and Culture, it is plausible to say that such denial reflects on artistic productions, in the form of literary fiction, screenplays, films, and others. His career as an essayist launched after the release of "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone," with strong criticisms to two of the most prestigious literary works on Blackness in the USA: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Stowe, and *Native Son*, by Richard Wright. Since then, Baldwin sought to portray the real life of Black characters learning how to survive in the violent Harlem, facing oppression, and developing agential capacities to thrive while demanding their right to freedom and citizenship.

Baldwin also spoke of love and empathy and defended the need to be honest. He declared about himself: "I want to be an honest man and a good writer" (*Collected Essays* 9), which means to portray authentic characters and plausible plots, not only for credibility and coherence, but for truthfulness, so that the cords that vibrate in his works resonate in the audience's heart. This corresponds to the empathy examined by Johansson in "Sonny's Blues," in which the young musician is trapped between drug addiction and musical talent. His complex personality, as a younger brother, was built to reach the empathy of the reader, since Sonny can be one of us or one of ours.

Among Baldwin's works, the novel *Train* and the story "Sonny's Blues" were selected with the purpose of investigating the mechanisms developed by the Black characters in order

to cope with racial oppression and be able to become professional artists. I argue that the oppressed characters, raised under the repression imposed by parents in contexts of racism, police brutality, and social vulnerability, build strategies of self-protection with similar strategies used by the oppressive system, in a process of "appropriated racial oppression," as defined by Banks and Stephens. They combine social oppression with self-suppression and incorporate their mechanisms in order to succeed as professional artists. Rage and fear are channelled into artistic productions, in a process Freud defined as "sublimation." In Baldwin, sublimation requires the domineering of Black rage and the master of emotions into articulated language, be it theatrical or musical. I selected Baldwin's formulations about "an examined life," myths of white supremacy, and acting truthfully, among others, to argue that Baldwin portrays the journey of the Black artist from imposed silence to creative expression, in which the processes of suppression, oppression, and sublimation trace a movement from psychic restraint to artistic truth.

As I have observed in Chapter One, the Black characters, like any other children, are subjected to repression, in the Freudian sense, during the first infancy, ranging from birth until around seven years old. The sexual drive that was successfully repressed in that period will remain repressed, not to be remembered. However, from seven years old on, most of what happens will be remembered, so acts of repression become more conscious. That is why I have decided to work with the term "suppression," for it is more related to intentionality. As I developed the study of *Train* and "Sonny's Blues," I have come to consider this term more adequate to define the attitudinal aspects of the characters in the "examined" intention to suppress fear and rage.

Our review of the concept of repression demonstrated that it covers a wide range of meanings, which required a deeper investigation in order to present definitions of: a)

repression, in the broad sense; b) Freudian repression; c) repression meaning oppression; d) repression meaning suppression (or self-suppression).

In the broad sense (a), repression refers to every action that aims to inhibit behavior. It can describe, for example, the police tactics to dismantle legal or illegal acts, from peaceful protests to invasions of stadiums. The Freudian concept of repression (b) is more technical and specific to sexual energies repressed to the unconscious. It is common to see the term "repression" used interchangeably with "oppression" (c) to indicate the forces of dominant groups over others. Differently from the broad sense, though, here, repression adds a component of injustice, since oppression represents inequality. Even in cases of dominant groups legally acting against criminality, as police forces against illegal immigration, for example, usually the counter-response is disproportionate. Repression meaning suppression (d) depicts individual acts of self-control, in the *conscious* intention of hiding thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors, aiming for self-protection.

In face of that, I delimited the scope of the term so that it could help explain the forces operating over individuals in general and Black individuals in particular. I used "repression" only in the Freudian sense, meaning unconscious drives in the personality. However, as the characters studied are in the second infancy according to Freud's patterns, with growing social awareness, I adopted the term "suppression" to describe conscious self-suppression in racist environments. Finally, oppression was adopted according to Khader's definition that it hinders freedom and inequality and is systemic.

In Chapter One, I catalogued acts of self-suppression adopted by the characters and examined origins and intentionalities in many examples. I could conclude that the characters were raised to be too self-conscious and "behave properly," both to please whites and to guarantee self-protection.

Racist practices are vestiges of a slavery mindset, or "the afterlife of slavery," an expression discussed by Dawson in *Growing Up Black: Coming of Age and the Afterlife of Slavery in Contemporary African American Literature*. Both his studies of "coming of age" and "the afterlife of slavery" provided a broader view of the raising of Black children and aligned to the biography of Leo, Sonny, and many other Baldwinian characters growing up in Harlem, among violence, poor living conditions, and inadequate education.

Dawson argues that the European literary concept of "Buildungsroman" does not serve the studies of African American Literature, mainly because it refers to heroic acts, from infancy to adulthood, in a completely different context of Black children being raised in oppressive countries. His argument is valid to the present dissertation, in which the racist environment forms an oppressive context for children coming of age. Sonny and Leo are children coping with fear and rage, as observed in the process of growing up and becoming artists amid racism and violence.

In "Sonny's Blues," the violence of Harlem, with high crime rates stemming from drug trafficking and consumption, led the orphan teenager Sonny to drug use and trafficking, and then to jail. Baldwin denounces the deliberate negligence by the State in face of social problems, especially in Harlem, where drugs became a public health problem in the 1950 which only worsened in the next decades. I argue that Sonny had to deal with social oppression related to drug addiction and drug dealing in a crucial moment of his life: the transition from adolescent to young adult, a time of emotional vulnerability, initiation into legal and illegal drugs, sex, and the artistic world. Deficiencies in the educational system, lack of family emotional and financial support background, and violent environment culminated in Sonny's addiction, from which he could only regain balance with family and community help, by offering financial and emotional support. Baldwin shows the importance of tackling social or personal conflicts with courage to accept pain and get strength, through self-knowledge, to

fight racism. Sonny's isolated strategy to leave Harlem and escape drugs was useless, since it neglected that a problem so complex as drugs requires efficient public policies, self-care, medical help, and emotional support. Through the narrative, Baldwin manifests his views of love as a necessary war in which the artist is not an enemy, but a lover, with the mission of "disturbing the peace" and being a mirror of truth to the audience. Freedom, for Baldwin, results from self-knowledge and realistic assumptions of individual and collective identity.

In the interest to demonstrate the transition from self-suppression to the mastering of fear and rage, I came to a split of the meaning of "behaving properly." To the parents, "behaving properly" means to please white masters, landowners, employers, landlords, teachers, and others, all these characters standing for white supremacy. It aims at the maintenance of jobs, housing, credit in the market, and others. To the children, as they come of age, "behave properly" starts to include appropriations of white language and behavior to their own benefit. Banks and Stevens proposes a reframing of the expression "internalized racial oppression" to "appropriated racial oppression," because this last one includes a more agential cognition in the process of coping with racism since the long process of slavery and segregation to the present days. Their review helped us attest the agential capacity of the characters in appropriation of the whites' verbal and non-verbal language, incorporating it to their lifestyle and then finding their own voice, with articulated language and the mastery of fear and rage.

In the paper "On James Baldwin and Black Rage," Myisha Cherry presented many faces of rage. Black rage against racism as a killing force is addressed in *Notes of a Native Son*, with Baldwin's autobiographical descriptions of his attempt to be served and his expulsion from a segregational restaurant, and the discovery that he "hated and feared white people" (8) and "had been ready to commit murder" (72), acknowledging the existence of Black rage and reflecting on mechanisms to cope with such anger and fear. The concept

refers to "the anger *of* Black folk *at* racism and racists" (2, italics in original). The essay covers many aspects of Black rage, such as useless and useful rage. Useless rage is the one that can lead a victim of racism to kill or to be killed; useful rage can have pragmatic applications to anti-racist struggle. The agential capacities of useful rage are important for individuals with an "examined life," a term used by Baldwin to express the individual consciousness of the struggle against racism and inequality. Cherry argues that "Baldwin's theoretical account of Black rage … dignifies Blacks by centering them as people with agential capacities;" we believe that fictional characters were dignified as well, especially because Baldwin wished to detach his protest novels from those he discredited as such.

In reviewing the concept of oppression, I demonstrated the emotional and psychical damages it causes on individuals and families. I approached inter-racial relationships in *Train*, examining the consequences of Leo's involvement with the white women Barbara and Madeleine. The mutual love between Leo and Barbara had to succumb to oppressive racism and risks of lynching.

"The myth of the Black rapist," as studied by Castro, permeates the narrative of *Train*. The inter-racial relationship between Leo and Madeleine brought about important discussions concerning race, gender, and sexuality. A night of sexual intercourse between a Black young man and a white woman in her apartment led her neighbours to suspicions of robbery and rape and, consequently, to a formal accusation of burglary to the police. The scene is one example of how oppression affects the characters' lives. In his process of coming of age, Leo is, at times, bold and inconsequential; however, his arrest made him put his rage under control and use proper language if he wanted to save his life and be released.

Lynching and castration could be an example of unfair and disproportionate counter-responses to sexual crimes. Baldwin denounces the false accusations of Black men for sexual crimes and the structural racism as an agent of oppression and their project to

destroy Black people. Myths concerning Black sexuality are addressed in *Train* in many scenes: with Leo facing consequences of his involvement with white women; the myth of the Black rapist, as described by Barbara in a rather honest conversation with Leo about marriage; Leo's fear that the mob could lynch him; among others.

Due to the importance of the theme "lynching" and since it is addressed Baldwin's story "Going to Meet the Man," I included a study about it in Chapter Two. I relied on research by Akpan, Cassel, and Castro to examine the devastating consequences of violence both for victims and for oppressors. As Akpan notes, by building a white, military character as Jesse, Baldwin "demonstrated what transpires in white minds" and used his literary skills to denounce the oppressive justice system of the 1960s. Cassel concludes that "[i]t is the same, unreliable police and authorities that operate in contemporary American society" (18).

The third chapter departs from the concept of sublimation and reveals that being a Black artist requires abilities beyond the stage. The Freudian idea of sublimation refers to sexual energy directed to artistic, intellectual, and sport endeavours. The study allowed us to perceive that sublimation, in Baldwin's work, gained new meanings. Parallel to Freud's theory of channeling sexual drive, in Baldwin's works we could see Leo channeling his rage against the actor who abused him onstage. Sublimation (Freudian or not) is not directly addressed in Baldwin's theoretical approach. However, some concepts he developed about plays helps us understand how the sublimation works for Black artists.

Throughout the research, I have presented what Baldwin means by "examined life," "acting truthfully" and "articulated language." The sentence "But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living," presented in the "Introduction" of *Notes of Native Son*, represents his beliefs in the need of a society more conscious of its responsibilities, acknowledging the wrongs and abandoning self-delusion. Also, it defends the *conscious* agency of Black individuals against inequality. Kevin Birmingham studies "the unexamined

life" and "history's pocket" in relation to Baldwin's reports of his incursions to the American South and the abuse he suffered from a leader activist with his "unexamined life."

What Baldwin means by "acting truthfully" is presented in "Theater: The Negro In and Out" and also in the literary piece "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." Baldwin criticizes white screenwriters who do not know nor aim to understand Black culture and denounces the fake plots for both reflecting and perpetrating the illusional idea white America has of itself. Then, he points to the "irritating, self-indulgent mannerisms" of the actors, who are obliged to keep in movement to convey the idea that something important is happening. The antidote to such fakeness involves empathy: the actors must find some compassion that connects them to the characters. I depicted examples from *Train* to highlight Baldwin's point and explain how it relates to sublimation in the Freudian sense. Leo faced challenges concerning the play *Winterset*, when he played Mio. He could find a common ground between him and the character, whose father had been wronged, but he judged the boy as "callow" and "whining," a flaw due to the screenwriters' and directors' failure in understanding the character's mind and soul. When the actor finds a personal/emotional connection with the character, he can act "truthfully," without mannerisms, because he puts his own pain or joy into the play, and that is the sublimation defined by Freud.

Finally, "articulated language" is represented by Leo delivering a little speech to a white audience of visitors in his own house. The examination of a dinner scene requires us to look back to Leo's trajectory of fear and rage and his stumbles along the way. If, in the beginning of his career, Leo was angry with the patronizing director Saul, and with himself for failing to master rage and language, now he is his own master, having learned how to mold rage as energy to produce articulated language. I rely on Cherry and Gehlawat to state that being a Black artist involves agential capacities to articulate activism and citizenship in

the public sphere; on the other hand, it requires privacy, with moments of loneliness and isolation so that the artist meets the self.

It is important to distinguish between the privacy and isolation aiming to create art and from the one that estranges the artist from the community. The theme is discussed by Gehlawat in relation to Baldwin's life as a writer and a spokesperson and extended here to investigate how loneliness and isolation affected Leo and Sonny personally and artistically. The articulation between these two spheres, private and public, is important to any artistic career, but, as Gehlawat argues, society demands more activism and representation from Black public figures, often harming their right to privacy. Leo and Sonny demonstrate strong perseverance in the pursuit of artistic career, sometimes with obsession and in isolation, triggering a series of ruptures with family, friends, artists, and community.

Several attempts were made by his brother Caleb to bring Leo closer to the family; however, the lack of family support just pushed him further away. Leo did succeed as an artist, found fame, wealthiness and love; he mastered rage and language; by acting truthfully, he could establish connections with himself, the characters, and the audience. However, he worked so much that he neglected health and almost died from a heart attack. And even under medical conditions, he had to hear underlying racist comments from reporters when he was leaving the hospital: "You're one of the biggest stars we have. No Negro's ever made it as big as you. It must mean a lot to—your people" (*Train* 250). This is a warning that activism is permanently necessary and that rights should not be taken for granted. In Gehlawat's words: "In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, we see how necessary it continues to be for prominent Black artists to use their platform for critique and truth-telling" (124).

As exposed, truth is a topic dear to Baldwin. He wanted to be "an honest man and a good writer" and wanted the nation to do the same. He put his writing skills to find honesty, goodness, and truth by breaking myths concerning the "American Dream," "the land of the

free," "the Black criminal," and others. Through her research, Isadora Castro worked to help break "the myth of the Black rapist;" Cherry emphasized the importance of Black rage to social movements; Ghelawat claimed for the need of continuous struggle for rights and freedom. However, there is space for academic research to catalogue and examine Baldwin's theories of American myths, along with studies about vestiges of slavery practices, such as the denial of a person's name. In *Train*, for example, Caleb was punished for refusing to respond to the name "Sam," as the ringleader chose to call him. The presence and the absence of the names of the characters, the meanings, the biblical references, make room for future research exploring subjectivity. Environment racism is also a theme that deserves more scrutiny, in the same path of Ushedo's and Stone's research. Baldwin's works contain many descriptions of environmental racism surrounding Black communities, with processes of gentrification, property speculation, socio-spatial segregation, and others. In *Train*, for instance, the transition from Harlem to Central Park is described to reflect the "pathetic green," where the buildings began to be higher and cleaner" (174). The transition suggests vestiges of slavery, with clean, green, and well-cared areas contrasting with the dirty streets Leo usually runs to reach the theater. In "Sonny's Blues," the streets were busy with drug dealers and users, destroying many lives due to chemical dependency and traffic wars.

I would like to conclude by remarking that Baldwin gave voice to Black characters, ensuring that they have a voice and a say. At some point, Leo declared: "I have lived long enough to see my language stolen" (*Train* 91). His voice is not given back: it is conquered. Leo succeeded in making room for his voice, and he had much to say: "The point is that the Negroes of this country are treated as none of you would dream of treating a dog or a cat," concluding with: "This *is* my house" (363, italics in original). He finally uses his voice to defend Black people and reaffirm his position as master of the house and of himself. Lastly, but not least, Baldwin reminds us that having an articulated voice is not enough: it requires an

active ear to listen. Mastering rage into language, be it theatrical or musical, is a kind of sublimation achieved by the Black characters, mobilizing loving support and honesty in the connection with the audience. Beyond that, it represents resistance against the rage that kills. Since, as Baldwin puts it, there is "a conspiracy to destroy black people," sublimation goes beyond channeling energy into art: it represents a moral act of resistance against oppressive destruction, by means of police brutality, neglect of the State, poor educational systems, and others, but also against self-destruction, by means drugs abuse and submission to the rage that kills. Against dissidence and isolation, Baldwin refuses sentimentality, illusion, and denial and argues in favor of realistic love and empathy, the ones that provide support and strengths the artistic collectivity.

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