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PEKKA KILPELÄINEN

In Search of a Postcategorical Utopia

James Baldwin and the Politics of "Race" and Sexuality

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ABSTRACT: IN SEARCH OF A POSTCATEGORICAL UTOPIA: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE POLITICS OF “RACE” AND SEXUALITY

Despite his prominent role as one of the most important African American authors and social critics, James Baldwin’s literary and intellectual legacy remains curiously overlooked and underappreciated, particularly as far as his later work is concerned. This study emphasizes the urgency of a large thematic impulse which runs throughout his oeuvre, consisting of an endeavour to question and challenge the oppressive effects of the social categorization of human beings, especially in terms of race and sexuality. This thematic undercurrent can be conceptualized as the idea of postcategorical utopia, an impulse towards a world, or a state of being, in which those identity categories would lose their capacity for oppression. This study maps the impulse of postcategorical utopia in three of Baldwin’s novels by making use of Fredric Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious, which is designed to reveal and explicate the political urgency of literary works. The reading proceeds from the rather narrow social scope of community to the level of the antagonistic dialogue between different social groups, and on to the widest perspective of history. Baldwin’s novels manifest the politics of race and sexuality on all of these three levels. Firstly, they map the heteronormative and patriarchal tendencies within the black religious community and, secondly, the issues of interracial and homosexual relationships. Finally, Baldwin’s work assumes a position as both a part and criticism of the black counterculture of Western modernity by taking to task the racist and heteronormative tendencies visible in both of these versions of modernity. The concept of postcategorical utopia provides a way of understanding the underlying logic of Baldwin’s work and helps establish his later work as an integral part of his legacy.

Keywords:
James Baldwin; African American literature; race; sexuality; ideology; utopia; Fredric Jameson

ABSTRAKTI: POSTKATEGORISTA UTOPIAA ETSIMÄSSÄ: JAMES BALDWIN JA ”RODUN” JA SEKSUAALISUUDEN POLITIIKAT

James Baldwinia pidetään yleisesti yhtenä merkittävimmistä afrikkalaisamerikkalaisista kirjailijoista ja yhteiskuntakriitikoista. Tästä huolimatta erityisesti hänen myöhäistuotantonsa on saanut osakseen hämmästyttävän vähän huomiota. Väitöskirjassa korostetaan, että Baldwinin koko tuotantoa lävistää sosiaalisen kategorisoinnin alistavaa voimaa kyseenalaistava tematiikka, mikä tulee esille erityisesti rodun ja seksuaalisuuden kategorioiden kautta. Tutkimuksessa tämä temaattinen jatkumo käsitteellistyy postkategorisen utopian käsitteen kautta. Se tarkoittaa pyrkimystä kohti maailmaa tai olemisen tapaa, jossa identiteettikategoriat menettävät alistussuhteita tuottavat ja ylläpitävät voimansa. Postkategorisen utopian impulssia tarkastellaan kolmen Baldwinin romaanin kautta käyttäen hyväksi Fredric Jamesonin poliittisen alitajunnan teoriaa, jonka avulla voidaan paljastaa ja analysoida kirjallisten teosten poliittisia merkityksiä. Luenta etenee yhteiskunnallisessa mielessä suhteellisen kapealta yhteisön tasolta vastakkaisten ryhmittymien tason kautta laajimmalle historian tasolle. Baldwinin romaanit käsittelevät rodun ja seksuaalisuuden problematiikkaa näillä kolmella tasolla. Ne kartoittavat mustan perheen ja yhteisön tasolla ilmenevää patriarkaalisuutta ja heteronormatiivisuutta sekä rotujen välisiä ja homoseksuaalisia ihmissuhteita. Lopulta Baldwinin tuotanto asettuu sekä osaksi länsimaisen moderniteetin mustaa vastakulttuuria että toisaalta sen kritiikiksi haastamalla näissä molemmissa traditioissa ilmeneviä rasistisia ja heteronormatiivisia piirteitä. Postkategorisen utopian käsite auttaa sitomaan Baldwinin moniulotteisen kirjailijantyön yhteen merkitykselliseksi kokonaisuudeksi ja vakiinnuttamaan hänen myöhäistuotantonsa olennaiseksi osaksi hänen kirjallista ja älyllistä perintöään.

Asiasanat:
James Baldwin; afrikkalaisamerikkalainen kirjallisuus; rotu; seksuaalisuus; ideologia; utopia; Fredric Jameson

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It was fifteen years ago that I first encountered James Baldwin. His voice spoke to me through an excerpt contained in a book of literary theory that I had consulted for an example of a particular literary device. I have forgotten which device the excerpt exemplified, but the voice has remained with me ever since. This coincidental encounter initiated a long and complex chain of events, which has led me to walk the chilly, sunlit streets of Harlem, to ascend a hill in Central Park, to stand at a subway station in New York wondering whether the train had already gone, to delve into the archives of Baldwin's letters and unpublished texts at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, to attend several academic conferences, to linger in the silences of numerous libraries, and to inhabit the spaces of several solitary brainstorms on the campus of the University of Joensuu. It has not always been an easy path to follow, as few paths ever are. Even at the risk of sounding overly pompous, I dare to say that it has been, to quote Baldwin's words, a process of "quest and daring and growth."

Looking back upon the past fifteen years, I feel deeply indebted to the people who have helped and supported me in numerous ways. First of all, I should like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Jopi Nyman, who has always had the time and the energy to guide me along the way, and who always seems to know the right books and articles to suggest in order to help me find my way out of a theoretical cul-de-sac. I also wish to thank Professor Magdalena J. Zaborowska for being one of the pre-examiners of this dissertation and for agreeing to function as the official examiner. I am also grateful to Professor Pirjo Ahokas for her work as a pre-examiner and for her valuable remarks and suggestions. Several other people have provided me with help and advice, and I wish to express my gratitude to them: firstly, Dr John A Stotesbury for checking the language of my manuscript and for his assistance throughout the whole process, especially in its early, formative phases. Professor Risto Turunen's extensive knowledge of literary theory was pivotal in spurring me on to explore the intricacies of the theoretical side of my work. Professor Mikko Tuhkanen's insight into Baldwin, African American literature and culture, and their larger theoretical contexts has provided me with numerous flashes of inspiration without which the analytical chapters of this thesis would not have reached their present level of sophistication. Discussions with Dr Matti Savolainen have also sparked various significant ideas and adjustments, particularly in the final stages of the writing process. The Finnish Graduate School for North and Latin American Studies and its teachers and members have provided me with support in terms of guidance, comradeship, and finance, for which I am deeply grateful. As far as my fellow researchers are concerned, I want to thank Hanna Reinikainen and Lea Tajakka for the encouragement and the hours that we have spent reading and commenting on each other's work. My deepest gratitude goes out to all of these people and numerous others,

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Pekka Kilpeläinen, Joensuu, 30 March 2010

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ABBREVIATIONS

Archaeologies	*Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, by Fredric Jameson
Black Manhood	*Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, by Keith Clark
"Down"	"Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind," by James Baldwin.
"Everybody"	"Everybody's Protest Novel," by James Baldwin
"Freaks"	"Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," by James Baldwin.
Go Tell	*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, by James Baldwin
"ISA"	"Ideological State Apparatuses," by Louis Althusser
JB	*James Baldwin: A Biography*, by David A. Leeming.
JBLF	*James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*, by Lynn Orilla Scott
Just above	*Just above My Head*, by James Baldwin
PU	*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, by Fredric Jameson.
Tell Me	*Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, by James Baldwin.

1 Introduction

1.1 AIMS AND STRUCTURE

More than two decades have passed since the end of James Baldwin's (1924-1987) life and literary career. Although the larger influence of his prophetic and polemical voice arguably decreased in the later stages of his career, its echoes have started to resonate with increasing strength in recent years. This rising wave of interest in his work and legacy is long overdue because, despite his prominent role as perhaps the most frequently quoted African American writer and social activist in the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly concerning the issues of "race" in America, his work from the mid-1960s onwards has all too often been ignored and underrated. The recent resurgence of critical and popular attention paid to Baldwin is evidenced by the publication during the past ten years or so of several anthologies and major studies of his work and by the constant reprinting of his books. Two conferences on his work and legacy, in London in 2007 and in Boston in 2009, with impressive rosters of speakers and delegates from around the world, are another indication of the longevity of Baldwin's literary and intellectual legacy. His words are still invested with urgency, demanding that we hear, recover, and reconsider what has been ignored and lost. His lifelong mission to fight against the oppressive power of social categorization in its various forms must not be forgotten. It is this call to remember and to re-evaluate the literary and ideological legacy of James Baldwin that this study seeks to respond to.

Broadly speaking, Baldwin's humanist agenda is based on his conviction that human beings are capable of moral progress and positive change. Accordingly, a central tendency in his writing is the desire to undermine and transcend various kinds of categorizations, especially those pertaining to race and sexuality. The origins of this impulse are expressed in an autobiographical passage in his essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood": "all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself" (819). Baldwin understood the capacity of these categories to produce and maintain relations of oppression, and he devoted his life and work to resisting and dismantling their power.

Another example of Baldwin's incredulity at categorization can be found in his seminal essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," in which he criticizes Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and explains why he sees it as a failure:

> we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorisation. […] We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of

> reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed. […] 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 categorisation alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. ("Everybody" 25, 28)

As Lawrie Balfour points out in *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (2001), Baldwin saw the moral vision perpetuated by *Native Son* and much of the tradition of protest literature as based on a simplifying division of the world into "good and evil, innocent and guilty" (114). She argues that

> [i]nadequate to the task of grappling with either slavery or racial injustices, this moral vision copes with their existence by assigning individuals and their behavior to simple categories and mouthing moral formulas. The protest novel proclaims its good intentions but does so by providing so flat a picture of the evil it aims to overcome that readers are not required to recognize racial injustice in their own lives. (*The Evidence of Things Not Said* 114)

This is exactly what Baldwin sought to avoid and criticize in his own work. He saw that categorizations tend to become instruments of power through which relations of inequality and oppression are produced and maintained. This is where Baldwin's thinking assumes a position of resistance against the tradition of Western modernity which may be seen as largely based on such categories as gender, race, sexuality, and class. Baldwin was far ahead of his time in his questioning and challenging the essentialist conceptions of identity which these categories entail.

In this study, I will focus on how the politics of race and sexuality and the concomitant categories of identity function in Baldwin's writing. To conceptualize the grand scheme of Baldwin's thinking, the central underlying thematic current which runs throughout the entirety of his oeuvre, this study foregrounds what I will call the idea of *postcategorical utopia*, a vision of, or, rather, an impulse towards, a world in which such categories as race, sexuality, and gender would lose their capacity for oppression. Baldwin never actually defines this ideal in any detail, except in negative terms, as the absence of categorization; rather, he suggests simply that the means of attaining this better world is *love* in the Baldwinian sense, that is, without ideological restrictions. The characters in his novels, for example, transcend various conventional categories, but this usually fails to produce any lasting state of personal happiness or any changes on a larger social scale. Despite the transgressive behaviour of these characters, the world around them remains unchanged, and we only see utopian glimpses of and allusions to what might lie beyond this world of late modernity governed by oppressive categorization. It is exactly the explication and analysis of Baldwin's denunciation of the defining power of categorization which will prove to be at the core of my contribution to Baldwin studies.

My analysis of the politics of race and sexuality in Baldwin's writing will concentrate on three of his novels: his debut, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), his fourth novel, *Tell Me*

How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968), and his last one, *Just above My Head* (1979). Together, these works span not only most of Baldwin's career as a writer, but also three different phases both of American society and also of the struggle of African Americans for social equality. Each of these novels is necessarily shaped by its distinctive socio-political context, providing access to the crucial social issues and problems of each era. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was written during the late 1940s and early 1950s, an era of racial segregation, the slow economic ascension of the black middle class, the intolerant ideology of McCarthyism, Cold War, and the almost dormant state of black protest movements. Baldwin wrote *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* in the mid and late 1960s, marked by fervent civil rights activism, the passing of the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Act, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the conflict within the black protest movement between the ideologies of nonviolence and Black Power. *Just above My Head* was published eleven years later, in a period characterized by the widening of the chasm between the black élite and the black proletariat, the political "white backlash," and the waning of affirmative action and black radicalism. In addition to Baldwin's novels, I will also refer to his essays from various periods to analyse the ideological and utopian aspects of his writing.

My readings of Baldwin's novels are largely based on Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious, according to which literary works are read as symbolic acts, producing imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions (*The Political Unconscious* 79). In this process, the text is regarded as a site of ideology, and its central problems are read as symbolic manifestations of the social contradictions of the historical context of its production. According to my own elaboration of Jameson's theory, these problems appear in the text in the form of *ideological closures*, as products of narrow and exclusive ways of thinking and structuring the world, which result in the creation and maintenance of oppressive social categories. The text seeks to solve these problems by generating what I regard as *utopian projections*, visions of an alternative, better future. My definitions of the concepts of ideology and utopia follow Karl Mannheim's view, according to which ideology is defined as a complex of ideas which aim at preserving the prevailing order, whereas utopia refers to modes of thinking which tend towards transforming the status quo (40). Building on Jameson's thinking, the text is conceptualized as a field of force, where history appears in the form of ideological closures, countered by fantasy, which assumes the form of utopian projections. This fundamental dialectic of ideology and utopia gives rise to the text at the intersection of history and fantasy, and, simultaneously, reshapes the levels of history and fantasy. As a consequence, the connection between a text and its socio-historical context is formed, and a political mode of reading literary texts is established.

The analyses of Baldwin's novels follow the framework of the three horizons of Jameson's theory of the political unconscious as outlined in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) (see chapter 2 of this thesis). The process of reading proceeds through three distinct conceptual horizons in which the social ground of the reading expands gradually. In the first horizon, the fundamental contradiction of the text must be identified and then grasped as a symbolic resolution of a real social

contradiction. The second horizon marks the widening out of the social scope of the reading to encompass the social order. Here the text is understood as one symbolic utterance, which carries an ideological message in the antagonistic dialogue between a dominant and an oppressed social group. The third horizon places the literary work in its widest context in the history of modes of production. This is conducted by searching for traces of how the text under scrutiny is related to modes of production and their cultural dominants.

Each of the three of Baldwin's novels will comply with one of these horizons, following the strategy adopted by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, which will enable me to provide new angles on these works. What this means in this study is that in chapter 3 *Go Tell It on the Mountain* will be read within the scope of the first horizon of Jameson's hermeneutical theory, in which the oppressive and confining closure, the home of the Grimes family, will be regarded as the central cluster of problems. This is grasped as a symbolic manifestation of the fundamental social contradictions of the era in which the novel was produced, that is, the problem of racial subjugation in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and, on the other hand, the issue of heteronormativity within black religious communities. The analysis will explicate the functioning of the dialectic of ideology and utopia in terms of space, both ideological and utopian. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* will be placed within the second horizon, in which the triangle of transgressive relationships produces the mythical character of Black Christopher, who functions as an embodiment of the Baldwinian ideal of love as a means of transcending the categories of race and sexuality. In the third horizon, *Just above My Head* will be read as a manifestation of resistance against the oppressive ideologies of modernity, particularly in terms of race, but also against the forms of oppression which can be detected within the black counterculture of modernity, especially homophobia and misogyny.

In other words, the reading process starts from the black family and community, moves on to the level of the social order in terms of race and sexuality, and finally expands to the level of the vast historical continuum of modes of production where the oppressive tendencies of both Western modernity and its black counterculture are revealed as the fundamental loci of ideological closure. This strategy will explicate the politics of race and sexuality on three different levels by unmasking the gradual expansion of the political scope of Baldwin's work and underscoring the political significance of the underlying impulse of postcategorical utopia which runs throughout his work. In the process, the hitherto ignored and understated importance of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *Just above My Head* as integral parts of his work is reassessed and confirmed.

The rest of this introductory chapter seeks to provide some contextual information on Baldwin, his work, reception, and earlier research. Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical framework developed and used in this political reading of Baldwin's novels. Firstly, this entails a brief overview of the premises of Jameson's thinking, with particular emphasis on his theory of the political unconscious and the three horizons of textual interpretation. This will be followed by an explication of the two central concepts which constitute my

methodology of reading Baldwin politically: ideology and utopia. The discussion will then move on to what may be considered to be my contribution to literary theory, that is, my understanding of the dialectic of ideology and utopia as a constitutive dynamic at work in literary texts. What this means is that I have started from the premises laid down by Jameson's thinking, and I have then worked my way towards a more systematic and elaborate notion of this fundamental dialectic. In other words, I have aspired to do what Jameson has not, in effect, sought to do in *The Political Unconscious* (see *PU* 10-12), that is, to shape this theory into a tool of textual analysis instead of arguing for the alleged superiority of the Marxist perspective over all other theoretical traditions. This has enabled me to adjust the theory of the political unconscious and transform it into a useful methodological tool which helps in the explication of the political dimensions of Baldwin's novels.

The analytical chapters of this thesis place the three selected novels by Baldwin within the framework of the political unconscious by examining how the categories of race and sexuality function on each of these levels. In Chapter 3, my reading of the dialectic of ideology and utopia in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* explicates the ideological closure of home and the spatial configurations of the utopian impulse to open up this oppressive closure. In Chapter 4, I will provide an account of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* which foregrounds the crucial role of the syncretic figure of Black Christopher and the transgressive interracial and homosexual relationships which bring him into being. This reading breaks some significant new ground by highlighting the importance of this neglected novel in Baldwin's oeuvre. Chapter 5 analyses Baldwin's last novel, the ambitious *Just above My Head*, as part of the black counterculture of modernity and, simultaneously, as its critique. This entails an overview of Paul Gilroy's account of the black counterculture in his seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), which is followed by a discussion of *Just above My Head* as a reaction against white racism and, on the other hand, against heteronormativity, both white and black. These analytical chapters will form an account of Baldwin's work and legacy in terms of postcategorical utopia, a conceptualization of the underlying emancipatory, teleological current, which becomes visible and is developed further in each of these novels. This may be regarded as my most significant contribution to Baldwin studies.

1.2 JAMES BALDWIN, THE TEXTS, AND EARLIER RESEARCH

James Baldwin's position within the tradition of African American literature is ambivalent. Although he was highly regarded in the early stages of his career, in the 1950s and early 1960s, in particular, he has tended to be overshadowed by other black American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, and from the 1970s onwards by African American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. As D. Quentin Miller points out in his introduction to *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), despite the undeniable scope and variety of Baldwin's influence, his "novels are certainly less likely to be included in American literature courses than novels by the three most prominent African American novelists of the past half-century: Richard Wright,

Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison" (Introduction 3-4). I would concur with Miller's view, according to which "Baldwin's fate in literary history […] rests upon his refusal to attach himself to any single ideology, literary form, or vision. Because he never let himself be labeled as a gay writer, a black writer, a protest writer, a modern writer, a fiction writer, an essay writer, or a prophetic writer, his legacy is not entirely stable" (Introduction 4). Dwight A. McBride also supports this in his introduction to *James Baldwin Now* (1999) by emphasizing the complexity of "Baldwin's vision of and for humanity" and his refusal to confine himself to one or two literary forms, despite the tendency of his contemporary critics to place him in one or other of these categories (2). In a word, Baldwin's ambivalent position results from the fact that his legacy is too complex to fit into any available category through which it could be read and understood in simple and straightforward terms.

Baldwin is, however, often regarded as a part of the tradition of African American protest literature. As implied above, his relation to that tradition is somewhat ambivalent, and he pointedly attacks it, as attested in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." He argues that protest novels, exemplified by Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, are guilty of certain "racial innocence." They perpetuate the illusion that issues like racism are distant and somehow external: "[they have] nothing to do with us, [they are] safely ensconced to the social arena, where, indeed, [they have] nothing to do with anyone" ("Everybody" 24). Marlon B. Ross offers a useful interpretation of Baldwin's position in his article "White Fantasies of Desire": "According to Baldwin, protest fiction plays up the illusion that we can understand injustice by fictionally *representing* the categories on which that injustice is based. Instead, Baldwin wants to *explode* those categories, offering not a protest but rather a critique that disables the categories from retaining their oppressive power" (36; original emphases). Here we are at the core of Baldwin's thinking, which underlies all of his writing, fiction and nonfiction alike. To quote his own words:

> Our passion for categorisation, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions. ("Everybody" 24)

In Baldwin's view, these categories function to deny humanity itself, and they must, therefore, be deconstructed ("Everybody" 27). Protest novels do not, Baldwin argues, question or transcend this categorization; instead, they propagate it ("Everybody" 28). In her essay "Finding the Words: Baldwin, Race Consciousness, and Democratic Theory," Lawrie Balfour sums this up well: "protest novels, far from encouraging self-examination or critique, generate the sort of indignation that comforts the comfortable in the righteousness of their opinions and the necessity of the existing moral framework" (77).

As McBride points out, the resistance of hegemonies was at the very centre of Baldwin's life as well as of his works, and he was committed to the struggle "for racial

equality, against elitism both in the United States and abroad, and against the forces of heterosexism both inside and outside the black community" (1). In "Everybody" Baldwin draws attention to the ability of society "to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree; it has the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, in so far as the societal realities are concerned" (25). Closely connected with this resistance of hegemonies is his resolute rejection of traditional narrow identity categories. As James A. Dievler argues in his essay "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*," Baldwin was not content to see himself in the rigid, categorized way in which most others saw him, that is, as black, gay, and male (161). It is exactly the denunciation of the defining power of categorization which will also prove to be the focal point of discussion in this study.

As far as style is concerned, Baldwin's prose is eloquent and poetic, and it is largely based on such modernist literary devices as the interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and complex handling of time. Religion has been a strong element in African American culture, and it is also an important factor in Baldwin's writing. His language is characterized by an extensive use of biblical allusions, which appear overtly in direct quotations from the Bible and hymns, and more covertly in the names of the characters, such as Black Christopher in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, and Gabriel in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The African American tradition of oral culture is also clearly visible in Baldwin's writing, particularly in the form of quotations from old slave songs, and gospel and blues lyrics. Baldwin comments on his own style in his essay "Autobiographical Notes": "I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech—and something of Dickens' love for bravura—have something to do with me today" (13). One important source of influence on Baldwin may also be found in the literary style of Henry James, as Charles Newman, for example, argues in "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin" (52-65). It is therefore obvious that Baldwin's style is analogous with the general tradition of African American literature, since both result from the intersection of African American and mainstream American influences. Traces of this dual heritage may also be detected in the title of Baldwin's first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), which seems to allude to Henry James's autobiographical *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) and also to Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*.

James Arthur Baldwin was born on 2 August 1924, in Harlem, New York, to Emma Berdis Jones. As David Leeming, one of his biographers, states in *James Baldwin: A Biography* (1994), it is unclear whether Baldwin had any information about his biological father (3). He was raised under the stern, almost tyrannical guidance of his stepfather, David Baldwin, who was a preacher and, according to Leeming, suffered from mental illness, which was manifested especially in "the form of an arbitrary and puritanical discipline and a depressing air of bitter frustration" to which the whole family was subjected (*JB* 5). Leeming suggests that David Baldwin's illness was largely a consequence of racial discrimination which rendered him unable to provide his family

"with what they needed most—their birthright, their identity as individuals rather than as members of a class or a race" (*JB* 5). In his essay "Notes of a Native Son," James Baldwin points out that he did not know his stepfather very well (84). There seems to have been an almost complete lack of communication between them.

It was only years later, after his stepfather's death, that James Baldwin came to understand profoundly the dimensions of the frustration which David Baldwin had suffered from. According to Leeming, Baldwin learned to see that his stepfather's tyrannical attempts to protect his children from earthly evil were a result of the latter's inability to love himself in the white world which despised him (*JB* 8). This problematic relationship between Baldwin and his stepfather, and the latter's extremely strict view of religion, may be seen as one reason for the former's ambiguous attitude towards religion, which is constantly visible in his writing. This is exemplified in *Tell Me*, for instance, specifically in the dispute between Leo and his brother Caleb, who experiences a religious conversion and becomes a preacher. Leeming also argues that Baldwin was to use his stepfather as "the archetypal victim of the 'chronic disease' of racism" in his literary works (*JB* 8).

Baldwin's relationship to his mother seems to have been a strong balancing force, particularly during his childhood and adolescence. As Leeming suggests, Berdis Baldwin was the main reason that young James was able to come to terms with his stepfather, because she functioned as a kind of an "antidote" to the same disease of racism of which David Baldwin was a victim (*JB* 8). She advised her children to love people "for their faults as well as their virtues, their ugliness as well as their beauty" (*JB* 9). Leeming goes on to argue that the principle of love which James learned from his mother was to act as a major constituent in the Baldwinian ideal of love as a solution to the racial problem (*JB* 9). This ideal will prove to be a central issue in this study as well.

James Campbell argues in his book *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (1991) that "[a]t each of the three schools he attended, […] [Baldwin] is remembered as having been exceptionally, even uniquely, intelligent" (12). His fervent interest in literature seems to have emerged already as a child, and, as he reminisces in "Autobiographical Notes," he spent most of his time reading and writing. His talent for writing was also noticed at school, and he received several prizes for his written work (11). At the age of fourteen, as Leeming states, Baldwin had a powerful religious experience and, as a consequence, became a preacher. His time in the church was of considerable importance to his later career as a writer and a spokesman, because it was there that he learned the powerful use of rhetoric, which became one of the basic characteristics in his writing and speeches (*JB* 24-25). Troubled, however, by the hypocrisy which he saw in the church and, in addition, attracted by the world of possibilities available to him because of his undeniable talents, the use of which was constantly encouraged at high school, Baldwin decided to leave the church after three years of preaching in the pulpit (Leeming, *JB* 31).

As Leeming points out, the time after his graduation from De Witt Clinton High School was a time of big decisions for Baldwin. Knowing what he most wanted in life, he eventually decided to pursue a career as a writer, which was difficult, since he had to work to provide for his family—his stepfather's health had deteriorated severely—

although he hated the jobs he was able to get (*JB* 37-40). After his stepfather's death in 1943, having held and lost various jobs, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, the bohemian atmosphere of which he found less suffocating than the misery which had dominated his life in Harlem. According to Leeming, Baldwin was torn between his sense of duty for his family and his career as a writer. He was afraid that if he stayed to support his family, he would eventually turn out to be a bitter and disappointed man, exactly like his stepfather. This was a vision which Baldwin could not bear, and, consequently, he made the hard decision to keep his earnings to himself and leave his family to survive on their own (*JB* 43).

During his Village years, according to Leeming, Baldwin was faced with problems concerning his identity in racial, sexual, and political terms. He was one of the very few African Americans who lived in the Village, and in addition to this he suffered from scoliosis, which "caused him to walk in a manner which people saw as effeminate" (*JB* 45). This, of course, caused him to stand out. At the same time, he was becoming increasingly conscious of his homosexuality, and, although he still continued to have relationships with women, he knew, in Leeming's words, "that for him the best way to love women was not to 'make love' with them" (*JB* 45). Leeming argues that the fact that Baldwin was still confused about his sexual identity prevented him from having successful relationships: he was afraid to reveal his feelings to the men he loved, because of the fear of losing their friendship (*JB* 53). At that time "he was still, at best, an 'up and coming Negro writer' and, at worst, a confused bisexual black man who had 'deserted' his family and who merely pretended to be at ease in what was, in fact, the hostile white world masked by a bohemian life-style" (Leeming, *JB* 53). Baldwin was also working on a novel—the tentative title of which alternated between *Crying Holy* and *In My Father's House* and would eventually evolve into *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—but he was making little progress. As he reminisces in "Autobiographical Notes," he also wrote book reviews and essays, many of which were published, but he was troubled by his failure to properly finish his novels (12).

In 1948, Baldwin moved to Paris, following the example of many American authors, as Leeming points out, to escape from the stifling racial and sexual climate in the United States. He was motivated in particular by his aim to "become the writer he wanted to be" and "to confront in a new context the personal problems" which bothered him (*JB* 56). As a writer, Baldwin made considerable progress during his stay in Europe: in 1952 he was finally able to finish the novel which was now titled *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (*JB* 79). Leeming argues that despite this long-awaited triumph as a writer, Europe did not prove to be a solution to Baldwin's problems in his personal life (*JB* 83). Although being an expatriate had provided him with the needed critical distance to help him understand his position as an African American and to accept his sexual identity, he had failed to find solutions to the frustrations of his personal life (JB 73, 83). As becomes obvious in the course of Leeming's biography of Baldwin, this somewhat unsuccessful search for personal happiness was to characterize the rest of Baldwin's life.

According to Leeming, one of the most enduring contradictions for Baldwin was the conflict between his role and sense of duty as a spokesman for African Americans and, on

the other hand, the "reclusive aesthete" in him who longed for love and happiness (*JB* 57). This conflict caused Baldwin to be, in Leeming's words, "torn between his attachments to home and his need to be in Paris, Istanbul, Hollywood, or Saint-Paul-de-Vence" (*JB* 57). As Randall Kenan points out in *James Baldwin* (1994), Baldwin was often criticized for his status as an expatriate because such a position was considered inappropriate for a civil rights activist (124). As William J. Spurlin suggests in his essay "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity," Baldwin's homosexuality was pointedly attacked by Eldridge Cleaver, an African American critic and activist, which considerably reduced Baldwin's potential as a black leader; unlike Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, he did not correspond to the stereotypical, heteronormative images of straight black masculinity (114). Largely as a consequence of his nonconformist sexuality, Leeming suggests, Baldwin was excluded from the roster of speakers at the March on Washington in August 1963 (*JB* 228). Baldwin had to live his life in the crossfire of obligations: obliged to African Americans as a spokesman, and to himself as an artist and human being.

As Kenan points out, Baldwin found his home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, southern France, in 1970, and was to spend most of his remaining years there (124). After the mid-1960s, Baldwin's works tended to evoke mixed reactions: according to Kenan, the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), for instance, "was either Baldwin's 'best novel yet' or 'insipid' and 'slight'; Baldwin himself was either at the height of his powers as the creator of a 'timeless' work of art or had become a 'dated' relic most interesting as a nostalgia piece" (127). Kenan argues that although Baldwin's last novel, *Just above My Head*, was his "first commercial success in nearly 15 years," his later work seems to have failed to arouse as much attention as his early novels and collections of essays (130). James Arthur Baldwin's life was brought to an end by cancer, and he died on 1 December 1987, in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, attended by his brother, David Baldwin, and some of his closest friends (Leeming, *JB* 386).

As a writer, James Baldwin has often been regarded first and foremost as an essayist. This observation is evidenced in articles by various critics, such as Langston Hughes, F. W. Dupee, and Robert A. Bone. In "From Harlem to Paris," Hughes characterizes Baldwin as an essayist who is "thought-provoking, tantalizing, irritating, abusing and amusing" (9), while Dupee, in "James Baldwin and the 'Man,'" argues that "as a writer of polemical essays on the Negro question James Baldwin has no equals" (11). Bone asserts in his article "James Baldwin" that Baldwin has succeeded in the novel form only once: with *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (28). Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when these articles were written, this seems to have been a common response to Baldwin's writing, and it still remains prevalent.

More recently, a number of more varied and sophisticated readings of Baldwin's writing have emerged, exemplified by two collections of essays already touched upon above: *James Baldwin Now* (1999), edited by Dwight A. McBride, and *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), edited by D. Quentin Miller, and a much needed study of Baldwin's last three novels: *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (2002) by Lynn Orilla Scott. Further examples include *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays* (2006), edited by Lovalerie King and Lynn Orilla Scott, an

anthology which puts these two writers in dialogue with each other through their works, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska's remarkable account of Baldwin's hitherto overlooked Turkish connection in *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (2009). These important books are indicative of the new wave of interest in Baldwin's work and legacy, a wave in which the present study seeks to participate.

Both *James Baldwin Now* and *Re-Viewing James Baldwin* do a remarkable job in displaying contemporary views on Baldwin's fiction, essays, plays, and poetry. *James Baldwin Now* includes significant articles concerning how Baldwin's work relates to such issues as the intersections of race and sexuality, white liberalism and democracy, transnationalism, gender, queer theory and literature. The book also includes a welcome account on the rather obscure children's book *Little Man Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (1976): "Of Mimicry and *(Little Man Little)* Man: Toward a Queersighted Theory of Black Childhood" by Nicholas Boggs. Many of the same approaches are also prevalent in *Re-Viewing James Baldwin*, which, in addition, pays attention to Baldwin's uses of music and includes important readings of such rarely studied works as *Nothing Personal* (1965), a collaboration with the photographer Richard Avedon, the extended essay on American cinema published as *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), and his last and often neglected novel, *Just above My Head*. The merits of these anthologies are indisputable, but, regrettably, they tend to replicate the conventional trait of excluding Baldwin's later novels: they almost completely ignore *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and, as pointed out, only *Re-Viewing James Baldwin* contains an article on *Just above My Head*.

In his foreword to *Re-Viewing James Baldwin*, David Leeming provides an interesting view according to which Baldwin's later work has been largely neglected as a result of "the critical establishment's resentment of Baldwin's apparent change of attitude in the mid-sixties" (vii). Leeming points out that the earlier works were subtle and nonviolent enough to appeal to white people, but the decided harshness of the short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), and the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) made them feel uncomfortable:

> they found it convenient to blame the discomfort on the author's failing powers rather than on the real problem that faced us in the mid-sixties. People with Baldwin's prophetic understanding already were beginning to see by that time that those whites who had linked arms to overcome racism in the "movement" were not willing or able to open the collective pocketbook or the collective neighborhood of white America in any significant way to alleviate inequality. They were willing to march in the nonviolent safety of Martin's shadow but were not in the sunlight of Malcolm's or Stokely Carmichael's early calls to battle. (Foreword viii)

In other words, these liberal whites were determined to end racial inequality in theory, but not in practice. Leeming suggests that this caused Baldwin to become "disillusioned," and this disillusionment found expression in many of his subsequent works, which

critics, again, tended to underestimate or even ignore (Foreword viii). On the other hand, Baldwin was regarded by many advocates of the new black radicalism of the 1960s as a representative of the allegedly outdated protest tradition of nonviolence and too friendly towards white Americans. This is obviously a result of Baldwin's refusal to subscribe to any one single political ideology, that is, in other words, his refusal of labels and categorizations. Unfortunately, his ambivalent position as an outsider, residing between and outside different political stances also seems to be one of the main reasons for the decline of his popularity and perceived significance in the later stages of his career.

Lynn Orilla Scott's *James Baldwin's Later Fiction* is a much needed initiative to end the neglect of Baldwin's later novels. It focuses on *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just above My Head*. Scott suggests that most earlier accounts of Baldwin's later works have failed to understand the consistent relationship of these novels and essays to his earlier work, "building upon, revising, and refocusing it, but never abandoning the critique of American racial and sexual identity" (*JBLF* xiii-xiv). She emphasizes the way in which Baldwin "traverses the cultural divide between the fifties and late sixties," caused by the tension between the crisis of nonviolence and the rise of militancy in the protest movement (*JBLF* xiv). One of Scott's most significant contributions to Baldwin studies is that she offers what may be regarded as the most comprehensive critical reading of *Tell Me* to date. In retrospect, it seems outrageous that it took more than three decades for such a critical account to appear.

The three novels under scrutiny in this study reach across the whole of Baldwin's work as a novelist, from his debut, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, via his fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, to his final work of fiction, *Just above My Head*. This is a logical way of looking at Baldwin's fiction as a coherent whole, the separate parts of which complement each other. These novels, each in its characteristic way, construct and elaborate what I have identified as the unifying thematic and ideological project of Baldwin's oeuvre: the vision of postcategorical utopia. My choice to include readings of *Go Tell* and *Just above* in this study is based on their respective positions as Baldwin's first and last novel, the alpha and omega, so to speak, which provides my work with the most extensive view possible on Baldwin's fiction in terms of chronology. This allows me to map the development and possible changes in his vision. All of the remaining four novels would have provided opportunities for intriguing readings and would have complimented my overall conception of Baldwin's work. Because of my aspiration to delve deeply enough into each novel under scrutiny to produce elaborate and sophisticated readings, I wanted to limit my primary research material to three novels. I chose *Tell Me*, the most neglected and underrated of Baldwin's novels, because I feel obliged to participate in the endeavour, most remarkably undertaken by Lynn Orilla Scott, to help the hitherto largely ignored part of Baldwin's oeuvre to gain the recognition it deserves. As a result, although the quite well-known and much more comprehensively analysed *Another Country* (1962), in particular, would have fitted my argument thematically and potentially strengthened it, I decided in favour of *Tell Me*.

At this stage, these novels, their reception, and earlier research must be briefly introduced. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is by far the most critically acclaimed of Baldwin's

novels, and it is, in consequence, also one of his most studied and analysed works. Conversely, the responses of readers and critics to *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *Just above My Head* have been predominantly negative. The former, in particular, has customarily been regarded as a total failure, and, therefore, it has been almost completely ignored in Baldwin studies. *Just above My Head* has received more attention, but has nevertheless been overshadowed by Baldwin's earlier works. One of the central aims of my study is to shed more light on this ignored and neglected part of Baldwin's oeuvre and thereby to participate in establishing a more complete understanding of the impact of his views, both descriptive and normative, on American society.

Go Tell It on the Mountain was Baldwin's first published novel, following his struggle of more than ten years with the writing process, from the early 1940s until 1952. Narrating a day in the life of a black American adolescent, John Grimes, the novel is largely autobiographical, and most of its characters can be traced back to their real-life counterparts. Negotiating the conflicts of his early life, especially his problematic relationship with his stepfather, *Go Tell* has often been read as an attempt to come to terms with these conflicts and, simultaneously, as David Leeming points out, to avoid repeating and confirming the stereotypical depictions of African Americans prevalent within the tradition of protest literature which Baldwin had criticized in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (*JB* 84).

The main events of the novel take place during a single day, the fourteenth birthday of John Grimes, a black adolescent, whose life is complicated by the problematic relationship between him and his tyrannical father, Gabriel, who is actually John's stepfather. John's unawareness of his illegitimacy further complicates his position, because he does not know what appears to be one of the main reasons for Gabriel's hostile attitude. John's mother, Elizabeth, functions as a balancing force, but she is largely unable to protect him and the rest of the family from Gabriel's bitterness and rage. The novel revolves mainly around the theme of suffering resulting from racial oppression and, in a religious sense, from sin, as Trudier Harris states in her introduction to *New Essays on* Go Tell It on the Mountain (1996) (17). John is portrayed as an intelligent and sensitive boy, who is faced with a profound conflict between the poles of sexual and, on the other hand, spiritual awakening, with no one to support and lead him through these frightening changes. His stepfather is a disillusioned part-time preacher, who attempts to subject his family to extremely severe Christian codes of discipline. John's main aspiration is to escape his stepfather's tyranny and to avoid having to lead a similar life of destitution and frustration.

The novel is divided in three parts: "The Seventh Day," "The Prayers of the Saints," and "The Threshing-Floor." Parts one and three are focalized through John and focus mostly on the time present of the story, whereas part two consists of the accounts of the life stories of John's aunt Florence, his stepfather Gabriel, and his mother Elizabeth, which are narrated through flashbacks dating back as far as to the time of slavery. "The Seventh Day" depicts the present situation of John and the whole Grimes family and ends as the Saturday night's tarry service is about to begin in the storefront church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, attended also by John, his stepfather, mother, and aunt. "The

Prayers of the Saints" provides background information on the lives of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, and helps understand their actions and choices in the present. "The Threshing-Floor" portrays John's powerful religious experience and conversion in the evening service, which ultimately makes him a full member of the church.

The status of *Go Tell* as Baldwin's most popular and highly acclaimed novel among critics and the reading public alike can scarcely be disputed. Some critics, such as Robert A. Bone, have proclaimed it as Baldwin's best venture into the novel form, while expressing disappointment regarding his later novels (see "James Baldwin" 28). Harris points out that most reviewers applauded "the linguistic quality and evocative power of Baldwin's writing" (Introduction 15). According to Leeming, Baldwin's writing was compared to such authors as Henry James and William Faulkner (*JB* 89). Although some critical views were obviously voiced as well, Baldwin's debut as a novelist was generally deemed as highly promising, to say the least. After more than half a century since its publication, there seems to be a widespread consensus concerning *Go Tell* as Baldwin's best novel.

The success of *Go Tell* is also reflected in the large amount of literary research which it has generated; in this respect, it is also by far Baldwin's most popular novel. Several books and anthologies have dealt extensively with this novel, as can be exemplified by *James Baldwin: A Critical Study* (1973), by Stanley Macebuh, *New Essays on* Go Tell It on the Mountain (1996), edited by Trudier Harris, and *James Baldwin's* Go Tell It on the Mountain: *Historical and Critical Essays* (2006), edited by Carol E. Henderson. As Horace A. Porter notes in *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (1989), critical accounts of *Go Tell* have traditionally largely focused on John's search for identity, examples of this being the readings by Macebuh and by Carolyn Wedin Sylvander in *James Baldwin* (1980) (14-15). The evident autobiographical dimension of the novel has also received a lot of scholarly attention; for instance, Michel Fabre argues in "Fathers and Sons in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" that "[t]he story reflects, barely disguised, Baldwin's own life" (133).

More recently, *Go Tell* has been read from a variety of points of view, such as queer and gender studies. An example of the queer studies approach which seeks to explicate the significance of the implications of homosexual desire in the novel can be found in Bryan R. Washington's "Wrestling with 'The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name': John, Elisha, and the Master," which also discusses the frustrated responses of gay studies to the allegedly repressed homosexual content of the novel (78). Csaba Csapó's "Race, Religion and Sexuality in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" and Margo Nathalie Crawford's "The Reclamation of the Homoerotic as Spiritual in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" foreground the significance of the intersectionality of homosexuality, race, and religion. Keith Clark's "Baldwin, Communitas, and the Black Masculinist Tradition" approaches *Go Tell* from the perspective of gender studies and provides an important account of Baldwin's "unequivocal but problematic" position in the tradition of black masculinist literature (128).

The ending of the novel, with John's spiritual struggle and conversion on the threshing floor of a storefront church during an ecstatic evening service, may be and has

been read in various different ways. Firstly, it may be grasped as John's triumph over his stepfather's tyranny as a result of his newly-elevated position in the black religious community; this is how Donald B. Gibson sees it in "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space" (6). This resolution may, conversely, be regarded as an act of submission, as the cancellation of John's ambitious future plans in favour of the life of poverty which he has sought to escape. Michel Fabre seems to adopt this point of view in "Fathers and Sons in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" by stating that, despite his salvation, "John remains the prisoner of the definition imposed by Gabriel" (132). Brian J. Norman's suggestion of the connection between John's struggle and the plight of black Americans in "Duplicity, Purity, and Politicized Morality: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and the Emergence of the Civil Rights Movement" may be seen as supporting this stance. Norman argues that through his salvation "John's fate becomes irrevocably tied to the fate of the suffering masses [... of] African Americans living in a 'wicked' world of poverty, racism, and the duplicity of American democracy" (22-23). Thirdly, the ending may be read as ambiguous or ambivalent, as Vivian M. May does in "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*." She sees *Go Tell* as comprised of conflicting and dissonant narratives which defy any straightforward conclusions: "[t]hrough discord and ambivalence, Baldwin conveys a many-sided interpretation of a reality that is always, through tensions, subversion, and ill-fitting replications, in the process of becoming" (124). That *Go Tell* has continued to generate such different, even opposite, readings may be taken as a proof of its complexity and longevity.

Baldwin's fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, was written during the turbulent decade of the 1960s, a painful process marred by the intimidating and frustrating news of the assassinations of civil rights activist and Baldwin's friend Medgar Evers and Malcolm X. W. J. Weatherby, one of Baldwin's biographers, points out in *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (1989) that Baldwin had long wanted to write about the different aspects of success and his own experiences on his way from obscurity to the status of a celebrity (278). He had originally planned to write an essay, but according to Weatherby, he believed that this would involve problems: "personal inhibitions, threats of libel, too many explanations," and instead decided to write a novel (278). This is how the founding idea underlying *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* was conceived. According to David Leeming, the writing process of *Tell Me* was a difficult one, and Baldwin showed little interest in the novel after its completion (*JB* 278). Weatherby suggests that Baldwin had difficulty in finding what he thought of as "the right voice for his witness" (279). The ideas for the novel began to take shape, as Leeming implies, during the early 1960s (*JB* 239, 241), but the novel was not completed until 1967 in Istanbul (*JB* 277).

Tell Me outlines the story of Leo Proudhammer, a black actor from Harlem, who struggles to gain acceptance and recognition in the hostile white world. The novel is a first-person narrative which consists largely of flashbacks to Leo's adolescence and early adulthood, as he is reminiscing and looking back through his life after suffering an almost fatal heart attack on stage at the age of thirty-nine. The events of the novel span a period of three decades, from the early 1930s to the mid-1960s. There are three books in

the novel: "The House Nigger," "Is There Anybody There? Said the Traveller," and "Black Christopher." The first book concentrates on Leo's childhood and adolescence in the context of racism and poverty, while the second deals mainly with the early years of his struggle to achieve success as an actor. The third book portrays the fulfilment of Leo's dream as he gradually achieves the position of a famous and respected actor.

A central issue in the early stages of Leo's story is his desire to climb the social ladder away from the oppressed social position of his family, of which his father, who has constantly had trouble in earning enough money to pay the rent, stands as an emblem. Leo's father is described as "a ruined Barbados peasant, exiled in a Harlem which he loathed […] betrayed by Garvey, who did not succeed in getting us back to Africa, despised and mocked by his neighbours and all but ignored by his sons, held down his unspeakable factory job, spread his black gospel in bars at the weekends, and drank his rum" (*Tell Me* 20, 23). Mr. Proudhammer's disappointed faith in Garveyan black nationalism forms an interesting connection to the young, militant Christopher, who becomes Leo's lover later in the story, and with whom Leo's father "would spend hours together, reconstructing the black empires of the past, and plotting the demolition of the white empires of the present" (*Tell Me* 368). Leo's mother is depicted as having a much fairer complexion than Mr. Proudhammer, and Leo, reminiscing about his childhood, wonders what she saw in his father. Leo has also read unspoken questions in the eyes of other people "wondering how such a handsome, almost white woman had got herself trapped in such a place" (*Tell Me* 25). She seems to have been the cohesive force to keep the family together: "Our mother was holding on—grim, silent, watchful, but not cheerless; she was determined to bring us to the daylight" (*Tell Me* 105).

Having witnessed the despair of his father, Leo has become determined not to follow in his footsteps: "Perhaps I loved my father, but I did not want to live his life. I did not want to become like him, he was the living example of defeat" (*Tell Me* 177). Instead, Leo has decided to make something more of his life: that is, to fulfil his aspiration and become a movie star. It must be noted that, as Michael Rogin points out in his *Blackface, White Noise* (1996), in the 1930s the few roles which were available for black entertainers were "usually variations on the narrativized minstrel roles of mammy, tom, and coon" (167). Rogin also states that the film *Body and Soul* (1947; dir. Robert Rossen) "created one of the first substantial, ungrotesque African American film roles. Canada Lee, who played the part, felt liberated from Hollywood racism" (213). Leo's dream of stardom emerges in the 1930s, when a successful black actor seems to have been an almost unthinkable concept, which renders Leo's ambition all the more difficult to achieve.

The thematic content of *Tell Me* is dominated by issues of race, which are constantly present—either explicitly or implicitly—in each and every event and piece of dialogue in the novel. The complications caused by the oppressive category of race are the reason for the apparent failure of the interracial relationship between Leo and Barbara, a white actress. They have experienced the strength of racial hatred from both sides: white people, who have harassed them and insulted them, and black people, especially Leo's mother and brother, who have severely disapproved of their relationship. As a consequence, they have decided to rescue what they can: their friendship, which has

remained close and vital through the years. The close relationship between Leo and his older brother, Caleb, is also destroyed, at least partly, because of their conflicting views on racism and resistance: Caleb becomes a preacher and, in Leo's view, endorses submission and docility, whereas Caleb disapproves of Leo's way of life, which he considers immoral and sinful.

In the course of the novel, it becomes evident that Leo is bisexual, which makes him a member of two oppressed minorities based on the categories of both race and sexuality. A central issue is his homosexual relationship with Christopher, a young, frustrated black man. With a one-off sexual encounter between Barbara and Christopher, the transgressive relationships assume a triangular form, and, as a consequence, Christopher turns into a militant revolutionary, whom Leo and Barbara begin to call by the name of Black Christopher. This symbolic figure is what Leo and Barbara regard as the ultimate outcome of their love: "perhaps we had given one child to the world, or helped to open the world to one child. Luckier lovers hadn't managed so much" (*Tell Me* 369). This is a very interesting point, because it is basically a dialectical process in which two opposites—a black man and a white woman, who love each other—produce a synthesis, Black Christopher, someone who is capable of loving both blacks and whites, both men and women. In other words, Leo and Barbara view Christopher as a new, black Christ, who would redeem not only whites—as Jesus Christ seemed to have done—and not only blacks—as such black nationalist movements as the Nation of Islam have aimed to do—but whites and blacks alike. The significance of this black Christ will be discussed further in chapter 4 of this study.

Tell Me is often regarded as one of the least successful of Baldwin's novels. It seems somewhat directionless and fragmented, because it tackles a variety of important issues, including the black family, interracial relationships, homosexuality, black Christianity, and the radicalization of the civil rights movement, but arguably fails to place enough emphasis on any of these issues. As a result, the novel received crushing reviews and then lay dormant in almost complete oblivion, first until the publication of William Edward Farrison's article "If Baldwin's Train Has Not Gone" (1977), which offered an eight-page account of *Tell Me*, and also Carolyn Sylvander's *James Baldwin* in 1980, which includes an introductory discussion of *Tell Me*. It was then more than two decades before Lynn Orilla Scott's pioneering book *James Baldwin's Later Fiction* appeared in 2002. The latter contains the most comprehensive analysis of *Tell Me* which I have come across. In Scott's view, critics have failed to see the way in which *Tell Me* deals with and criticizes American racial and sexual politics in the 1960s. Her main point concerning this novel is that its symbolic structure "suggests that both liberalism and black nationalism as strategies of resistance to racial oppression are limited to the extent that each relies on essentialist conceptions of personal and political identity and fails to accommodate difference in the construction of those identities" (*JBLF* 23). This anti-essentialist resistance of social categorization in Baldwin's thinking will be regarded as the central theme of this study. Magdalena J. Zaborowska's recent book *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade* offers another welcome reading of *Tell Me* by recontextualizing the novel and the process of its production and reception in the ambiguous space of exile provided by

Istanbul, Turkey (see, for example, 7-8, 22-24, 142-44). D. Quentin Miller's "Playing a Mean Guitar: The Legacy of Staggerlee in Baldwin and Morrison" also contains an interesting reading of the significance of the folk figure Staggerlee and concomitant associations of black militancy and the blues in the novel (see 121-48). With the exception of these, *Tell Me* has tended to be ignored in critical accounts of Baldwin's work, or, at best, it has appeared in rather brief and superficial readings.

Some of the criticism directed at *Tell Me* is clearly justified, but the flaws of the narrative do not render the novel worthless as an object of critical attention. On the contrary, I would wish to argue that the problems in the text may be read as interesting and revealing manifestations of the difficult social contradictions which were prevalent during its production in the mid and late 1960s. Despite its shortcomings, *Tell Me* is an important, albeit neglected, part of Baldwin's larger project of mapping the obstacles for a better world and imagining the possibility of postcategorical utopia.

The ending of *Tell Me* is somewhat problematic: having recovered from his heart attack, Leo returns from Europe to continue his career and is left standing in the wings, waiting for his cue, as the novel draws to an end. There is no sense of fulfilment, but also no sense of catastrophe; instead, Leo's life and career seem to continue with no implication of change. This is an open ending in the sense that the reader cannot be certain as to where Leo's life will finally take him, but there is no feeling of suspense in this uncertainty, since the text gives the reader no reason to suspect that the rest of Leo's life-course will go through any radical changes. This can be read as Baldwin's failure as a novelist, as most critics seem to have suggested (see, for example, Mario Puzo, "His Cardboard Lovers" 157), but also as a literary expression of the frustration and social conflicts which characterized the socio-historical context of the novel's production.

Baldwin's final novel, *Just above My Head* (1979), is evidently one of his most ambitious works. Spanning a time period of thirty years in almost six hundred pages, it may be read as a retrospective narrative which revisits many of the themes of his earlier novels: the black family and community, the church and the black religious experience, the black artist and the problem of success, to mention only a few. As Lynn Orilla Scott puts it, this novel "represents Baldwin's effort to shape his own personal legacy as well as to challenge historical legacies" (*JBLF* 121). To quote Baldwin's own words from an interview with Wolfgang Binder: "So in a sense the novel is a kind of return to my own beginnings, which are not only mine, and a way of using that beginning to start again. In my own mind I come full circle from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to *Just above My Head*, which is a question of a quarter of a century, really" ("James Baldwin, an Interview" 191).

Just above My Head consists of five books: "Have Mercy," "Twelve Gates to the City," "The Gospel Singer," "Stepchild," and "The Gates of Hell." The story is centred on the life and death of Arthur Montana, who has worked his way from a singer in a gospel quartet to an international star, known as the Soul Emperor. Hall, Arthur's elder brother and manager, assumes the role of the narrator in attempting to come to terms with his brother's death and ambivalent legacy. The novel opens with a short and intensive flashback to Arthur's death, and moves on to a stream of consciousness narration of Hall's rather erratic thoughts after receiving the news of his brother's death. Arthur's

homosexuality becomes a central issue, as Hall attempts to negotiate his own stance and that of the black community and the whole world towards his brother's sexual identity. This may be regarded as the core of the novel. It is, however, also a story of two interrelated families: the relatively harmonious Montanas and the deeply troubled Millers, as the latter epitomize a variety of issues ranging from religious hypocrisy to violent incest.

Arthur's career as a singer starts as an adolescent in a gospel quartet, The Trumpets of Zion, with Crunch, Peanut, and Red. His nonnormative sexuality is foregrounded during their tour in the South as he and Crunch fall in love. It eventually evolves into a central issue in the novel, because Arthur cannot, despite Hall's attempts to assure him otherwise, dispel the fear of betraying the African American musical and religious traditions and community which he represents. This profound inner conflict haunts him constantly, even after he eventually reaches international success as the Soul Emperor, and ultimately leads him to his tragic demise. Julia and Jimmy, the children of the Miller family, are also significant characters in the story: Julia as an arrogant child-preacher and later Hall's lover, Jimmy as Arthur's piano player and lover. Julia's role as a child-preacher makes her an interesting counterpart of John in *Go Tell*. She also becomes Hall's lover before her journey to Africa in search of peace of mind.

Just above received mixed but predominantly negative reviews.[1] As Leeming notes, "[t]he critics did not receive the new Baldwin novel with enthusiasm, though they did recognize the immensity of the attempt" (*JB* 350). Darryl Pinckney's "Blues for Mr. Baldwin" represents the mainly negative views adopted by many by deeming the novel to have "a repetitious and inert quality" and by claiming that "[a]ttempting to be earthy, to render a vernacular, black speech, Baldwin loses something when he declines to use the subtle language of his essays" (165). He also complains that Hall's voice as the narrator "is not very fluent and this makes for something of a strain in such a long work. The burden of editorial omniscience, including what his brother felt while having sex, force Hall's imagination to do more work than it can bear" (162). Some critics, for instance James Campbell, have pointed out both the pros and cons of *Just above*. He criticizes the novel for having the same faults as, allegedly, most of Baldwin's other novels: "too many bloodless characters, too neatly divided into goodies and baddies; too strong a dependence on colour as an indicator of virtue […]; too many rambling conversations and descriptions; too many rhetorical passages which belong not to the narrator but to James Baldwin" (250). He does, however, emphasize that "in spite of these faults, there is a magnificence in the conception of *Just above My Head*. […] it has the possibility of redemption at the core" (250). Eleanor Traylor's article "I Hear Music in the Air: James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*" is one of the rather few positive early accounts of the novel. She regards *Just above* as another instance of "a tale told consistently for twenty-six years by a narrator whose features are clearly etched among the splendid in twentieth century global literature" (96).

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[1] For a comprehensive overview of the critical reception of *Just above*, see Lynn Orilla Scott's *James Baldwin's Later Fiction* 122-23 and 202-05.

Just above has received more scholarly attention than *Tell Me*, but it has, nevertheless, evidently been overshadowed by Baldwin's early novels, especially *Go Tell* and *Another Country*. Following the lead of some early reviewers, such as Darryl Pinckney, many of the later critics decry Baldwin's decision to narrate Arthur's queer story from Hall's heterosexual point of view. Melvin Dixon, in *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987), provides an example of this by criticizing what he sees as Hall's manipulative and "arrogant rendition of Arthur's emotion and sexuality about which he could know nothing," which, in his view, causes the novel to fail (135). Keith Clark makes a similar point in *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2002) (56-61).

These rather negative views have, however, been countered by more neutral and also positive ones. The central role of music in *Just above* has generated various interesting analyses. Craig Hansen Werner's *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (1994) includes an important discussion on the significance of musical patterns in moving from innocent naivety towards a higher innocence (see 229-40). In his "Manhood, Musicality, and Male Bonding in *Just Above My Head*," Warren J. Carson approaches the novel from the point of view of gender studies by explicating the connection between black music and black masculinity. He sees *Just above* as an attempt "to bring together all of the strands of black male experience into a definitive statement of black masculinity" (216). Trudier Harris makes a noteworthy contribution by discussing Julia's role and incest in *Just above* (see *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* 165-204), as does Lynn Orilla Scott in "Revising the Incest Story: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*" (see 83-102). Again, the most comprehensive analysis of the novel is provided in Scott's *James Baldwin's Later Fiction*.

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My intention in this doctoral thesis is to help raise Baldwin from that peculiar state of quasi-oblivion in which he has resided for the past four decades. As Miller states,

> [i]n the case of James Baldwin, what has been lost is a complete portrait of his tremendously rich intellectual journey that illustrates the direction of African American thought and culture in the late twentieth century. Also lost has been a widely varied oeuvre of an experimental writer who never was content with retelling the same story, using the same voice, or speaking to the same audience. (Introduction 2-3)

With my readings of three of Baldwin's novels, I hope to participate in the endeavour, shared by a growing number of scholars around the world, to recover what has been lost and repressed within the political unconscious of history during the span of more than forty years since the zenith of Baldwin's public status. Whether this endeavour will prove successful may be seen to depend on the extent to which the moral progress of human beings, which Baldwin persistently believed in, has really occurred. Somewhat

paradoxically, should the world continue to ignore or misunderstand Baldwin's vision, it would not be rendered invaluable or meaningless; the opposite, rather.

2 *Reading Politically: Fredric Jameson, Ideology, and Utopia*

My readings of the novels of James Baldwin are based on the premise that African American literature is inherently political. The readings initiate on the textual level and work their way towards the socio-historical contexts of the novels. That is, my starting point is to locate the central problems in the texts and then proceed to trace the problems back to their sources in history and society. From this point of view, the novels under scrutiny pose certain questions which must be answered. An understanding of the questions and, consequently, the process of searching for answers to them obviously requires a functional and viable theoretical framework. It is crucial that this theory be generated by the central problems of the texts; that is, it is the questions which arise from the texts that must guide the construction of the theoretical framework, rather than vice versa. This approach will avoid the danger of violently forcing the texts to conform to a certain theory and its ideological methods of interpretation. In other words, the theory must listen to what the texts have to say and explicate these often covert messages, while respecting their inherent significance and uniqueness.

Having said this, it must be noted that there is also the danger of idealism lurking behind this strategy, because a certain level of ideological distortion is inevitable in each and every reading of any literary text. It is impossible to approach a text in a vacuum, free of all ideological interference, unaffected by contextual issues concerning both the object of study and the existing ways of reading. Without this contextual knowledge, the act of reading and interpretation would not be possible at all. A perfectly neutral and "truthful" reading remains, therefore, an ideological mirage, an unattainable idealistic notion. I would be inclined to argue that it must still, nevertheless, be kept in focus, not as an ultimate goal or haven to be arrived at, but, rather, as a beacon to guide the way. In other words, the reading process of a given literary text is always a dialectical balancing act between the opposing forces of the demands and integrity of the text and, on the other hand, the limitations of the theories used.

The inherently political nature of African American literature sets certain requirements for the theories which are to be consulted in reading Baldwin's novels. It seems obvious to me that what Fredric Jameson calls "a purely immanent criticism," a mode of reading which is content to remain strictly on the textual level, is clearly inadequate in the process of answering the questions which emerge from these literary

works (see *PU* 57-58). Formalist theories, such as narratology, which have traditionally tended to concentrate on the level of the text and bracket all other levels, will not, however, be rejected, because they provide tools for deciphering the inner dynamics of the texts, and may therefore be used in the more inclusive, socially and politically oriented reading process.

It is evident that a more extensive theory is needed in analysing Baldwin's novels. The fact that these texts are politically charged requires that the theoretical framework be capable of mediating between the level of the text and, on the other hand, the level of the political, that is, history and society. This is where the theory of the political unconscious by Fredric Jameson becomes relevant. This theory, which Jameson introduced in his seminal *The Political Unconscious*, emphasizes the need for a political mode of reading literary texts and aims at revealing literary texts as crisscrossed by ideology, as symbolic manifestations of the problems of the level of history and society (77-80). What makes Jameson's theory particularly useful for my work is the fact that it is aimed at producing political readings of literary works and designed to explicate the relations between the level of the text and the level of its socio-historical context. The utilization of the theory of the political unconscious will prove to be adequate in the analysis of the political urgency of Baldwin's fiction and in providing answers to the problems and questions which it generates.

Jameson's theory of the political unconscious has been applied in earlier research, particularly in the social sciences. For example, Jeffrey M. Paige's *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (1997) is a survey of the narratives of Central American revolutions, which makes use of Jamesonian thinking in its endeavour to explicate the relations between the ideological and structural transformations of Central American political economy and to reveal the underlying social contradictions as they appear in the narratives of the interviewees (339). Leslie H. Hossfeld's *Narrative, Political Unconscious, and Racial Violence in Wilmington, North Carolina* (2005) explores the ideologies of repression in the narrative accounts of racial violence, with particular emphasis on how these narratives "reveal how social actors understand social relations and how social groups sustain these interpretations over time" (6). Christopher J. Wright's *Tribal Warfare:* Survivor *and the Political Unconscious of Reality Television* (2006) constructs a reading of the popular reality television show *Survivor* as a political allegory by using the theory of the political unconscious as a way of revealing the mechanisms of repression at work on the show (4). My study shares some theoretical premises with those mentioned above but breaks some new ground in its application of the theory of the political unconscious to African American literature.

Jameson's theories will not, however, be applied in this study directly and uncritically; rather, I will adapt them in order to make them more appropriate for African American literature and, in particular, for finding answers to the hitherto neglected or misunderstood questions which Baldwin's novels contain. The most conspicuous deviation from Jameson's neo-Marxist viewpoint is that instead of strictly adhering to the concept of social class, my primary focus falls on race and sexuality. It must be noted, however, that these categories are intersectional; that is, they are inextricably bound

together, and oppression in terms of race, for instance, tends to be closely related to and accompanied by class oppression.[2] Given the central position of the categories of race and sexuality in this study, they must be briefly discussed and defined at this point.

Baldwin's endeavour to dismantle the power of essentialist social categorizations is emblematic of the way in which the concepts of race, sexuality, and gender are understood in this study. In short, they are regarded as socially and discursively constructed, not as something given, immutable, or absolute. This is what Baldwin, far ahead of his time, may be seen to be alluding to in his rejection of categorization in the early essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and later in "Down at the Cross" (1963). As he states in the latter essay, "[c]olour is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality […] and the value placed on the colour of the skin is always and everywhere and for ever a delusion" ("Down" 88). This was decades before the emergence of antiessentialism as a dominant mode of thinking in the human and social sciences.

In everyday speech, race has often been comprehended on the grounds of physical features, such as skin colour, which can presumably be assigned to this or that group of people. This is a result of blatant misconceptions and simplifications, since, as Stuart Hall stresses in his article "The Question of Cultural Identity," race as a genetic or biological category has no scientific validity (297-98). To quote his words:

> Race is a *discursive* not a biological category. That is to say, it is the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics—skin colour, hair texture, physical and bodily features etc.—as *symbolic markers* in order to differentiate one group socially from another. (298; original emphases)

Kenan Malik supports this point in *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (1996): "Race exists only as a statistical correlation, not as an objective fact. The distinction we make between different races is not naturally given but is socially defined" (4-5). Malik states that although there are various noticeable physical differences among the peoples of the world, "[t]he pattern of variation in one set of genes—say skin colour—is independent of that in another—blood group, enzyme or headform" (5). He suggests that instead of being "natural" or given, "[t]he concept of race emerged […] as a means of reconciling the conflict between the ideology of equality and the reality of the persistence of inequality" (6). In the United States, for instance, the concept of race has functioned as an instrument of power, as a means of legitimating the dominant social position of the people who label themselves as "white" and the oppressed positions of the peoples regarded as "nonwhite."

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[2] Patricia Hill Collins defines intersectionality, with particular emphasis on the African American context, as "analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape African American experiences and, in turn, are shaped by African Americans" (*Black Sexual Politics* 351).

Sexuality is another term which is commonly oversimplified in everyday language. As Jeffrey Weeks has pointed out in *Sex, Politics and Society* (1981), it is customarily assumed that "sex is a definable and universal experience, like the desire for food" (1). Given the variety of different manifestations and forms of sexuality, it is obvious that this is a crude simplification. Joseph Bristow argues in his book *Sexuality* (1997) that sexuality has been used in reference to both sexual desire and "one's sexed being" (1). He goes on to suggest that "[g]iven the equivocal meaning of sex, one might suggest that sexuality occupies a place where sexed bodies (in all their shapes and sizes) and sexual desires (in all their multifariousness) intersect only to separate. Looked at from this dual perspective, there are many different kinds of sexed body and sexual desire inhabiting sexuality" (1). In this study, race, sexuality, and gender are understood as socially constructed and context-bound categories which can be used to legitimate the prevailing social power structure, or, alternatively, to resist it. It is precisely the oppressive power with which these categories have been invested, which Baldwin's works resist and seek to undermine.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the main aspects of Jameson's thinking and its basic premises, with particular emphasis on the theory of the political unconscious, which functions as an underlying theoretical undercurrent of my work. My primary aim is to make use of the premises laid out by Jameson in order to arrive at a viable and functional tool of analysis which will help open up Baldwin's works in an innovative and productive way. In a manner similar to Jameson's, I will make use of other theories inside the framework of the political unconscious, but whereas Jameson relies on such tools as A.J. Greimas's semiotic rectangle and the archetypal system of Northrop Frye, I will turn to the theories of cultural geography—with particular emphasis on the concepts of space and place—Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, René Girard's erotic triangle, and Paul Gilroy's postcolonial thinking. This is exactly one of the strengths of Jameson's theory: it is capable of co-operating with various different methods and theories in order to reveal and analyse the hidden political unconscious of literary works.

This overview will be followed by an introduction to the theories of ideology and utopia, which assume a central position in the theoretical framework of this study. These two opposing but overlapping concepts may be regarded as the main components of the fundamental dynamic at work in cultural texts. In short, ideology functions to produce closures, which are manifested in the central problems of a given text, whereas utopia signifies the impulse to open up such closures and to project alternatives to the status quo.

The introduction of the concepts of ideology and utopia constitutes the foundation for my own conception of political reading. The main argument is that literary works, and, in effect, all texts, can be read through what, following Jameson, I term the dialectic of ideology and utopia. What this means is that literary texts necessarily carry within them the fundamental social contradictions of the socio-historical context of their production,

which emerge in the texts as *antinomies*[3] in the form of ideological closures. As a response to this, the texts generate what may be termed a utopian desire, an impulse to overcome the antinomies and imagine alternatives to the status quo in the form of utopian projections.

The influence of Jameson's thinking is evident here, as well, but I have strived to shift the emphasis from his rather strictly theoretical considerations to a more practical tool of literary analysis. This move may be read as a complementary application of Jameson's theory. To accomplish this, I have adapted his ideas by connecting some dots according to my own views, and I have then combined them with influences from other theorists and theoretical traditions. These divergent theories converge to construct the theoretical framework which will help unravel and analyse the functioning of the dialectic of ideology and utopia in Baldwin's fiction and, concurrently, in his account of American society. The chapter concludes with an overview of utopian thinking in the African American context, tracing the ways in which the impulse towards better ways of living has been manifested in African American culture and thereby providing a larger context for my explication of the utopian tendencies in Baldwin's work.

2.1 INTRODUCING FREDRIC JAMESON'S THEORY OF THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS

There seems to be a widespread consensus in the academic world concerning Fredric Jameson's position as the most influential and accomplished contemporary Marxist literary and cultural theorist in the United States. His achievements are also acknowledged by those theorists, such as Aijaz Ahmad and R. Radhakrishnan, who do not necessarily agree with his ideas. The main reason for Jameson's position as the leading American Marxist thinker is his refusal to simply defend the principles of Marxist cultural and literary theories. Instead, he has systematically aspired to resolve the internal theoretical problems of Marxism and also to answer the challenges presented to it by other theoretical traditions, especially poststructuralism. As Adam Roberts points out in *Fredric Jameson* (2000), one of Jameson's strengths is also his "extraordinary range of analysis," which extends from various styles of literature—from nineteenth-century realism to science fiction—to architecture, cinema, avant-garde art, philosophy, and so on (1). Jameson's contribution to the debate on postmodernism has also been highly significant. As Douglas Kellner argues in "Introduction: Jameson, Marxism, and

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[3] In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Jameson points out that conventionally the difference between an antinomy and a contradiction is articulated in terms of resolvability. That is, contradiction "is susceptible of a solution or a resolution, whereas [antinomy] is not" (1). More important in the present context is Jameson's suggestion in "Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse" that a distinction must be made "between a contradiction in the social infrastructure and the form it takes when it becomes registered in the realm of thought and ideology, or in the superstructure—namely the antinomy" (90). For the purposes of this thesis, this definition must be slightly adjusted: in short, contradictions exist on the level of history and society and appear, through the process of mediation, on the textual level as antinomies.

Postmodernism," Jameson's article "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" was one of the most influential accounts of postmodern culture and "probably the most quoted, discussed, and debated article" in the 1980s (2).

The central argument of *The Political Unconscious* is that Marxism holds a decisive position as the ultimate semantic precondition for literary comprehension. As outlined in *The Political Unconscious*, the starting-point of Jameson's theory of literature reads as follows: "there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, […] everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (*PU* 20). This is based on the traditional Marxist view, shared by various other socially oriented theoretical traditions and expressed by David Forgacs in "Marxist Literary Theories" to the effect that a work of literature, or of any form of art, can be understood and interpreted only "within the larger framework of social reality," by taking into account the social and historical conditions of its production (135). Jameson subscribes to this view in his "Metacommentary" (1971), where he argues that "genuine interpretation directs the attention back to history itself, and to the historical situation of the commentator as well as of the work" (5). According to this view, neglecting the socio-historical context of a literary work and its relation to the present necessarily produces a partial and inadequate reading. Jameson also refers to this in *The Political Unconscious* by emphasizing the need to respect "the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (*PU* 18). For my purposes, this socially, politically, and historically oriented approach to literature provides a useful way to explicate the socio-political dimensions of Baldwin's work.

As a result of its fundamentally historicizing nature, Jameson's theory has to refer to a theory of history on the basis of which literary texts can be interpreted. The theory in question is the dialectical notion of history as a sequence of modes of production outlined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Jameson seeks to legitimate the integral position of the Marxist theory of history in his own theoretical construction by arguing that "only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past," only through Marxism can the original significance of the socio-historical contexts of different literary works become visible, and this is what ultimately renders interpretation—which Jameson regards as the essential task of literary criticism—possible (*PU* 19; original emphasis). In other words, Jameson emphasizes the need to re-evoke the importance and meaningfulness of the different social formations of different times and to expose the underlying unity which binds them all together into a logical whole. These apparently separate chapters of history become coherent and understandable, and "recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme" (*PU* 19). This underscores Jameson's dependence on the underlying totality connecting the seemingly separate and differentiated fragments of society within late capitalism.

The integral thematic principle of this theory of history is articulated by Marx and Engels as follows:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes. ("Manifesto of the Communist Party" 48-49)

This struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed functions as a vehicle of progress through a Hegelian dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This confrontation of the oppressor and the oppressed is supposed to result in a revolution and the rise to power of the formerly subjugated class and, consequently, a new mode of production. This forms the foundation of Jameson's thinking; as Erkki Vainikkala notes in "Marxismin paradoksi ja Fredric Jameson," it is based on searching for the traces of this narrative of the history of modes of production and the chance of freedom in literary works, and on restoring the repressed and hidden reality of this fundamental history to the surface of the text (273-74). According to Jameson, this is how "the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity" (*PU* 20). It is also important to notice that when Jameson spells "History" with a capital "H," he is referring specifically to this Marxist view of history as a sequence of modes of production.

The subtitle of *The Political Unconscious* is *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, which implies that narrative is one of Jameson's central concepts. According to the definition provided by Terry Threadgold in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), "[a] narrative is a story, told by a narrator about events which may be factual, fictional, or mythical" (230). What makes narrative such a central issue is the fact that it is an integral formal factor of literature, especially the novel, which can be seen as a product of the capitalistic system and is therefore an interesting object of study for a Marxist critic. In *Jameson, Althusser, Marx* (1984), an explanatory introduction to *The Political Unconscious* and a standard guide to Jameson's thinking, William C. Dowling suggests, however, that Jameson sees narrative first and foremost as an epistemological category, a way of coming to know the world, and as "a contentless form that our perception imposes on the raw flux of reality, giving it, even as we perceive, the comprehensible order we call experience" (95). Adam Roberts makes a similar point in *Fredric Jameson* (2000) by arguing that Jameson regards narrative as an integral "mode of mediating between the individual and society, as well as between the apparent fragmentation of society and the real totality underlying it" (81). That is to say, the world and history appear to us in the shape of stories, which invest our chaotic existence with some degree of comprehensibility. An example of this is the concept of the grand narrative, which has traditionally been the form in which people perceive the large outlines of history, such as the project of modernity, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the Marxist narrative of emancipation.

Closely connected to this is Louis Althusser's conception of *history as an absent cause*, which plays a significant role in Jameson's theory. Althusser claims that history is a

process without a telos, a goal, or a subject, and thus present only through its effects, because no process can exist except through its relations and effects (*Politics and History* 183-86). As Jameson points out, Althusser does not, however, regard history merely as one text among others, although the original wording of the theory might suggest such a conclusion. Jameson adjusts the formulation of Althusser's theory by stating that "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (*PU* 35; original emphasis). This further underscores the centrality of the concept of narrative in Jameson's thinking.

It must be noted that Marxism is by no means the only tradition upon which Jameson constructs his theory of the political unconscious. Rather, his main strategy is based on exposing what he regards as the strategic and ideological limitations of other theoretical traditions and their methodologies, which result both from their situational origins and from the limited and local ways in which they construe their objects of study. Jameson argues that the interpretative codes of non-Marxist traditions must not, however, be rejected as invalid and useless, since they can be seen as possessing certain local significance when historicized and inserted into the all-embracing Marxist process of interpretation ("Marxism and Historicism" 149). What is at stake here, then, is not merely the interpretation of literary works but also commentary on the existing ways and methods of interpretation. Jameson calls this approach *metacommentary*. Its main idea is that "texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions," which makes it impossible to read a text without simultaneously commenting on other interpretative codes (*PU* 9-10). This strategy will assume an important role in my readings of Baldwin, which engage in critical discussions with earlier readings.

In practice, Jameson's approach seeks to make use of the methods of non-Marxist theoretical traditions in order to uncover the repressed contents of the political unconscious in literary texts. This is evidently an attempt to combine in a meaningful way two opposite modes of approaching a literary work: the synchronic and the diachronic. As a Marxist critic, Jameson underlines the importance of the diachronic approach, the primacy of the socio-historical perspective, but he uses the synchronic approach—for example the Greimassian semiotic rectangle (see *PU* 46-49)—in order to reach deeper into the structures of literary works. In this way, he attempts to simultaneously make use of the interpretative methods of other literary theories and, on the other hand, demonstrate the allegedly superior position of Marxism as the "'untranscendable horizon' that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them" (*PU* 10).

An example of Jameson's metacommentary can be found in the way in which Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious is adopted as an integral part of Jameson's own theory. The name of the theory, the political unconscious, itself implies the

fundamental significance of the Freudian model of the human psyche for Jameson. He does not, however, find it fully satisfactory as such; it must be historicized. As Dowling points out, Jameson regards Freud, like, basically, all other non-Marxist theorists, as a prisoner of his time who is unable to see beyond the horizon of his own social and historical existence. This means that, viewed from a historicizing perspective, Freud's theory is based on the model of the bourgeois nuclear family and its internal relations which are not eternal or timeless but in fact produced and maintained by the capitalist system. Consequently, Freud's ideas of the structure and functioning of the human mind are not unalterable, either (Dowling 30-31).

According to Dowling, what makes Freud such an integral part of Jameson's thinking, is precisely the former's insight that

> interpretation is indispensable in any situation where a latent meaning lies hidden behind what is open or expressed or manifest, and that this in turn is always the case when a primal and eternally repressed source of energy (for Freud the individual unconscious, for Jameson the collective or "political" unconscious) exists in a troubled and antagonistic relation to those overt structures (for Freud the mechanism of the conscious, for Jameson culture and ideology viewed as a whole) that exist to hold the repressed at bay or "manage" its threatening eruptions. (36-37)

The relation between Jameson's demand for the interpretation of literary works and Freud's theoretical insights becomes obvious here. While Freud's work emphasizes the importance of the interpretation of dreams as a gateway into the unconscious of the individual, Jameson foregrounds the need to interpret literary works in order to gain access to the collective, political unconscious of the societies in which these literary works have been produced. This is not to be considered as a result of authorial intention but, rather, as a manifestation of an inexorable social logic, according to which the problems and contradictions of the level of history and society inevitably leave their mark on cultural products. According to Roberts, Jameson believes that "texts must be treated as if they were psychiatric patients," because the unconscious of a text is not necessarily visible in its surface meaning (76). In essence, Jameson aspires to widen the scope of Freudian ideas by inserting them into the Marxist perspective, to transfer the theory from the individual level to the collective level and to assign it to its proper place in the history of modes of production.

Jameson may be characterized as a totalizing thinker; that is, he emphasizes the underlying totality which connects all levels and phenomena of social life which the differentiation process[4] of late capitalism has caused to be perceived as separate (see *PU*

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[4] The differentiation process which Jameson refers to connotes the phenomenon within modernity which "consists in the gradual separation of areas of social life from each other, their disentanglement from some seemingly global and mythic (but more often religious) overall dynamic, and their reconstitution as distinct fields with distinct laws and dynamics" (*A Singular Modernity* 90).

40, 50-57). The concept of *mediation* is crucial in explicating the connections between these levels. According to Jameson's definition, mediation refers to

> the relationship between the levels or instances, and the possibility of adapting analyses and findings from one level to another. Mediation is the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base. (*PU* 39)

A well-known example of this is the debate on the concept of *base and superstructure*[5] which Marx used as a schematic and suggestive illustration of the structure of social reality, the connection between the economic base and the ideological and cultural superstructure.

In order to avoid the problems caused by dated and mechanistic readings of the relation between base and superstructure, particularly the idea of the simplistic determination of cultural texts by the mode of production, Jameson aspires to update his terminology by adopting the term *transcoding*, by which he means a process of inventing "a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or 'texts', or two very different structural levels of reality" (*PU* 40). This renders possible at least a local nullification of the specialization and fragmentation of different regions of social life, which Jameson regards as a phenomenon especially characteristic of late capitalism, without resorting to the crude simplifications of vulgar Marxism (*PU* 40). In the analytical chapters of this thesis, the process of transcoding is central in establishing the connections between the level of the text and the historical and political conditions of its production, an instance of this being the relation between the ideological closure of home and the history of white racism in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Jameson's ambitious and polemical views have obviously not been accepted unanimously in the academic world. Douglas Kellner summarizes the central critical stances towards Jameson's thinking as follows:

> Generally, poststructuralists and others claim that Jameson is guilty of excessively totalizing, subjectivizing, historicizing, and of utilizing humanist and reductive

[5] In this model, as Jameson states, the base includes the relations of production and the forces of production which together constitute the mode of production. Upon the base rests the superstructure, which consists of culture, ideologies and different kinds of institutions (*PU* 32). Within so-called vulgar Marxism, the relation between the economic base and the ideological superstructure has been reified in terms of *mechanistic causality*, where the base directly determines the superstructure, or *expressive causality*, where the superstructure expresses or reflects the base (see *PU* 25-28). As a response, the theory of *structural causality* was outlined by Althusser. It contains only one level: the mode of production, which includes the whole system of social relations, that is, forces and relations of production, culture, institutions, ideologies and so on. Althusser stresses that this structure is never empirically present, because it is not merely the sum of its parts, but a system of the relations between its parts (*Reading Capital* 186-89).

> modes of thought […] while Marxist and other critics claim that Jameson goes too far in the direction of dissolving and fragmenting subjectivity and in accepting postmodernism […] or they criticize him for pessimistically reifying society into a massive systematic totality, invulnerable to political struggle. (39)

In a word, Jameson's challenge has been a balancing act: on the one hand, he has defended the importance of a totalizing mode of thinking in an era which favours fragmentation and dispersal as the most urgent sign of the times, and this has inexorably led him into a debate with poststructuralists. On the other hand, he has consistently avoided denouncing the partial and local validity of anti-totalizing thought; a move which has often been regarded as anti-Marxist. This is how Jameson's dialectical thinking functions: it combines and makes use of opposing and seemingly incompatible systems of thought in order to transcend their internal limitations which render them ideological in the most negative sense of the word, that is, in the sense of false consciousness.

Jameson has also been criticized for endorsing what may be regarded as a Westernizing perspective. This means that he has frequently been accused of ignoring, as Phillip Brian Harper points out in *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (1994), the situation of socially marginalized groups, such as African Americans (11), and of forcing the whole world to comply with characteristically Western thinking. In this latter sense, Jameson has been criticized by various critics, for example by R. Radhakrishnan, who in his article "Poststructuralist Politics" claims that Jameson's views are based on an error within the Marxist mode of thinking, that is, the tendency to regard its own "revolutionary subject" to be simultaneously "the global subject of history" (306). In his *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), Aijaz Ahmad argues that Jameson's emphasis on "[the] binary opposition of what [he] calls the 'First' and the 'Third' worlds" suppresses "the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries on the one hand and the imperialized formations on the other" (95). Nevertheless, some other critics have defended Jameson's arguments. Ian Buchanan, for instance, asserts in his article "National Allegory Today: A Return to Jameson" that Jameson has often been misread. Buchanan argues that Ahmad, among others, "reduces a dialectical argument to a positivist assertion" (67), that is, he "mistakes the first word for the last word" (70). In other words, Jameson uses the term "third world" as a starting point for discussion, rather than as an essentialist category.[6] This is typical of Jameson; he aspires to avoid sealing off his theoretical constructions from criticism, because that would render them static and unproductive.

Within the scope of this study, I will use Jameson's sophisticated neo-Marxist theory as a starting point and also as an underlying guideline for the theoretical framework of my reading of Baldwin's novels. With its preoccupation with such notions as history, social contradiction, ideology, and utopia, and with its capacity to subsume and make use of various other theoretical concepts and methodological tools, this theory provides a

[6] For more, see R. Radhakrishnan, "Poststructuralist Politics: Towards a Theory of Coalition"; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*; and Ian Buchanan, "National Allegory Today: A Return to Jameson."

solid ground for the explication of the complicated web of relations between texts and their historical origins. Jameson's thinking will, therefore, prove to be adequate and useful in my endeavour to offer historicized readings of Baldwin's works.

2.2 THE THREE HERMENEUTIC HORIZONS

Although Jameson emphasizes that his aim in *The Political Unconscious* is not to provide an actual detailed method of literary interpretation (12), the introductory chapter of the book certainly contains an outline for the construction of such critical tool. He introduces a process of reading which consists of three distinct levels in which the social scope of reading is gradually expanded. To quote Jameson:

> such semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us. (*PU* 75)

Jameson argues that these three semantic frameworks, or horizons, are also distinctive stages in the process of interpretation, in which the reading proceeds from the immanent interpretation of the first horizon through the second horizon of class struggles towards the third horizon of History, which is "the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular" (*PU* 75, 100). In other words, the historical perspective of the interpretation expands stage by stage, starting from the rather narrow scope of the first horizon and ending up in the Marxist view of the history of modes of production.

I have chosen to apply these three horizons in my readings of Baldwin in a similar manner to that used by Jameson in the analytical chapters of *The Political Unconscious*. What this means is that not all of the novels will be read through all three horizons. Instead, each horizon will be applied to one particular novel, and, vice versa, each novel will be read within the scope of one particular horizon. As far as this study is concerned, the advantage of this approach is that the emphasis of each reading will fall on explicating the large thematic undercurrent of postcategorical utopia which penetrates the entirety of Baldwin's work and which I regard as its political unconscious. The individual novels, each in its own way, serve as instances of and contributions to the functioning of this political unconscious in the larger context of Baldwin's oeuvre.

A central influence on the theory of the three horizons has been the hermeneutic tradition and especially the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, from whom Jameson has

adopted the circular shape of the hermeneutic process and the concept of horizon. In *Truth and Method* (1975), Gadamer argues that in hermeneutics all understanding is construed as a circular, ever-widening movement, in which the whole is placed in increasingly wider contexts, which always affects the understanding of its individual elements (167). This movement is evident in Jameson's method of reading texts within the three horizons, which entails the gradual expansion of one's understanding of the texts. Gadamer defines the concept of horizon as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (269). He also asserts that a horizon is not an inelastic limit; rather, it moves constantly as the interpretation proceeds and thus guides the interpretation (217). As an example of a hermeneutic process, Jameson refers to the medieval system of the four levels of scripture which was used to produce an allegorical reading of the events and prophecies of the Old Testament in terms of the events of the New Testament, that is, the life of Jesus Christ (see *PU* 29).

In Jameson's interpretative method, each of the three horizons also reconstructs its object and construes the text in its own characteristic way (*PU* 75-76). In the first, narrowly political and historical horizon, where history is seen as individual events and as a succession of temporal incidents, the object of study is an individual literary work which is comprehended as a symbolic act, which provides a fictional resolution of a real social contradiction (*PU* 77). In the second phase, the horizon of class discourses, the text is seen as an expression of class conflict, which means that the semantic horizon of the literary work has expanded to include the social order. The individual work is now grasped as a single utterance in the class discourses, and the actual object of study is the *ideologeme*, "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes," an ideological message, which the text transmits in the dialogue between opposing social groups (*PU* 76). In the third horizon, where history is now grasped in its largest sense as a succession of modes of production and social formations, the individual text and its ideologemes are read as the *ideology of form*, that is, as symbolic messages, which refer to a *cultural revolution*, a moment when the contradictory coexistence of different modes of production and their sign systems becomes manifest and can be seen as anticipating the dominant position of a new mode of production (*PU* 76). These three conceptual horizons must now be explicated more closely.

Within the scope of the first horizon, Jameson sees history in a rather narrow sense as "the chroniclelike annals of the rise and fall of political regimes and social fashions, and the passionate immediacy of struggles between historical individuals" (*PU* 77). According to Jameson's model, the process of interpretation begins with what he regards as an immanent analysis of the formal and structural elements of the studied object, in which the fundamental contradiction of the text is identified and consequently grasped as a symbolic manifestation of a real social contradiction in an aesthetic form. The text itself is seen as a symbolic act which functions as an "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (*PU* 77). Jameson points out that he has adopted this model of interpretation from the famous study of the facial art of the Caduveo Indians by Claude Lévi-Strauss. These facial decorations have a symmetrical design which lies across an

oblique axis, and the illogicality of this visual "text" is interpreted as a symbolic solution to the unequal social relations of the Caduveo (*PU* 77-79).

Jameson stresses that this interpretative model differs from the traditional practice of the sociology of literature (e.g., Lucien Goldmann), which, in his view, is content to show how a text reflects its socio-historical context (*PU* 80-81). Instead, the aim here is to read the literary text in such a way that it can be seen "as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*" (*PU* 81; original emphasis). The Jamesonian conception of the subtext differs from the mainly poststructuralist use in which it refers to other already existing literary works to which the studied text might have an intertextual relationship.[7] Jameson uses the term *social subtext* to refer to the socio-historical context of the work, that is, the locus of the real social contradiction. This subtext is never immediately present as such, as some common-sense external reality or as some conventional narrative contained in history books: it must in each case be reconstructed (*PU* 81).

Jameson summarizes the paradox of the subtext as follows: "the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction" (*PU* 82). This assertion seems quite perplexing, unless the Althusserian concept of history as an absent cause is brought back into focus. As Jameson points out, history in this sense is not a text, but it is available to us only in textual form—in the history manuals, for example—which means that it can only be approached through prior textualization. History is, then, the absent cause of a literary work which textualizes its own historical situation, "thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but the text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage" (*PU* 82). The concept of subtext is important because, in order to have an active and meaningful relationship with the Real,[8]

> [t]he literary or aesthetic act […] cannot simply allow "reality" to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. (*PU* 81)

What this means in this study is that although Baldwin's novels inevitable originate in certain socio-historical contexts, their relationship to this context is not a case of direct or straightforward reflection. Rather, the novels articulate their particular contexts in a unique way, thereby constructing and carrying the Real within their narratives.

The paradox of the subtext is a part of the relation between the text and social reality, between literature and the world, which has traditionally been a central problem within

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[7] For a definition of intertextuality, see Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text" (1973), 39.

[8] The concept of the "Real" is a part of Jacques Lacan's tripartite theory of human consciousness, which will be discussed more closely in section 2.4.

Marxism. This is where Jameson, following Kenneth Burke, focuses on the shift of emphases between a symbolic *act* and a *symbolic* act. In the former case, the reality of the act is stressed, insofar as it aspires to genuinely affect the world, whereas the latter emphasizes that the act is "'merely' symbolic" and can thus produce merely an imaginary—non-real—solution to a real contradiction (*PU* 81). Jameson balances between these two alternatives, because overemphasizing either one of them at the expense of the other would lead to an undesirable position and hence produce sheer ideology, in the sense of false consciousness. Favouring the active role of the text in reorganizing its subtext and the capability of language to arrange the world—that is, the symbolic *act*—will result in the conclusion that the external referent of the text does not exist at all. Insisting on the merely *symbolic* nature of the act will, on the other hand, "reify its social ground" to such a degree that it cannot really be "understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically 'reflects'" (*PU* 82). Either way, Jameson stresses, the result would be sheer ideology: in the first instance, the ideology of (post)structuralism, or the ideology of vulgar materialism in the second (*PU* 82).

The social contradiction which the text symbolically resolves is always necessarily an absent cause which cannot be directly conceptualized by the text. Jameson deems it important, therefore, to distinguish between this ultimate historical or social subtext—the locus of the social contradiction—and another one, the *ideological subtext*, which assumes the form of *aporia*, an unresolved problem, or *antinomy*, a contradiction. This second subtext is the locus of ideology, and it is "the symptomatic expression and the conceptual reflex" of the first one (*PU* 82-83). Jameson argues that the social contradiction of the first subtext can be resolved only through practical measures, whereas the problems and conflicts of the second need to "generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus—the text itself—to square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure" (*PU* 82-83).

Through this distinction, Jameson believes, it is possible to combine semiotic and dialectical methods in a useful way. He makes use of the Greimassian semiotic rectangle which is suitable for modelling contradictions of the textual level, particularly in order to articulate the functioning of binary oppositions, which happens to be the privileged form of antinomies. The findings of the semiotic method will, in turn, be reconsidered dialectically. In other words, the entire system of antinomies is understood as a symptomatic projection of the social contradiction (*PU* 83). To exemplify the relation between these two levels or subtexts, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* constructs the ideological closure of the defunct Grimes family and John's utopian projections of alternative futures as an ideological subtext which functions as a symbolic resolution of the social subtext of the oppressive categorization in terms of race and sexuality in postwar American society.

The narrow borders of the first horizon must be left behind in order to move into the second, which includes the whole social system in its largest sense. According to Jameson, this means that the class struggle between a dominating and a working class is seen as the central feature of the social system. The antagonistic relation between these groups also determines the social positions of those groups which do not directly

participate in the struggle (*PU* 83-84). Adapting the Marxist model, Jameson argues that social groups and their values and cultural spaces cannot be analysed as isolated, autonomous entities, as in what he regards as the conventional mode of sociological analysis; instead, their ideological value systems are determined precisely in relation to those of the opposing groups. In this antagonistic relation, a dominant ideology seeks to secure and legitimize its power position, while an opposing ideology attempts to dispute and undermine the prevailing system of values, often using covert and disguised strategies. The class discourses are dialogical in structure and antagonistic by nature, and they are carried out "within the general unity of a shared code" (*PU* 84). Jameson points out that the fundamental contradiction which was defined in the first horizon is now transformed in this larger context: the monologue now finds its place as a part of the dialogue, as "the irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes" (*PU* 85).

Jameson suggests that in the second horizon an individual text is refocused and grasped, in Saussurean terms, as a *parole*, an individual utterance, of *langue*, that is, the system of class discourse. The text maintains its formal structure as a symbolic act, but now understood in a wider sense, "as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes" (*PU* 85). Jameson states that the hegemonic voices of a ruling class always aspire either to systematically silence and marginalize the voices of an opposing, oppressed class, or to assimilate and merge them into the culture of the dominant group. In the horizon of class discourse, those oppressed and stifled voices must be uncovered in a literary work by rewriting them in terms of their originally polemical and revolutionary tones. Consequently, this process also renders possible a rereading and rewriting of the hegemonic cultural forms themselves as a process of undermining and neutralizing the forms of subordinate groups (*PU* 85-86). A prime example of this is blues, the style of music which originated in the context of racial oppression of African Americans as a way of both protesting against and surviving the harsh living conditions, but which was eventually accepted and assimilated as a part of white Western culture. A similar more recent example can be found in hip hop culture. According to Paul Gilroy's view in *The Black Atlantic*, hip hop culture is "the powerful expressive medium of America's urban black poor which has created a global youth movement of considerable significance"[9] (33).

For Jameson, the actual object of study in this phase is the ideologeme, that is, the smallest expressive unit of class discourse, around which this collective dialogue is organized. The relation between the ideologeme and the dialogue is similar to the relation between the Saussurean parole and langue (*PU* 87). The advantage of the ideologeme, as Dowling suggests, is that it is amphibious, since it can be developed in two different directions:

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[9] It must be noted that Gilroy emphasizes the contradiction between the profoundly hybrid origins of hip hop as a cultural form and its use "as an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity" (107). It is precisely the connections between hip hop and such notions as ethic absolutism, racial authenticity and essentialism which become a significant object of his criticism.

> the conceptual, in which case it appears in rudimentary form as a "pseudo-idea" (opinion, belief, prejudice, etc.) but can then be taken to the length of a complete philosophical system, or the narrative, in which case it appears first as a "protonarrative" (fantasy, anecdote, tale, etc.) but may then be taken to the length of a cultural narrative like a novel or epic poem. (133)

In other words, the ideologeme combines ideology as an abstract value or opinion and the narrative substance in which that particular ideology assumes an aesthetic form. Dowling takes as an example of this the ideologeme of ressentiment, an attitude generated by feelings of frustration concerning the sensed inferiority of one's situation or personality, which appears in a theoretical form in Nietzsche's philosophy and finds an aesthetic expression in George Gissing's novels (133-34). The central task in the second hermeneutic horizon is, then, to identify, name, and analyse the ideologeme. Seen from this point of view, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* becomes a vehicle of Baldwin's fundamental ideological message, that is, of what I regard as the notion of postcategorical love: in other words, love which is free from the tyrannical stranglehold of the categories of race, sexuality, and gender. The text transmits this ideologeme in the form of Black Christopher, a syncretic character, who transcends the socially defined boundaries and restrictions which place limitations on the conventional Western notion of love.

Jameson characterizes the shift into the third and final horizon by a displacement in emphasis, which means that the shared code which rendered the antagonistic dialogue possible and exposed the fundamental difference between opposing classes is now seen as a unifying factor, as an indication of a broader social unity (*PU* 88). Within the Marxist tradition, the terms for this underlying unity are the mode of production and social formation. According to Jameson, the individual text and its ideologemes undergo their last transformation, when the aspirations and values of a particular social formation are placed in history in its widest sense, as a succession of modes of production and social formations (*PU* 76).

The mode of production is not, however, as Jameson immediately points out, an unproblematic concept (*PU* 89). One reason for criticism is that the traditional point of view seems to encourage a simple and mechanistic classification of literary works in their respective modes of production or in some revolutionary period of transformation (*PU* 94). This kind of typologizing is not particularly productive, as far as literary analysis is concerned. According to Jameson, another problem is that "no historical society has ever 'embodied' a mode of production in any pure state" (*PU* 94). Jameson argues that these problems will be settled once it is understood that "every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once" (*PU* 95; original emphasis), which means that remnants of old modes as well as anticipatory signs of new and forthcoming ones can be detected as existing in a contradictory relation with the now-dominant mode. Hence, it is evident in Jameson's view that a literary text is never affected by only a single mode of production but by a complex structure where contradictory modes of cultural production coexist (*PU* 95).

The textual object of study continues its process of transformation in the third horizon of interpretation. What Jameson has in mind is called cultural revolution, "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life" (*PU* 95).[10] Jameson goes on to suggest that all modes of production have been accompanied by their specific cultural revolutions (*PU* 95-96). With the concept of cultural revolution, that is, "the reconstruction of the materials of cultural and literary history in the form of this new 'text' or object of study which is cultural revolution," Jameson intends to place the study of culture, grasped in its widest sense, on a profoundly materialist basis (*PU* 96). He emphasizes that cultural revolution does not refer solely to transitional periods, during which a social formation moves from one dominant mode of production to another one. Rather, it is an eternal and constant process in every society, a permanent struggle for dominion between different coexisting modes of production, and the actual revolution, when a mode of production obtains a dominant position, is nothing more than a momentary manifestation of that process (*PU* 96-97).

From the interpretative viewpoint, the task of cultural and social analysis in this final horizon is, in Jameson's words, "the rewriting of its materials in such a way that this perpetual cultural revolution can be apprehended and read as the deeper and more permanent constitutive structure in which the empirical textual objects know intelligibility" (*PU* 97). Jameson states that the individual work is "restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended" (*PU* 98). The text as reconstituted in this final horizon now makes up the ideology of form, which refers to "the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation" (*PU* 98-99). Metaphorically speaking, the text functions as a stage where the complex drama of the remnants of old and the premonitions of new modes of production is acted out. Jameson emphasizes that "at this level 'form' is apprehended as content," which means that the various heterogeneous formal processes present in a work are regarded as "sedimented content in their own right," as a stratum of ideological messages, as manifestations of a political unconscious, distinguished from the apparent content of the work—this is what Jameson calls the *content of form* (*PU* 99). According to Jameson's suggestion, this sedimented content becomes visible in a literary text through generic messages, some of which are remnants of older modes of production, while others are anticipatory signs of new ones (*PU* 99).

Within this third and final horizon, *Just above My Head* assumes a place in the history of the modes of production by joining what Paul Gilroy calls the black counterculture of modernity (*The Black Atlantic* 36). What this means is that the allegedly emancipatory

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[10] As an illustration of this, Jameson refers to the period of the Enlightenment, which was a part of the bourgeois cultural revolution. The Enlightenment was the moment when the existing systems of values and practices were dismantled to be replaced by the processes and life forms of capitalism. It is obvious that this was not a precise historical event such as the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution; rather, it was a historical process which took place over a longer period of time (*PU* 96).

grand narrative of Western modernity is revealed as fundamentally ideological in its tendency to produce and maintain relations of oppression. *Just above* becomes a part of the black counter-modernity particularly through its relentless criticism of the issues of racism and heteronormativity in American society and through its extensive use of allusions to black music in order to accomplish this. At the same time, however, the novel also directs its critique toward the forms of heteronormativity which can be detected within the black counterculture. In accordance with Jameson's formulation, *Just above*, and, by extension, the entirety of his work, may be seen as reconstructing "the materials of cultural and literary history in the form of this new 'text' or object of study which is cultural revolution" (*PU* 96), as countering the history of multiple forms of oppression by projecting the horizons of what I call the cultural revolution of postcategorical utopia, a world in which the oppressive power of social categories would be nullified.

Thus, we have arrived at the outermost boundaries of Jameson's hermeneutic theory, that space in which "History itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular" (*PU* 100). As Jameson observes, it is at this very moment that the questioning arguments of other interpretative codes and theoretical traditions are at their strongest, demanding that History be reduced to being merely one code among many, with no special privilege (*PU* 100). Jameson does not, however, assent to this. Instead, he argues that History as the ultimate ground and absent cause manages to avoid the reification and thematization to which other interpretative codes fall prey. This is because History is a manifestation of Necessity,[11] accessible only through its effects, as the Althusserian absent cause, not as some reified force. History as the ultimate ground and untranscendable horizon does not, according to Jameson, need any further justification: the nightmare of History is always necessarily present, no matter how badly we might want to forget it and repress it into the collective political unconscious (*PU* 101-02).

It is obvious that the ultimate validity of Jameson's theory of the political unconscious may be questioned, especially from a poststructuralist viewpoint, because of its fundamental reliance on the grand narrative of the Marxian history of modes of production. With the demise of the Soviet Union, for instance, the credibility of Marxism has become highly dubious. In this light, it is interesting to point out what reads as if it were Jameson's anticipatory account of the fall of socialist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

> Necessity is here represented in the form of the inexorable logic involved in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history:

[11] Dowling defines Necessity as "that dark and implacable force lying eternally just beyond the borders of any possible vision of human freedom, that baleful power that through all the ages of humanity has been at work to produce relations of domination within society, has led to alienation and fragmentation and estrangement, to our permanent imprisonment within one or another structure of false reality. The endless dismantling of such false structures, a repeated and hopeful gesture in the direction of the Freedom that may ultimately be won from Necessity, will be the distinguishing mark of Jameson's criticism" (55).

> the ultimate Marxian presupposition—that socialist revolution can only be a total and worldwide process (and this in turn presupposes the completion of the capitalist "revolution" and of the process of commodification on a global scale)—is the perspective in which the failure or blockage, the contradictory reversal or functional inversion, of this or that local revolutionary process is grasped as "inevitable," and as the operation of its objective limits. (*PU* 102)

It may be argued that this is a view of history which can be proven either correct or incorrect only by history itself.

To conclude, the three hermeneutic horizons outlined above provide the ground upon which my readings of Baldwin's novels stand. The gradual expansion of the socio-historical scope of reading will unmask the urgency of Baldwin's lifelong mission of undermining the oppressive power practiced through social categorization; the underlying current which penetrates all of the three novels under scrutiny in this thesis, and arguably all of Baldwin's work. To transcode this into distinctively Jamesonian terminology, the three horizons of interpretation will stage by stage reveal and elaborate the idea of postcategorical utopia, as it unfolds in these three novels, as the political unconscious of Baldwin's literary works.

2.3 TWO DIMENSIONS OF THE CULTURAL TEXT

The fundamental theoretical feature of this study is the functioning of the opposite but inherently related concepts of ideology and utopia within the three Jamesonian conceptual horizons of interpretation. This is mainly based on the premises laid out by Jameson in his discussion of ideology and utopia in the conclusion of *The Political Unconscious*. The main point is that he regards ideology and utopia as "two dimensions of the cultural text" (*PU* 288), which tend to overlap: "the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian" (*PU* 286). These concepts are not mutually exclusive, but rather they are interdependent.

Jameson argues that the main task of a Marxist analysis of culture is that of demystification. Such an analysis must aspire to reveal the ideological functions of cultural texts, that is, the ways in which they seek to legitimate certain power relations and to naturalize the concomitant systems of thought. This is what Jameson calls the "negative hermeneutic," or the Marxist ideological analysis (*PU* 291). He goes on to proclaim that this is not, however, sufficient: any Marxist analysis of culture "must also seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity" (*PU* 291). For Jameson, this is "the Utopian or 'positive hermeneutic'" (*PU* 292). It must be noted that neither of these approaches is sufficient on its own, because they both have their pitfalls and shortcomings. Practiced in isolation, the negative hermeneutic is in danger of becoming too mechanical and instrumental, and thereby justifies the criticisms often issued against Marxist cultural analyses. On the other hand, the utopian positive hermeneutic, in

Jameson's view, often "relaxes into the religious or the theological, the edifying and the moralistic, if it is not informed by a sense of the class dynamics of social life and cultural production" (*PU* 292). In consequence, Jameson stresses that "a Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised *simultaneously* with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts" (*PU* 296; original emphasis). This is exactly the strategy adopted in this thesis.

Jameson's account of ideology and utopia requires some clarification and elaboration, and this is where my theoretical and methodological contribution reaches its crux. The central point of my argument is that historical and social contradictions appear in the texts as antinomies in the form of ideological closures, or, to quote Jameson, as "symbolic enactment[s] of the social within the formal and the aesthetic" (*PU* 77). In other words, ideology appears as a confining force which seeks to establish and maintain closure in the text. This is where utopia comes into play: it functions in texts as a counterforce of ideology, in order to open up closures and to project alternatives. This is what I regard as a fundamental dynamic of cultural texts on a purely formal level.

The conception of ideology as closure and utopia as a strategy to open up the closure can be traced back to Karl Mannheim's influential book *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1936). In his view, ideology is defined as referring to forces which aim at preserving the prevailing order, whereas utopia connotes modes of thinking which seek to change the status quo:

> There is implicit in the word "ideology" the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.
>
> The concept of *utopian* thinking reflects the opposite discovery of the political struggle, namely that certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it. (40; original emphasis)

He points out that "[a] state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs," and goes on to maintain that it differs from other modes of thinking seeking to transcend the immediate situation in that it tends "to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time" (192). As Paul Ricoeur argues in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), ideology may in this respect be read as contrary to utopia: "it is what preserves a certain order" (173). This is also in accordance with the view of ideology and utopia articulated by Steven Helmling in *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique* (2001):

> If ideology sustains itself on antinomic logics of "closure," utopia seeks alternative strategies that afford or promise, or at least license hope of a break, breach, or

> opening in structures, closures, prison-houses that had seemed escape-proof. Utopia must aspire—it can only aspire (it can do nothing else; it can do nothing more than)—to sublate ideology's antinomies. (8-9)

It is precisely the unmasking of the ways in which this fundamental dynamic of cultural texts functions in Baldwin's novels which forms the central focus of my work.

It is important to acknowledge that ideology and utopia function both on the level of form and on the level of content, and that these are not necessarily commensurable. This may be elucidated by explicating the strategic differences between literary works produced in support of status quo and those seeking to challenge it. At first glance, it may seem that the dialectic of ideology and utopia would function backwards in the texts which seek to legitimate the prevailing power structures, that is, they could be seen as aspiring to contain the utopian impulse and stifle it inside the ideological closure. It is crucial to distinguish between the different levels at work here: the level of the text as a formal structure and the level of political content. What we are dealing with on this level is not a question of ethics in the texts, of who or what is right or wrong, of what is just or unjust. Rather, this is an issue of the internal logic of cultural texts. In other words, a text produced in support of status quo will posit the endeavour to uphold the prevailing power structure as a utopian impulse and any attempt to undermine it as ideological manipulation, whereas a text aimed at revoking the present relations of power will work vice versa.

My argument is that Baldwin's novels, and, in effect, all texts, may be seen as functioning through this dialectical process, which provides access to the political unconscious of the texts in question. Given the aura of complexity and confusion surrounding the concepts of ideology and utopia, they must be introduced and defined in the context of this work. I will, first, offer a brief overview on the theories of ideology and utopia, and then move on to provide my own elaboration of the dialectic of ideology and utopia, the method of reading which will be used as the main strategy of reading Baldwin's novels.

2.3.1 Ideology: The Logic of Closure

Slavoj Žižek, one of the most remarkable contemporary theorists of ideology, points out in "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology" that "'[i]deology' can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relation to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power" (3-4). Terry Eagleton's argument in *Ideology* (1991) is along the same lines as Žižek's in maintaining that ideology is a controversial and complex concept, and that a single, comprehensive, and useful definition does not exist, because the term is used so widely in different contexts to connote a large variety of different things (1). Eagleton suggests that "[t]he word 'ideology,' one might say, is a *text*, woven of a whole tissue of different conceptual strands; it is traced through by divergent histories, and it is probably

more important to assess what is valuable or can be discarded in each of these lineages than to merge them forcibly into some Grand Global Theory" (1; original emphasis). These arguments summarize the difficulty of the concept of ideology and provide a convenient starting point for this discussion. My intention in this section is not to arrive at any definitive theory of ideology; rather, I will introduce the concept and delineate it in a way which complies with the aims and purposes of this study.

The intellectual tradition of Marxism is often regarded as the conceptual "home" of ideology. As David Forgacs implies, in traditional Marxism ideology has often been regarded as a form of "false consciousness," as an untrue view of the world, where people actually live lives of destitution and oppression (137). From a Marxist point of view, a classical example of ideology is religion: people who suffer from exploitation respond by inventing stories to explain and understand, and thus to bear, their suffering or close their eyes to it. Within Christianity, examples of this are the story of the Fall and that of Christ's sacrifice. In his "*Excerpt from* Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," Marx refers to religion as

> the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man, who either has not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society produce religion, *a perverted world consciousness*, because they are a *perverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, […] its universal ground for consolation and justification. […]
>
> *Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the *demand* to *give up a condition which needs illusions*. (303-04; original emphases)

Despite his critical stance toward religion, Marx seems to imply that although religion is a means of repressing the source of human suffering it also acts as a source of consolation and as a means of survival. As Dowling points out, Marx realized that religion, and ideology in general, also has a positive role to play: it helps human beings find some coherence and consistency in the world and thus makes life bearable, although it simultaneously leads to the repression of history and its contradictions, contains revolutionary impulses, and consequently gives rise to a political unconscious (76-77). This point is also supported by Louis Althusser, who stresses that ideology is not simply an illusion but a necessary illusion, without which no social system can function (*For Marx* 235).

Althusser's account of ideology has been very influential, and it is therefore necessary to summarize some of his basic arguments. In his seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser argues that

> all ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them. What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live. ("ISA" 155)

In this sense, Althusser's argument seems to comply with the traditional Marxist view of ideology as false consciousness, but he goes on to develop his theory further than that by suggesting that ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects" ("ISA" 160). Ideology functions by concealing its own operations and assigns individuals to their subject positions, creating an illusion of coherence, wholeness and reality. This, according to Althusser, is a defining characteristic of ideology: "one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'" ("ISA" 163-64; original emphasis).

Eagleton presents a frequently quoted list of different definitions of ideology, many of which are contradictory and incompatible with each other, but all of them are usable and important in their own contexts (1-2). As far as this study is concerned, three of them seem particularly relevant: ideology as a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; as ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; and as semiotic closure. The first definition is a very general and neutral basic definition which forms the foundation for further discussion. The second one defines the socio-political function of ideology as it is understood in this study, while the third refers to its form and logic.

The initial assumption is, then, that ideology connotes a body of ideas, a system of beliefs which seeks to promote the interests of a particular social group. The fact that ideology functions to legitimate certain ways of thinking and structuring the world and, simultaneously, to discredit others obviously makes it a question of power. As a result, it is often thought to serve to sustain the power of a dominant social group. According to Eagleton,

> a dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions.[12] (5-6; original emphases)

[12] It is interesting to notice that Eagleton refers to "ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions." This is related to Jameson's conception of the process by which literary texts

Ideology, when understood in this way, as Jameson notes, is called a *strategy of containment*, "which allows what can be thought to seem internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable […] which lies beyond its boundaries" (*PU* 53).

This brings us to an important question: how should one address so-called transformative or progressive ideologies, which clearly do not aim to legitimate existing power structures and relations of domination but, vice versa, seek to challenge these structures and relations and thereby to tip the power balance? It seems clear that the concept of ideology pertains to these non-dominant groups and movements as well, because they evidently use the same strategies, summarized in the previous quote by Eagleton, as dominant forms of social thought. This argument is based on the conviction that all groups seek to promote their own interests and, inevitably, at the same time, to discredit other points of view. In addition, no group or movement can be either purely ideological or non-ideological, even if we chose to subscribe to the notion of ideology as necessarily in support of the dominant political power, because all groups and movements have their own internal relations of power which may, in turn, be understood in terms of ideology.

An interesting question concerns the state of being "true" or "false," and whether this could be used to decide whether a system of thought may be regarded as an ideology. In other words, is a dominant form of social thought necessarily an instance of the production of false consciousness and mystification, and thus ideological, while, for their part, are transformative ideas always demystifying, based on a "truthful" perception of social reality, and, therefore, not ideological? A related question runs along the ethical axis of "right" and "wrong." In other words, could a system of thought be regarded as ideological on the basis of whether it is perceived to produce unjust, oppressive social relations? These questions are inevitably grounded in issues and concepts which defy absolute definitions, lest we be able to consult a neutral, omniscient point of view from which such ethical judgements could be handed down. Such a position is obviously not available for us.

Eagleton provides some answers to these questions. He argues that supporting the dominant social order is not necessarily always based on mystification and delusion. As an example, he points out that it is possible to understand adequately the exploitative and unjust mechanisms of capitalism, but simultaneously to believe that this system is preferable to other possible options (26). In addition, oppositional political movements may also involve strategies of mystification and delusion. To use Eagleton's example, a call for political militancy which assures workers that they have nothing to lose and

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produce imaginary resolutions of real social contradictions. There is, however, a significant difference of emphasis: according to my reading, Eagleton is referring to the process of repressing real contradictions by means of ideology, whereas Jameson's main point is that texts produce *imaginary* resolutions to social contradictions. The latter does not connote a form of false consciousness per se, but rather an instance of imagining alternative futures and possibilities of change. It must, however, be noted that ideology and utopia are not strict contraries; rather, they tend to overlap. In other words, an ideology may be utopian, and a utopian system of thought may be ideological. We will return to this issue towards the end of this section.

everything to gain is clearly false, since militancy obviously involves various dangers and potential loss (26). It might also be useful to quote Adam Roberts's view, according to which ideology refers to "the system of ideas by which people structure their experience of living in the world; this is not something straightforwardly 'right' or 'wrong,' but rather a complex network of relations and attitudes" (19). Although it is clear that some systems of thought produce oppression and inequality and are, therefore, from the present point of view, obviously questionable and even blatantly wrong, this does not mean that ideology in itself is merely something bad and deplorable which should be done away with. The concept of ideology is, then, an ambiguous one: in accordance with Althusser's formulation, it is indispensable and necessarily present in all forms of society (*For Marx* 235), but it tends to produce unjust relations of hegemony and oppression. It may be concluded from this that issues of being right or wrong, or true or false, are inadequate in defining ideology.

The questions presented above may also be answered by quoting Žižek's view: "We are within ideological space proper the moment this content—'true' or 'false' (if true, so much the better for the ideological effect)—is functional with regard to some relation of social domination ('power,' 'exploitation') in an inherently non-transparent way" ("Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology" 8). Since it is exceedingly difficult, if not downright impossible, to determine whether a system of beliefs is based on a "truthful" or "false" perception of social reality or whether it is "right" or "wrong," ideology may be grasped as a primarily contextual issue, that is, a system of ideas becomes ideological through its relation to issues of social and political power. Eagleton seems to support this view by stating that "[t]he force of the term ideology lies in its capacity to discriminate between those power struggles which are somehow central to a whole form of social life, and those which are not" (8). The advantage of these definitions is that they are inclusive enough to encompass both dominant and transformative forms of thought and also avoid the dilemma of false consciousness. In addition, they also manage to delineate the concept of ideology in order to stop it from becoming all-inclusive, which would unavoidably result in the term becoming an empty signifier with no significance whatsoever.

The conception of ideology as semiotic closure refers to the form which ideology assumes and the logic according to which it functions. This marks a strategic move away from attempts to define ideology in terms of consciousness and ideas—that is, idealism—towards language and discursive practices. According to Eagleton, "[i]deology is a matter of 'discourse' rather than of 'language'—of certain concrete discursive effects, rather than of signification as such. It represents the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them" (223). He adjusts this view by suggesting that ideology may be regarded "less as a particular *set* of discourses, than as a particular set of effects *within* discourses" (194; original emphases). This is based on the view of language and ideology according to which, as Eagleton puts it,

> ideology is essentially a matter of "fixing" the otherwise inexhaustible process of signification around certain dominant signifiers, with which the individual subject

> can then identify. Language itself is infinitely productive; but this incessant productivity can be artificially arrested into "closure"—into the sealed world of ideological stability, which repels the disruptive, decentred forces of language in the name of an imaginary unity. (196-97)

It may therefore be argued that ideology functions according to the logic of closure, that is, it tends to include certain things in its more or less fixed domain while excluding others.

This view is supported by Jameson's conception of ideology as not simply a theory of false consciousness "but rather one of structural limitation and ideological closure" (*PU* 52). According to Althusser, "closure […] constitutes the structure of an ideological domain" (*Reading Capital* 308). He also points out that "an ideology is both theoretically closed and politically supple and adaptable. It bends to the interests of the times, […] it moves, but with an immobile motion which maintains it *where it is*, in its place and its ideological role" (*Reading Capital* 142; original emphasis). Ideologies are understood as necessarily limiting and constrictive ways of structuring the world, as sets of beliefs which function to produce conventions and categories of inclusion and exclusion. As Jameson argues, an ideological consciousness has certain limits which it is incapable of transcending (*PU* 47). Ideology may, therefore, be regarded as a closed system, or, more accurately, as tending towards a closure.

The introduction of semiotics, language, and discourse into the discussion necessarily turns our attention to the concept of narrative. In his foreword to *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (1987) by Algirdas Julien Greimas, Jameson maintains that ideology is a

> twofold or amphibious reality, susceptible of taking on two distinct and seemingly incompatible forms at will […] That "ideology" in the narrower sense is a mass of opinions, concepts, or pseudoconcepts, "worldviews," "values," and the like, is commonly accepted; that these vaguely specified conceptual entities also always have a range of narrative embodiments, that is, indeed, that they are all in one way or another buried narratives, may be less widely understood and may also open up a much wider range of exploration than the now well-worn conceptual dimension of the ideology concept. ("Foreword" xiii)

The concept of the narrative clearly assumes a central role here, because it is the form in which ideology and its functions are manifested. This is a crucial point as far as this study is concerned. In *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979), Jameson stresses that

> ideology must always be necessarily narrative in its structure, inasmuch as it not only involves a mapping of the real, but also the essentially narrative or fantasy attempt of the subject to invent a place for himself/herself in a collective and

> historical process which excludes him or her and which is itself basically nonrepresentable and nonnarrative. (12)

On the level of cultural texts, the social contradictions appear in the guise of antinomies. This is where textual representations and narratives become particularly important, because they provide access to the functioning of ideology and the contradictions of the level of history and society. According to Jameson's suggestion, a cultural text is where the underlying contradiction manifests "its operations through those surface clicks and malfunctionings in which the [antinomies] consist, and which serve to signal an approach to the conceptual limits or closure of a given ideological system" ("Of Islands and Trenches" 90). In short, texts become force fields where social contradictions are transcoded into systems of antinomies, which assume the form of ideological closures.

At this point, we must briefly revisit Jameson's conception of the paradoxical duality of subtext, discussed in section 2.2. To quote Jameson's own words:

> the social contradiction addressed and "resolved" by the formal prestidigitation of narrative must, however reconstructed, remain an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text. It seems useful, therefore, to distinguish, from this ultimate subtext which is the place of social *contradiction*, a secondary one, which is more properly the place of ideology, and which takes the form of the *aporia* or the *antinomy:* what can in the former be resolved only through the intervention of praxis here comes before the purely contemplative mind as logical scandal or double bind, the unthinkable and the conceptually paradoxical, that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought, and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus—the text itself—to square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure. […] [T]his entire system of ideological closure is taken as the symptomatic projection of something quite different, namely of social contradiction. (*PU* 82-83; original emphases)

This spells out the core of Jameson's argument and, simultaneously, provides the theoretical basis for this study. In this process, which may be regarded as an instance of what Jameson calls transcoding, we negotiate between the level of history and society on the one hand and the level of the text on the other. Ideological closures in the text are read as symptoms of historical and social contradictions, conflicts, and relations of oppression. In this thesis, an instance of this is the antinomical situation of the Grimes family in *Go Tell*, which will be read as a symptomatic expression of the problem of racial subjugation in American society.

It is important to notice, however, that ideology must be regarded merely as one side of the story. We have so far established the connection between the cultural text and the level of history and society in terms of ideological closures, antinomies, and contradictions, which could be taken to imply that the text is merely capable of functioning as a way to gain access to the underlying social problems, that is, of passively

manifesting existing problems. This impression is exactly what must now be disputed by introducing and explicating the utopian dimension of cultural texts. In other words, having discussed the preconditions of the negative hermeneutic, we must now turn to the central concept of the positive hermeneutic.

2.3.2 Utopia: The Logic of Change

The concept of utopia is of crucial importance, because it enables me to map the emancipatory thrust of Baldwin's novels as they respond to the ideological structures of oppression within American society. In this context, utopia is defined as a dimension of cultural texts which functions as the counterforce to the dimension of ideology by attempting to open up ideological closures and providing imaginary resolutions to the contradictions of the level of history and society. As a critical concept, utopia is complex and controversial. In colloquial language the term usually connotes an imaginary, unattainable place or state of happiness, but there seems to be no consensus over the academic meaning and usage of the term. Ruth Levitas argues in *The Concept of Utopia* (1990) that part of this difficulty derives from the wide range of variation in the usage of the concept of utopia and the fact that it can be discussed from the perspectives of various disciplines, such as history, literature, psychology, cultural anthropology, political theory, sociology, theology, and so on (2). She also suggests that a significant source of confusion is precisely the "absence of a clear definition of utopia which separates its specialist academic use from the meaning current in everyday language" (2).

According to Roberts, the origins of the term "utopia" are to be found in two Greek words: "eutopia," which denotes "good place," and "outopia," which means "no place" (107). Sir Thomas More combined these words in the title of his famous book *Utopia* (1516), which describes an imaginary country of harmony and happiness. In *Utopianism* (1991) Krishan Kumar describes More's Utopia: "Here was a place, imaginary, it was true, and accordingly futile to seek out, that nevertheless existed tantalizingly on the edge of possibility, somewhere just beyond the boundary of the real" (1). As Levitas points out, this ambiguous combination of two words "has left a lasting confusion around the term utopia, and one which constantly recurs like a familiar but nonetheless rather troublesome ghost" (2-3). What this means is that the oxymoronic nature of the term seems to suggest that such a place of happiness is a logical impossibility, and that utopia is precisely an idealistic, imaginary, and intrinsically impractical state of perfection. This is a common conception of utopia in colloquial use.

For the present purposes it seems plausible to start from a simple, everyday language definition of utopia, which, Levitas suggests, "is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that" (1). She goes on to point out that this kind of vision of a better world is often deemed to consist of escapist, unrealistic daydreams or even to be politically dangerous (1). This implies the ambiguous social significance of the concept of utopia. It may function as a form of ideological compensation, as a strategy of containment, which stifles revolutionary impulses and thereby participates in upholding the prevailing status quo. On the other hand, it may

assume a socially active role as a tool of political protest, as a model and catalyst of change. If we go by the famous words of Oscar Wilde: "Progress is the realisation of Utopias" ("The Soul of Man under Socialism"), utopia emerges as an indispensable feature of social being: it reveals the defects of a given society and proposes alternatives for the present state of affairs.

Kumar goes even further by arguing that utopia is "more than a social or political tract aiming at reform, however comprehensive. It always goes beyond the immediately practicable, and it may go so far beyond as to be in most realistic senses wholly impracticable. But it is never simple dreaming. It always has one foot in reality" (2). This dialectic which consists of the real and the imaginary is what gives the concept of utopia its unique character and makes it a useful and significant way of looking at the world and of envisioning social changes. According to Kumar, "[u]topia describes a state of impossible perfection which nevertheless is in some genuine sense not beyond the reach of humanity. It is here if not now" (3).

In Levitas's view, the concept of Utopia has usually been defined in terms of three different aspects: content, form, and function (4). Unsurprisingly, each of these approaches has its characteristic advantages and problems. Content-wise, as Levitas points out, definitions of utopia are customarily "evaluative and normative, specifying what the good society would be" (4). This is still a very vague and not particularly useful account, because views on what constitutes the good society vary enormously according to socio-historical circumstances and even personal opinions. Consideration of the content of a utopia is also necessarily connected to the questions of possibility. Levitas argues that what are considered to be realistic visions of a better society have commonly been regarded as more valuable and worthy of attention than those considered unrealistic (5). She denounces this attitude, however, and states that while it may be valid in some cases, it cannot be generalized (5). In other words, questions of possibility can never be answered with absolute certainty, because our conceptions of what is regarded as realistic are socially constructed and, therefore, subject to large variation.

Another way to define utopia is in terms of form, that is, descriptively. Levitas asserts that one version of this is "[t]he common sense equation of utopia with a description of a good society" (4). More's fundamental work *Utopia* is often taken as a model, and this has led many theoreticians to regard utopia as a literary genre, which includes fictional depictions of alternative societies. Levitas points out, however, that this account excludes all non-literary and non-fictional utopias, which suggests that form as a means of defining the concept of utopia is too exclusive (5).

The third option is to take a more analytical approach and attempt to define utopia in terms of function. As Levitas puts it, "utopia is seen as presenting some kind of goal," or "[a]t the very least, utopias raise questions about what the goal should be" (5). This account is clearly a teleological one. The problem is, however, that the functions attached to utopia are often contradictory. An example of this is the Marxist tradition, which has foregrounded functional definitions of utopia either in the negative sense as a strategy of containment or in the positive sense as a catalyst of social change.

It becomes obvious that none of these approaches is capable of producing a satisfactory definition of utopia, because they all have their problems and complications. They all place different limits on what may be regarded as utopian and also tend to ignore the degrees of variation in the concept. Levitas's point is that all of these approaches must be contained in a competent definition of utopia and that something "which remains constant while content, form and function vary" must be located (7). She identifies *desire* as that constant element, that is, "desire for a better way of being and living" (7). Desire, in this sense, she asserts, "involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the 'collective problem' solved" (191). To a certain extent, Lucy Sargisson's line of thought, as presented in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), complies with Levitas's: "The future cannot be programmed in terms of the present, as constructed by the past. It must be dreamt and imagined according to desire" (225).

The identification of desire as the central catalyst of utopian thinking does not imply a belief in an essential, unchanging human nature, a part of which such a fundamental utopian longing would be. Instead, Levitas suggests that this desire itself is subject to change in terms of content, form, and function:

> it will not only vary markedly in content but may be expressed in a variety of forms, and may perform a variety of functions including compensation, criticism and the catalysing of change. The most useful kind of concept of utopia would be one which allowed us to explore these differences and which ultimately might allow us to relate the variations in form, function and content to the conditions of the generating society. (8)

These qualifications allow Levitas to arrive at a definition of the concept of utopia which will manage to solve many of the previous problems:

> Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being. This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia, and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation. It allows for this desire to be realistic or unrealistic. It allows for the form, function and content to change over time. And it reminds us that, whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies. (8)

Although this account cannot be considered the perfect, definitive definition of the problematic and multifaceted concept of utopia, it nevertheless appears to be a logical and useful one. I will use it as a point of departure in this study, that is, as a backdrop for my discussion of Fredric Jameson's views on utopia and, consequently, for my reading of three novels by James Baldwin.

The concept of utopia is an integral part of Jameson's thinking. This becomes evident in many of his books and essays which deal explicitly with this concept, particularly the closing chapter of *The Political Unconscious* entitled "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology," and his books *The Seeds of Time* (1994) and *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005). It seems justified, however, to argue, as Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks do in their introduction to *The Jameson Reader* (2000), that the significance of utopian thinking is not limited to these explicit discussions, but rather underlies his entire oeuvre (24). In *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1971), Jameson defines the term as "[t]he ultimate ethical goal of human life […], a world in which meaning and life are once more indivisible, in which man and the world are at one" (173). He also argues that "[t]he Utopian idea […] keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one" (111). Another important definition emerges in his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: "the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change" (xvi). In other words, for Jameson, utopian thought functions as an emblem of ethical teleology and as a necessary catalyst of social change by imagining alternatives to the prevailing power structures.

To restore literature to the focus of discussion, it is important to quote an argument which Jameson offers concerning the concept of utopia:

> The Utopian moment is indeed in one sense quite impossible for us to imagine, except as the unimaginable; thus a kind of allegorical structure is built into the very forward movement of the Utopian impulse itself, which always points to something other, which can never reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures, which always calls out structurally for completion and exegesis. (*Marxism and Form* 142)

This is exactly where literature and other forms of cultural representation become relevant, because they may be regarded as primary vehicles of such allegorical structures in and through which the utopian impulse functions. The completion and exegesis of this utopian impulse, as it appears in Baldwin's novels, is precisely one of the central aims of this study. For example, the character of Black Christopher in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and the spatial configurations of John's dreams of a better future in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are instances of the way in which the utopian impulse "speaks in figures." An example of the utopian impulse within African American literature can also be found in Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), which appears to be a dystopian rather than a utopian novel, because it portrays a disturbing vision of Los Angeles in the year 2024 as a gated community plagued by erratic violence and rampant plunder. A driving force of the narrative is, however, the utopian plan of the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, to migrate northwards in order to found a new community based on the new religion of her own creation, Earthseed, which foregrounds the inevitability of change and the importance of human agency in the process.

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson distinguishes between what he calls "the Utopian genre or text as such" and "a Utopian impulse which infuses much else, in daily life as well as in its texts" (xiv). With the former he refers to utopia as "a socio-economic sub-genre" (xiv) of science fiction, which often includes explicit and conscious utopian programmes, whereas the latter has to do with "the operation of the Utopian impulse in unsuspected places, where it is concealed or repressed" (3). As Baldwin's novels neither belong to the genre of science fiction nor explicitly spell out any systematic utopian programs, I will concentrate on detecting the traces of the utopian desire and impulse in the texts and explicate how they attempt to open up ideological closures and suggest solutions to antinomies. Jameson defines the nature of this kind of utopian solutions more closely:

> Yet it is the social situation which must admit of such a solution, or at least of its possibility: this is one aspect of the objective preconditions for a Utopia. The view that opens out onto history from a particular social situation must encourage such oversimplifications; the miseries and injustices thus visible must seem to shape and organize themselves around one specific ill or wrong. For the Utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and to extirpate this specific root of all evil from which all the others spring. (*Archaeologies* 12)

It is obvious that, for Jameson, utopia is not by definition an impossible, unrealistic daydream. Rather, the ultimate possibility of a utopian solution is one of its prerequisites.

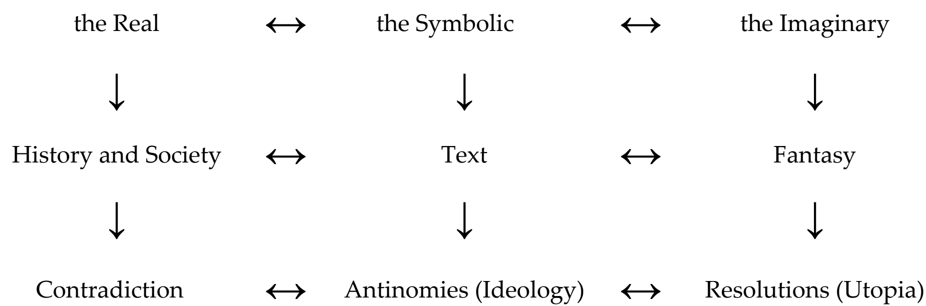
In this thesis, utopia is, then, posited as a central concept for literature in both a formal and a thematic sense. In both senses, utopia becomes established as the counterweight to ideology. As far as formal aspects are concerned, the utopian desire in a text is regarded as the impulse to open up the ideological closure which the text contains. This dynamic can, in my view, be detected in all texts. Thematically speaking, some texts may seek to construct representations of utopian communities, that is, more or less detailed models for a better world, while others respond to their own ideological closures by generating implications and visions of "a better way of being and living," to bring Levitas's definition of the utopian impulse back into focus (7). Baldwin's writing clearly falls into the latter category, as will become evident in the subsequent chapters.

2.4 THE DIALECTIC OF IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA

Having laid out the conceptual premises of both the negative and the positive hermeneutic, the methodological approach of this study must now be discussed further. My readings of Baldwin's novels map the dynamic of the two different forces which function within the texts: ideology and utopia. This may be viewed as a dialectical process, where the text emerges as the synthesis of the thesis, namely ideology, and the antithesis, utopia. What this means in practice is that the reading process starts by identifying a central problem, an antinomy, in the text, which assumes the form of an

ideological closure, an intolerable situation. As a response to the closure, the text generates a utopian impulse, a desire to open up the closure and imagine alternatives to it. This may be illustrated as follows:

Fig. 1. The dialectic of ideology and utopia



This Figure is based on the governing principle of Jameson's theory of the political unconscious, according to which literary works may be read as *symbolic* acts, which produce *imaginary* resolutions of *real* social contradictions (*PU* 79). The connection to the thinking of Jacques Lacan becomes obvious, because this formulation includes the three orders of his seminal theory, that is, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, which Adam Roberts defines as the three "arenas or conceptual spaces in which the individual psyche operates" (65).[13] It is crucial to notice, however, that what is at stake here is not a psychoanalytic reading of the texts per se; rather, the three Lacanian orders are reinterpreted from a more politically emphasized viewpoint. In my Figure, to put it simply and schematically, the Real connotes the level of history and society, the Symbolic signifies the level of the text, and the Imaginary corresponds to the level of fantasy. Before going further, these levels and their Lacanian connotations need to be briefly explicated.

A basic definition provided in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (1996), at the note of "imaginary/symbolic/real," suggests that

> [t]he concept of the imaginary […] refers to both the capacity to form images and the alienating effect of identification with them. […] The symbolic is primarily the order of culture and language; this is the order into which the subject is inserted or inscribed […]. The Real is not synonymous with external or empirical reality, but refers to that which lies outside the Symbolic and that which returns to haunt the subject in disorders like psychosis. (257)

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[13] For concise and accessible accounts of Lacan's tripartite theory and its significance for Jameson, see Adam Roberts's *Fredric Jameson* (2000) (62-72) and Sean Homer's *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism* (1998) (50-55).

Lacan introduced the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in a lecture in 1953. In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954* (1988), he refers to them as "those elementary categories without which we would be incapable of distinguishing anything within our experience" (271). Although these categories are often used to explain the development of a child, they should not be understood in terms of a strictly successive, chronological movement, in which one stage is left behind when entering another one. Rather, they all interact in the process of constructing our experience. The interdependence of these orders is pointed out by Serge Leclaire: "[t]he experience of the Real presupposes the simultaneous exercise of two correlative functions, the imaginary function and the symbolic function" ("A la recherché des principes d'une psychothérapie des psychoses" quoted by Jameson in "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 82). The main idea is, as Jameson suggests, that the Real cannot be accessed directly, but its effects may be read on the levels of the Symbolic and the Imaginary through a process of mediation (82).

As implied above, we enter the Figure in the middle, that is, the text. The first step is, therefore, to define what is meant by *text* in the context of this work. Although my Figure distinguishes between the three levels of history, text, and fantasy, it must be noted that these levels are not clearly separate or opposite entities. Edward Said articulates this in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983): "a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world (33; original emphasis). As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out in their *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (1995), the traditional opposition between the text and the world represented in the text is a false one, because texts are evidently not something external to the world but an inherent part of it, and, in effect, according to the poststructuralist way of thinking, produce the world (33). My conception of the text follows Jameson's formulation:

> The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow "reality" to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. (*PU* 81)

The text does not merely reflect reality; instead, in a way, it absorbs reality within itself and simultaneously recreates it.

In this study, the level of the text is crucially important, because it is regarded, in accordance with Jameson's thinking, as a field of force where history and fantasy meet in an antagonistic confrontation: history in the guise of ideological closures and fantasy in the form of utopian projections. What this means in practice is that the central problems of a given text are read as antinomies, that is, as symbolic manifestations of the contradictions of the level of history and society which have found their way onto the level of the text. These antinomies are understood as resulting from and adopting the

form of ideological closures, which are based on strategies of exclusion and inclusion and seek to maintain the status quo. This dialectic of ideology and utopia is what produces the text as a synthesis, while the text simultaneously shapes the levels of both history and fantasy. In this way, these separate levels are ultimately connected, and the political significance of the text is brought into focus.

Moving to the left in the Figure, we need to take a closer look at the level of history and society. In my work, the text is conceptualized as the only available way to access the level of history, the Real. According to Jacques Lacan's own formulation, "the real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists symbolization absolutely" (66). As Catherine Belsey argues in *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (2005), "[t]he real is not reality, which is what we do know, the world picture that culture represents to us. By contrast, the real, as culture's defining difference, does not form part of our culturally acquired knowledge, but exercises its own, independent determinations even so" (xii). She points out that the Real is all around us and "inhabits us as the condition of our existence" (*Culture and the Real* 50). The Real is something which can never be accessed directly, but becomes manifest in cultural representations and therefore the process of mediation, or transcoding, becomes a crucial issue. According to Jameson's reading, the Lacanian Real means "simply History itself" ("Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 104). The point is, he stresses, that "our approach to it […] necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (*PU* 35).

Lacan explicates the relation between the Real and the Symbolic as follows: "One can only think of language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic" (262). Jameson goes on to explain that "history—Althusser's 'absent cause,' Lacan's 'Real'—is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization" (*PU* 82; original emphasis). In other words, although Jameson does not regard history as a text per se, the only means to access it is through texts and narratives. This is how Jameson constructs an analogy between the Lacanian connection of the individual unconscious to the Real and his own linkage of the text to History, thereby moving from the level of individual psychology to the level of the collective and the political.

Next, we must move to the right towards the level of fantasy and the Imaginary. In *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), Žižek points out that fantasy is usually thought to function within ideology as a way of blurring the terrible truth of a situation (6). He counters this conventional conception by suggesting that the relation between fantasy and "the horror of the Real" is considerably more ambiguous: "fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 7).[14] He goes on to arrive at the following definition: "a fantasy

[14] This logic is clearly analogous with Jameson's conception of the relation between text and history, according to which a literary work emerges from a particular socio-historical situation, but, since

constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates; that is, it literally 'teaches us how to desire'" (7). This view supports Ruth Levitas's conception of desire as the fundamental component of utopia (see, for instance, 7-8).

Žižek raises a crucial point by arguing that fantasy may be regarded as the prototype of narrative (*The Plague of Fantasies* 10). He also emphasizes that narrative emerges in order to provide "solutions" to fundamental antagonisms (10-11). Fantasy thereby becomes an integral level of cultural texts and assumes its position as the counterforce of the level of society and history. This runs parallel with Jameson's view, according to which the role of the text is not one of passively manifesting what he calls "real social contradictions" (*PU* 79). Rather, as becomes clear in Jameson's own formulation, texts have "the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79). Jameson regards "fantasy or protonarrative structure as the vehicle for our experience of the real" (*PU* 48). This is exactly where fantasy, the utopian dimension of the text, becomes a crucial issue, because it functions as a way in which the Real—the unapproachable, the absent cause—becomes manifested through its effects, as utopian projections are generated by the level of the Real.

In sum, the text is the site which hosts the encounter of history and fantasy, ideology and utopia, the Real and the Imaginary. The Real finds its way into the text by way of mediation; that is, the real historical and social contradictions are transcoded into antinomies in the text, which, in turn, produces utopian solutions. In other words, a utopian desire arises as a response to antinomies and their ideological closures and produces utopian projections—options of opening up these problematic clusters of antinomies—which function as imaginary resolutions of the real social contradictions which originally gave rise to the text. This is the strategy which I will use in order to explicate the political unconscious of Baldwin's work.

2.5 UTOPIAN TENDENCIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

In addition to its role as a theoretical and methodological concept in this study, utopia has had remarkable significance as a mode of progressive thinking in a cultural and social sense in the African American context. To further illuminate the ideological and political context of Baldwin's work, it is necessary, therefore, to consider briefly the concept of utopia in this sense. First of all, the entire historical narrative of African Americans may certainly be read as the outcome of the dialectic of ideology and utopia, because it has centred on the long and difficult plot of striving for release from the ideological closure of white racism in its various forms. This utopian impulse has produced various visions of a better future and liberation, which may be defined, as Akinyele Umoja does in "Searching for Place: Nationalism, Separatism, and Pan-Africanism," in terms of "three basic ideological trends—assimilation, pluralism, and nationalism" (531). In short, Umoja argues that assimilationists adhere to the dominant

history can be accessed only through textualization, the text simultaneously brings into being the very situation in which it is produced (see *PU* 82).

values and paradigms of American society and promote the integration of African Americans into the American mainstream, whereas pluralists emphasize the importance of maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic and interest groups while participating in the political and economical mainstream of American society. In contrast, nationalists strive for "a separate national identity from the dominant society and self-determination, up to an independent national state" (531).

An example of African American assimilationist progressive thinking, or, in other words, black liberalism, can be found in Booker T. Washington's rather modest claims. As Joanne Turner-Sadler points out in *African American History: An Introduction* (2006), he encouraged black people to accept segregation, to adhere to the dominant values of American society, and aim for economic equity (128). To quote Washington's words in *Up from Slavery* (1901) concerning segregation: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (221-22). W. E. B. Du Bois had a more ambitious vision concerning the advancement of the social position of African Americans. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois declares assimilationist adherence to "the greater ideals of the American republic," but, in contrast to Washington, he calls for complete racial equality and foregrounds the importance of education, culture, civil rights, and freedom in general: "all these ideals must be melted and welded into one. […] Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro People, the ideal of human brotherhood" (33). One of the most important utopian visions to originate within black liberalist thought is articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous speech "I Have a Dream," in which he presents his view of a world in which racial categorization would not be regarded as a defining factor of human value:

> I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. (2343)

To a certain extent, Baldwin's vision of a better world in which social categorization would cease to function as an instrument power and oppression runs along the same lines as King's dream. A major difference between these two visions is that King was mainly concerned with racial inequality, whereas Baldwin's endeavour to transcend categorization includes also issues of sexuality and gender.

Since its emergence in the eighteenth century, black nationalism has produced various utopian visions, which have functioned as a counterforce to black integrationist thinking and as critiques of American liberalism. As Michael C. Dawson suggests in *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (2001), black

nationalism "sees American liberalism as a hypocritical failure to the degree that it denies the benefits of liberal citizenship to blacks in the United States" (86). The largest and one of the most influential of black nationalist movements was Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was in its prime during the 1920s. According to Robert Hill, the cultural and political legacy of Garvey and UNIA has had a significant influence on various subsequent black nationalist movements in America and may also be seen as a predecessor of the independence movements in Africa (xliii-xliv, xc). The importance of Garveyism is also clearly visible in more recent movements such as cultural nationalism. The utopian dimension of Garvey's thinking was centred on the idea of building the African nation for black people. To quote Garvey's own words: "The culmination of all the efforts of the U.N.I.A. must end in Negro i[n]dependent (sic) nationalism on the continent of Africa" (211). As Dawson suggests, Garvey believed that black liberation was possible only through the creation of the black state in Africa (94).

The African country of Liberia is a special case of black nationalism, because it was founded in 1847 by the American Colonization Society, formed by a group of white Americans and freed African American slaves in order to resettle the latter in Liberia. According to Turner-Sadler, the main motivation for this was the endeavour of the American Colonization Society "to rid the United States of troublesome free Africans" (207). Liberia has, however, turned out to be rather less than a utopia. As Turner-Sadler suggests, it has a difficult history marked by disputes between the African American immigrant population and the indigenous Africans (207).

The Nation of Islam is the longest enduring black nationalist organization in America. Since its inception in the 1930s, the movement has entailed the idea of a separate nation of Black Muslims within the United States. As Manning Marable points out, the political programme of the Nation of Islam stands in steep contrast with black liberalism: "racial separation; the ultimate creation of an all-black nation state; and capitalist economic development along racial lines" (56). This utopian vision is based on the conviction that white American democracy will never live up to its promise of equality and justice for all. The key ideologues of the Nation of Islam include Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan, whose thinking has influenced such more recent lines of thought as community nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, cultural nationalism, and ethnic nationalism. Umoja argues that although liberalism tends to dominate the political discourse concerning African Americans, black nationalism remains an important ideological force: "As long as racism exists in North America, and people of African descent find their status and humanity marginalized, African descendants will continue to search for place, and a variety of interpretations of the role of Black Nationalism will interact within the historiography of the Black Experience" (542).

In the mid-1960s, Black Power became the ideological umbrella concept which covered a large portion of the black protest movement against white racism. As Peniel E. Joseph argues in her introduction to *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era* (2006), Black Power entailed the emergence of a new militant race

consciousness (3). She goes on to explicate the scope and influence of Black Power as follows:

> The main thrust of Black Power politics was radical in orientation. This is to say that Black Power activists argued that American society needed to be fundamentally altered, rather than reformed. This radicalism was reflected in the politics of a broad range of historical actors and organizations that were black nationalists, Marxists, pan-Africanists, trade unionists, feminists, liberals, or a combination of all or some of these tendencies. Additionally, small strains of black conservatives also were attracted to Black Power's call for self-determination and promotion of black business, self-help, and entrepreneurship. (279)

The role of Black Power ideology in black self-definition has been remarkable in envisioning a new, better world. It must, however, be noted that its influence has by no means been strictly progressive. This is most clearly evidenced by the retrogressive and oppressive attitudes which Black Power ideology has tended to adopt towards women and sexual minorities. These narrow and exclusionary definitions of blackness, as Patricia Hill Collins suggests in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (2006), were central within black nationalist and Afrocentric thought (90-91).

It is hardly surprising that from the black feminist point of view the utopian visions of Black Power were controversial at best. According to Dawson, black feminists customarily "must face sexism from within the black movement as well as racism from the women's movement at the same time they are struggling to combat what they perceive as the cumulative effects of multiple disadvantages" (138). Prime examples of the black female accounts on the issues of racism, sexism, and utopian thinking include bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Toni Morrison. The patriarchy and phallocentricity of black nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s is characterized by bell hooks in *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001) as having "a devastating impact on black heterosexual unions, [and] tragic consequences for black homosexuals," because the "[p]atriarchal black male takeover of the civil rights struggle ushered in a mood of intolerance" (188-89). hooks's utopian vision of a better world stands in decided contradistinction to the patriarchy of Black Power, as it necessitates a complete rejection and nullification of the intolerance which has at times plagued black redemptive thinking: "Patriarchal thinking blocks recognition of the power of female wisdom and our words. Contemporary black women leaders know that we can only heal the crisis in our diverse black communities by returning to a love ethic which stands in opposition to all forms of domination, including white supremacy and sexism" (*Salvation* 223). The "love ethic" which hooks foregrounds as the main guideline towards a better future is conspicuously reminiscent of Baldwin's doctrine of love as a means of transcending oppressive social categorization.

Angela Y. Davis is one of the most prominent figures to emerge from the ideological confines of the Black Power movement. As Dawson suggests, her thinking has confronted intersections of race, gender, and class from a point of view which combines elements of

black nationalism, feminism, and Marxism (228). As exemplified in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), Davis strongly opposes the "widespread views in black communities that race must always take precedence, and that race is implicitly gendered as male" (xix). Her utopian vision, as expressed in an interview "A New Look at Angela Davis" by Robert A. DeLeon, foregrounds the aim of

> build[ing] a world free of racism and legally-sanctioned robbery and murder, a world without war, a world where health does not cost money, where education is open to all, where all, young and old, can freely and fully develop all their individual talents and capacities. A world where the people have truly seized control over the affairs of their lives. (54)

Although this passage focuses on the categories of race and class, Davis's vision also encompasses other oppressive categories, such as gender and sexuality.

The patriarchal emphasis of black cultural and political traditions is clearly manifest also in black literary theory and research. Pirjo Ahokas suggests in "Muuttuva kaanon: amerikkalaisuuden konstruktio ja sen purkaminen" that black literature has often been equated with the tradition of black male writers, which has also dictated the theoretical stances of such prominent African American critics as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (28). According to Ahokas, Gates's view of black male literature as a profoundly competitive tradition, based on such devices as parody and Signifyin(g), and his foregrounding of race as the primary category of oppression have been countered by the more intersectional approach of black feminism, which stresses the importance of gender as a source of both intra- and interracial subjugation. In terms of literary theory, black feminism has emphasised the importance of the maternal and sisterly aspects of the tradition of black women's writing, which become visible particularly in the intertextual relationships between the works of older and more recent women authors, an example of this being the close connection between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker ("Muuttuva kaanon" 28).

Accordingly, literary works by African American women writers provide important examples of black utopian thinking and challenge the male-centredness of African American cultural traditions and research. Toni Morrison's book of nonfiction, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), tackles racism and sexism by criticizing the Euro- and phallocentricity of American literary canon and literary criticism and calls for more expansive and inclusive approaches across the lines of race and gender (see, for example, xiv, 3, 25-27). In the essay "Home," she discusses the concept of utopia in terms of race:

> I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape—Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement. From Martin Luther King's hopeful language, to Doris Lessing's

> four-gated city, to Jean Toomer's "American," the race-free world has been posited as ideal, millennial, a condition possible only if accompanied by the Messiah or situated in a protected preserve—a wilderness park.
>
> But […] I prefer to think of a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father's house of many rooms. I am thinking of it as home. (3; original emphasis)

The shift which Morrison makes in envisioning a world free of racial hierarchies through the metaphor of home rather than of "the father's house" is crucial, because it simultaneously avoids reproducing "the master's voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father" ("Home" 4) and confronts the patriarchy and phallocentrism, both black and white. She also asserts that this shift "domesticates the racial project, moves the job of unmattering race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire; away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern activity" ("Home" 3-4). Morrison's thinking clearly establishes a link to John's plight "in the darkness of his father's house" (*Go Tell*) and his longing for release from his stepfather's patriarchal power in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

In a somewhat similar manner, Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976) challenges both the relations of oppression based on white racism and the patriarchal subjugation of women within the militant branches of the black protest movement. It also foregrounds the issue of reverse racism by portraying the hostility of black radicals towards white women. As Pirjo Ahokas points out in "Kohti uutta etiikkaa: mustan naisidentiteetin hybridisaatio Alice Walkerin romaanissa *Meridian*," the novel emphasizes the significance of new forms of black resistance and identities in terms of hybridity and heterogeneity (41). The political agendas envisioned by both Morrison and Walker may be read as manifestations of the larger utopian impulse, of the impetus towards a better world characterized by the eradication of the racist and patriarchal relations of oppression, prevalent in African American literature.

The significance of Black Marxism as a form of black utopianism and its influence on other strands of black radicalism must not be ignored, either. According to Dawson, "[b]lack Marxism has its roots in the history and culture which developed out of African Americans' resistance first to slavery and then to the decades of economic, political, and social subordination that followed the defeat of what Du Bois called Black Reconstruction" (173). As Cedric J. Robinson argues in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), Marxism and black radicalism are based on visions of revolutionary social change: "each represents a significant and immanent mode of social resolution, but […] each is a particular and critically different realization of a history" (1). A fundamental difference of emphasis creates a decisive discrepancy between these two systems of thought: Marxism asserts the primacy of social class, whereas black radicalism foregrounds the problem of racial inequality. These partly divergent revolutionary visions have, however, been combined in a variety of ways in black American history, for instance in the thinking of Richard Wright, Du Bois's later work, and the Black Panther

Party. Joseph describes the Black Panther Party as an "eclectic fusion of black nationalism and Marxism" (18). Simon Wendt points out in "The Roots of Black Power? Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement" that during its various phases the Black Panther Party aimed at "a fusion of Marxist socialism and revolutionary nationalism" and establishing "global socialism through revolutionary intercommunalism, which would overthrow U.S. imperialism and capitalism through alliances among revolutionaries around the world" (332n67).

Baldwin's emancipatory thinking contains traces and influences of all of these modes of utopian thought, and, on the other hand, his own thinking has inspired black utopianism. To a certain extent, his humanist agenda may be regarded as building upon what Du Bois called "human brotherhood" ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings" 33). Up until the mid-1960s, Baldwin firmly supported the principle of nonviolence advocated by Martin Luther King Jr., but towards the end of the decade, he began to show increasing support for more radical strategies of resistance, such as the Black Panthers. This ideological shift is of crucial importance, because it influenced Baldwin's later work in different ways. Perhaps the most obvious example may be found in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* in the relationship between Leo Proudhammer, who comes across as a supporter of nonviolence, and Christopher Hall, who becomes a personification of Black Power, although a rather eclectic one as such. Another implication of the influence of Black Power ideologies is the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), which reads as a celebration of conventional heterosexual love and family, and excludes homosexuality and interracial love. It is hard not to regard this as at least partly resulting from the attacks against Baldwin's homosexuality by black radicals, particularly Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (1968) (see 122-37). In sum, the utopian impulse on the basis of which these divergent movements and ideologies have originated is present in Baldwin's writing, and each of these lines of thought contributes to the construction of his own ideal of a world without oppressive and restrictive categories.

* * *

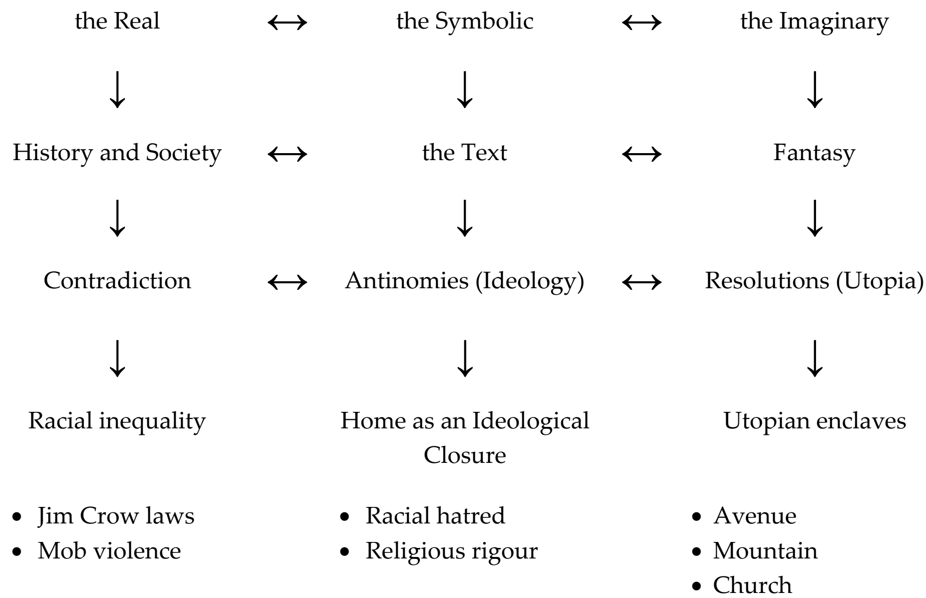
Although ideology and utopia may be regarded as largely opposite forces at work in cultural texts, it must be noted that all texts are crisscrossed by both ideological and utopian impulses. Texts always exist in relation to various centres of power, attempting to build a façade of inevitability and naturalness for the ones which they support and, on the other hand, seeking to unmask the arbitrariness and constructed nature of the ones they wish to undermine, simultaneously yearning to project alternatives to them. In other words, literary works are playgrounds, or battlefields, of complex and multifaceted processes, saturated by both ideological and utopian impulses, involving both emancipatory and constricting tendencies. As Jameson puts it: "the undiminished power of ideological distortion […] persists even within the restored Utopian meaning of cultural artifacts, and […] within the symbolic power of art and culture the will to domination perseveres intact" (*PU* 299).

In conclusion, ideology and utopia function in literary works simultaneously in terms of form and in terms of political content; the former relating to the internal dynamics of the texts, and the latter in relation to various centres of social and political power and their counterforces. These levels are ultimately connected, because form in itself may be read as content and, on the other hand, content cannot exist without form. What this means in practice is that the reading process must include both a formal analysis of ideology and utopia in the text and a political reading of the findings, the scope of which varies according the hermeneutic horizon in question. This is where Jameson's tripartite hermeneutics and the interplay of ideology and utopia are ultimately bound together in order to construct a framework for a political mode of reading cultural texts.

3 Geographies of Ideology and Utopia in Go Tell It on the Mountain

The primary conflict in James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is centred on the adolescent protagonist, John Grimes, and his life under oppression on the various levels of family, the African American community, and American society. This chapter sets out to analyse the functioning of the dialectic of ideology and utopia in the novel by explicating John's problematic position and his options for alternative futures. The social scope of the reading will coincide with the first horizon of Jameson's hermeneutic of the political unconscious, in which the narrative is regarded as a symbolic act, as "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (*PU* 77). The main task is the explication of the central antinomy in the text and the ways in which the text seeks to "square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure" (*PU* 83). In other words, the reading starts off with the identification of the locus of the ideological closure in the novel and proceeds to an analysis of the utopian solutions which the text produces in response. This may be illustrated as follows:

Fig. 2. The dialectic of ideology and utopia in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*



The text posits the home of the Grimes family, governed and largely defined by the dogmatic racial and religious attitudes of the father, Gabriel, as the centre of problems, or, in Jamesonian terms, as a system of antinomies. At this stage, the social scope of the ideological closure is still rather narrow, as it takes place in the exclusively black context of the home of the Grimes family. It is crucial to notice that this can and, according to the theory of the political unconscious, must be read as a symbolic manifestation of a larger social contradiction. It seems evident that the historical and social contradiction which has found its way into the text in the guise of the ideological closure of home is the history of racism in the United States. The text implies Gabriel's traumatic childhood experiences of mob violence and other manifestations of racism as the reason for his bitterness towards white people and his fundamentalist religious beliefs. This establishes a link between the level of the text and the socio-historical circumstances of its production, that is, the context of racism in the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s. Gabriel's frustration and sense of powerlessness under the circumstances of institutionalized racial and economic oppression lead him to adopt rather extremist strategies in order to protect his family and turn their home into a strictly delineated, closed system. This is an instance of how the real contradiction of racial subjugation is transcoded onto the level of the text.

This ideological closure is countered by what may be regarded as a utopian impulse, a utopian desire which seeks to project ways of opening up the closure and to imagine alternative futures. The protagonist of the novel, John, whom Gabriel has adopted when marrying John's mother, Elizabeth, is the main target of Gabriel's tyrannical attitudes and

practices, and hence he becomes, firstly, the prime victim of the ideological closure and, secondly, the main carrier of the utopian impulse in the text. It is precisely John's three different visions for his future, each connected to a certain location, which function as potential solutions to the ideological closure of home: firstly, a life of drugs and uninhibited sexuality represented by the avenue; secondly, success in the "white" world by means of his intelligence, envisioned on a hill in Central Park; and thirdly, a career as a preacher embodied by the storefront church. These sites may be regarded as what Michel Foucault regards as *heterotopias*, "real and effective spaces […] in which […] all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at and the same time represented, challenged and overturned" ("Other Spaces: The Principles of Heterotopia" 12). These heterotopias encompass the utopian desire of John's subversive future visions and, as a result, they may be grasped in terms of what Jameson calls *utopian enclaves*, spaces of resistance "in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (*Archaeologies* 9).

In this chapter, I will, firstly, discuss the central concepts of space and place in order to arrive at the central concepts of the utopian enclave and heterotopia to be used in my reading of *Go Tell*. The first step of the analysis is to explore the role and function of home as the defining place in John's life, or, in other words, as the system of antinomies and the site of the ideological closure. The reading will then proceed to an analysis of John's visions of breaking out of the suffocating closure of home and of his stepfather's tyrannical rule in particular, which entails the process of identifying and explicating the ways in which the text seeks to project alternative futures in the form of utopian solutions. As I will show, the hill in Central Park and the storefront church are the most significant sites in this respect, because the former entails the subversive vision of the transcendence of the category of race through John's dreams of success in the white world, while the latter challenges the heteronormative and patriarchal conventions of the church by juxtaposing John's religious conversion and homosexual allusions.

3.1 HETEROTOPIAS AND UTOPIAN ENCLAVES: THE DIALECTICAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE

The fact that both the ideological closure and the utopian projections in the novel are conceived in spatial terms brings the concepts of *space* and *place* into focus. These concepts are central in many academic fields of study, for example in geography, social sciences, and also humanities. This is where the field of cultural geography becomes particularly relevant, firstly, because space and place are integral in its conceptual vocabulary, and secondly because it is, as David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley, and Neil Washbourne suggest in the preface of *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts* (2005), concerned with issues such as "identity formation, the construction of cultural difference, citizenship and belonging" (vii). To varying degrees, these issues are relevant in *Go Tell*. This becomes evident in the problematic construction of black subjectivity embodied by John, that is, his struggle for release from the suffocating

closure of his stepfather's tyranny and the yearning for a sense of belonging, which may be regarded as the central points of the novel.

Although space and place are often used synonymously and interchangeably—both in everyday usage and scientific contexts—many scholars agree that these concepts are related but distinct. A basic distinction is articulated by John Agnew in "Space: Place": "In the simplest sense, space refers to location somewhere and place to the occupation of that location. […] Thus, place becomes a particular or lived space. Space then refers to the fact that places cannot but be located somewhere. Place is specific and space is general" (82). This is in line with the distinction which Yi-Fi Tuan makes in his influential book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977): "'[s]pace' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we begin to know it better and endow it with value" (6).

Yi-Fu Tuan articulates a central point which supports my approach to *Go Tell*: "[p]lace is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (3). Phil Hubbard supports this view in "Space/Place" by suggesting that place is often identified with stability and enclosure, whereas space implies freedom, mobility, and "a lack of univocality" (43). A related and very significant distinction, according to Agnew, is the common tendency to define these concepts in terms of geographical scale, that is, place in relation to the local and traditional, and space in relation to the global and the modern (82). As Agnew suggests, this leads to further definitions in temporal terms which connect place with the past and regard it as regressive, reactionary, and nostalgic, whereas space is associated with the future and viewed as radical and progressive (83). In other words, this distinction posits place as a concept of stagnation which upholds the status quo, whereas space becomes invested with the impetus for change. As I will show in this chapter, the dialectic of ideology and utopia, that is, the ideological closure of John's home and his utopian desire projected in utopian enclaves, runs parallel with these definitions of place and space.

Henri Lefebvre's thinking provides an influential account of spatiality. It is based on the conviction that, as he argues in "Reflections on the Politics of Space," "[s]pace has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies" (341). In *The Production of Space* (1974), he introduces the concept of social space which is produced through a dialectical process which encompasses "mental space (as defined by the philosophers and mathematicians) on the one hand, and physical space (as defined by practico-sensory activity and the perception of 'nature') on the other" (27). Andrzej Zieleniec summarizes this aptly in *Space and Social Theory* (2007):

> Lefebvre's spatial dialectic involves the *thesis* that space is a material thing (defined, analysed and quantified according to its fixity, that is its geographical location as defined by Cartesian co-ordinates that locate an object in space). The *antithesis* is that space is a process involving social relations between people and between people and things in space. His *synthesis* is that capitalist space is produced; it is an object, a thing, whilst simultaneously a process, a means, a tool

> through which and in which, social relations, and therefore change, can occur. (68-69; original emphases)

What Lefebvre means by the idea that space is produced is that such categories as social relations, identities, and activities necessarily exist in a space and, simultaneously, produce that space. As he puts it in *The Production of Space*:

> the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself. Failing this, these relations would remain in the realm of "pure" abstraction—that is to say, in the realm of representations and hence of ideology: the realm of verbalism, verbiage and empty words. (129)

Space is, then, produced by the dialectic of material, geographical location and the abstract notion of social relations. As Rob Shields points out in *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (1998), "[e]xploitative or Utopian, social relations must also be spatial to count as more than dreams" (150). To return to the arguable dichotomy of space and place, Tim Cresswell suggests in *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (1996) that it is possible to read Lefebvre's account of the production of space as a process in which uncharted and undifferentiated space is turned into a more defined social space which may be regarded as place (3).

In order to connect these accounts of spatiality with my analysis, it is necessary to turn our attention to the issues of the representation of space. Lefebvre acknowledges the view according to which "an encrypted reality becomes readily decipherable thanks to the intervention first of speech and then of writing" (*The Production of Space* 28), but he is highly critical of it, because he regards it as a token of "the predominance of the readable and visible, of the absolute priority accorded to the visual realm, which in turn implies the priority of reading and writing" (*The Production of Space* 146). He emphasizes his conviction that representation is always secondary to the actual production of space: "semantic and semiological categories such as message, code and reading/writing could be applied only to spaces already produced" (*The Production of Space* 160), and "[i]nterpretation comes later, almost as an afterthought" (*The Production of Space* 143). Edward Soja has expressed a similar concern in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989):

> The production of spatiality is represented—literally re-presented—as cognition and mental design, as an illusive ideational subjectivity substituted for an equally illusive sensory objectivism. Spatiality is reduced to a mental construct alone, a way of thinking, an ideational process in which the "image" of reality takes epistemological precedence over the tangible substance and appearance of the real world. Social space folds into mental space, into diaphanous concepts of spatiality which all too often take us away from materialized social realities. (125)

In contrast, Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy argue in "Introduction: Urban Space and Representation," that the stance adopted by Lefebvre and Soja tends to "delimit the role of representation (and more particularly its cultural forms—ideational, narratological and imagistic) in the production of space" (3). Balshaw and Kennedy suggest that the production of space is not limited to the material environment:

> The production of urban space is simultaneously real, symbolic and imaginary; what it produces is a material environment, a visual culture and a psychic space. Recognition of this simultaneity of and in representation does not (necessarily) "take us away from materialised social realities," not unless we assume that representational forms (always) transcend or exist autonomously from what they represent. (4-5)

From my point of view, this seems to be a much more apt conception of the production of space, because it is not content with the level of the Real but also encompasses the levels of the Symbolic, that is, of text and ideology, and the Imaginary, that is, of fantasy and utopian desire. This is a crucial prerequisite to my reading of *Go Tell*.

The emphasis on spatiality in the way in which the utopian impulse produces options of deconstructing the system of antinomies in *Go Tell* requires further attention to be paid to the correspondence between utopian desire and space. This is where the definition of utopia put forward by Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Architecture from the Outside* (2001) becomes particularly important: "Utopias are the spaces of phantasmatically attainable political and personal ideals, the projection of idealized futures" (131). John's dreams of escape from the intolerable closure of home evidently comply with this definition, because his three future visions are integrally connected to different sites: the avenue, the hill in Central Park, and the storefront church. These sites are invested with personal ideals which also carry significant political weight. The text may, therefore, be read as constructing what Fredric Jameson refers to as *utopian enclaves*:

> Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, […] the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation.[15] But it is an aberrant by-product, and its possibility is dependent on the momentary formation of a kind of eddy or self-contained backwater within the general differentiation process and its seemingly irreversible forward momentum. (*Archaeologies* 15)

According to my reading, utopian enclaves are imaginary in the sense that they do not exist as such in terms of real physical space. It may, however, be argued that they have

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[15] For a holistic thinker such as Jameson, the differentiation process is ideological in the narrower sense of the term, that is, false consciousness, because it functions to conceal the underlying unity or totality of social reality. Hence, one major task of utopian thought is to resist the differentiation process.

real effects in the sense that they are often connected to certain geographical spaces, and allow for the possibility to imagine alternatives to the status quo, the world fraught with social contradictions. This is exactly where the view shared by Balshaw and Kennedy concerning the multidimensional process of the production of space is particularly relevant. Jameson goes on to argue that

> [s]uch enclaves are something like a foreign body within the social: in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on. (*Archaeologies* 16)

Although these enclaves momentarily transcend the limits of the social, they are not merely some unrealistic visions of happiness and bliss, but must always be generated as responses and solutions to real social problems and contradictions. Its dynamic nature distinguishes the concept of the utopian enclave from the more passive and arguably less political concepts of the idyll and the pastoral.

Grosz emphasizes the imaginary status of utopian enclaves:

> There are no utopian spaces anywhere except in the imagination. But this absence doesn't necessarily have to be restrictive. If we had a utopian space, we would already be there, and yet the phallocentric world would continue intervening within it, for it would be a space alongside of, rather than contesting, the space of the real. It is to our benefit that we cannot access this space because it means that we must continue to fight in the real, in the spaces we occupy now. We must fight for results we can't foresee and certainly can't guarantee. (*Architecture from the Outside* 20)

Utopian enclaves may, therefore, be regarded as belonging to the realm of the Imaginary, which supports the central argument of this study. Utopian space is not a clearly delineated geographical location, although it may be connected to one. This is exactly where Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia becomes relevant, because it may be used to attach an imaginary utopian space to a real place. In other words, it functions as a mediator between the levels of the Real and Imaginary, as a location where a utopian enclave may exist. By implication, the very idea of a utopian space may also be regarded as a construct which transcends the dichotomy of idealism and materialism, and, as Jameson suggests in "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," as a means of displacing "the traditional concept of base and superstructure" (51).

In "Of Other Spaces" Foucault suggests that heterotopia connotes "real places […] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). As Kevin Hetherington points out in *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (1997), the direct translation of the

word heterotopia in Latin is "place of otherness" (8). He defines heterotopia as "space of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve—social order, or control and freedom" (ix). As this quote suggests, heterotopia is closely related to the concept of utopia, and, in fact, Hetherington's definition comes very close to blurring the difference between them. What Foucault regards as the basic difference between these concepts, as far as spatiality is concerned, is that utopia is an unreal space, a site "with no real place," whereas heterotopia is a real place ("Of Other Spaces" 24).

Bearing in mind Grosz's insistence that utopian spaces are necessarily imaginary, it becomes clear that heterotopia and utopian space stand in an important reciprocal relation to each other. In this study, heterotopia is grasped as a real, geographical site which differs from the mundane places of everyday life in that it allows the utopian impulse to thrive, as the latter, simultaneously, functions as the main incentive for the production of subversive spaces. As a consequence, the relation between utopian enclaves and heterotopias becomes crystallized: heterotopias are actual sites, real locations within society, which the utopian desire reconstructs as utopian enclaves. This is a result of the dialectic of the levels of the Real and the Imaginary: a real space which differs from the surrounding society becomes invested with projections of alternative futures, which results in the production of a space located somewhere between the Real and the Imaginary. In other words, what makes a space utopian is a process of imaginary reconfiguration and reconstruction in which a mundane space becomes redefined and invested with projections of a better future, of social change. An important conclusion which can be drawn from this is the proposition that all visions of social change are necessarily utopian. This ideal is articulated by Krishan Kumar: "all social theory is utopian or has a utopian dimension" (31).

Another crucial point concerning the relation between heterotopia and utopia may be articulated in terms of language. Foucault emphasizes this in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966):

> *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias […] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (xviii; original emphases)

For the purposes of this study, this passage suggests a fundamental way in which heterotopia and utopia interact: the former juxtaposes antithetical signifiers and their cultural meanings to undermine and break existing conventional signifying processes of

language, while the latter enables this breakdown of meaning to be reread as a utopian synthesis. In other words, heterotopia shatters the conventional relations between signifiers and the concomitant oppressive political and cultural implications, and utopia reconstructs these fragments into new, subversive structures of meaning. On the level of language, these two phases may be read as distinct parts of the utopian impulse which seeks to open up ideological closures. This dimension of the dialectic of ideology and utopia is central in my reading of the politics of space in *Go Tell*.

To put the concepts of place and space in the context of the dialectic of ideology and utopia developed in this study, ideology becomes linked with place and, on the other hand, utopia with space: the concept of the bounded and specified place is analogous with the confining logic of the ideological closure, whereas space as more abstract and undifferentiated complies with the utopian impulse and desire. Consequently, my initial view is that home as an ideological closure in *Go Tell* is defined primarily in terms of place, whereas the utopian resolutions seem to fall into the category of space. As will become obvious, the home of the Grimes family is constructed as a bounded place according to the principles of exclusion and inclusion which are based on Gabriel's strict views of race and religion labelling all white people as evil and all black people who are not explicitly religious as "sinners." On the other hand, the alternatives for the future which John envisions are also conceived in terms of imaginary spaces, as ways to counter the oppressive closure of home with projections of freedom, each connected to a certain geographical location. In other words, the utopian impulse is reconceptualized as a desire to map new spaces and turn them into non-ideological places, open, fluid, and accommodating, and thereby to contest and open up the ideological closure of home as a bounded place.

3.2 "THE DARKNESS OF HIS FATHER'S HOUSE": HOME AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CLOSURE

The home of the Grimes family is the locus of antinomies in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It appears as a bounded place of fear and oppression, defined and delineated by the authoritative strategies of inclusion and exclusion based on Gabriel's narrow-minded views on race and religion. As a result, Gabriel becomes the personification of these antinomies; in other words, his character is a battleground where racial hatred and fundamentalist Christianity converge to construct a bitter and cruel man, who subjects his family to extremely strict and rigid rules, which he enforces through corporal punishment invoking fear and hate in his children. Instead of being a place of shelter and safety which could provide favourable conditions for identity construction, home is reconceptualized as a place of oppression which encompasses the ideological closure of race and religion. This section will discuss the significance of home in *Go Tell* and contrast it with the conventional role of home in the African American context. It is also important to trace the sources of the ideological closure which stem from Gabriel's childhood and youth in the South and particularly his experiences of white racism in the form of poverty and the threat of mob violence.

The effects of Gabriel's patriarchal rule are primarily focused on his adopted son, John. The special emphasis on the juxtaposition of Gabriel and John immediately invokes questions concerning the biblical connotations of their names. In the Christian tradition Gabriel is an angel, often regarded as one of the archangels, who announces the births of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-20) and Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). It is also worth noting that in some traditions he is regarded as the angel of death. The connection of John to John the Baptist is further strengthened by the fact that their mothers have the same name: Elizabeth. Read in this light, the relation of Gabriel and John in *Go Tell* is invested with special urgency: Gabriel, who, in the biblical sense, is supposed to be a messenger of God who foretells of the birth of John, systematically seeks to downplay John by regarding him as "evil," rather than as a prophet, in *Go Tell*: "His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan" (30).

In the first part of the novel, in which the narrative is focalized primarily through John, Gabriel is viewed as a one-dimensional, single-minded tyrant. The second part, "The Prayers of the Saints," gives voice to Gabriel himself by providing glimpses of his childhood, youth, and early adulthood and thereby serves to shed some light on the motives of his actions and the reasons for his bitterness and frustration. The narrative reaches from the mid-1930s back to the time of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. In this way, the marginalized African American history characterized by racism in its various guises is brought into focus and established as the fundamental background of the antinomies of the novel. It becomes evident that it is precisely his traumatic experiences of white racism and its effects which underlie and motivate Gabriel's principles and actions. The strictly bounded home of the Grimes family governed by fundamentalist Christianity and authoritarian discipline is supposed to function, in Gabriel's view, as a shelter against the hostile world governed by white racism. The ruthless imposition of this view on other members of the family, however, turns into a reversal of Gabriel's intention.

The way in which the narrative portrays the ideological closure of the Grimes family elevates the concept of home to a central position. It must be noted that the significance of home is evident in all of Baldwin's novels. This is the case in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, where it is especially conspicuous in the flashbacks to Leo's childhood. *Just above My Head* explores the problems of home by juxtaposing the relatively harmonious Montana family and the violent, incestuous relationship between Julia Miller and her father. A further instance is David's search for home in *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which entails the conception of home as "not a place but simply an irrevocable condition" (121). As Kathleen N. Drowne suggests in "'An Irrevocable Condition': Constructions of Home and the Writing of Place in *Giovanni's Room*," this exemplifies Baldwin's conception of home as not merely an external, geographical reality, but also as an internal, psychological condition, and as a component of identity (73). The concept of home as place assumes the focus of attention in my reading of *Go Tell*.

Home is traditionally regarded as a place of safety in many cultures. According to the view articulated by Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in their article "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?", "'[b]eing home' refers to the place

where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (196). It becomes evident that John's life is characterized by the modality of "not being home" rather than "being home." Home, admittedly, sets clear boundaries for him: his father strongly discourages any contact with white people or those black people whom he regards as sinners. In other words, Gabriel defines his family by means of ideological inclusion and exclusion based on race and religion. The boundaries thereby determined do not, however, invest John's life with safety and protection, but instead evoke fear and hate. In effect, they act as incentives which cause the awakening of the utopian impulse in John, that is, of the desire to open up the ideological closure of his home.

In the African American context, the concept of home carries remarkable weight and a variety of meanings. Valerie Sweeney Prince suggests in *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (2005) that the history of African Americans, and the twentieth century in particular, has been characterized by a search for home in a metaphorical sense as "the search for justice, opportunity, and liberty" (1). Considering the grim history of having been torn from their homes in Africa and brought into slavery in the Americas, the significance of the quest for home in the context of the black diaspora is hardly surprising. This has been manifested in many ways and on various levels: in the mass migrations of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North, in religious metaphors and allegories—such as the exodus from the bondage in Egypt towards the promised land—coined by civil rights leaders, in literature, the blues and other forms of art, et cetera. Home has therefore become an ambiguous metaphor of security and freedom, and, simultaneously, of their absence. As Prince puts it, "home is ubiquitous and nowhere at the same time" (2).

bell hooks emphasizes the political function of home in African American culture by defining it as a place of resistance in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990):

> Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (42)

In hooks's view, home is characterized as an enclave within the system of institutional racism, a place of safety and freedom created and maintained primarily by women, who are responsible for building "a community of resistance" against white supremacy (*Yearning* 42). This is, to a certain extent, in accordance with Prince's suggestion that "[t]he act of place making, like all other constructions of identity, is necessarily communal. It operates in terms of inclusion and exclusion, and consequently precipitates

the construction of binary oppositions like inside versus outside or 'us' versus 'them'—and these are debatable constructs" (69).

These notions bear direct relevance to the situation of the Grimes family. Gabriel's attempt to impose religious discipline and racial hatred on the other members of the family is clearly based on the logic of inclusion and exclusion and seems to aim at a sense of communality and resistance against white supremacy. The binary oppositions on which the logic of Gabriel's thinking is based—black versus white, believers versus sinners—are obviously questionable, because they presume the existence of absolute definitions and boundaries, that is, of essentialist categories, which have been fundamentally discredited during the recent decades. The most noteworthy problem which these oppositions entail is the fact that they fail to establish home as a place of safety, but instead turn it into an incarcerating, suffocating place; a locus of ideological closure. Although this may, in a sense, be read according to what Prince defines as the function of home—"[a]s both a material and psychological construct, home is given to impose structure and purpose on an otherwise meaningless space" (68)—it is obvious that this sense of structure and purpose is not shared by the other members of the family. As a result, home is constructed neither as a shelter from the oppressive policies of the racist society in the present nor as a utopian enclave entailing visions of an alternative future. Instead, John's utopian projections focus on less clearly delineated spaces, particularly the mountaintop, which becomes mapped as a utopian enclave of social ascension.

The conception of home as place also implies its significance in the process of identity construction. Kathleen M. Kirby summarizes some of the main points of spatiality and identity in *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (1996):

> *Place* seems to assume set boundaries that one fills to achieve a solid identity. Place settles space into objects, working to inscribe the Cartesian monad and the autonomous ego. It perpetuates the fixed parameters of ontological categories, making them coherent containers of essences, in relation to which one must be "inside" or "outside," "native" or "foreign," in the same way that one can, in the Euclidean universe at least, be in only one place at one time. If place is organic and stable, space is malleable, a fabric of continually shifting sites and boundaries. (19; original emphasis)

This must not be mistaken for an argument in defence of the essentialist notion of fixed subjectivity which has become highly suspicious and regarded as "a *functional* fiction," as Kirby points out (39; original emphasis). She suggests, however, that "[e]ven if it never existed as reality," "as ideal or standard it still carries much power in defining the world and grounding intentional activity" (39). Gabriel's attempt to define home and family according to the absolute categories of race and religion in *Go Tell* is an instance of the oppressive power of the fiction of essentialist categorization. Neither these categories nor the place called home, which they are supposed to define and delineate, are in reality

fixed or immutable, but this does not undermine Gabriel's power and its suppressive effects on the other members of the family.

It is evident that the image of home constructed in *Go Tell* fails to comply with the stereotypical ideal of homeplace as a safe haven. Although resistance against white racism seems to be a central concern for Gabriel, this does not result in the construction of a safe and secure place, where, as hooks summarizes this black American cultural ideal, "black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination" (*Yearning* 42). Instead, home in *Go Tell* may be read in terms of the feminist thought which, according to Gillian Rose's *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), has viewed home, especially from the late 1970s onwards, not as a locus of "the ultimate sense of place" but as a site of patriarchal oppression and exploitation (54-55). Home becomes a battleground of power and oppression which, especially for John, connotes the act of inflicting wounds and bruises, especially mental, rather than healing them. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the fact that Gabriel accuses John of being "evil." Looking at himself in the mirror, John sees himself through his stepfather's eyes:

> was there not something—in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father's words? In the eye there was a light that was not the light of Heaven, and the mouth trembled, lustful and lewd, to drink deep of the wines of Hell. […] But he saw only details: […] the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the devil's little finger. (*Go Tell* 30-31)

Considering the dominant role which the Christian faith plays in the Grimes' family, accusations such as this render John an outsider, ideologically excluded from the family to which he is supposed to belong.

The ideological closure of home in *Go Tell* may be read according to Prince's view concerning the consequences of the failure of home to provide safety and security:

> The ultimate tragedy of home as place is that when it fails to be precisely that which it is promoted to be (fixed, inherently locatable, stabilizing), it asserts itself despotically upon the lives of its inhabitants by dictating what they can and cannot do. Yet rather than being abandoned as a failed, even impossible, construct, it becomes the focus of a power struggle instigated by the politics of place to maintain the elusive/illusionary site of home. (68)

This is exactly what is happening in *Go Tell*. Gabriel's rule over the whole family does not result in experiences of safe and secure stability, that is, home becomes not a fortress against racism and poverty but, rather, a locus of these very problems. In addition, it is configured as a closed space in which any possibilities for change seem to be blocked out. In *Go Tell* home is not conceived as a site of resistance in the sense argued by hooks, which entails home being characterized by a feeling of safety in contrast to the fear of the

streets evoked by "those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate" (*Yearning* 41). Especially for John, home appears as a place of fear and insecurity which makes the dangers of the world outside a preferable option.

The only moments when the home of the Grimes family appears to fulfil, to a certain extent, its conventional role and entail some sense of security and happiness are distinctively marked by the absence of the father. This is implied early on in the novel, on the morning of John's fourteenth birthday, when Gabriel is at work. His absence creates a sense of relative freedom, a momentary release from the discipline which Gabriel imposes on the rest of the family. The moment of freedom allows Roy, John's younger stepbrother, to engage in a discussion with their mother and to articulate his discontent concerning their father's principles and actions:

> "I just don't want him beating on me all the time," he said at last. "I ain't no dog."
>
> She sighed, and turned slightly away, looking out of the window. "Your daddy beats you," she said, "because he loves you."
>
> Roy laughed. "That ain't the kind of love I understand, old lady. What you reckon he'd do if he didn't love me?" (*Go Tell* 26).

Although Elizabeth attempts to defend Gabriel, she does not, in the end, manage to sound convincing. Roy's sarcastic words explain the situation of the Grimes family further:

> "Yeah," said Roy, "we don't know how lucky we *is* to have a father what don't want you to go to movies, and don't want you to play in the streets, and don't want you to have no friends, and he don't want this and he don't want that, and he don't want you to do *nothing*. We so *lucky* to have a father who just wants us to go to church and read the Bible and beller like a fool in front of the altar and stay home all nice and quiet, like a little mouse. Boy, we sure is lucky, all right." (*Go Tell* 27; original emphases)

Despite the occasional moments of freedom, the Father's patriarchal rule markedly dominates the lives of the whole family even during his absence from the house.

The relatively supportive relationship between John and his mother, stepbrother, and stepsisters cannot compensate for the suffering inflicted by his stepfather's tyranny. The fact of John's exclusion and estrangement from his home is manifested in the text through his feelings of panic and disorientation on the morning of his birthday: "He moved to the table and sat down, feeling the most bewildering panic of his life, a need to touch things, the table and chairs and the walls of the room, to make certain that the room existed and that he was in the room" (*Go Tell* 25). Although home is a familiar place, John feels lost. In other words, the home of the Grimes family is a travesty of what home conventionally stands for: safety, dignity, and resistance against the hostile, oppressive forces of the world outside.

Gabriel's attitudes concerning race are a main component of the ideological closure of home in *Go Tell*. Based on the strategy of inclusion and exclusion, his aim is to isolate the family from white people as completely as possible, arguably to protect them from white racism. His attitude towards white people is uncompromising: he is convinced that there exists a fundamental boundary between the black world and the white world, which W. E. B. Du Bois refers to as the "color-line" in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (v), which must not and, in the end, cannot be transcended. Accordingly, he explicitly expresses his hatred of white people and attempts to pass this hatred on to his children. This becomes evident in his warnings addressed to John: "His father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a nigger" (*Go Tell* 41). The irony is, of course, that this ideological closure does not protect the members of the family, because they cannot be sealed off from the white world and its effects. Furthermore, avoidance of personal contact with white people, impossible as it is, cannot, even in theory, nullify the effects of the larger social power structure which necessarily play a significant role in shaping the lives of African American families.

The text makes it rather clear that Gabriel's uncompromising racial thinking is largely a result of his traumatic childhood experiences of white racism in the South, and later in his difficulty in providing for his socially subjugated family in Harlem. Living in the South at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gabriel's family has been subjected to poverty and constant fear of racial violence. As Joanne Turner-Sadler states in *African American History: An Introduction* (2006), this era was marked by increased violence against black people, who "suffered from many forms of oppression, racism, discrimination, and violence, particularly from southern whites" (112). Ever since the Civil War and the emancipation, legislative means had been used in order to promote segregation and to justify white supremacy. Charles W. McKinney, Jr and Rhonda Jones point out in "Jim Crowed—Emancipation Betrayed: African Americans Confront the Veil" that the southern states "codified the new state of un-freedom in a system of segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement that became known as Jim Crow (taking its name from a popular minstrel show of a previous era)" (271). Turner-Sadler also suggests that the media played a remarkable ideological role, especially in the early twentieth century, by stigmatizing African Americans "as stupid or foolish in cartoons, in movies, and on the radio. They also were portrayed as lazy, dishonest, primitive, and even savage" (114). This negative stereotyping was an important ideological factor in instigating anti-black attitudes among white people and feelings of inferiority in black people. This backlash of racism which followed the period of Reconstruction had devastating effects on the lives of African Americans. As Turner-Sadler puts it, "[l]ynchings replaced Reconstruction in the South" (113).

Go Tell depicts the racism of the era by narrating the incidents of the rape of Deborah, a black girl from the neighbourhood, whom Gabriel would eventually marry, and the killing of her father by white men. The fear invoked by this incident is portrayed powerfully in Gabriel's mother's prayer: "we come before You on our knees this evening

to ask You to watch over us and hold back the hand of the destroying angel. Lord, sprinkle the doorpost of this house with the blood of the Lamb to keep all the wicked men away" (*Go Tell* 76). In this context, "wicked men" refers precisely to violent white mobs which used to inflict violence and terror on African Americans. These traumatic childhood experiences place the history of racism in the focus of the text and provide an explanation for Gabriel's view, according to which all white people are categorically evil. This conviction constitutes a central part of the ideological closure of home.

Gabriel's response to the experience of racism is twofold. Firstly, in his youth he has led a life which he has later come to regard as irresponsible and "sinful": "he drank until hammers rang in his distant skull; he cursed his friends and his enemies, and fought until blood ran down; in the morning he found himself in mud, in clay, in strange beds, and once or twice in jail; his mouth sour, his clothes in rags, from all of him arising the stink of his corruption" (*Go Tell* 107). This escapist lifestyle may be read as a strategy of survival in the context of racism, as an attempt to blot out the reality of social inequality and oppression. There is, however, a profound contradiction between this self-destructive manner of behaviour and his religious upbringing, which has eventually led Gabriel into a deep spiritual crisis and found resolution through a religious conversion. As a consequence, religion turns out to be his ultimate method of dealing with the problem of racism.

Being a character of extremes, Gabriel transforms from being a hard drinker and womanizer into a charismatic preacher who marries Deborah, the girl raped by white men earlier in the novel and now characterized as a woman "wholly undesirable" (*Go Tell* 136). It becomes obvious that this resolution is fraught with further antinomies: firstly, Gabriel has been constantly struggling against the force of sexual temptation, and eventually he has had an affair with Esther, who has become pregnant and given birth to Royal, whom Gabriel has not acknowledged as his son. Secondly, having later moved to New York, Gabriel has become the stern, unforgiving, disillusioned part-time preacher, depicted in the first and third parts of the novel from John's point of view. Religion as a solution to the antinomy of racism seems to have failed for Gabriel, because it is evident that he has not really found what he thought God would give him: "Yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed, His well-beloved, and worthy, nearly, of the snow-white dove which had been sent down from Heaven to testify that Jesus was the son of God. He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God" (*Go Tell* 106). Eventually, however, he merely manages to continue the vicious circle of hate and fear, which he has attempted to escape through religion. This is how racism and fundamentalist Christianity have become the dominant features of the home of the Grimes family and constitute the ideological closure in *Go Tell*.

3.3 SPACES OF ESCAPE: HETEROTOPIAS AND UTOPIAN ENCLAVES

The ideological closure of home generates a utopian impulse in the text; that is, home as an ideologically closed and bounded place causes the desire for escape to awake in John.

Looking at the world around him—Harlem in the mid-1930s—John sees three different alternative options for his life, or three routes of escape. Firstly, he could simply surrender his struggle and become one of the people loitering along the avenue—drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, pimps, and so on—to free himself from his stepfather's stranglehold. John's second vision of the future might be seen as utopian in the colloquial sense of the word as an ideal, unrealistic pipe dream: he dreams of success and wealth as a famous artist or an academic. This option has been established in John's mind, because he has been encouraged by his teachers, both black and white, who have called him "a very bright boy" (*Go Tell* 22), thereby suggesting that his intelligence might provide him a chance to climb the social ladder and to escape the poverty which his family suffers from; in other words, to pursue the American Dream of individualism and material well-being. Thirdly, he could follow in his stepfather's footsteps and become a preacher, the role which the black religious community expects him to assume.

Each one of the future options which John envisions for himself is connected to a certain location, which brings the concept of heterotopia into focus. Firstly, the self-destructive corporeality of the "sinful" life of drugs and free sexuality on the avenue right outside the doors of the storefront church offers its own utopian spaces. Secondly, there is a hill in Central Park where John likes to climb to watch over New York and to dream of a glorious life in what he regards as the white world. Thirdly, the church functions as an intense enclave of spiritual release and allows the socially oppressed people some utopian gratification and compensation for their suffering through the hope of a heavenly reward in the afterlife. These mundane places are reconceptualized as heterotopias, geographical sites which allow the abstract utopian impulse to attach to the material world in order to create utopian enclaves; they are spaces invested with personal and political ideals and consisting of utopian projections which function as imaginary resolutions of real social contradictions. The following sections will analyse the construction of each of these utopian enclaves and their function and significance in the novel.

3.3.1 The Avenue: The Promise of the World of Sin

> *When one set of folks got tired of me they sent me down the line*. Yes, down the line, through poverty, hunger, wandering, cruelty, fear, and trembling, to death. And she thought of the boys who had gone to prison. Were they there still? Would John be one of these boys one day? These boys, now, who stood before drug-store windows, before pool-rooms, on every street corner, who whistled after her, whose lean bodies fairly rang, it seemed, with idleness, and malice, and frustration. How could she hope, alone, and in famine as she was, to put herself between him and this so wide and raging destruction? (*Go Tell* 207; original emphasis)

This passage of Elizabeth's thoughts suggests one of the future options available for John: a life of danger and crime on the streets. It is precisely her marriage with Gabriel Grimes which Elizabeth intends as protection for John against the world of danger. Ironically, this shelter has eventually turned into a place of oppression because of Gabriel's frustration and his consequent tyrannical rule of religious discipline over the whole family and over John, who is not Gabriel's son in the biological sense, in particular. As a result, life on the streets, which may be seen as a counterpoint to Gabriel's religious rigour, has begun to appeal to John, at least to a certain extent, because it represents a potential way out of the intolerable status quo of his home.

This future option is conceptualized in spatial terms, represented by the avenue on which the Grimes family lives. The mysterious and dangerous world of the avenue is portrayed in the text through John's eyes as follows:

> Every Sunday morning, then, since John could remember, they had taken to the streets, the Grimes family on their way to church. Sinners along the avenue watched them—men still wearing their Saturday-night clothes, wrinkled and dusty now, muddy-eyed and muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths. They talked, and laughed, and fought together, and the women fought like the men. […] These men and women they passed on Sunday mornings had spent the night in bars, or in cat houses, or on the streets, or on rooftops, or under the stairs. They had been drinking. They had gone from cursing to laughter, to anger, to lust. (*Go Tell* 12).

This world appeals to John, but, simultaneously, it terrifies him. This is evidenced by his memory of watching a drunken couple "in the basement of a condemned house. They did it standing up. The woman had wanted fifty cents, and the man had flashed a razor. John had never watched again; he had been afraid" (*Go Tell* 12-13). John is simultaneously fascinated and frightened. This is directly related to his own awakening sexuality, and, on the other hand, to his strict religious upbringing, which leads him to regard sexuality as inherently sinful.

The avenue may be read in terms of heterotopology, because the text constructs it exclusively from John's point of view. As a result, it is conceived as a space of otherness which is located outside of the ideological closure of home and contains various cultural and social implications. For instance, as Richard Ings suggests in "A Tale of Two Cities: Urban Text and Image in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*," for many African Americans "[t]he street is what distinguishes the city from the rural birthplace of the South. […] There is a sense of liberation and of anonymity, all of which feeds into the notion of the city as a place of opportunity" (46). This has been the case particularly since the Great Migration, which, as Mark Andrew Huddle maintains, started in the mid 1910s and continued all the way through to the late 1930s (450). Ings also points out that "the street is a site of transgression," which entails "the growth of a street-based culture that replaces the bonds of family with those of peer-group gangs" (47). These connotations appear alluring

to John, because his life under his stepfather's authority seems to lack any sense of liberty and opportunity.

This juxtaposition of the bounded place of home and the space of the avenue encompasses crucial points concerning the concepts of power and identity taking place in the urban space of the city. As Balshaw and Kennedy point out, "[c]ities exhibit distinctive geographies of social differences and power relations, where space functions as a modality through which urban identities are formed" (11). The category of spatial duality of inside and outside is central in the opposition between home and the avenue, as John is inside the closure of home looking out at the promise of freedom, self-determination, and empowerment represented by the avenue. John's exclusive and limited point of view conceives the avenue, in effect, as what might be termed a subjective heterotopia, a space of otherness purely in an individual, not a social sense, because in general the city streets may be regarded as mundane public spaces which are an integral part of the urban space, rather than as spaces which would, in Foucault's words, "contradict all the other sites" ("Of Other Spaces" 24).

The avenue becomes reconstructed as a utopian enclave, because in John's mind it is a space which contains one possibility of countering the status quo of his stepfather's rule, or, in other words, a response and as an imaginary solution to the ideological closure of home. This vision is twofold: firstly, it encompasses John's envy of other children, who are free to play in the streets, and, secondly, it contains the frightening but enticing idea of a world of sin, of drugs, crime, and uninhibited sexuality. In both cases, the governing mode of this utopian enclave is corporeality. This becomes evident early on in the novel, when John watches other children playing outside: "he wanted to be one of them, playing in the streets, unfrightened, moving with such grace and power, but he knew this could not be. [...] He wanted to be with these boys in the street, heedless and thoughtless, wearing out his treacherous and bewildering body" (*Go Tell* 34-35). The way in which the urban space of the avenue is produced by the corporeal activity of other children resonates with Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and the concept of a "spatial body":

> A body so conceived, as produced and as the production of space, is immediately subject to the determinants of that space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions, axes and planes, centres and peripheries, and concrete (spatio-temporal) oppositions. […] [T]he spatial body's material character derives from space, from the energy that is deployed and put to use there. […] For the spatial body, becoming social does not mean being inserted into some pre-existing "world": this body produces and reproduces. (*The Production of Space* 195, 199)

The production of corporeality and space is a reciprocal process in which the bodies are defined by space and vice versa. From John's point of view, the children's play produces the space of the avenue as a heterotopia, a place of otherness, of freedom, in contradistinction from the incarcerating ideological boundaries of his home. John is, however, excluded from the corporeal space of the avenue because of his shyness, puny

physical appearance, and lack of physical strength, and, importantly, because of his stepfather's overprotective discipline.

According to Gabriel's view, which becomes manifest primarily through John's thoughts, the avenue also represents the life of sin, of unrestrained sexuality and intoxication, that is, things which the ideology of fundamentalist Christianity represented by Gabriel condemns as forbidden and sinful. This is where the conflict between John's religious upbringing and his awakening sexuality becomes an integral issue. He is fascinated by the unexplored territory of sexuality represented by the space of the avenue and the more clearly delineated sites within it, such as rooftops, brothels, and abandoned houses, but, on the other hand, he is troubled by feelings of guilt and the fear of a punishment by God:

> He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (*Go Tell* 20)

What makes this passage particularly noteworthy is the closing phrase, which clearly functions as an intertextual allusion to the poem "Two Loves" (1894) by Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's lover, which includes the line: "I am the love that dare not speak its name" ("The Wilde Trials, 1895" 56). According to Richard Ellmann's book *Oscar Wilde* (1987), the line was an important factor in Wilde's prosecution, because it was, and continues to be, read as an expression of homosexuality (435). As Lasse Kekki suggests in "Löydetty kieli, joka uskaltaa sanoa nimensä," this line is an indication of the tendency, particularly within modernity, to bracket and exclude homosexuality, to marginalize it (32). The significance of homosexuality in *Go Tell* will be discussed further in section 3.3.3.

A considerable part of John's interest for the utopian space of the avenue is the fact that the lifestyle which it represents for him is strictly contrary to Gabriel's beliefs and, therefore, contains the potential function of resistance. As a consequence, this enclave of corporeality becomes a space of John's utopian impulse to contest the ideological closure of his home. It may therefore be argued that the avenue is a utopian projection only on the subjective level. For John, the avenue does represent a better way of being; that is, freedom from the ideological closure of his home and also from the feelings of guilt concerning his budding sexuality. On the social level, however, the avenue appears less as a utopian space than as a site of ideological compensation, because the self-destructive lifestyle of the sinners may be read as a rather docile and regressive response to the economic hardship and poverty which racism and social inequality generate. In this sense, the avenue hardly qualifies as a properly utopian space, although, as noted earlier, ideological compensation necessarily involves also utopian aspects. The point is that, viewed from a wider social perspective, it is highly debatable whether the self-

destructive lifestyle of drug abuse, poverty, and criminal activity may be regarded as a better way of being. Rather, it seems evident that it functions to defuse any revolutionary and progressive impulses which could challenge the social status quo.

In brief, the enclave of the avenue seems to be the least significant one of John's utopian projections, because it becomes obvious quite early in the novel that he is remarkably less interested in the world of sinners compared to his stepbrother Roy: "John and Roy, passing these men and women, looked at one another briefly, John embarrassed and Roy amused. Roy would be like them when he grew up, if the Lord did not change his heart" (*Go Tell* 12). It is also interesting to notice that this regressive and destructive future vision is rejected twice in the novel: firstly, Gabriel has abandoned his reckless life as a consequence of his religious conversion, and, secondly, John clearly prefers the other two of his utopian projections, that is, the option of individual success in the white world and the future as a part of the religious community. This is largely a result of the fact that the governing mode of the utopian enclave of the avenue is corporeality. John, who is constantly reminded of his alleged ugliness and small physical size, is aware that his potential strengths lie elsewhere and that surviving in that dangerous world would be very difficult for him. Consequently, the avenue as an actual utopian enclave does not assume a particularly central role in the novel. It may, therefore, be argued that the other two utopian projections eliminate the option of the self-destructive and poverty-stricken life on the avenue.

3.3.2 The Mountaintop: The Promise of the White World

> *Broadway:* the way that led to death *was* broad, and many could be found thereon; but narrow was the way that led to life eternal, and few there were who found it. But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked; where houses did not rise, piercing, as it seemed, the unchanging clouds, but huddled, flat, ignoble, close to the filthy ground, where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark, and where the unconquerable odour was of dust, and sweat, and urine, and home-made gin. In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation for ever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil. (*Go Tell* 39; original emphases)

This passage sets the stage for the construction of the second utopian enclave in *Go Tell*. It articulates John's resistance against the black Christian tradition represented by his stepfather, which resonates loud and clear in the first part of the novel. John dreads the idea of spending a lifetime in poverty, of living a life like his stepfather's. As an alternative, the dream of success as "a poet, or a college president, or a movie star" (*Go Tell* 21) and the concomitant idea of crossing the racial boundary between the black and the white worlds seem notably preferable to him. In this section, I will discuss this utopian projection in terms of space, as a process in which a mundane everyday place is

understood as a heterotopia which allows the utopian impulse to construct a utopian enclave, a space of hope for a better future.

What makes this dream seem somewhat realistic to John, is the fact that he is intelligent and has been encouraged by his white teachers: "For John excelled in school […]. It was not only coloured people who praised John, since they could not, John felt, in any case really know; but white people also said it, in fact had said it first and said it still" (*Go Tell* 21-22). This encouragement gives John a sense of power to counter the powerlessness he experiences in the context of his family. The scene, discussed in the previous section, in which John watches other boys playing in the street and longs to be one of them, solidifies intellect as his most important asset: "but he knew this could not be. Yet, if he could not play their games, he could do something they could not do; he was able, as one of his teachers said, to think" (*Go Tell* 34). It is also clear that intellect becomes the central characteristic of this utopian resolution, because it promises a better future, a way out of the life of poverty and the vicious circle of hate and fear. It functions as a protest against the constrictive power and racial attitudes of his stepfather and, simultaneously, against the history of racial oppression.

John's situation as an outsider, excluded from the peer-groups of other children, encompasses various binary oppositions, such as intellect versus corporeality, and individuality versus community. The following quote from the novel further intensifies these dichotomies:

> [I]t was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of His People. John was not much interested in His people and still less in leading them anywhere, but the phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a great brass gate, opening outward for him on a world where people did not live in the darkness of his father's house, did not pray in the darkness of his father's church, where he would eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished. In this world John, who was, his father said, ugly, who was always the smallest boy in his class, and who had no friends, became immediately beautiful, tall, and popular. People fell all over themselves to meet John Grimes. (*Go Tell* 21)

The image of a brass gate is a strong metaphor which connotes the opening up of the closed space of John's life in his stepfather's house, and by extension, providing a way out of the poverty of the black community. John's desire to leave behind the black community, in which he is an outsider, seems to be driven by individualism. He is interested in his personal success, that is, the elevation of his social status and his escape from the life of poverty and subordination, not in the fate of black people in general. This estrangement from the black community and tradition seems to result from the fact that, because of Gabriel's exclusionary discipline, the religious community is the only form of black communality John knows. Considering his stepfather's role in the congregation, John's reluctance to invest his future in this community is hardly surprising:

> though he had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing, […] John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father. On this refusal had his life depended. (*Go Tell* 23)

The primary scene of John's dreams of success is a hill in Central Park, where he goes to watch the city. It is basically a mundane place open to anyone, but it may, however, be read according to one of Foucault's definitions of heterotopia as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" ("Of Other Spaces" 25). The hill in Central Park combines various dichotomies: the rural and the urban, nature and culture, tradition and modernity. It is an enclave, a place of otherness, within the fabric of the city:

> At a point that he knew by instinct and by the shape of the buildings surrounding the park, he struck out on a steep path overgrown with trees, and climbed a short distance until he reached the clearing that led to the hill. Before him, then, the slope stretched upward, and above it the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy, and far away, he saw the skyline of New York. He did not know why, but there arose in him an exultation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him. (*Go Tell* 37)

The image of the glowing city unmistakably alludes to the proto-American myth of the shining city on the hill as envisioned the Puritans who immigrated to America in the seventeenth century. This is articulated by John Winthrop in *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), in which he presents his vision of the community to be established in New England: "men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us" (233). The glowing city which John sees before him is an intertextual reference to the utopian impulse of the Puritans to establish an ideal community and, simultaneously, to the African American struggle towards social equality. This invests the mundane space of the hill with a larger social and political significance.

John's entering the space of the hill activates the dialectical process of the production of space which, simultaneously, shapes and defines John's identity. The mundane space of the hill in the park functions as a platform for a utopian projection of an alternative future. What makes it a heterotopia is, firstly, the solitude which it offers as a counterpoint to the throng of the city streets and the confined apartment of the Grimes family. Secondly, it provides a vantage point, a view onto the predominantly white areas of New York and to Harlem where John lives. As a result, the hill becomes a liminal space between the black and the white world, between the secular temptations of the city and the religious security and burden of the black community. It is a space of otherness which provides suitable conditions for the utopian desire to function.

Looking at the city from the heterotopic vantage point, John is filled with a momentary, ecstatic sense of power, which functions as a form of utopian gratification and compensation for his real lack of power:

> Then he, John, felt like a giant who might crumble this city with his anger; he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet multitudes cried, Hosanna! He would be, of all, the mightiest, the most beloved, the Lord's anointed; and he would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away. (*Go Tell* 38)

This is not, however, merely a scene of passing bliss, an instance of some false consciousness or ideological compensation; rather, it may be regarded as a manifestation of the utopian impulse in the text. Instead of being a passifying impulse, this vision strengthens and solidifies John's belief in his own ability to raise himself from the oppressed social position of his family. The proto-American ideals of self-reliance[16] and social ascension are an important part of John's utopian vision, because he longs to escape the poverty of his family and the black community he knows and replace it with a life of material wealth: "here he might eat and drink to his heart's content and clothe his body with wondrous fabrics, rich to the eye and pleasing to the touch" (*Go Tell* 39).

What must not be neglected is that despite John's apparent disinterest in being a leader of his people, the biblical rhetoric and connotations of this passage seem to indicate otherwise. The text may actually be regarded as Signifyin(g)—to use the term coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which may be interpreted as "repetition with a signal difference" (*The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* [1988] xxiv)—on the biblical story of Moses leading his people from their slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. First of all, the passage above suggests that in the case of African Americans the Promised Land has not yet been reached. What this entails is the white utopian view of America as the Promised Land, which obviously differs drastically from the point of view of black Americans whose experience of America has been characterized by slavery and other forms of social inequality. Secondly, John, the conqueror, intends to live in that utopian land instead of merely being able to see it from distance like Moses. In spite of the apparent emphasis on individuality, John's dream of success in the white world is invested with profoundly political implications, because it contains the notion of transcending the racial boundary, of the success of a black boy in the white world.

The heterotopia of the hill in Central Park becomes reconfigured and transformed into a utopian enclave, a space of hope in which the social contradictions underlying the

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[16] This concept was coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841). As Jopi Nyman points out in *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (1997), "Emerson's self-reliant individual, who trusts in his own abilities and does not listen to others, is the ultimate example of belief in the individual self and his ability to growth" (172). John's ambitious future plan of a prosperous life in the white world clearly reflects this Emersonian ideal and the way in which the ideology of white individualism functions as a part of the black political unconscious.

text find an imaginary resolution. As I have argued, this space is an example of what Jameson denotes as "an imaginary enclave within real social space, [...] a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (*Archaeologies* 15-16). It is also consonant with Jameson's fundamental precondition, according to which the solution offered by a utopian space "must respond to specific dilemmas and offer to solve fundamental social problems" (*Archaeologies* 11). The solution which John imagines evidently seeks to open up the intolerable ideological closure of home on the level of the text and, on the larger social level, to provide an imaginary resolution of the dilemma of racism and other social problems which stem from it.

What prevents this utopian space, constructed on the top of the hill, from becoming a politically passive idyll or pastoral is the fact that the social contradictions which have generated the need to envision an alternative future are inevitably present in John's mind:

> And still, on the summit of the hill he paused. He remembered the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him. And he thought of their feet so swift and brutal, and the dark grey clothes they wore, and how when they passed they did not see him, or, if they saw him, they smirked. And how their lights, unceasing, crashed on and off above him, and how he was a stranger there. Then he remembered his father and his mother, and all the arms stretched out to hold him back, to save him from this city where, they said, his soul would find perdition. (*Go Tell* 38)

John's mind becomes a battleground of conflicting impulses of the material wealth promised by his potential success in the white world and the questioning and restraining voices of the black Christian community and tradition. Firstly, John is painfully aware of the issue of race and of the fact that the white city would probably not readily embrace him and welcome him. Secondly, he feels the simultaneous support and burden of the black religious community, which functions as a strong resisting force. It may therefore be argued that the fundamental antinomy, to which this utopian enclave provides an imaginary solution, is inherently included as a part of that utopian projection itself.

The obstacles which John acknowledges make him hesitate. He knows that it would probably be wise to simply abandon his dream of success and to settle for the life he is used to. A major source of confusion is his conflicting stance towards religion, which haunts the utopian daydream in which he has a big house, a wife and children: "but what church did they go to and what would he teach his children when they gathered around him in the evening?" (*Go Tell* 40-41). It is evidently the conflict between John and his stepfather which ultimately complicates John's attitude towards the Christian faith. Gabriel also stands as the ultimate personification of what John imagines as his future, if he decides to live his life in Harlem and follow in his stepfather's footsteps. The life of poverty and humiliation entailed by the socially subjugated position of African Americans is exactly what John seeks to escape, and, consequently, he is torn and undecided between these future visions.

Having stood for a while on the hill, which may, in accordance with the biblical allegory of watching the Promised Land from afar and with the title of the novel, be renamed as a mountaintop, John seems to make the decision: "He stood for a moment on the melting snow, distracted, and then began to run down the hill, feeling himself fly as the descent became more rapid, and thinking: 'I can climb back up. If it's wrong, I can always climb back up.'" (*Go Tell* 39). It is very interesting to notice that the white world seems to give John a sign of welcome and approval in the guise of an elderly white man:

> At the bottom of the hill, where the ground abruptly levelled off on to a gravel path, he nearly knocked down an old white man with a white beard, who was walking very slowly and leaning on his cane. They both stopped, astonished, and looked at one another. John struggled to catch his breath and apologize, but the old man smiled. John smiled back. It was as though he and the old man had between them a great secret; and the old man moved on. (*Go Tell* 40)

This incident carries remarkable allegorical weight, considering the cultural implications of the participants and the place in which this encounter occurs. Firstly, as Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar point out, Central Park has been a popular gathering place and cruising ground for gay men since the late nineteenth century (405, 479). This encounter may, therefore, be read as containing an implication of shared transgressive desire. Secondly, this scene involves an African American boy and a white man: in other words, representatives of both the oppressed and the oppressor. As a consequence, this incident becomes invested with huge political significance: it suggests the act of reaching across the boundaries of race and sexuality, and also across generations, and may therefore be read as a glimpse of postcategorical utopia. As a result, this fleeting moment becomes a central point in the novel and further emphasizes the role of the hill in Central Park as a utopian enclave.

In spite of this encouraging encounter, John, having left behind the heterotopia of the mountaintop and the utopian enclave constructed there, does not feel comfortable walking down the Fifth Avenue. This is largely due to his remembering his stepfather's words concerning the social position of African Americans: "This world was not for him. If he refused to believe, and wanted to break his neck trying, then he could try until the sun refused to shine; they would never let him enter. In John's mind then, the people and the avenue underwent the change, and he feared them and knew that one day he could hate them if God did not change his heart" (*Go Tell* 42). Seen through the ideological gaze of his stepfather, the exciting and enticing city becomes hostile and closed. As he sits in a movie theatre, the dichotomy of the white secular world and the black religious community becomes overwhelming:

> John thought of Hell, of his soul's redemption, and struggled to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit. But there was none, for he had been raised in the truth. […] Either he arose from this theatre, never to return, putting behind him the world and its

> pleasures, its honours, and its glories, or he remained here with the wicked and partook of their certain punishment. Yes, it was a narrow way—and John stirred in his seat, not daring to feel it God's injustice that he must make so cruel a choice. (*Go Tell* 46)

Eventually, John has no choice but to leave the movie theatre and the white city and return home. This seems, however, to be precisely a practical and, at least in John's mind, temporary necessity, which does not imply a decision to forsake the utopian projection of personal success in the white world envisioned on the mountaintop.

3.3.3 The Church: The Promise of the Black Community

The storefront church which John's family attends regularly is reconstructed as the third location for the flourishing of utopian desire in the novel. It represents a possible direction for John's life as a full member of the African American Christian community and, perhaps, as a preacher, like his stepfather. This is exactly what is expected of him within the community: "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself" (*Go Tell* 11). As has become obvious, the problem is that this future option is associated with precisely the life of social and economic hardship which John seeks to escape. And, even more importantly, he detests the idea of replicating the life of his stepfather, which also enhances the ambivalence of his stance towards Christianity:

> The darkness of his sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God's power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life. (*Go Tell* 21).

The text underlines John's desire to leave behind the black community in favour of a path of ostensibly individualistic success beyond the confines of racial categories. Michael F. Lynch makes a parallel point in "A Glimpse of the Hidden God: Dialectical Vision in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*": "John's theology, based on the church's image of the terrible God, suffers from the redoubling force of Gabriel's severity and judgment" (46), and goes on to argue that John resists salvation and the call of the black religious community primarily because "bowing to God would entail capitulation to Gabriel" (47).

The final part of the novel, "The Threshing-Floor," seems, however, to terminate John's ambitious future plans by placing the enormous power of the black Christian community in focus. As a consequence, spirituality emerges as the integral mode of what appears to be the final resolution of the antinomies in the novel: John's religious conversion in the ecstatic service at the storefront church. This scene begins as part one of the book draws to a close, and it functions as a background to the second part "The

Prayers of the Saints," in which Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth each in their turn cry out to God, as the narrative recounts the earlier events of their lives, alternating between the present and the flashbacks. In part three the narrative focuses again on John and depicts his religious conversion in the storefront church, surrounded by the members of the black Christian community. In this section, I will read this scene by using the spatial concepts of heterotopia and utopian enclave in order to explicate the ambiguity of the ending of the novel and the resolution which it seems to suggest pertaining to the ideological closure of home. My main argument is that the narrative reconfigures the heterotopic sacred space of the church, where the spirituality of the black religious community and the implications of transgressive homosexual desire manifested in John's attraction to Elisha converge, thereby constructing a utopian enclave.

The text posits the storefront church as a heterotopia, a place of otherness, in accordance with Foucault's fifth principle of the concept:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. ("Of Other Spaces" 26)

The service at the church complies with this definition: the full membership of the Christian community is acquired through a religious conversion, through what may be regarded as what Foucault refers to as "rites and purifications." The allegorical space of the threshing floor is central, because it is there that the metaphorical separation of the grain from the straw and the chaff, that is, the separation of believers from sinners, occurs. As Dolan Hubbard points out in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (1994), this analogy appears in the Bible, for example in Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17 (113). The church is also very much a place where, to quote Foucault, "the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Firstly, the community tends to replicate certain power hierarchies of society, which is manifested particularly by the prevalent patriarchy of the congregation and of the Christian dogma which it adheres to. As Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart maintain in *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (2007), "[t]he backbone and majority membership of the Black Church has always been women, but their roles have always been heavily circumscribed. This is especially true vis à vis the role of minister and higher leadership positions within the various denominations" (127).

Secondly, the church complies with Foucault's definition of heterotopia because black Christianity has played an important role in contesting white racism and, thereby, the values and practices of American society. According to Anderson and Stewart,

> African American religion and churches were founded on the principles of protest and liberation. Early Black ministers were at the forefront of abolitionist movements and contributed to the oratorical denouncement of slavery. Black ministers and church leaders conceived and led the major slave revolts. […] Many of the prominent leaders of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s were ministers, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Jesse Jackson. These and other ministers were supported by thousands of their church members and followers. (124-25)

In spite of the significance of this progressive political impetus, the ambivalence of black Christianity must not be ignored, either: it has functioned actively as a means of protest, but also as a stagnating force, as ideological compensation, which has tended to contain and sublimate revolutionary impulses. This contradiction has been articulated particularly within Marxism which has traditionally considered religion as ideological in the negative sense of the word: as a partial and limited view of the world and reality, which represses the real social contradictions. Religion has evidently functioned as an instrument of hegemonic power against African Americans: the ideology of Christianity, which promises to reward all earthly suffering in the afterlife, has helped to keep the oppressed black people at bay, and thus allowed the dominant white power structure to confirm its position instead of causing it to waver. This claim is supported by Hubbard: "[h]aving had their physical freedom negated, black people developed a view of history that emphasized liberation. Hence, the black sermon in its emphasis on liberation and true Christianity is offered as a corrective to an inadequate history in which black people need not exist, except as beasts of burden" (4). An imaginary view of history of this kind may be regarded as an example of the repression of History.

It must also be noted, however, that the position of religion as ideological compensation is in itself an ambivalent issue, because, in addition to its politically subversive function, religion has also played a positive role as a means of survival in helping people to endure the harsh effects of racial oppression on the level of daily life. As a result, any straightforward reading of African American religion is clearly inadequate. It must, therefore, be regarded as a contradictory, partly progressive and partly regressive force. Based on these points, the storefront church is configured as a very complex ideological space: both progressive and regressive, both utopian and ideological, both contesting and replicating the prevailing power hierarchies of society. As a heterotopia, however, it provides the necessary space for the construction of the third utopian enclave in the novel.

The utopian projection which this enclave contains has various levels. Firstly, in a collective sense, it encompasses the idea of absolution and life eternal with the promise of compensation for earthly injustice and suffering. Secondly, the ecstatic nature of the event provides a momentary release from the hardship of daily life in the context of racism and poverty. Thirdly, on the personal level, the church as a utopian space contains a chance for John to free himself from his stepfather's power by beating him at his own game, that is, by becoming a more successful preacher than he. These levels are

inextricably intertwined in the text, thereby constructing a multidimensional utopian projection as a response to various sedimented layers of oppression: familial, racial, and economic.

The utopian space of the church is largely focused on the threshing floor, on which John's conversion takes place. This scene has been read in a variety of ways producing several different and often conflicting interpretations. Earlier critics, in particular, have tended to view it as a resolution of the conflicts in the novel and as John's entrance into maturity and a stable identity, whereas some more recent accounts have emphasized the ambivalence of this ostensible resolution. Shirley S. Allen seems to support the former stance in "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" by stating that "[a]fter seeing the light, John stands up as an adult. He is no longer dependent on his mother, […] [a]nd he is able to stand up to Gabriel […]. In becoming a man he has rejected not only childish dependency on his mother and fear of his father, but also racial bondage" (186). An example of a parallel view can be found in Donald B. Gibson's article "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space," in which he argues that John's salvation entails a profound resolution: "All the fears, anxieties, tensions of John's life up to that point are washed away. His father is finally seen by John in 'proper' perspective. He has, that is, changed his relation to Gabriel and will no longer be dominated by him. He has divested Gabriel of authority by transference of his allegiance from his earthly to his Heavenly Father" (6).

These accounts strike me as somewhat speculative, because they seem to be founded on rather far-fetched assumptions. The complexity and ambiguity of the final pages of *Go Tell* defy any simple readings and call in into question Allen's and Gibson's claim that John's conversion would inevitably undermine Gabriel's power over him. Such conclusions appear unfounded, unless we resort to biographical details of Baldwin's life as indicative of the resolution of *Go Tell*. While Baldwin's biographical essays and the story of his life, when read parallel with the *Go Tell*, provide interesting insight into the world of the novel, it does not seem particularly convincing to use them to speculate what happens to John after the narrative draws to a close.

On the other hand, Vivian M. May, in "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," prefers to stress the ways in which the novel "provides readers with conflicting and fluctuating understandings of textual meaning," and that "[a]s readers we come away from the novel with a sense of ambivalence and irresolution, for the novel's discord is never harmonized" (97). She also suggests that this narrative ambivalence entails the emphasis on the fluidity and mutability of identities as opposed to essentialist conceptions of fixed subjectivity (97). This ambivalence and ambiguity is what I tend to regard as the primary outcome of what John experiences on the threshing floor. Although this incident may appear to fix John's identity and the course of his life as a member of the Temple of the Fire Baptized and possibly as a preacher, as has always been expected of him, a close reading of the final part of the novel reveals various indications of ambiguity and unresolved antinomies.

The church, located at an abandoned store, is the space which hosts these antinomies. Firstly, this place of worship is depicted in the text as dark and dirty: "In the air of the church hung, perpetually, the odour of dust and sweat; for, like the carpet in his mother's living-room, the dust of this church was invincible; and when the saints were praying or rejoicing, their bodies gave off an acrid, steamy smell, a marriage of odours of dripping bodies and soaking, starched white linen" (*Go Tell* 57-58). It is John's duty to clean up the church before the services, but this seems to be a hopeless task, because the dust and dirt persist. Secondly, although the church as a place of worship is linked with spirituality in a way which largely seeks to blot out corporeality and sexuality, the church is, however, depicted in distinctively corporeal terms as containing the odour of sweat and through imagery such as "dripping bodies."

Perhaps the most remarkable of these antinomies is conveyed through the presence of the sexual implications which characterize John's struggle and eventual salvation of the threshing floor. At this point, Elisha, whose masculinity John admires, assumes the focus of attention. Earlier in the novel, the text depicts Elisha playing piano and singing in a Sunday morning service:

> At one moment, head thrown back, eyes closed, sweat standing on his brow, he sat at the piano, singing and playing; and then, like a great black cat in trouble in the jungle, he stiffened and trembled, and cried out. *Jesus, Jesus, oh Lord Jesus!* He struck on the piano one last, wild note, and threw up his hands, palms upward, stretched wide apart. The tambourines raced to fill the vacuum left by his silent piano, and his cry drew answering cries. Then he was on his feet, turning, blind, his face congested, contorted with this rage, and the muscles leaping and swelling in his long, dark neck. It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain this passion, that he would be, before their eyes, dispersed into the waiting air. (*Go Tell* 17; original emphasis)

Elisha's masculinity is seen through John's eyes unmistakably in terms of corporeality and homosexual desire. These implications are further emphasized as Elisha plunges into a frenzied dance:

> His hands, rigid to the very fingertips, moved outward and back against his hips, his sightless eyes looked upward, and he began to dance. Then his hands closed into fists, and his head snapped downward, his sweat loosening the grease that slicked down his hair; and the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit, his heels beat on the floor, and his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum. And so, for a while, in the centre of the dancers, head down, fists beating, on, on, unbearably, until it seemed the walls of the church would fall for very sound; and then, in a moment, with a cry, head up, arms high is the air, sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop. Sometimes he did not stop until he fell—until he dropped like some

> animal felled by a hammer—moaning, on his face. And then a great moaning filled the church. (*Go Tell* 17)

The sexual allusions are evident, particularly in phrases such as "he stiffened and trembled, and cried out" and "the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit."

This sexualization of Elisha's body occurs in the same sacred space, the threshing floor, in which John is later converted. The church is also where John and Elisha engage in a wrestling match: "And so they turned, battling in the narrow room, and the odour of Elisha's sweat was heavy in John's nostrils. He saw the veins rise on Elisha's forehead and in his neck; his breath became jagged and harsh, and the grimace on his face became more cruel; and John, watching these manifestations of his power, was filled with a wild delight" (*Go Tell* 61). As May points out, in *Go Tell* "(homo)sexuality and the church are inextricably intertwined. The church indirectly allows John access to homosexual desire at the same time that (homo)sexuality is proscribed" (120). Stanley Macebuh has also noted in *James Baldwin: A Critical Study* (1973) the rebellious nature of the presence of homosexual implications within the sacred space of the church:

> homosexual love—especially when it seeks to express itself in the Temple of God—is the highest form of rebellious heresy [Baldwin] can conceive of. The body, the Bible tells us, is a temple consecrated to God, and since homosexuality is in this novel expressed for the most part in terms of physical attraction, John apparently sins by trying to substitute Elisha for God. (66)

The intertwining of the discourses of homosexuality and Christianity alludes to the definition of heterotopia suggested by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, that is, as an instance of the breakdown of the conventional signifying processes of language and the production of meaning (see xviii). As the traditionally incompatible discourses of spiritual salvation and sexual transgression and their signifiers converge, the threshing floor of the storefront church is reconfigured from a conventional place of worship into a heterotopia which provides the possibility for the utopian enclave to emerge. In other words, the homosexual implications between John and Elisha inform the reading of the former's conversion. Elisha is present during the entirety of John's struggle, guiding him and praying for him. The space of the threshing floor, "the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned" (*Go Tell* 223), becomes the scene of what may be regarded as the third utopian enclave of the novel, as a space of forbidden, enticing desire, which contains the utopian impulse of subverting the ideological limitations of the Christian community. In John's mind, Elisha is explicitly defined as an object of desire:

> In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and, with that authority, to confound his father. […] As he cursed his father, as he loved Elisha, he had, even then, been

> weeping; he had already passed his moment, was already under the power, had been struck, and was going down. (*Go Tell* 225)

This is not merely a symptom of John's longing to earn respect from his stepfather or of his oedipal urge to defeat him. Rather, this may be read as an indication of John's homosexual desire for Elisha, as a symptom of his emerging sexual identity. The significance of Elisha's role can also be read, albeit between the lines, in a remark made by the saints: "Look like the Lord was using Elisha to say: 'It's time, boy, come on home'" (*Go Tell* 241). The last page of the novel further underscores the nature of John's transformation: "And [Elisha] kissed John on the forehead, a holy kiss. […] The sun had come full awake. It was waking the streets, and the houses, and crying at the windows. It fell over Elisha like a golden robe, and struck John's forehead, where Elisha had kissed him, like a seal ineffaceable for ever" (*Go Tell* 256). Read in the light of John's obvious attraction to Elisha, these passages point towards the transformation of the heterotopia of the storefront church, in which visions of spiritual salvation are intertwined with corporeality and sexual transgression, into a utopian enclave which opens up the horizon of transcendence, of the possibility of nullifying the constrictive power of the ideological social categories.

My reading of John's experience of conversion is largely opposite to that put forward by Jermaine Singleton in "Sacred and Silent (Man)ufacturing: Melancholy, Race and the Gendered Politics of Testifying in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," in which he argues that John's salvation marks his "passage into the realm of hegemonic masculinity" (117) and a "departure from the realm of deviant masculinities" (117-18). From my point of view, John's struggle on the threshing floor constructs a utopian space, in which spirituality and corporeality coexist, and, importantly, John's nonnormative masculinity and transgressive sexual desire are retained in focus because of Elisha's constant presence. William J. Spurlin's argument in "*Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Cold War Tropes of National Belonging: Homoerotic Desire and the Redeployment of Betrayal under Black Nationalism" seems to run parallel with mine:

> [John's] identification with Elisha, a different kind of identification with masculinity and the male body, occurs *in* the church, in the place of bodily prohibitions; in fact, one could easily argue that the church eroticizes desire, so the John's "conversion" at the end of the novel is both spiritual *and* (homo)erotic insofar as his desire refuses to be domesticated or tamed or "cured." (37; original emphases)

In other words, John's salvation does not necessarily indicate an entry into and compliance with the realm of hegemonic masculinities; instead, it may be read as an act of resistance.

The text implies the political significance of John's struggle on the threshing floor: "in his turning the centre of the whole earth shifted, making of space a sheer void and a mockery of order, and balance, and time. Nothing remained: all was swallowed up in

chaos" (*Go Tell* 224). John's experience of conversion may therefore be read as a subversive act which suggests the eradication of the existing order. When John finally wakes up on the floor, he appears to have changed: "he scarcely knew how he moved, for his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air" (*Go Tell* 238). The world outside the church also seems different:

> And the avenue, like any landscape that has endured a storm, lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean, and new. Not again, for ever, could it return to the avenue it once had been. Fire, or lightning, or the latter rain, coming down from these skies which moved with such pale secrecy above him now, had laid yesterday's avenue to waste, had changed it in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, as all would be changed on the last day, when the skies would open up once more to gather up the saints. (*Go Tell* 250)

The urban space of the avenue has been transformed on the level of the Imaginary as a result of John's conversion, but as a physical, tangible space on the level of the Real and as an ideological space on the level of the Symbolic, it remains the same:

> Yet the houses were there, as they had been […]. When John would walk these streets again, they would be shouting here again […]. Boys would be throwing ball in these streets again—they would look at him, and call:
>
> "Hey, Frog-eyes!"
>
> Men would be standing on corners again, watching him pass, girls would be sitting on stoops again, mocking his walk. Grandmothers would stare out of windows, saying:
>
> "That sure is a sorry little boy." (*Go Tell* 250-51)

The avenue as a material and ideological space still appears as hostile and excludes John. He has descended into the void and returned to the world which has essentially remained the same, but John himself has changed. The religious salvation has become a major constituent of his identity by providing him a frame of reference for self-definition, that is, a place in the community. Although the black religious community recognizes John's salvation and considers him a full member, the rest of the world remains unchanged. It is therefore obvious that the change has occurred primarily on the level of the Imaginary, in John's mind.

It is crucial to notice that there is no indication in the text that the ideological closure of home would change either. After he gets up from the threshing floor, John attempts to connect with his stepfather, who "did not move to touch him, did not kiss him, did not smile. They stood before each other in silence, while the saints rejoiced; and John struggled to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. But it did not come, the living word" (*Go Tell* 239-40). In my view, this renders any readings of John's conversion as a resolution of the

antinomies of the novel as highly dubious. Rather, the conclusion of the novel creates a sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction:

> And he felt his father behind him. And he felt the March wind rise, striking through his damp clothes, against his salty body. He turned to face his father—he found himself smiling, but his father did not smile.
>
> They looked at each other a moment. His mother stood in the doorway, in the long shadows of the hall.
>
> "I'm ready," John said, "I'm coming. I'm on my way." (*Go Tell* 256)

John's conversion cannot transform the world around him; rather, it merely offers a glimpse of a possibility of transcending oppressive ideological categorizations. John is only allowed a fleeting vision of this transcendence, a passing reflection of the possibility of opening up the oppressive ideological closure of racial hatred and religious bigotry epitomized by Gabriel's patriarchal power. In spatial terms, the effects of the utopian impulse to map new spaces and transform them into places of openness and fluidity remain ambiguous, because the utopian enclave of the storefront church, which assumes the central position towards the end of the novel, is a contradictory place where the struggle between the opposing forces of ideological closure and utopian opening persists. In spite of this ambiguity, it must, however, be emphasized that by inserting transgressive homosexual desire in the sacred space of the church the utopian impulse does produce a new subversive space, invested with remarkable political urgency.

* * *

Within the scope of the first horizon of Jameson's hermeneutical framework, the fact that homosexual desire is largely repressed and becomes manifest primarily by implication may be read as an indication of the political unconscious of the novel. It allows John's conversion, which appears to signify the end of his ambitious plans of transcending the category of race, envisioned on the mountaintop, to be reread as political and subversive, or, in distinctively Jamesonian terms, as a socially symbolic act in its own right. By fusing the spirituality of black Christianity and homosexual desire, the text simultaneously affirms the strength of the black community as a shelter against external forces of racial subjugation and, on the other hand, reacts against its internal forms of oppressive ideological power which operates in terms of patriarchy and heteronormativity. This is in accordance with both Foucault's definition of heterotopia as a discursive breakdown (*The Order of Things* xviii) and Jameson's definition of a utopian enclave as "a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (*Archaeologies* 16). Despite the ambiguity and the sense of transience which it entails, the wish image which appears in *Go Tell* as a result of the fusion of homosexual desire and religious spirituality carries huge political significance as a glimpse of the persistent thematic, utopian tendency which can be detected in most of Baldwin's work, that is, the vision of

postcategorical utopia, a possibility of a world free from the oppressive effects of social categorization.

4 Black Christ(opher) and the Triangle of Postcategorical Love in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone

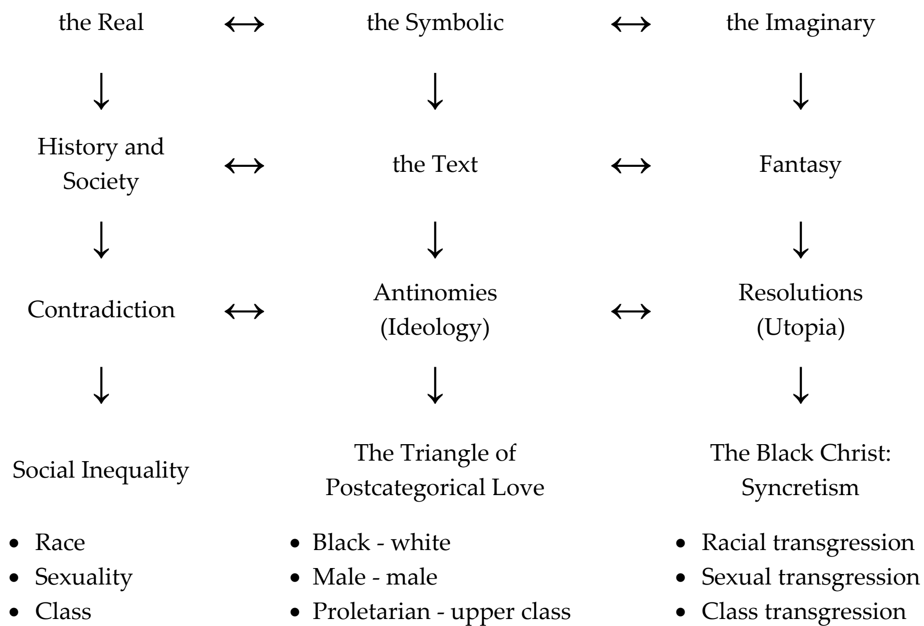
This chapter focuses on the ways in which Baldwin's impulse towards postcategorical utopia becomes manifest in his fourth novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968). The reading will place the novel within the scope of the second horizon of Fredric Jameson's neo-Marxist theoretical framework introduced in *The Political Unconscious*. According to Jameson, the second horizon of interpretation is characterized by a shift of focus and an expansion of the social ground of the novel which will now be read "in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes" (*PU* 75). What this means is that *Tell Me* will be read as a symbolic move in the antagonistic discourse between the hegemonic dominant group and the oppressed group; that is, it will be regarded, in Saussurean terms as a parole in the langue, as a single utterance in the system of discourse in terms of race: white versus black, and of sexuality: normative heterosexuality versus transgressive homosexuality.

What the novel conveys in this antagonistic dialogue is what I conceptualize as the ideologeme of *postcategorical love*, that is, love in the Baldwinian sense as free from the conventional limitations and taboos perpetuated by the dominant white, heterosexual patriarchy, free from the oppressive effects of social categorization in terms of race, sexuality, gender, and class. This ideal stands in drastic contradistinction to the naïve, romanticized Hollywood ideal of love as living together happily ever after and especially the heteronormativity and racism which it contains. Baldwin discusses his subversive and redemptive philosophy of love in his essays, especially in "Down at the Cross: A Letter from a Region in My Mind," "My Dungeon Shook," and "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," and it also becomes visible in his novels, particularly in *Another Country*, *Tell Me* and *Just above My Head*. As I will show in this chapter, *Tell Me* and the ideologeme which it transmits constitute an important part of the larger thematic, teleological current which penetrates the entirety of Baldwin's work: the idea of postcategorical utopia. This is negotiated in terms of the issues of interracial and homosexual love in *Tell Me*.

According to my reading, the ideological closure of the novel is formed by the triangle of problematic relationships between Leo, Barbara, and Christopher. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (see *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [1985], 21-27) and René Girard (see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* [1988], 2-3), this cluster of relationships may be seen to constitute an *erotic triangle*, in which all three participants are sexually involved with each other. The social scope of this ideological closure is significantly larger than that of the dysfunctional black family in *Go Tell*, because it includes transgressive relationships which reach across the conventional boundaries of race, sexuality, and class. This expansion of the social ground of the ideological closure signifies and complies with the shift from the first horizon of the political unconscious to the second. The triangle is a symbolic manifestation of certain social contradictions of the socio-historical context of the novel: that is, it is a result of transcoding the issues of racial and sexual oppression in the United States in the 1960s onto the level of the text. This is an instance of what Jameson refers to as "a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic" (*PU* 77).

The erotic triangle may be regarded as an attempt to transcend the socially determined boundaries of race, sexuality, and class in a hostile social context which condemns both interracial and homosexual relationships. The dialectic of ideology and utopia in *Tell Me* may be represented graphically by the following figure:

Fig. 3. The dialectic of ideology and utopia in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*



What lends this triangle an especially remarkable allegorical significance is the fact that all the relationships of which it consists transgress and seek to transcend at least one ideological boundary. The interracial relationships between Leo, a poor black man, and Barbara, a rich white heiress, and between Barbara and Christopher, reach across the boundaries of both race and class, whereas the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher challenges the heteronormative conventions of sexuality. The ideological resistance due to which these relationships seem to fail in the novel is what establishes the erotic triangle as an ideological closure. What I regard as the central ideological message, the ideologeme, of the novel is the concept of postcategorical love carried by the mythical, syncretic figure of Black Christopher, who is allegorically born in the intersection of the interracial and homosexual relationships which constitute the erotic triangle. As an embodiment of the Baldwinian ideal of love bereft of constricting categories, Black Christopher becomes the messenger of postcategorical utopia in *Tell Me*.

The erotic triangle and its constituents may be read as a socially allegorical structure in its own right, with Leo representing the ideology of nonviolence, Barbara white liberalism, and Christopher the Black Power ideology. As a consequence, the political significance of the erotic triangle is radically enhanced, because it becomes the locus and battleground of several competing ideologies, which are working in the same direction, but, at the same time, they diverge in their ultimate goals and preferences for the means of achieving them. My reading of the novel suggests that this allegorical triangle is not merely a sign of the wavering of Baldwin's attitudes towards nonviolence, Black Power militancy, and white liberalism, but rather a vehicle of transcending their limitations in order to resist the ideologies of white supremacy. The triangle transforms Christopher from a potential criminal into a civil rights activist who supports Black Power militancy but contests its homophobic tendencies through his bisexual behaviour and problematizes its racial attitudes through his interracial affair with Barbara.

My approach will prove to be decidedly different from those usually adopted with respect to *Tell Me*. First of all, relatively few comprehensive studies of this novel exist, and various critics, for example, Irving Howe, Mario Puzo, and Stanley Macebuh, have tended to dismiss the novel as an utter failure. To quote Howe's words, it is "a remarkably bad novel, signaling the collapse of a writer of some distinction" (98). Puzo proclaims that *Tell Me* is "a simpleminded, one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters, a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention, and poor selection of incident" (155). Macebuh argues that "when we come to [Baldwin's] latest fictional effort, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, we begin to suspect that the psychic effort the former novel [*Another Country*] demanded was an almost devastating one" (149). Calvin C. Hernton adopts a more subtle tone when he states in his article "A Fiery Baptism" that the novel "is full of labor and it works, although I personally find it void of the stuff that grips me in the gut and makes me want to move" (117).

A more neutral reading of *Tell Me* is provided by Houston A. Baker, Jr, who discusses the novel for two and a half pages in his essay "The Embattled Craftsman," written almost a decade after the publication of the novel. He points out the significant role which Black Christopher plays in the novel as Leo and Barbara's "progeny" and as a

representative of “the youth of a new generation: revolutionary, hopeful, aggressive” (“The Embattled Craftsman” 71). Baker does not, however, seem particularly convinced by this “bond of commitment—a joining of North and South, Black and white—across the color line” which he interprets as having “lent a final hope to America” (“The Embattled Craftsman” 71).

Clifford Thompson’s essay on *Tell Me*, written in 1999 and titled after the novel, exhibits an attitude drastically different from Howe’s or Puzo’s: he regards it as one of Baldwin’s best novels. In addition, he praises Baldwin as a novelist for his skill in “creating a sense of intimacy with the reader,” and argues that *Tell Me* is the best example of this intimacy. Thompson acknowledges that there is “a certain meandering of quality, a seeming plotlessness, in this novel,” but emphasizes that this may actually save the novel from becoming too melodramatic. He also points out that “[o]ne of the major themes in all of Baldwin’s work is the failure of Americans to love one another, to take on the risks which that entails,” which, he believes, is exemplified by Leo’s character. Thompson’s essay is clearly one of the more competent accounts of *Tell Me* and one of the few in which the novel has been taken seriously as an object of study.

As noted above, Lynn Orilla Scott’s book *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction* includes what may be regarded as the first comprehensive effort to fill the gap which the neglect of *Tell Me* has left in Baldwin studies. She argues that earlier critics have mistaken the novel’s preoccupation with “the problem and uses of racial anger” for “the unmediated expression of anger” (*JBLF* 21). The reason for this was, she suggests, the differences in understanding the socio-political state of the United States and the implications of the accomplishments of the civil rights movement: Baldwin was aware of the fact that the attainment of the civil rights had by no means made black and white Americans equal, whereas his liberal critics seem to have failed to understand this (21). Another issue which significantly affected the reception of the novel was homophobia, which caused its sexual themes to be, as Scott puts it, “either ignored or treated with dismissal and sarcasm, while a few critics expressed outright distaste or offense” (*JBLF* 22). As a consequence, the sophisticated way in which *Tell Me* contests and deconstructs the prevailing racial and sexual politics of the 1960s largely fell on deaf ears. The aim of my reading of *Tell Me* is to complement the process of re-evaluation started by Thompson and Scott by examining the political unconscious of the novel and thereby to reveal the underlying workings of the problems of race and sexuality.

4.1 THE FIERY BAPTISM OF LOVE: THE BALDWINIAN IDEOLOGEME

The following two quotations from “Down” may serve to summarize the nature and significance of the concept of love in the Baldwinian sense. The first one differentiates this ideal from the more conventional connotations of the word:

> Love takes off the masks that we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made

> happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. ("Down" 81-82)

The second quotation expresses Baldwin's belief in the transforming power of love and its potential social significance:

> If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. ("Down" 89)

There is obviously more at stake here than mere personal affection and attraction: for Baldwin, love signifies a rejection of dishonesty—the removal of the masks—in other words, an eradication of the illusion of white supremacy and black inferiority, which he sees as a fundamental part of the ideological foundation of white America. As Kathryn Perry points out in her essay "The Heart of Whiteness: White Subjectivity and Interracial Relationships," it is through this reconceptualized notion of love that Baldwin, in many of his writings, "suggests a redirection of the white quest away from the supposed problem of black people and towards an exploration of how white identity has problematised blackness as a counterpoint to white supremacy" (171). In Baldwin's view, white people define themselves primarily in relation to black people, that is to say, the ideological illusion of white supremacy is inherently dependent on the illusion of black inferiority. He argues that white people project their "unadmitted—and apparently, to [them], unspeakable—private fears and longings" onto black people ("Down" 82). It is exactly the eradication of these illusions and this white self-deception which Baldwin refers to when he talks about taking off the masks. He stresses that integration and acceptance should not be taken to mean the acceptance of blacks by whites, but rather the opposite: it is African Americans who must accept white people and teach them, with love, to see and accept themselves, "to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" ("Down" 17). This is one of the central aspects of the Baldwinian doctrine of love, which, although formulated according to the socio-historical context of the 1950s and 1960s, still resonates with special urgency today.

The echoes of this utopian ideology of love are easily detectable in the narrative of *Tell Me*, albeit in an allegorical form. This is particularly evident in the relationships between Leo, Barbara, and Christopher which can be taken to constitute a structure which Sedgwick, following René Girard, calls the erotic triangle (21). Girard suggests in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961) that the triangle is a spatial metaphor which can be used to connote triple relationships: "The triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models. […] They always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations" (2-3). Discussing Girard's ideas, Sedgwick points out that "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved," and that in many cases "the choice of the beloved is determined in the

first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved's already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival" (21). This seems, to a certain extent, to be true in *Tell Me*, as far as Christopher's infatuation with Barbara is concerned. He is well aware that Leo and Barbara share a long history of affection and that, were it not for the racist society around them, she and Leo would in all probability have retained their relationship and stayed together instead of retreating. Christopher admires and adores Leo, which justifies the claim that the former's interest in Barbara is at least partly a result of the fact that she had originally been "chosen" by Leo.

The bond of rivalry between Leo and Christopher is not particularly conspicuous in the novel, however, because the relationship between Barbara and Christopher does not assume much emphasis or attention. As a consequence, it may be argued that the triangle is turned on its side in *Tell Me*, because it is Leo, rather than Barbara, whom the text posits as the primary object of desire. It becomes clear that the brief affair between Barbara and Christopher is largely motivated by their shared desire for Leo. In the following sections I will use this erotic triangle and its constituents to discuss the socio-political significance of interracial relationships and homosexuality as the constitutive parts of the ideologeme of love.

It is also interesting to note that this erotic triangle consists of three representatives of "the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks" on whom Baldwin calls in his essay to "end the racial nightmare" ("Down" 89). As pointed out earlier, in an allegorical reading of the novel, Leo may be seen as a representative of the nonviolent wing of the civil rights movement, whereas Christopher seems to endorse the militant ideology of Black Power. Barbara stands as a prototype of white liberalism. What this means is that the characters which constitute the erotic triangle of transgressive relationships assume a larger significance as symbolic and allegorical figures representing different, partly parallel and partly conflicting, social forces which were instrumental in redefining the black resistance against the forces of racism in the 1960s. By reaching across the ideological divides between each other, these characters become invested with acute political urgency. It is with these actors that *Tell Me* becomes a carrier of the ideologeme of love in the Baldwinian sense, one parole in the langue of the dispute between the oppressor and the oppressed. As a consequence, the erotic triangle may now be recontextualized and reconceptualized as the triangle of postcategorical love.

4.2 TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF "RACE": INTERRACIAL LOVE

The interracial relationship between Leo and Barbara, between a black man and a white woman, is central in the novel. It is clear from the outset, however, that the possibilities of sustaining this relationship are drastically reduced by the issues of racial categorization. Neither whites nor blacks approve of Leo and Barbara's relationship, and they are, therefore, denied the possibility of living together as a couple and establishing a family. Through this interracial relationship *Tell Me* becomes a part of what Werner Sollors terms *interracial literature* in his book *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of*

Interracial Literature (1997), that is, "works in all genres that represent love and family relations involving black-white couples, biracial individuals, their descendants, and their larger kin" (3). According to Sollors, stories of black-white families have appeared frequently in American literature by both black and white writers (8), although interracial marriages have been prohibited by laws, and although "[w]hat is subjected to socially approved attempted or legalized bans in real life is often also censored, suppressed, or rejected in symbolic representations" (4). *Tell Me* represents the interracial relationship of Leo and Barbara without hesitation, but makes it clear that the social climate constructed by the text does not tolerate such transgression.

The socially condemned position of interracial relationships has a long history in America. As Pia Thielmann points out in *Hotbeds: Black-White Love in Novels from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean* (2004), "American attitudes about race were expressed in colonial laws that defined and punished interracial sex" (42). It is crucial to notice, however, that white male interracial transgression was tolerated, whereas all sexual relations between black men and white women were strictly condemned. This obviously reads as a manifestation of the aim of the legal system to support white male dominance over black men and all women. The political significance of interracial relationships in the socio-historical context of *Tell Me,* that is, the United States in the 1960s, immediately prior to the abolition of the miscegenation laws in 1967, was obviously remarkable. Kathryn Perry suggests that interracial relationships involve some of the fundamental fears of and threats to the white supremacy, such as the myth of superior black sexuality, miscegenation, and the contamination of the allegedly 'pure' white blood (177-78). These fears seem to be persistent, and therefore, according to Perry, interracial love, despite the full legalization of interracial marriages by the 1967 Supreme Court decision, still bears a mark of being forbidden (173). She goes on to point out that "this forbidden love promises no guiding fantasy of integrating sexuality into a socially sanctioned relationship," and that, according to "the mythologies of racism," it has a tinge of "a 'perverse' erotic encounter: a thrilling excursion into the landscape of interracial desire, […] ever marginal and destined to end" (173). In other words, interracial love is a taboo, a nonnormative form of love, a transgression of social conventions.

The problematic nature of interracial relationships in the context of racism and the concomitant issues of black masculinity become evident in *Tell Me*. Leo and Barbara are constantly confronted with the intolerant attitudes of the racist society around them. This is Barbara talking to Leo:

> I know this situation is impossible. I even know, in a way, that *I'm* being impossible. And everyone I grew up with would think so, and many people think so who will never dare admit it. I don't care about those people. I care about whether or not *I* know what I am doing. You're black. I'm white. Now, that doesn't mean shit, really, and yet it means everything. (*Tell Me* 237; original emphases)

Leo's thoughts in an early stage of their time together express the same situation from a black-male point of view:

> I loved Barbara. I knew it then, and I really know it now; but what, I asked myself, was I to do with her? *Love, honour, and protect*. But these were not among my possibilities. And, since they were not, I felt myself, bitterly, and most unwillingly, holding myself outside her sorrow; holding myself, in fact, outside her love; holding myself beyond the reach of my blasted possibilities. One cannot dwell on these things, these echoes of what might, in some other age, and in some other body, have been; one must attempt to deal with what is, or else go under, or go mad. And yet—to deal with what is! who can do it? I know that I could not. And yet I knew that I had to try. (*Tell Me* 232; original emphasis)

This excerpt brings problems of masculinity into focus. It is interesting to notice that Leo's thinking seems to follow the conventional patriarchal view according to which the male must protect the female. What is at stake here is the tendency of black masculinities to replicate the ideals of dominant white masculinity. As Michael C. Dawson points out in his book *Black Visions* (2001), the black counterpublic has tended to adopt its masculinist norms more or less directly from the dominant white society (28). This is especially conspicuous in the misogynist and homophobic tendencies within black nationalism—the Nation of Islam and other branches of cultural nationalism in particular—which, as Dawson puts it, insists that "black men protect and embrace black women as the complement to their own existence—but not necessarily on the basis of equality" (110).[17] Leo's thinking does, to a certain extent, reflect this ideological stance, as he quotes the expression "*[l]ove, honour, and protect*" (*Tell Me* 232; original emphasis), conventionally used in wedding vows, to articulate his aspiration to protect Barbara. The crucial difference is, however, that Barbara is a white woman. Keeping in mind that, according to Dawson, ideologies of black nationalism have tended to regard "relationships outside of the race or with those of the same gender" as a crime (110), it becomes clear that Leo transgresses these ideals. As a consequence, Leo is haunted by his conviction of not being able to fulfil his conventional role as a man, or that even by trying, he is already in conflict with the ideals of the new black radicalism.

It becomes clear in the text that the racial prejudice, the effects of which Leo and Barbara experience, is not one-sided, that is to say, it is not only white people but also blacks who disapprove of their relationship. This reverse racism becomes particularly evident through the behaviour of Leo's brother, Caleb, and their mother. Caleb's recent

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[17] In *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2002), Keith Clark clarifies the link between this tendency and its literary expression by emphasizing that African American literature has often tended to represent this desire of black men to be treated like white men, and thereby replicate the stereotypes of mainstream American masculinity, which encompasses such qualities as physical strength, dominance, violence, sexism, and heterosexuality (18). To quote Clark: "black men assiduously attempt to position themselves within society's dominant narrative of male subjectivity" (4). This is evident in such canonized works as Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

religious conversion and his consequent vocation as a preacher do not prevent him from adopting a racist and sexist attitude towards Barbara: "Caleb kept her carefully quarantined in the limbo of unregenerate harlots—unregenerate because she was white, harlot because she was a woman, in limbo because she was both" (*Tell Me* 289). This is taken further in the novel by stating that, completely contrary to Leo's expectations, his mother dislikes Barbara even more than Caleb does. Although the colour of her own skin is very light for an African American, she is struck with utter consternation when she finds out that Leo is involved with a white woman. Her attitude is spelled out by her statement: "I am not going to have no fair-haired, blue-eyed baby crawling around here and calling me Grandmama" (*Tell Me* 289). Moreover, Leo's next of kin are obviously not the only black people who disapprove of interracial relationships.

The complications of interracial relationships involve, besides racial issues, also problems concerning gender. Felly Nkweto Simmonds argues in her essay "Love in Black and White" that "historically white men have been able to 'have' Black women as sex toys, concubines, and as commodities" (215). Sexual relationships between white men and black women have often been quietly approved by white people, whereas black men's lives were seriously risked if they became sexually involved with white women. As pointed out above, this is a consequence of the patriarchal nature of white supremacy, which endorses the dominance of white men over all others. It is clear, therefore, that both a black man and a white woman are representatives of an oppressed group: the former because of racial categorization and the latter because of gender. Furthermore, in an interracial relationship a white woman can be seen to lose, at least in part, her racially privileged position as a member of the dominant group, in the eyes of both the oppressor and the oppressed. As Perry argues, such people "have not travelled from one territory to another by crossing the boundary between them. They are permitted to inhabit neither," and "find themselves in 'no-person's-land'" (181-82). The political significance of this mode of an interracial relationship is intensified by the fact that together the participants are subjected to even harsher oppression than they would be separately. What Simmonds regards as one crucial factor in the success or failure of an interracial relationship is the separation of the private and the public, that is, the interracial romance must be kept within the private realm, which is, undoubtedly, extremely problematic (218). It is exceedingly difficult to live in an overtly racist society, and, simultaneously, to isolate a major part of one's life from the prejudices of that society.

In *Tell Me* Leo and Barbara are faced with these issues. Placed in the hostile world, they are constantly faced with the threat of violence: "one must be ready for the rock, the fist, the sudden movement; one must see every face, and yet make it impossible for one's eye to be caught, even for a second, by any other eye" (*Tell Me* 240). This threat is depicted explicitly in the text in the scene where Leo and Barbara walk through a predominantly white town together:

> Then, a car stopped on my side of the street, with a young boy in it. He said, "Nigger"—his voice was melodious—"you are a dead man. We going to get you. And your white whore, too." The old woman and the young woman and the

> young man and the child were coming closer. I did not dare put a hand on Barbara. I whispered, "Come closer to me," and I stepped nearer the kerb, and she moved with me, just as we passed the old woman, who shouted, "You hussy! You nigger-lover! You low-down, common, low class, poor white *slut*!" A great, mocking cheer went up behind us. (*Tell Me* 241-42; original emphasis)

Insults and threats articulated by white people of different ages express in a powerful manner the strength and extensiveness of racial prejudice and hatred. In addition, this passage also contains the suggestion that as a result of her involvement with a black man a white woman is automatically regarded as "low class." This is an indication of the interrelatedness of the categories of race and class.

While Leo and Barbara succeed in keeping the outside world out of their relationship for a limited period of time, they are, in the end, forced to realize that this is not possible in the long run. Gradually, they become more and more disturbed by the racist attitudes and the consequent social pressures imposed on them:

> We sometimes sat in our house in the evening as though we were waiting for the mob to come and carry us away. Some nights, the entire town was in the house with us, and we tried to ignore them and concentrate on each other.
>
> I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, that we could not succeed. Of all the fears there are, perhaps the fear of physical pain and destruction is the most devastating. For I had to admit to myself that I was simply, ignobly, and abjectly afraid. I didn't like the taste of my own blood. I didn't want all my teeth knocked out, didn't want my nose smashed, my eyes blinded, didn't want my skull caved in. To drive to town, to walk about, to get through a single day, demanded at least as much energy as would have been demanded for a fifteen round fight. More: for a fifteen round fight supposed a winner and a loser, supposed a resolution, and, hence, a release. But there was no release for me, and especially not where it should most certainly have been found, in Barbara's arms, in bed. Fear and love cannot long remain in the same bed together. […] Barbara and I were marooned, alone with our love, and we were discovering that love was not enough—alone, we were doomed. We had only each other, and this fact menaced our relation to each other. (*Tell Me* 297-98)

Rather soon Leo and Barbara come to realize that the obstacles on the level of daily life are simply too high for them, and they yield under this constant pressure. Since both Leo and Barbara aspire to become professional actors—a social role which tends to turn one's private life into a piece of public property—they realize that they cannot possibly keep their private and public lives separate. They decide to break up in order not to destroy each other's lives and chances to succeed in the theatre. This decision appears to be an act of submission, a cancellation of the socially symbolic act constituted by the interracial relationship. It is, therefore, evident that Leo and Barbara's transgressive love alone is not capable of opening up the ideological closure of racism in the novel.

Leo and Barbara's situation resonates with Sollors's point according to which "[b]lack-white interracial love and family relations have been […] a subject to elicit censure and high emotions, or at least a certain nervousness. […] In the United States, the mere presence of a white woman and a black man in the same space could justify mob violence or terror" (4). As a consequence, literary representations of such forbidden relationships have also been censored, and in many cases, as Sollors points out, plots or subplots dealing with interracial marriages or friendships have often been removed from literary works or sometimes resolved "in such a way that what looked like an interracial romance at the beginning would turn out to be an intraracial one at the end" (6). The dilemma of Leo and Barbara's interracial love seems to be resolved by their decision to end their relationship. This might be read as an act of submission; that Leo and Barbara give up their struggle and give in to the social conventions of racism. Another possible reading would suggest that the end of this interracial relationship is a social allegory of the rise of black nationalism in the 1960s. Both these readings are, however, discredited by the emergence of the symbolic figure of Black Christopher, the outcome of Leo and Barbara's denied interracial love, who carries the ideologeme of the Baldwinian ideal of love and thereby challenges the categories of the racist society.

In spite of all the obstacles and complications posed by the world of oppressive categorization, *Tell Me* does, however, offer glimpses the ideal of postcategorical utopia in the context of interracial love. This becomes evident especially in the passionate interracial sexual encounter between Leo and Barbara, which occurs at a time when they are still hoping to stay together:

> I seemed to know, that night, that we were trapped, trapped no matter what we did: we would have to learn to live in the trap. But that night it did not seem impossible. Nothing seemed impossible. Barbara began to moan. It was a black moan, and it was as though, trapped within the flesh I held, there was a black woman moaning, struggling to be free. Perhaps it was because we were beneath the starlight, naked. I had unzipped the sleeping bag, and the August night travelled over my body, as I trembled over Barbara. It was as though we were not only joined to each other, but to the night, the stars, the moon, the sleeping valley, the trees, the earth beneath the stone which was our bed, and the water beneath the earth. With every touch, movement, caress, with every thrust, with every moan and gasp, I came closer to Barbara and closer to myself and closer to something unnameable. […] The moment of our liberation gathered, gathered, crouched, ready to spring, and Barbara sobbed; the wind burned my body, and I felt the unmistakable, the unanswerable retreat, contraction, concentration, the long, poised moment before the long fall. (*Tell Me* 307)

In this passage, Baldwin's emotional use of language constructs a utopian space in which Leo and Barbara are in harmony with each other and the world around them. This is accomplished by using natural imagery, which creates an atmosphere reminiscent of Paradise. The ending of the quote suggests, however, that this utopian space created by

means of transgression cannot last; in a world governed by oppressive categories the result is the inevitable Fall.

As Dievler suggests, Baldwin regards love-based sex as the most effective way of transcending the suppressive categories of sex, race, and gender (163). The scene quoted above is clearly an instance of this. In this sexual act, Barbara, in Leo's view, becomes black as they transcend the racial barrier by means of love-based interracial sex. This may be read as a manifestation of Baldwin's conviction that the only solution to the racial problem in the United States is for white people "to consent, in effect, to become black" themselves, "to become a part of that suffering and dancing country" which they both envy and fear ("Down" 82). In this scene, Barbara becomes an emblem of such transcendence. This could arguably be read as an indication of Baldwin's alleged newfound advocacy of Black Power ideology and its insistence on the superiority of blackness, which would dilute Barbara's transformation to a symbolic act of merely rejecting one racial category in favour of another. It must, however, be remembered that, at this point in the novel, Leo has already stepped over the boundary between the black and the white worlds, firstly as a result of his choice to pursue a career as an actor, a predominantly white profession at the time, and secondly because of his relationship with a white woman. As a consequence, this interracial sexual act becomes a fleeting moment of mutual transcendence, of a transitory escape from "that cage of reality," that rigidly categorized world which Baldwin denounces for instance in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (25). At that moment they seem to succeed in establishing a connection to each other, the nature, and even "the sleeping valley," implying a sense of connection even to the racist, intolerant society around them, which has momentarily released its stranglehold. This is what I regard as a fleeting moment in which the horizon of postcategorical utopia becomes manifest.

This "moment of liberation" is prolonged until the next morning: "Naked, I built the fire, and boiled our coffee. Naked and happy, facing each other, we drank it. We became drunk on the sun and the coffee and our nakedness and touched each other's bodies with a terrible wonder everywhere and we had to make love again. […] Then, the sun was high, warning us that the world might be on the way, and we got dressed" (*Tell Me* 308). The temporary nature of this utopian fulfilment is inscribed in the last sentence of the quotation: the world around the lovers has not changed at all, and, in the end, neither have Leo and Barbara themselves. The momentary postcategorical microcosm which Leo and Barbara have managed to build is not able to hold against the crushing strain of the prejudiced, rigidly categorized American society.

4.3 TRANSGRESSING HETERONORMATIVITY: HOMOSEXUAL LOVE

As a result of the failure of Leo and Barbara's interracial love, the focus must be shifted onto the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher, who is a drifter, a young, directionless man with a criminal record. This is the moment when the issue of homosexuality assumes the focus of attention. Homosexuality and bisexuality are usually regarded as central themes in most of Baldwin's fiction, especially in *Giovanni's Room* and

Another Country, and *Tell Me* is no exception in this respect. Both Leo and Christopher are bisexual, and there also occurs a homosexual scene between Leo and Caleb. It seems to me that some critics have misjudged and oversimplified the meaning of homosexuality in Baldwin's novels. An example of this is Irving Howe, who argues that in *Tell Me* Baldwin "tries out the idea that black men devoted to homosexuality and visions of racial apocalypse are somehow more pure, more soulful, and more trustworthy than men still messing around with women" (103). The sarcasm of this statement is, in my view, misplaced. I believe that *Tell Me* should not be dismissed simply as a naively allegorical glorification of homosexual love as somehow superior to heterosexual love. Instead, this foregrounding of homosexuality may be regarded as a metonymy of the approval and total acceptance of love bereft of the moral restrictions and taboos which often seem to be taken for granted, as somehow inherent in the concept of love. As David Leeming points out, love, understood in this way, holds a central position in Baldwin's philosophy, according to which sexual dishonesty and the denial of love are among the most tragic and far-reaching mistakes which one can make (*JB* 123). The sexual relationship between Leo and Christopher may, therefore, be seen as a rejection of sexual dishonesty, as an expression of courage; the courage to accept love.

The political significance of homosexuality in the social climate which produced *Tell Me* was no less remarkable than that of interracial relationships. In fact, despite the growing tolerance and acceptance of different lifestyles, attitudes towards relationships between members of the same sex still often continue to be characterized by prejudice and intolerance. As Jeffrey Weeks maintains, in the 1950s the prejudice against homosexuality reached the point of paranoia in the United States: homosexuals were regarded as "'security risks' by reason of their 'lack of emotional stability', the 'weakness of their moral fibre' and their susceptibility to blandishments and blackmail" (240-41). Weeks also argues that "the 'liberation' expressed in the 1960s counter-culture had its limitations. Sex roles were rarely challenged […]. 'Sexual liberation' was confined to the heterosexual libido" (283).

These issues also become evident in some of Baldwin's essays, some dating from the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as "The Male Prison" (1961), and some as late as from the 1980s, such as "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood." In these essays, he discusses the restrictive categories of sexuality in the Western world, the socially oppressed position of homosexuality and homosexuals, and the patriarchal bigotry and prejudice which these issues have been dealt with. In "Freaks," for example, Baldwin criticizes the American conceptions of sexuality and masculinity:

> The American *ideal*, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—the American boy evolve into complexity of manhood. ("Freaks" 815; original emphasis)

As this passage suggests, for Baldwin, sexuality and masculinity are complex constructs which all too often become reduced to, and regulated in terms of, the simplifying categories based on the crude binary oppositions through which they operate.

By discussing homosexuality in his fiction and nonfiction, Baldwin joins what Gregory Woods, in his book *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998), refers to as a "'gay tradition' in literature" (1). Woods suggests that after World War II censorship concerning gay literature was very strict in the United States: "the heterosexist institutions of state, all the more powerful for the need to satisfy the requirements of the Cold War, successfully silenced any deviant voices and halted all progress towards sexual liberation" (289). Woods also points out, however, that in the 1950s gay writers increasingly emerged into the dominant culture "to begin to transform the 'mainstream'" by exploring "ways of reintegrating the homosexual character into social fictions" (289). Baldwin's subsequent novels *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, as well as *Tell Me*, are clear examples of this act of "speaking the unspeakable," as Woods puts it (300), referring to the poem by Lord Alfred Douglas mentioned in the previous chapter. Michael J. Meyer argues in his introduction to *Literature and Homosexuality* (2000) that "[d]ue to societal taboos, there continues to be intolerance and rejection of both lesbian and gay writing" (i). In such a restrictive socio-historical and literary context, the political significance of homosexuality in *Tell Me* is evident.

Although the marginalized position of homosexuality is scarcely even alluded to in the surface narrative of *Tell Me*, it is undoubtedly an integral part of the political unconscious of the novel. At this stage, the erotic triangle constituted by Leo, Barbara, and Christopher must be read as a reaction against the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality, both of which are integral parts of the social subtext of the novel, that is, the problem of oppressive social categorization. The concepts of hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality must, therefore, be defined. As R. W. Connell argues in *Masculinities* (1995), despite numerous attempts by influential theorists, such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, no coherent theory of masculinity exists. This is, however, a result of the inevitable incoherence of this object of study, rather than an implication of the incompetence of the theorists (67). A contemporary view of masculinity is summarized by Julie Peteet in her article "Male Gender in the Palestinian Intifada": "Masculinity is neither natural nor given. Like femininity, it is a social construct" (321). This constructionist stance discredits the essentialist view of masculinity and femininity as fixed facts based on biology. Connell emphasizes that masculinity is an "inherently relational" concept (68) and exists only "in a system of gender relations" (71). It is crucial to notice that gender is, as Connell points out, "a way of structuring social practice" and therefore it is inseparably related to other social structures, such as race and class (75). This intersectionality is particularly important for the context of this study, because, to reverse Connell's example, black masculinity is constructed not only in relation to black femininity, but also in relation to white masculinity and white femininity (75).

Antonio Gramsci's theory of *hegemony* has been highly influential in various fields of study, particularly in gender studies and postcolonial studies. In *Selections from Prison*

Books (1971) he suggests that hegemony is a form of domination which depends on "[t]he 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (12). Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee assert in their article "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" that "'[h]egemony', then, always refers to a historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held" (114). The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* is defined by Connell as "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (76). This hegemony is based on relations of dominance and subordination to which Connell refers by the terms *authorization* and *marginalization* (80-81). This means that the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group functions to subordinate and exclude other masculinities, thereby creating an illusion that it is the only legitimate form of masculinity. According to Connell, the most important example of this in the context of the Western world is the dominance of heterosexual men and the consequent subordination of homosexual men (78). In this system of relations between different masculinities, it is clear that heterosexuality has assumed a normative position as the only "correct" form of sexuality. This is what I will be referring to as *normative heterosexuality* or *heteronormativity*. Cameron and Kulick offer a concise definition of the concept: "The phrase 'normative heterosexuality' […] refers to the particular form of sexual relations between men and women that is institutionalised as a norm […] from which all other possibilities are defined as 'deviations'" (156-57n2).

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the socio-political significance of homo- and bisexuality is, to a remarkable extent, repressed on the surface level of *Tell Me*. In other words, race subordinates sexuality in the system of antinomies which the novel contains. It must be noted, however, that, in accordance with Jameson's view, a text cannot be approached in a vacuum, isolated and unaffected by the available knowledge concerning the socio-historical background of the text and the ways in which the text has previously been read and interpreted; rather, the text is necessarily approached "as the always-already-read" (*PU* 9). In this case, one's knowledge of the sexual politics of the postwar United States, integrally determined by the form of hegemonic masculinity of the white patriarchy, which encompasses normative heterosexuality and homophobia, is inevitably brought into the reading of *Tell Me*. Contrasted with this knowledge, the seemingly unproblematic nature of Leo and Christopher's bisexuality assumes remarkable polemical weight. It may, indeed, be regarded as an emblem of Baldwin's utopian vision, the vision which Dievler defines as "a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call 'postsexuality'" (163). This ideal of postcategorical sexuality is visible also in Baldwin's earlier novels: *Giovanni's Room*, and especially *Another Country*, which Dievler discusses in depth in his essay. In *Tell Me* Leo functions as an embodiment of this ideal which seeks to contest and transcend the rigid categories of conventional sexuality, race, and gender. On these grounds, the repression of the social significance of homosexuality and sexual marginalization is what constitutes the political unconscious of *Tell Me*, a rift between the social subtext and the ideological subtext of the novel.

According to Joseph Bristow, the voices of subordinated and marginalized sexual minorities became increasingly audible during the late 1960s (219). Written in the period, *Tell Me* may, therefore, be regarded as anticipating the increasing social activeness of those groups with marginalized sexualities. Within the second horizon of interpretation, *Tell Me* may be read as transmitting the ideologeme of postcategorical love in the antagonistic social discourse between normative heterosexuality and marginalized homosexuality. Because of the practically uncontested bisexuality of Leo and Christopher, *Tell Me* is evidently a representation of Baldwin's ideal of sexual freedom, of postcategorical sexuality.

A governing and also, from the perspective of this study, an integral feature in Baldwin's writing is the way in which he links the issues of race and sexuality, that is, the supremacy of whiteness over non-whiteness and the supremacy of heterosexuality over non-heterosexuality. He regards these two forms of inequality as inherently related to each other, indeed, as two inseparable parts of the larger concept of social inequality inscribed in the ideological superstructure of the United States. In *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade*, Magdalena J. Zaborowska emphasises the need to understand how race and sexuality intersect and intertwine in Baldwin's work and that the conviction that "liberation from racism must go hand in hand with liberation from sexual oppression" is at the core of Baldwin's thinking (22). This point is supported by Timothy Libretti in his essay "History and Queer Consciousness":

> "Whiteness" for Baldwin, however, finally signifies a set of values that normalize not only racial bigotry but also anti-gay bigotry, registering the extent to which sexuality, race, class, and gender are not separable aspects of identity that have separate histories. Rather, for Baldwin, the cultural construction of racial identity and privilege is inextricably bound up with the privileging of a heterosexual orientation. (251)

Libretti also argues that Baldwin carries the political meaning of this linkage even further by regarding the conflicting dichotomies of both hetero- and homosexuality and whiteness and blackness as consequences of a deeper contradiction in the social and economic structures of the United States, that is, "the central contradiction of capitalism between the forces and relations of production which, from a Marxist-humanist perspective such as that which Baldwin adopts, fetters individual creativity, creating partialized human beings subordinated to a system geared toward creating profit rather than fully realizing its productive or creative potential" (Libretti 252). Although labelling Baldwin as a Marxist may be regarded slightly simplifying,[18] he makes use of Marxist ideas in "Freaks," for instance, when he discusses the relation between capitalist ideals and racial discrimination in the United States:

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[18] Magdalena Zaborowska characterizes Baldwin's relation to the Left as a "brief romance" which was probably inspired by several of his leftist friends, particularly by Richard Wright's involvement with the Communist Party and Eugene Worth's membership in the Young People's Socialist League (see 4 and 270n12).

> a man was reduced not merely to a thing but to a thing the value of which was determined, absolutely, by that thing's commercial value. That this pragmatic principle dictated the slaughter of the native American, the enslavement of the black and the monumental rape of Africa—to say nothing of creating the wealth of the Western world—no one, I suppose, will now attempt to deny. ("Freaks" 816)

The pragmatic principle which Baldwin describes may be understood through the concept of *reification*. This characteristically capitalistic term is defined by Lucien Goldmann in his *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964) as a phenomenon in which "other men become for the seller or buyer objects like any other objects, mere means that enable him to achieve his ends, whose only important human quality will be their capacity to make contacts and produce constricting obligations" (137). In other words, the value of a human being is measured by his or her potential financial value. Brought into this context, the political significance of homosexuality and race are radically enhanced, because they are now linked to the fundamental theory of the structure of social reality within capitalism, as Marxism conceives it. This holistic tendency in Baldwin's thinking also establishes a connection to Jameson's view of social reality as a totality and the concomitant resistance of the differentiation process of modernity.

It should be remembered that African American sexuality is inevitably connected to the context of white racism in America, which renders it a complex and problematic issue. Many of the problems stem from the failure or refusal to recognize the intersectionality of racism and sexuality as matrices of normative power. Judith Butler articulates this connection in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) and emphasizes that race must not be regarded as subordinate to sex and gender:

> Rejecting those models of power which would reduce racial differences to the derivative effects of sexual difference […], it seems crucial to rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested. (18)

In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005), Patricia Hill Collins provides an interesting insight into the interconnectedness of race and sexuality in America. She points out that the common traditional white view of the people of African descent as more primitive, instinctual, and closer to nature, has entailed the presumption that homosexuality would be practically non-existent among black people, because all their sexual energies are supposedly devoted to biological reproduction. Hence, "[e]ither Black people could not be homosexual or those Blacks who were homosexual were not 'authentically' Black" (*Black Sexual Politics* 105-06). According to this logic, homosexuality has become regarded as a predominantly "white" phenomenon. This point is supported by Jonathan Dollimore, who suggests in "Desire and Difference: Homosexuality, Race, Masculinity" that "[t]he myth that homosexuality is 'the white

man's disease' persists today in some black communities, especially in certain kinds of political radicalism and nationalism" (33). A logical consequence of this is the belief that homosexuality and "authentic" blackness would rule each other out. This provides one explanation for the existence of heteronormativity in African American communities and culture.

Tell Me clearly challenges this presumption by depicting homosexuality between black men and by placing hardly any emphasis on its evidently transgressive nature. Rather, it is treated as a given, not explicitly contested in any incident in the novel, in contrast to the conspicuous condemnation of the interracial relationship of Leo and Barbara (see, for example, *Tell Me* 241-42). Only a few faint allusions to the transgressive significance of homosexuality can be found in Leo's thoughts as he reminisces about a discussion with Christopher: "If I was afraid of society's judgment, [Christopher] was not: 'Fuck these sick people. I do what *I* like.'" (*Tell Me* 373; original emphasis). A couple of other similar suggestions can be found in the novel, but they are never discussed further or emphasized in any way. It is interesting to notice that the homophobic attitudes which tended to plague the Black Power ideology are never explicitly addressed in the text, either, although Christopher actually becomes an advocate of this ideology, while both he and Leo contest these attitudes through their transgressive sexual behavior. This is one of the places where the narrative seems to be too subtle or too vague for it to properly deal with this interesting and important contradiction and turn it into a strong argument. It may be argued that instead of foregrounding and explicating this contradiction explicitly the text represses it into the political unconscious of the novel.

This issue gains considerable polemical significance when juxtaposed with the dominant and patriarchal view of homosexuality in the twentieth-century United States of the twentieth century. As Sedgwick points out, homophobia seems to be inherent in any patriarchy, at least within modernity, because it is closely related or even "knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations" (3-4). Since the social climate in the United States during the production of *Tell Me* is certainly no exception in this respect, it is obvious that Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality in this novel becomes a powerful act of social critique, which protests not merely against homophobic systems of thought, but against the entire social power structure and its defects, including sexual, racial, gender, and class discrimination. Sedgwick also suggests that "[o]ur society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged" (4). In this light, it becomes evident that the representation of homosexuality in *Tell Me* carries a strong, albeit somewhat covert, political and ideological message: it seeks to challenge the prevailing power structure and demands a profound restructuring of its principles and conventions.

The fact that this social commentary is expressed in an implicit manner is particularly interesting from the point of view of the present reading. The political significance of homosexuality, which can be regarded as a part of the fundamental ideological message emitted by the novel, is actually repressed by the surface of the text and thereby concealed in the political unconscious of the novel. What is at stake here is a discontinuity between the text and its social subtext, between the manifest surface

narrative of the novel and the narrative of history: in the world of the novel, homosexuality forms a part of the lives of Leo and Christopher, not conspicuously questioned or deprecated by any of the characters or by society as a whole, whereas the real historical situation which gave rise to the novel was drastically different. The antinomy constituted by the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher can, therefore, be seen as a symbolic act in its own right, which, as J. A. Berthoud points out in his article "Narrative and Ideology: A Critique of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*," "reveals by concealing" (106).

The significance of love-based sex in the context of homosexuality receives little emphasis in *Tell Me*. There occurs an incestuous homosexual act between Leo and Caleb in their youth after Caleb has been released from imprisonment, which functions as a brief moment of liberation, as a moment of a profound connection between them, which does not, however, stand the test of time. The sense of transcending the rigid categories of sexuality eventually becomes annulled by Caleb's religious conversion, which, indeed, indicates approval of and obedience to the very categories. It is somewhat surprising to notice that the novel does not depict one single erotic encounter between Leo and Christopher, although such an encounter would effectively accentuate the emancipatory function of love-based sex and the importance of confronting the categories of hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality. This is one more indication of how the socio-political function of homosexuality is repressed by the text.

The text does not clearly indicate what happens to the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher, but there are implications suggesting that it does not really succeed in the end. There remains a close bond between them, but they seem to be drifting further apart as the novel draws to a close. One reason for this is Christopher's role as a civil rights activist and Leo's occupation as an actor, both of which are public roles which require a lot of traveling, thereby establishing a physical distance between the two men. Another reason becomes apparent when Leo is recovering from a heart attack and receives a basket of fruit and a telegram from Christopher: "Not very long ago, such ingenuity on Christopher's part would have filled me with joy—not now; I put the telegram, folded, on the table and wondered if I would ever feel anything again, for anyone" (*Tell Me* 68). Trapped in a world dominated by white heterosexual patriarchy, Leo has been forced to build up a façade, harden himself, and repress his feelings in order to protect himself. As a result, it is difficult for him to find these repressed feelings in a situation where such repression would not be necessary; rather, it actually becomes a major reason for the partial failure of Leo's relationship with Christopher. This lack of emotion, or the inability to feel, may be grasped as an example of what Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, terms *the waning of affect*, of the fragmentation of the feeling subject (15-16). The waning of the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher undermines its capability to transmit the ideologeme of postcategorical love. This requires the focus of this reading to be shifted once again; this time from the transgressive relationships of the triangle of love to their symbolic outcome in the character of Black Christopher.

4.4 THE BLACK CHRIST

The triangle of love remains an ideological closure, but it simultaneously generates a utopian resolution through the transformation of Christopher, a young drifter, into Black Christopher, a syncretic embodiment of various ostensibly conflicting ideologies, who reaches across the boundaries of race, sexuality, and class. The triangle is completed by the short, one-off sexual encounter between Barbara and Christopher. The main reason for this affair, as far as Barbara is concerned, is articulated clearly in the novel through her words addressed to Leo: "'He reminded me of you,' she said, 'when we were young. I was reaching backward for you—and for me—I think—reaching backward, over twenty years.' […] 'He was you before our choices had been made. Before we'd become—what we've become'" (*Tell Me* 398). Although Leo and Barbara have fulfilled their primary ambitions, they doubt whether their lives and what they have accomplished have any larger significance, beyond individual success. Because of their unfulfilled but enduring love for each other they have not been able to commit themselves to other people, at least not profoundly enough to establish a conventional family with children. As a consequence, they place their hopes in Christopher, who has not yet made his choices, or for whom the choices have not yet been made. Speculating on Christopher's motives, Barbara's words in a discussion with Leo are illuminating:

> "I think *he* wanted"—she stopped—"I think *he* wanted to find out—if love was possible. If it was really possible. I think he had to find *out* what I thought of *his* body, by taking mine." […] "I wasn't trying to hurt you. I was trying to get back to you. And he realised that, oh, very quickly. *Then*, he realised that love was possible. I shouldn't be surprised if that didn't frighten him." (*Tell Me* 398-99; original emphases)

If read in the context of the conventional romanticized Hollywood sense of love, passages such as this render Mario Puzo's dismissal of *Tell Me* as a "soap opera" (157) more understandable. It is, however, crucial to notice that the love which Barbara is referring is precisely the Baldwinian, politically charged notion of love, which transcends the confines of social categorization, and which the triangle of love in *Tell Me* exemplifies.

As a result, Christopher goes through a transformation from a directionless drifter into a civil rights activist, and from there on he is called Black Christopher. Through this symbolic baptism, he becomes the "child" which the triangle of love produces. In Barbara's words:

> "Leo. I think we have done something very rare." […] "I think we have managed to redeem something. I think it's our love we redeemed. Who could have guessed such a thing? Black Christopher!" […] "And I was afraid it was too late—that it had all been for nothing—that we'd betrayed and discarded all the best of us—for—what anyone with five dollars can buy at the box-office." (*Tell Me* 94)

This implies the significance of the role of Black Christopher in the novel. Leo's thoughts express this explicitly: "The incestuous brother and sister would now never have any children. But perhaps we had given one child to the world, or helped open the world to one child. Luckier lovers hadn't managed so much" (*Tell Me* 369). In this sense, the triangle of postcategorical love may also be read as contesting the conventional and normative ideal of the nuclear family.

Considering his crucially important role, it is somewhat curious that Black Christopher seems, on the surface level, to receive surprisingly little emphasis in the text. This is arguably one of the weaknesses of the novel. Although the third and final book of the novel is titled "Black Christopher," the eponymous character does not appear to assume the focus of the narrative. Despite this curious gap in the narrative, Black Christopher holds a significant position in this reading process, because he is the symbolic solution which the novel offers to the real, underlying social contradiction, that is, the dilemma of social categorization and the concomitant relations of oppression. This does not mean that *Tell Me* should be read as Baldwin's naive suggestion or idealistic hope that one young, bisexual, black revolutionary could actually provide an answer to the racial problem in the United States, or even as an expression of his faith in the next generation as builders of a better future. Rather, the novel itself functions as an ideological message, an ideologeme, in the social discourse across the lines of race and sexuality. Black Christopher should, therefore, be regarded as one allegorical character in the symbolic act which the text performs, that is, as an embodiment of Baldwin's vision of postcategorical utopia.

The name Christopher carries at least two important cultural connotations which must be brought into this reading of *Tell Me*. Firstly, Christopher immediately recalls Christ. Although the text does not explicitly designate Christopher as the new black Messiah, this idea becomes obvious through implications. An example of this can be found in the text, when the narrative shifts from Leo watching his father and Christopher spending time together to Leo singing at his mother's funeral: "*Mary, Mary, what you going to name that pretty little boy?*" (*Tell Me* 368; original emphasis). Leo's mother had sung this song to him when he was a child, projecting her hopes onto him. Similarly, Leo and Barbara project their hopes onto Black Christopher. At this stage, it seems that the relationships between Leo, Barbara, and Christopher, in a way, become irrelevant once Christopher's transformation has occurred. It may be argued that towards the end of the novel, the text subordinates personal happiness to the larger political agenda and utopian longing for a better world, which the character of Black Christopher comes to embody.

The figure of the black Christ in *Tell Me* is not an isolated or incidental phenomenon, because similar cross-racial and cross-cultural figures can be found in other works of literature and other forms of art. As Susan Gubar argues in her *Racechanges* (1997), "a number of artists and thinkers use cross-racial strategies to underline African cultural centrality in Western civilization" (30). She goes on to point out that "twentieth-century critical and creative speculations reinvent Western legends in such a way as to restructure our ideas about race and culture" (30). Examples of this are Jean-Paul Sartre's *Black Orpheus* (1963), Angela Carter's *Black Venus* (1983), Countee Cullen's poem "The

Black Christ" (1929), and 2pac's song "Black Jesuz" (1999), to name only a few. *Tell Me* may be read according to the view which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin presented in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), which asserts that literatures of dominated peoples question "the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery […]. In this way, concepts of polarity […] are challenged as an essential way of ordering reality" (32). Baldwin's Black Christopher is clearly a syncretic figure, in other words, an example of a process in which, to quote the words of Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "distinct cultural formations […] merge into a single form" (14). It functions as a subversive act of rewriting and restructuring of one of the most powerful Western myths, and thereby questions the foundations of the disproportionate power structure of American society.

Secondly, Christopher may be read as an allusion to the figure of Saint Christopher, known in the West and in Greek mythology. According to Donald Attwater, in Greek Christopher connotes "one who carries Christ" (*A Dictionary of Saints* 85). The Western version of the story depicts him as a giant who, as John J. Delaney puts it in his *Dictionary of Saints*, "made his living carrying people across a river," and he wanted to find Christ, whom he believed to be the only one more powerful than himself (141). Attwater states that according to the story Christopher was once carrying a child across the river when the child started to become heavier and heavier and turned out to be Jesus Christ. Christopher was consequently put to death for his faith, and he became a martyr. Later he has become known as the patron saint of wayfarers (85). This story gives further significance to Black Christopher, because he may be read as a mythical figure who protects those who travel across boundaries in order to inhabit a utopian, postcategorical space.

The character of Black Christopher is, however, far from simple and unproblematic. The new, black Messiah who is supposed to be the messenger of love, or the new black Saint Christopher, the protector of travellers, becomes an advocate of militancy and the Black Power ideology. This becomes obvious through Leo's thoughts: "Christopher did not believe that deliverance would ever come—he was going to drag it down from heaven or raise it up from hell" (*Tell Me* 99). Christopher's words addressed to Leo also resound with the younger man's militant attitude: "'*I* know that you love me and you don't want no blood on my hands—dig—but if you don't want me to keep on going under the feet of horses, then I think you got to agree that we need us some guns. Right?'" (*Tell Me* 406; original emphasis). Although Leo reluctantly agrees with Christopher, he is deeply disturbed by these militant views: "There was a terrible weight on my heart—for a moment I was afraid that I was about to collapse again" (*Tell Me* 406). This is one of the most explicit allusions to the clash of nonviolence and Black Power militancy in the text.

Black Christopher would, therefore, seem to contradict the ideological message, the ideologeme, which the novel emits in this dialogical horizon. This is not, however, the case. Black Christopher is by no means a stereotypical representative of Black Power. It is crucial to notice that he drastically transgresses the ideological stances of the Black Power

movement through his homosexual relationship with Leo and his interracial relationship with Barbara. In other words, he thereby challenges and denounces the ideologies of heteronormativity and racial absolutism which have tended to plague certain strands of black radicalism. I will return to these issues in the next chapter; suffice it to point out at this stage that heteronormativity and homophobia have been a part of the Black Power discourse, as evidenced by the writings of Eldridge Cleaver (*Soul on Ice* [1968]), and Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) (*Home: Social Essays* [1966]), among others.

Black Christopher's attachment to Black Power is also visible on the level of language, as becomes obvious in the text when he explains what the younger generation of black radicals thinks of Leo:

> "Look. A whole lot of cats dig you, and some of them love you. But, Leo—you a fat cat now. That's the way a whole lot of people see you, and you can't blame them, how *else* can they see you? And we in a situation where we have to know which people we can trust, which people we can *use*—that's the nitty-gritty. Well, these cats are out here getting their ass whipped all the time, Leo. You get *your* ass whipped, at least it gets into the papers. But don't nobody care what happens to these kids—nobody! And all these laws and speeches don't mean shit. They do not mean *shit*. It's the spirit of the people, baby, the *spirit* of the people, they don't want us and they don't like us, and you see that spirit in the face of every cop. [...]" (*Tell Me* 402-03; original emphases)

The above quotation exemplifies the vernacular rhetoric of what Houston A. Baker terms "Black Power Language" in his book *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (1988) (173). This is an instance of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's view of language as an instrument of power: the black vernacular is a result of "the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages" (37). The fact that Christopher employs the rhetoric of black nationalism also further enhances the contradictory nature of his character: his use of the tough, boasting language of the rigid, heteronormative black nationalist ideal of masculinity is in severe conflict with his own bisexuality. In this sense, Christopher's transgression against the ideal of the normative heterosexuality of the black nationalist movement may be read as an instance of the Baldwinian critique of harmful, oppressive categories.

The tough rhetoric of black nationalist language is countered in *Tell Me* by Baldwin's use of standard English narrative, which often tends toward poetic language. Like the vernacular used by Christopher, also the standard English register of Baldwin's writing functions to criticize categorization and to endorse transcendence and transgression. This is in accordance with the view presented by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin which emphasizes the importance of cultural hybridization and syncretism in postcolonial literature and culture, that is, as far as African American literature is concerned, the creative co-operation of the cultural conventions of both European and African origin "in the service of a future community in which division and categorization are no longer the

bases of perception" (34). This is exactly the idea which *Tell Me*, and by extension, most of Baldwin's work, seeks to endorse.

Another significant contradiction arises when the character of Black Christopher is read in the context of what Manning Marable, in *Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (1991), terms "the messiah complex", that is, the failure of black leadership, which has "undermined the power, impact and longevity of black political organizations" (223). Marable argues that black protest movements have tended to rely on strong and charismatic individual leaders, probably modelled on the great leaders in the Old Testament, particularly Moses, "who led the oppressed Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage," and Joshua, "who brought them into the Promised Land" (223). African American examples include Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Malcolm X. The problem with this model of leadership is that it renders the movement which follows it extremely vulnerable. As Marable points out, "with the political demise or death of these individuals, their formations suffered and the social protest movements that had projected them onto the national stage were diminished" (223). This is clearly evidenced by the aftermath of the assassinations of King and Malcolm X: equally competent replacements for either of them could not be found. Marable goes on to proclaim that by depending on the messiah model of political leadership "black activists [have] become unwitting pawns in the strategy to impose conservative and even reactionary politics upon the African American community" (225). It is possible to read Black Christopher as a manifestation of this problematic nature of black leadership.

Another crucial point emerges when the concept of love as Baldwin conceives it is retained in focus. As has been noted earlier, Baldwin's ideal of love is conspicuously different from the conventional, romanticized concept—endorsed by much of the Hollywood film industry and works of popular fiction—which Baldwin refers to as "the infantile American sense of being made happy" ("Down" 82). It can be argued that the Baldwinian concept of love is actually a protest and counter-reaction against the conventional heteronormative and racist concept of love impregnated with restrictions, taboos, deception, and dishonesty, in other words, ideological in the most negative sense of the word.

In questioning the romanticized notion of love, *Tell Me* also challenges the concept of the happy end, which may be seen as a form of closure of classic realism. Catherine Belsey argues in her *Critical Practice* (1980) that in classic realism "the story moves inevitably towards *closure* which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself" (70; original emphasis). There is a certain "re-establishment of order" in *Tell Me,* but no "dissolution of enigma": Leo recovers from his heart attack and continues his career, but the interracial relationship between Leo and Barbara and the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher are left in limbo. Belsey also points out that "the subject finds in the discourse of the classic realist text a confirmation of the position of autonomous subjectivity represented in ideology as 'obvious.' It is possible to refuse that position, but to do so, at least at present, is to make a deliberate and ideological choice" (*Critical*

Practice 83-84). *Tell Me* does not provide Leo and Barbara with a life as a couple—thereby denying them the American fantasy of a "normal," happy family—nor does it seem to allow Leo and Christopher to find conventional happiness together. In refusing to fulfil the relationships which constitute the erotic triangle between Leo, Barbara, and Christopher, *Tell Me* makes "a deliberate and ideological choice" and challenges the principles of classic realism; in other words, the novel rejects the conventional ideal of the happy end and carries the Baldwinian ideologeme of love instead.

* * *

It seems clear that, despite the overwhelmingly negative reviews and the almost complete oblivion which have defined this novel for four decades, *Tell Me* is an integral part of Baldwin's legacy. Although problematic in some literary respects, *Tell Me* becomes a symbolic articulation of various crucial social problems and contradictions of the era in which it was written and seeks to resolve them on the level of the imaginary. Through the triangle of transgressive, unsuccessful homosexual and interracial relationships and their outcome in the mythical, hybridized character of Black Christopher, the novel evidently develops further Baldwin's vision of a better world created by people who no longer believe in the power and significance of the oppressive categorization of human beings. This is what I have referred to as postcategorical utopia.

According to David Leeming, *Tell Me* may be read as a sign of Baldwin's wavering between the ideologies of nonviolence and Black Power militancy or as a manifestation of the shifting of his attitude from nonviolence to militancy, that is, as "a conflict between his long-preached prophecy of love and Black Christopher's call to arms against a known enemy" (*JB* 281). As I have suggested, the novel clearly provides clues which point towards a different kind of reading. In my view, the text does not simply and unproblematically endorse either nonviolence or Black Power militancy. The point that I wish to make is that the failure of the text to adopt a clear stance in this debate becomes a strategic move which supports Baldwin's larger agenda of transcending and undermining social categorizations. *Tell Me* may be regarded as a vehicle for pointing out the problems and limitations of both nonviolence and Black Power ideologies and as suggesting that neither of them must be accepted uncritically. The novel seems to express the fear that the ideology of nonviolence will not, in the end, be able to help achieve changes profound enough, and therefore it embraces the new energy and potency of black radicalism. It is crucial to notice, however, that Black Christopher functions not only as an advocate of black radicalism but simultaneously as a critic of the homophobic and strict racial attitudes of the Black Power ideology, which becomes evident through his bisexual and interracial sexual behavior. This point emphasizes the significance of love—in the Baldwinian sense, as free from constrictive ideological categorizations—as the means of building a better world.

Most of the loose ends in the narrative could ultimately be connected in the character of Black Christopher, but the problem is that the text fails to place enough weight on the process of transformation from Christopher, the juvenile delinquent, into Black

Christopher, the mythical, black messiah-figure, and the political significance of this process. This is where the novel falters. This does not, however, indicate that *Tell Me* should be forgotten and left to gather dust on the shelf of complete failures and lost causes; quite the contrary. As I hope to have shown, the novel does raise and struggle with crucial issues, and although it arguably fails to translate them into a perfectly executed work of art, it does, nevertheless, suggest a resolution of these issues and, consequently, assumes its own important place in Baldwin's oeuvre and his search of a better world. Black Christopher becomes a personification of Baldwin's vision of postcategorical utopia, his unwavering belief in the moral progress of human beings as expressed in *Nothing Personal*:

> One day, perhaps, unimaginable generations hence, we will evolve into the knowledge that human beings are more important than real estate and will permit this knowledge to become the ruling principle of our lives. For I do not for an instant doubt, and I will go to my grave believing, that we can build Jerusalem, if we will. (*Nothing Personal* n.p.)

This passage may be read as connecting the utopian constructs of Black Christopher, as the black Christ or as the black Saint Christopher, and New Jerusalem, a city upon a hill, as the Puritans envisioned America. Baldwin uses his eloquent rhetoric and powerful allusions in order to point out the failure of America to fulfill the promise of a better world and, equally, to keep the faith in the possibility of the moral progress of humanity, that is, the possibility of postcategorical utopia.

5 Beyond Modernity and Its Black Counterculture: The Dialectic of Ideology and Utopia in Just above My Head

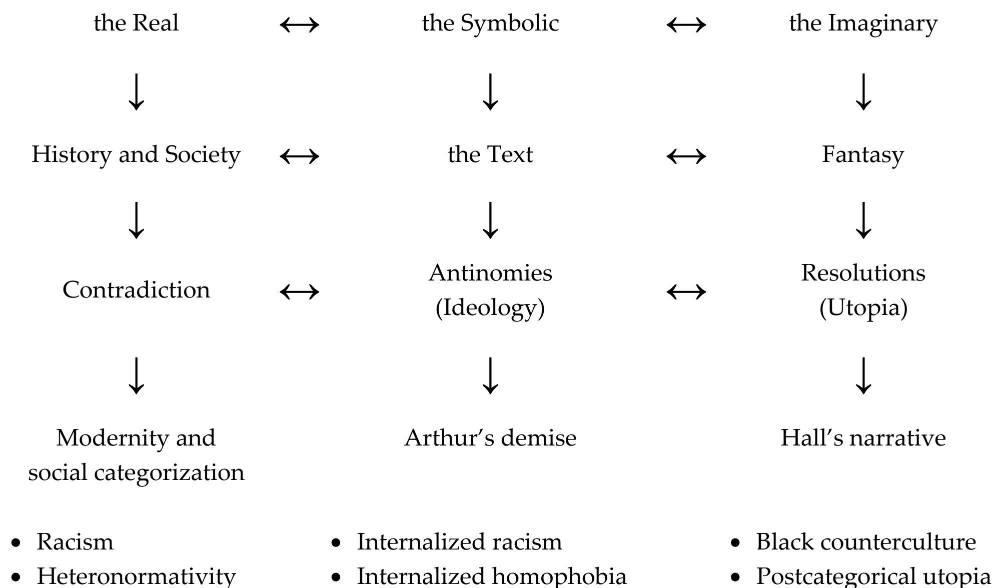
The fact that *Just above My Head* is Baldwin's most ambitious and thematically most extensive novel, revisiting various central concerns and locations of his earlier work, warrants the shift of the reading process to the final and widest horizon of the Jamesonian hermeneutic theory. What this means is that the novel is assigned a place and meaning in the history of modes of production, which is the largest possible social context according to the theory of the political unconscious. The main point is that the novel assumes a function as a critique of late modernity and, in other words, as a contribution to what Paul Gilroy calls the black counterculture of modernity in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (36). Anthony Giddens offers a general definition of modernity in his *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990): "'modernity' refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence" (1). In this study, modernity is understood in accordance with the concise summary by Stuart Hall, David Held, and Gregor McLennan in *Modernity and Its Futures* (1989) as a multidimensional concept which is based on the ideals of rationality and progress, and manifested on various levels of social life in such phenomena as industrialism, secularization, and globalization (2-3).

The role played by the categories of race, gender, and sexuality in this process is central. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), "racism is strictly a modern product. Modernity made racism possible. It also created a demand for racism; an era that declared achievement to be the only measure of human worth needed a theory of ascription to redeem boundary-drawing and boundary-guarding concerns under new conditions which made boundary-crossing easier than ever before" (61-62). According to Hall, Held, and McLennan, modernity "produced distinctive social patterns of gender and racial division, as well as other social divisions

which intersect with, but are not reducible to, class. This has given rise to complex patterns of asymmetrical life-chances, both within nation-states and between them" (3). These divisions and the disproportionate relations of power which they maintain are exactly what Baldwin's emancipatory thinking seeks to challenge and undermine. In other words, modernity has constructed the ideal subject—white, heterosexual, male—on the basis of these identity categories and, simultaneously, rendered deviations from this ideal subordinate. This is where the Baldwinian ideal of postcategorical utopia becomes ultimately connected to the large outline of history as a reaction against the identity categories produced and sustained by modernity.

Just above My Head functions as an indication of how Baldwin's oeuvre assumes a role in what Jameson calls the history of modes of production. This is achieved in the novel primarily through extensive use of black music and the emphasizing of its political significance as an instrument of resistance against social oppression. It is crucial to notice, however, that *Just above* must not be regarded as simply a link in the chain of black counterculture. That is, the novel does not uncritically continue and endorse the ideological heritage of the tradition; rather, it seeks to go beyond the ideological stances and categories which have often been taken for granted and accepted as unquestionable truths. This becomes particularly evident in its critique of the heteronormative tendencies visible in black cultural traditions, which is conveyed in the text through Arthur's ambivalent character and his tragic demise. It is exactly here that we again encounter the Baldwinian ideal of what I have termed postcategorical utopia. This may be represented as follows:

Fig. 4. The dialectic of ideology and utopia in *Just above My Head*



To a large extent, *Just above* deals with the same contradictions and antinomies—produced by the ideologies of racism and heteronormativity—as most of Baldwin's earlier novels. It is, therefore, appropriate to focus on the question of what happens to the ideal of postcategorical utopia, which I have defined as the major thematic undercurrent which runs through the entirety of Baldwin's oeuvre; that is, how does his final novel portray this utopian impulse and does it live on after this novel? These questions constitute the central concern of this chapter.

The reading will, to a certain extent, follow the same logic as adopted in the previous chapters, initiating with the identification and explication of the central antinomies and ideological closures of the novel, reading them as symbolic, transcoded manifestations of the contradictions of the level of history and society, and then proceeding to an analysis of the functioning of the utopian desire, which the text generates as a response and a solution to the antinomies. The main difference, as far as *Just above* is concerned, is that the social scope of the ideological closure has now expanded, from the level of black family and community in *Go Tell*, and the issues of interracial and homosexual love in American society in *Tell Me*, to encompass the vast historical and ideological tradition of Western modernity.

Arthur's untimely demise is what I regard as the central antinomy of the novel. It is the incident which generates the whole narrative in which Hall relates the life stories of not only his brother and himself, but of two interrelated families: the Montanas and the Millers. This is a massive process, which may be regarded as Hall's search for redemption from guilt, because he seems to hold himself at least partly responsible for the tragedy which became of Arthur's life. The novel obviously contains other significant incidents as well, the violent, incestuous rape of Julia by her father and her subsequent journey to Africa in an attempt to reconstruct her shattered identity being perhaps the most important of these. The focus of attention will, however, be placed on Arthur's life in the context of racism and heteronormativity, and his attempts and, in the end, his incapability to transcend these categories.

Just above relies heavily on the tradition of black music. First of all, the novel makes extensive use of song lyrics in the epigraphs of each of its books and in the narrative itself, which is typical of all of Baldwin's novels. Secondly, the main character, Arthur, is a gospel and soul singer, and, therefore, the tradition of black music carries a significant ideological and polemical weight here; perhaps even more so than in any of his other novels. As various critics, for example Lynn Orilla Scott (*JBLF* xxiv, 123, 155), Eleanor Traylor (96-98), Trudier Harris (*Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* 169-70), and Carolyn Wedin Sylvander (135), have noted, *Just above* may be read as an expansion and elaboration of the themes introduced in the short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), which also focuses on music and is narrated from the point of view of the musician's brother.

In African American culture, the exceptional strength and significance of the tradition of black music is evidenced by its remarkable influence on other forms of black expression, especially literature. This is true on the thematic level, as many novels and short stories are centred on black musicians, and also on the level of form, as narratives

often quote song lyrics in epigraphs and replicate musical motifs and patterns. As Saadi Simawe argues in his introduction to *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison* (2000), African American writers

> attribute subversive, unsettling, antiestablishment, and ultimately liberating and transforming power to the music and the musicians they portray. […] Fiction written under the influence of music naturally aspires to imitate musical structures and tends to emphasize the sound and the rhythmic patterns of language. In addition to the impact music wields on characterization, theme, and structure in the works of fiction, the diction itself experiences more freedom, where sound of words, in many musical passages, frees itself from meaning, constantly aspiring to grow more musical. (xxiii)

This passage aptly summarizes the integral role of black music in African American culture in terms of both content and form. Examples of novels which thematically foreground black music include John A. Williams's *Clifford's Blues* (1999), which narrates the story of a black gay jazz musician in the Dachau concentration camp during the Second World War, Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues," various poems by Langston Hughes, and numerous other works by black writers. As far as the adaptation of the formal features of blues and jazz in literature are concerned, the intricate call and response patterns of different soloing voices in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) is one of the most famous instances. This formal and thematic emphasis on musicality is one of the central features which give African American literature its distinctive character.

The integral role of black music in *Just above* sets certain requirements for the reading process; that is, it calls for a theory capable of explicating the ideological and political significance of this tradition. This is where Paul Gilroy's influential account of black music as a decisive factor in reproducing "a distinctive counterculture of modernity" (36), becomes particularly relevant. The bottom line is that the plight of the peoples of the black diaspora is based on the ideologies of the Enlightenment and modernity, which, according to Gilroy, have rendered them "as people *in* but not necessarily *of* the modern, western world" (29; my emphases). Black musical expression has functioned as a form of resistance against the oppressive racial typology which has been an inextricable part of the ideologies of modernity. As this implies, Gilroy's thinking may be read in line with the dialectic of ideology and utopia developed and used in this study. In short, modernity is what establishes the ideological closure of racial categorization, which is, in turn, countered by black resistance, of which the tradition of black music is an integral part. This approach forms the basic guideline for the present chapter.

My reading of *Just above* starts from the dynamics of the general framework of the novel. The antinomy which generates the whole narrative is Arthur's life and his untimely death at the age of thirty-nine. The reasons which have led to this tragedy revolve around the ideologies of racism and heteronormativity, which establish and maintain oppressive categorizations and create a cluster of unresolved contradictions in Arthur's character. As an artist, celebrity, and civil rights activist whose sexuality

transgresses the heterosexist norms of both the dominant white patriarchy and the idealized black masculinity, Arthur's life becomes the central ideological closure of the novel, and generates the whole text as a utopian attempt at a resolution. This is how the dialectic of ideology and utopia functions in *Just above* as far as the whole structure of the novel is concerned. It is exactly this ideological closure around which the narrative is organized and which, in the end, determines the positions and significance of all characters and subplots in the text.

This chapter will, firstly, provide an overview of Paul Gilroy's account of the black counterculture of modernity, which will function as the tool of locating *Just above* in the third horizon of modes of production of the Jamesonian hermeneutic framework. The analysis of the text will start from an introduction to the concept of call and response as a fundamental formal feature in African American culture and, in accordance with the theory of the political unconscious, as the ideology of form (see *PU* 98-99) in which the antinomies of the text are confronted with utopian resolutions. The analysis will then explicate the role of black music as a form of resistance against white racism and, subsequently, move on to an account of how the text seeks to transcend the limits of the black counterculture by challenging the presence of heteronormativity and homophobia exemplified particularly by the ideologies of the black radicalism of the 1960s. In other words, the text assumes a role in the black counterculture of Western modernity, but, simultaneously, reaches beyond its ideological boundaries towards what I regard as the cultural revolution of postcategorical utopia.

5.1 PAUL GILROY AND THE BLACK COUNTERCULTURE OF MODERNITY

The first page of *Just above My Head* is crucially important, but not merely in the way that the first pages of all novels are, as a rule, important as a gateway into the narrative. What is exceptionally significant here is the fact that on the first page the text briefly, but decidedly, touches upon four different locations: Britain, America, Africa, and France, which carry a huge allegorical significance with particular reference to the history of the black diaspora. The narrative starts off with a graphic depiction of Arthur's death "in a men's room in the basement of a London pub" (*Just above* 3). It then shifts to the telephone call relating the news to Hall in New York before moving on to provide a description of Arthur's thinning hair as "that rain forest of Senegalese hair" (*Just above* 3). Subsequently, the focus is briefly placed on Arthur's lover, Jimmy, in Paris, and finally on Jimmy's sister, Julia, in Yonkers, New York. All of these places are important in the story which follows, but even more importantly, they draw a map of the Transatlantic Triangular Trade and evoke the memory of slavery by connecting Africa, Europe, and the Americas, the main continents of the black diaspora, or, as Paul Gilroy puts it, the black Atlantic.

The transatlantic scope of the text is not the only connection between *Just above* and Gilroy's thinking. The central role and function of black music in *Just above* requires a theoretical viewpoint capable of explicating the vast significance of this tradition. This is exactly where Gilroy's influential account of black music as a counterculture of

modernity assumes the focus of attention. His reading of the antinomies of the Western concept of modernity and the ambiguous place of black people simultaneously inside and outside of it shifts the scope of this study from the narrower limits of the first and second Jamesonian hermeneutic horizons to the third and final horizon. What this means is that the final phase of Baldwin's search for postcategorical utopia is read in terms of the black counterculture of modernity. The first step of this process is to introduce the central points of Gilroy's thinking as they are expressed in *The Black Atlantic*.

The relationship between black people and modernity is inherently ambivalent. Gilroy seeks to assess this ambivalence in *The Black Atlantic* by discussing the various aspects of the specific nature of modernity as experienced by black people. Gilroy argues that black people stand in an ambiguous position "both inside and outside the West" (30). In other words, the experiences of black people have usually been regarded as something external to the white, Western narrative of modernity, although that narrative has significantly depended on the physical and social slavery of blacks. As Kenneth Mostern states in his "Social Marginality/Blackness: Subjects of Postmodernity," Gilroy's point is that the members of the black diaspora have been excluded from the Western intellectual history and that the intellectual history of blackness remains yet unwritten (172). Gilroy emphasizes the need "to have blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and an intellectual history," and "to get black cultural expressions, analyses, and histories taken seriously in academic circles" (5-6). *The Black Atlantic* is a significant effort to redress this state of affairs.

Gilroy argues that the ideas of nationalism and ethnic absolutism which dominate both white and black political cultures must be called into serious question (5, 31). He stresses the importance of the experience of the black diaspora, the black Atlantic; that is, "the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering" shared by the black people of Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe (3). The common denominator of the black Atlantic, according to Gilroy, was first slavery and then the memory of slavery, "a living intellectual resource" in the expressive political culture of blacks, which has led them to question the Western ideals of social and political existence (39). This is the foundation of his strategy of transcending the categories of nationalism and ethnic particularism.

In Gilroy's view the concept of double consciousness is a fundamental element in the intellectual history of the black diaspora. He uses it to connote the problematic subjectivity of black people, located between "two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations" (1). It serves as a central theme which underlies the whole argument of *The Black Atlantic*. The concept was originally coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in order to account for the problematic position of African American identity simultaneously inside and outside American society:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but

> only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings" 29)

This doubleness, the sense of being simultaneously both on the inside and on the outside, is one of the most significant aspects of the African American experience of modernity. Gilroy aspires, however, to take this argument further by claiming that Du Bois's interest was not limited to African Americans, but extends to the experience of all black populations after slavery (126). This is supported by the fact that some of Du Bois's later work adopts a clearly pan-African viewpoint and, according to Gilroy's suggestion, includes implications of the possibility to interpret the cultures of the black diaspora as expressions and critiques of the ambivalent nature of modernity, particularly the problematic coexistence of rationality and racial terror (117-18).

Gilroy goes on to argue that the concept of double consciousness results from

> the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalistic in that it derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not-yet-citizens find themselves, rather than from their aspiration towards a nation state of their own. The third is diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universalist. (127)

Gilroy's argument, which runs through the whole book, is that the first two should be transcended in favour of the third mode, because the grounds for racial particularism and nationalism are all too vague. He suggests that the conception—favoured by so-called "cultural insiderism"—of the nation as a clearly delineated, ethnically homogeneous entity is illusory (3). The alternative which he offers to this racially particularistic and nationalistic thinking is the theory of the black Atlantic characterized by hybridity and heterogeneity united by the memory of slavery shared by the black populations of Africa, the Americas, and Europe (39). This is one of the parallel lines of thought between Gilroy and Baldwin, as the former's rejection of racial particularism and nationalism clearly runs parallel with the latter's distrust of categorizations.

Modernity itself is, undoubtedly, a concept of remarkable complexity. It is usually viewed as a concept of periodization which is based on the ideals of rationalism endorsed by the project of the Enlightenment from the eighteenth century onwards. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (1985), Jürgen Habermas points out that classical social theorists foreground the process of cultural rationalization and the consequent secularization and the disintegration of religious world views as central tendencies of modernity (1-2). What renders modernity particularly problematic, as Gilroy suggests, is that this process of rationalization has resulted in the differentiation of

science, morality, and art into autonomous spheres, which has, in turn, caused fragmentation in various fields of society (50). This differentiation is also evident in the occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, and culture and politics.[19] It may be argued that the practice of racial slavery was made possible by this separation which enabled the seemingly rational justification of slavery from a purely economic viewpoint.

Being a characteristically Western concept, modernity has, as noted above, traditionally excluded the experiences of the black diaspora, and this is also the case with most theorists of postmodernity. According to Gilroy, there has been a tendency to downplay the significance of racial slavery in the context of modernity. Even when its relevance has been acknowledged, the history of slavery has been regarded exclusively as a part of the black heritage rather than as a fundamental element of Western modernity (49). Gilroy presents an interesting view:

> there is little attention given to the possibility that much of what is identified as postmodern may have been foreshadowed, or prefigured, in the lineaments of modernity itself. Defenders and critics of modernity seem to be equally unconcerned that the history and expressive culture of the African diaspora, the practice of racial slavery, or the narratives of European imperial conquest may require all simple periodisations of the modern and the postmodern to be drastically rethought. (42)

In other words, the repression of the black experience in the theories of modernity and postmodernity now returns to undermine the credibility of these occidental concepts, and they should, therefore, be radically rethought without ignoring the significance of slavery and its aftermath. This point is, to some extent, reminiscent of that presented by Phillip Brian Harper in *Framing the Margins*, where he suggests that some characteristically postmodern phenomena have actually been experienced by marginalized minorities and represented in their literatures prior to what many theorists have called postmodernity (3). Gilroy believes, however, as Mostern points out, that discussions on the black experience of postmodernity are somewhat premature until the black diaspora's experience of modernity has been profoundly assessed (172).

The fact that black people and their expressive cultures may be regarded as both internal and external to modernity has provided them with a viewpoint which permits a critical assessment of the ideals and principles of Western thinking. Gilroy emphasizes that the recent history of black people caught in this ambiguous position "involves processes of political organisation that are explicitly transnational and international in nature," and that this requires a profound questioning of the adequacy of nationalist perspectives as a "means to understand the forms of resistance and accommodation intrinsic to modern black culture" (5). Gilroy is strongly opposed to the principles of ethnic absolutism, because he seems to regard them as an excuse to isolate the histories and experiences of black and white people from each other, which inevitably leads to an

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[19] This point forms a link to Jameson's thinking and especially his view of the differentiation process (see, for example, Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* 90).

impoverished and partial viewpoint. He prefers to stress the ultimate relatedness of the black and white experiences, because they have not been "sealed off hermetically from each other," but have, instead, been inevitably linked with each other (2). This is obviously an attack against the idea of cultural nationalism and the overintegrated conceptions of culture, which entail a profound separation of black and white histories and experiences.

There are, in Gilroy's view, two drastically different but necessarily related perspectives of understanding issues of identity, politics, and cultural processes of black people: the essentialist and the pluralist (31). The former standpoint endorses viewing cultural processes as "the expression of an essential, unchanging, sovereign racial self," whereas the latter regards them as "the effluent from a constituted subjectivity that emerges contingently from the endless play of racial signification" (36). Gilroy suggests that this opposition is unsatisfactory and fruitless, because neither of these narcissistic positions is simply correct or incorrect. That is, they are not mutually exclusive, and both have at least some relevance once this dichotomy is deconstructed.

The respective pertinence of these seemingly antagonistic positions is suitably exemplified in black music: the "squeamish, nationalist essentialism," in Gilroy's words, is supported by the fact that "the preeminence of music within the diverse black communities of the Atlantic diaspora is itself an important element in their essential connectedness," while the "sceptical, saturnalian pluralism" finds some confirmation in the statement that "the histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription that the musical culture encloses are a living legacy that should not be reified in the primary symbol of the diaspora and then employed as an alternative to the recurrent appeal of fixity and rootedness" (102). This is closely connected with the view which Simon Featherstone puts forward in *Postcolonial Cultures* (2005): "The hybrid resources of Black Atlantic music are shaped and used by its practitioners, but the formations of those resources are intimately bound to histories and movements that are uncontrolled and unplanned, but resisted through culture" (45).

Closely connected with this is Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the difference between what he regards as intentional or constructed hybridity and, on the other hand, organic hybridity (358). Jazz is a prime example of the latter, aptly illustrated by Ishmael Reed in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) as a disease, "a *psychic epidemic*" (5; original emphasis), "Jes Grew" (4). Constructed hybridity, according to Featherstone, is marked by "synchronic musical fusions and manufactured encounters between musicians from different cultures" (42), such as the collaboration between American guitarist Ry Cooder and Cuban musicians which resulted in the film and album *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999).

Gilroy seeks to transcend this restrictive polarity by introducing a third position which he, relying on Michel Foucault's thinking, terms *anti-anti-essentialism* (102). He argues that identity need not be grasped either as a fixed essence or as a completely contingent construction:

> Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and

> legitimises it is persuasive or institutionally powerful. Whatever the radical constructionists may say, it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires. (102)

Black identity is, then, neither an immutable, absolute essence which could be used as a justification for ethnic absolutism or nationalism, nor a whimsical, random construction which can be shaped either which way the wind blows. Gilroy points out that some underlying affiliations are necessary in theorizing the black Atlantic; some unifying dynamic or structure of feeling must be identified in seeking to establish a fundamental connection between these apparently dispersed and disparate black cultures of Africa, the Americas, and Europe (80). The concept of diaspora is crucial in this endeavour to examine the differences and similarities between these cultures and, thereby, to reply to both essentialist and anti-essentialist views. Gilroy argues that it is irreplaceable "in focusing on the political and ethical dynamics of the unfinished history of blacks in the modern world," and, despite the obvious perils of idealism associated with the concept, it in the very least offers "an heuristic means to focus on the relationship of identity and non-identity in black political culture" (80-81).

One of Gilroy's central points is that the people of the black diaspora have produced a distinctive counterculture of modernity, which finds its clearest expression in black music (5). The enhanced importance of musical expression among black people may partly be explained by the fact that being denied access to literacy, slaves turned to a medium more easily available for them, that is, music. According to Gilroy,

> [t]he power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slaves' access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantations and in the barracoons. Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. (74)

In effect, music became a tool of resistance and protest as well as a form of compensation for suffering. This can be conceptualized in terms of the dialectic of ideology and utopia developed in this study. That is, music has had an ideological function as a strategy of containment and compensation, but, simultaneously, it has carried a utopian vocation by resisting oppression and envisioning alternative futures. Gilroy argues that the persistent commitment of black music to the idea of and struggle for emancipation has been crucial, because it has functioned as a catalyst for "communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational" (36).

The resistant and subversive aspects of the black counterculture are evident in *Just above*, particularly in the crucial role of black musical culture both in terms of individual subjectivity and collective resistance against white racism.

The function of black music as a counterculture of modernity is summarized by Gilroy as "posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be," and as supplying "a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present" (36). Being both a product and an expression of the history of slavery and racism in the West, it constructs a critique of modernity and the concomitant principles and practices of racial capitalism. This critique is, according to Gilroy, achieved through the normative content and, on the other hand, the utopian objectives of black music (37). The normative content endorses what Gilroy, following Seyla Benhabib, calls "the politics of fulfilment: the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished" (37). Gilroy points out that this is a mode of discursive communication, and although it is not literal, its message can be deciphered in "what is said, shouted, screamed, or sung" (37). A prime example of this in *Just above* is the conspicuous allegorical dimension of gospel lyrics as a way of strengthening the collective spirit of resistance, especially in Arthur's performances in fund-raising rallies for the civil rights movement (see, for instance, *Just above* 406-09).

The utopian aspirations of black music reach beyond the discursive dimension of expression in order to refer to "the politics of transfiguration," which, in Gilroy's words,

> emphasises the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction. (37; original emphasis)

This passage solidifies my conviction that Gilroy's thinking sits comfortably together with both the research object and the theoretical approach of this study and strengthens my views on both these levels. Based on the definition above, it would not seem far-fetched at all to juxtapose the Baldwinian telos of postcategorical utopia with Gilroy's conception of the politics of transfiguration. To be sure, the emergence of "new desires, social relations, and modes of association" (37) is largely in line with what the Baldwinian ideal of society without oppressive categories might be like. In addition, it is evident that Gilroy's account of the black counterculture of modernity may be read according to the strategy developed in this thesis. It clearly emerges as a result of the dialectic of ideology and utopia; that is, the ideological closure of racial subordination, inherent in the narrative of Western modernity, generates the utopian desire and impulse in the form of a distinctive counterculture, the primary expression of which is black music.

The politics of transfiguration adopts hidden, covert strategies to convey its message. Gilroy argues that its critique of modernity must be read, at least partly, on a different

level in the kinesics of dancing, playing, acting, and singing, but also in the stretched and distorted words which are sung (37). This form of cultural expression and the politics of transfiguration it entails function to expose the concealed fractures in the concept of modernity; in particular, as Gilroy states, the antinomy of rationality and barbarity manifest in the practice of racial oppression (38). A significant aspect of Gilroy's view is expressed as follows: "I am proposing, then, that we reread and rethink this expressive counterculture not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics" (38-39). An interesting connection is thereby established between Gilroy's account of the significance of the black counterculture of modernity and Fredric Jameson's Marxian idea of the underlying totality of social reality. Both these lines of thought are committed to resisting the differentiation process, one of the fundamental characteristics of occidental modernity. This fundamental questioning and repudiation of the principles of modernity forms the polemical core of this black counterculture.

A significant point which Gilroy raises is that black expressive cultures have tended to favour the concept of *eschatology* rather than utopia in their resistance to slavery and other forms of racial oppression: "In keeping with the spiritual components which also help to distinguish them from modern secular rationality, the slaves' perspectives deal only secondarily in the idea of a rationally pursued utopia. Their primary categories are steeped in the idea of a revolutionary or eschatological apocalypse—the Jubilee"[20] (55-56). Eschatology in the Christian tradition is defined by Gareth Jones in *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (1996) as "the doctrine of the last things, i.e. those events which will occur as a consequence of God's judgement of humanity, the end of the temporal order and the inauguration of a different, transcendent reality" (299). Baldwin's famous words at the end of "Down" exemplify the importance of eschatology in African American writing: "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfilment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" (89; original emphasis).

In the context of the black diaspora, eschatological discourses have assumed an integral role as guidelines towards emancipation. This is evident especially in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century which often conceptualize freedom from bondage in terms of violence and death. One of the most notable examples of this is the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who, after a failed attempt to escape, killed her three-year-old daughter and tried to kill the rest of her children instead of allowing them to be taken back into slavery. The story has been revisited by Frederick Douglass in his novella *The*

[20] This biblical tradition refers to a mythical moment of liberation, explained primarily in Leviticus 25. It carries a variety of meanings, including the restitution of the land (25:28) and the freeing of slaves and servants (25:39-40). As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker point out in *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), jubilee has come to represent "[a] plan for liberation," "an attempt to solve the problems of poverty, slavery, the factory, and the plantation" (290). According to Hans Ucko, jubilee may also be regarded as "a resolve against a status quo of continued oppression and exploitation of people and creation" ("The Jubilee as a Challenge" 2). The promise of freedom from slavery is the obvious reason for the enhanced significance of this tradition among the enslaved.

Heroic Slave (1852) and by Toni Morrison in her critically acclaimed novel *Beloved* (1987). Gilroy points out that

> the positive preference for death rather than continued servitude can be read as a contribution towards slave discourse on the nature of freedom itself. It supplies a valuable clue towards answering the question of how the realm of freedom is conceptualised by those who have never been free. This inclination towards death and away from bondage is fundamental. It reminds us that in the revolutionary eschatology which helps to define this primal history of modernity, whether apocalyptic or redemptive, it is the moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means. The discourse of black spirituality which legitimizes these moments of violence possesses a utopian truth content that projects beyond the limits of the present. (68)

The primacy of spiritual eschatology over rational utopianism and the preference for death rather than slavery indicate the strength of the yearning for freedom from bondage, of the impulse to undermine the status quo of slavery by any means necessary.

It is important to notice, however, that the apparent primacy of eschatology over utopia in the tradition of black narratives is by no means absolute. To begin with, there are examples of clear, detailed visions of ideal communities in African American literature. Possibly the first utopian novel written by an American of African descent was *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) by Sutton E. Griggs, which presents the idea of a black state, of "building up this Imperium, whose holy mission it is to grapple with our enemy and wrest from him our stolen rights, given to us by nature and nature's God" (153). Another important instance of an African American literary utopia can be found in Zora Neale Hurston's arguably idealized depictions of the hometown of her youth, Eatonville, Florida, which was the first incorporated exclusively black community in America. In her collection of folklore *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston describes it as a town with a "love of talk and song" (7). Carla Kaplan characterizes Hurston's Eatonville as "a utopian, imagined world," marked by the absence of racial conflict, and relative plenty (38). In contrast to Hurston's harmonious utopian vision, Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* (1997) offers a grim account of an all-black American town, Ruby, Oklahoma, plagued by financial dispute, ancestral feuds, isolation, exclusion, and religious fervour, and, ultimately, the massacre by its people of the four nuns of the nearby convent. In an interview conducted by Elizabeth Farnsworth, Morrison points out that

> [t]he isolation, the separateness, is always a part of any utopia. And it was my meditation, if you will, and interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, it's based on the notion of exclusivity. All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in. ("Conversation: Toni Morrison")

In effect, *Paradise*, as a narrative of a failed community, questions the very possibility of utopia based of strategies of inclusion and exclusion. This African American utopia which exists in the context of racial oppression seems to fall prey to the same issues which largely define the outside world.

What is crucial for my argument, however, is not the occurrence of narratives of actual utopian communities in African American literature, but, rather, the functioning of what, following Fredric Jameson (see, for example, *Marxism and Form* 142) and Ruth Levitas (see 7-8), I have been calling the utopian impulse or the utopian desire. This underlying textual impulse which seeks to resolve the antinomies of the text by projecting alternative visions is a fundamental aspect of the literatures produced by the black diaspora. That is, the narratives may be read as functioning by the dialectic of ideology and utopia, where the antinomies of the texts and their resolutions are regarded as symbolic enactments of the problems and contradictions of the level of history and society. In other words, the texts adopt the function of resistance against the unjust status quo and are, as a result, profoundly politicized.

It has become evident that black experiences of modernity are necessarily complex and ambiguous. Located in a no-person's-land between Africa and the West and at the antinomical junction of the Enlightenment ideal of rationality and the practice of racial terror and subordination, black subjectivity has been cast as necessarily problematic or even paradoxical. The experiences of black people in this problematic position have produced cultural expressions which may be regarded as a counterculture to the Western concept of modernity. Slavery and its memory have functioned as a central instrument of constructing a characteristically black view of modernity, which is not, however, a simple repudiation of it. Instead, as Gilroy points out, the historical relationship between the people of the black diaspora and Western modernity involves not merely antagonism but also mutual dependency (48). In other words, the experiences of black and white people cannot be separated neatly from each other, and black critiques of modernity may concurrently be regarded as its affirmation. The way in which the peoples of the black Atlantic have experienced modernity should, therefore, be included as a substantial factor in the dialectical reassessment of the intellectual tradition of modernity.

5.2 MUSIC AND THE TROPE OF CALL AND RESPONSE

Given the importance of music in *Just above My Head*, this reading will emphasize the ambiguous and transgressive legacy of the protagonist of the novel, Arthur, the gospel singer. Later on, he expands his repertoire to include secular forms of black musical expression, the blues and soul, and, in so doing, becomes a link in the chain of the tradition of black music and religion. Keeping in mind Gilroy's conception of black music as an integral manifestation of the black counterculture of modernity, this means that Arthur's character is inevitably invested with the political weight and power of black resistance against white racism. What makes his legacy ambiguous is the tension between his transgressive sexuality and the heteronormativity which can be detected within black cultural traditions. This discrepancy is an increasingly heavy burden for Arthur, which

ultimately crushes him and becomes the main reason for his tragic demise. To phrase this in terms of the theory of the political unconscious, the text posits Arthur as a force field where a variety of opposing forces clash in terms of race and sexuality. This antinomical character is the locus of the central ideological closure of the novel in which the ideologies of racism and heteronormativity and their counterforces meet. As a consequence, Arthur becomes an embodiment of what must now, within the scope of the third horizon of Jameson's hermeneutic theory, be read as a cultural revolution: the Baldwinian vision of, or, rather, the impulse towards, postcategorical utopia.

I will first read the novel in terms of the ideological closure of racism and the utopian projections of black resistance. This is done by explicating the contexts of racism in the text and the forms of resistance exemplified by Arthur's role as a gospel singer who participates in the activities of the civil rights movement. The focus of this reading will fall on the simultaneous significance and ambivalence of black music and religion as tools of active resistance and, alternatively, as sources of passivizing ideological compensation. Secondly, attention will be paid to the ideology of heteronormativity in the black counterculture of modernity, which constitutes the second part of the ideological closure in *Just above*. The reading will concentrate on the ways in which the text challenges the heteronormative tendencies visible in black religious and musical traditions through Arthur's unconventional sexuality. Of particular significance is what may be regarded as a process of queering the gospel tradition: as Scott has pointed out, the text represents gospel music "as a coded expression of sexual desire" by explicitly depicting "homosexual desire in a religious context" (*JBLF* 144, 145). This is done by saturating the performances of the gospel quartet, the Trumpets of Zion, with sexual implications and, conversely, by depicting homosexual love, as Scott puts it, "in the public language of spirituals and gospel" (*JBLF* 166). It may consequently be argued that *Just above* reaches beyond the limitations of the black counterculture of modernity, and the relations of inequality produced and maintained by its heteronormative tendencies, towards the horizon of the cultural revolution of postcategorical utopia.

The reading will pay attention to the presence of the musical elements in the texts; especially the occurrence of what Gilroy regards as the main formal characteristic of black musical traditions, that is, *antiphony*, or *call and response*, which "has come to be seen as a bridge from music into other modes of cultural expression, supplying, along with improvisation, montage, and dramaturgy, the hermeneutic keys to the full medley of black artistic practices" (78). Antiphony is clearly visible in *Just above* on various levels, ranging from the level of the narrated events of the novel, particularly the interaction between Arthur and his audience, to the level of the narrative and the overall structure of the novel. This formal feature and its different meanings in the text will be read as a symbolic enactment of what Jameson regards as the largest possible context of any work of art; that is, the history of modes of production (*PU* 76), which in this case denotes the Western concept of modernity. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss briefly the concept of call and response and its significance in the context of African American culture.

Craig Werner points out in *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (1994) that the concept of call and response is "[g]rounded in West African

conceptions of the interrelationship of individual and community" (xviii). This is an interesting issue, not merely because it supports diasporic thinking, but, importantly, in the sense that it is precisely the problematic relationship between Arthur and the black community which may be read as a central antinomy of *Just above*. Werner goes on to underscore the significance of African oral traditions as the main source of the significance of the trope of call and response in African American culture (xviii). A point which Carol E. Henderson makes in *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* (2002) foregrounds the same premise as Werner's: "The process of call and response is an integral part of communication in the African American community. Its roots go back to Africa, and its influence was retained in the way slaves communicated with each other as they worked in the plantation fields" (11).

One of the principal features of African oral traditions is the reciprocal and communicative nature of the relationship between the performer and the audience. Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman explicate this reciprocity in their classic article "How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community" by offering a concise definition of the concept of call and response: "this African-derived process is the verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which each of the speaker's statements (or 'calls') is punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (4). Harold Scheub's view, presented in *Story* (1998), elaborates this further by stating that "[o]ral narratives are a part of a communication mechanism, whereby coded messages—emotions—are relayed by artistic means, by verbal and nonverbal means, to a receptive audience that is well acquainted with the images being evoked by the artist" (128-29). The audience, then, responds to the call of the performer by either affirming it or presenting an alternative perspective. This is what makes performance an interactive and communal process. In *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002), Cheryl L. Keyes argues that "[c]all and response is ubiquitous to the African American aesthetic in that it synchronizes speakers and listeners within a performance event, but more importantly, it is the life force of black communication. Without this interchange, black communication is lifeless" (26).

Call and response is closely related to what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. regards as an integral feature of the black vernacular: the concept of Signifyin(g). Gates stresses that this term must not be equated with the Saussurean terminology of signification, because these belong to what Gates sees as "two parallel discursive universes" related by both their similarities and their differences (*The Signifying Monkey* 44-45). Signifyin(g) may be understood as a rhetorical strategy and self-reflexive use of language. Gates regards this self-reflexivity, or tendency to "theorize about itself," as a characteristic feature of the black vernacular which distinguishes it from other linguistic traditions (*The Signifying Monkey* xxi). What makes the connection between Signifyin(g) and call and response conspicuous is Gates's view according to which "[r]epetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it *is* repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (*The Signifying Monkey* xxiv; original emphasis). It is exactly this "repetition with a signal difference," which

takes call and response a step further by emphasizing the element of change in the dialogue between cultural objects or agents or between the performer and the audience.

It is crucial to notice, particularly in the context of this study, that this communicative interchange has remarkable political and even utopian implications pertaining to such issues as identity, community, and race, for example. As Gilroy points out: "there is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolises and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships" (79). It may therefore be maintained that antiphony is one of the main forms which the utopian impulse assumes in African American culture. It is a vehicle of negotiating the problems of identity and social oppression, as well as a medium of imagining alternatives to the status quo. On the other hand, its ideological functions must not be ignored, either, because it obviously contains a compensatory dimension in offering a momentary release from the effects of social inequality. What this suggests is that the trope of call and response is a complex and, to an extent, contradictory concept in the African American context, because it may be read in terms of both ideology and utopia, that is, it can act simultaneously as an instrument of stagnation, as a strategy of containment, and, on the other hand, as a catalyst of revolutionary impulses.

Black artistic practices may be regarded as consisting of dialogues in which, according to Gilroy, "[l]ines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others. Antiphony is the structure that hosts these essential encounters" (79). This is particularly evident in African American music, which is arguably the most important and influential of all black cultural forms and, therefore, carries special significance and polemical weight. Werner discusses the manifestations of this in terms of impulses, that is, as "processes capable of generating and expressing powerful insights grounded in, but not limited to, Afro-American experience" (218). This is largely based on Ralph Ellison's definition of the blues impulse as

> an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (78-79)

This strategy functions as the basis for what Ellison defines as the jazz impulse:

> [T]rue jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. (234)

As Werner points out, when defined in this way, these impulses may be applied to any form of cultural expression and function as a gateway for the entry of new ideas into the tradition (xxi).

Werner summarizes the three different impulses of blues, jazz, and gospel as follows:

> If the blues impulse can be described as a three-stage secular process—brutal experience, lyrical expression, reaffirmation—then the gospel impulse can be described in parallel terms derived from the sacred vocabulary of the African-American church: the burden, bearing witness, the vision of (universal) salvation. To summarize, awareness of its blues and gospel roots highlights two central functions of the jazz impulse: *clarifying (blues) realities* and *envisioning (gospel) possibilities*. (269; original emphases)

The terms of the gospel impulse are particularly noteworthy, because they establish a useful connection to the dialectic of ideology and utopia articulated in this study. On the level of the African American experience, the burden may be reread in terms of the contradiction, which gives rise to the vision of salvation, or, in other words, a resolution. This whole process may be regarded as an act of bearing witness, which is one way of looking at what the text does in the dialectical encounter of ideology and utopia.

The significance of blues and jazz in African American literature and culture has been acknowledged and documented by such figures as Ellison and Houston A. Baker, Jr. In his influential *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Baker emphasizes the importance of black music by arguing that

> Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix. […] The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network. (3-4)

Baker explores the functioning of this blues matrix in African American literature by looking for what he calls "blues moments," that is, "suggestive accounts of moments in Afro-American discourse when personae, protagonists, autobiographical narrators, or literary critics successfully negotiate an obdurate 'economics of slavery' and achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 13). This is evident in the works of writers such as Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 13-14). One of the most powerful examples of this can be found in a scene in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," quoted here at length, in which Sonny resumes his role as a pianist after being released from prison:

> Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. 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, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. 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. ("Sonny's Blues" 142)

In accordance with Baker's theory, Sonny negotiates "an obdurate 'economics of slavery'" through his interpretation of a song and, as a result, achieves "a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 13). This passage emphasizes the communicative and reciprocal nature of black music, because the dignifying and emancipatory effect of music for Sonny presumes a similar effect also for his audience. This profound sense of mutuality conveyed by means of call and response is central in black cultures.

Werner raises an important issue by pointing out that despite the widely acknowledged influence of blues and jazz on African American culture, the important effect which the gospel impulse has had on both of these musical genres has been largely ignored (219). He emphasizes the unique position of gospel within the black church, arguably "the institutional space farthest removed from the attention and mediation of whites," which has established this form of musical expression as "a forum for developing appropriate articulations of its experience with relative autonomy," also in relation to the market forces of the music industry (219-20). This has resulted in the development of a less ambiguous black perspective than that provided by blues or soul, which have been shaped more substantially when marketed to significantly more diverse mainstream audiences. What must be pointed out, however, as Werner does, is that gospel must not be regarded as a medium of a completely authentic and pure black experience, untouched and untainted by Euro-American influences (220). In accordance with Gilroy's well-known argument (1), gospel, along with other African American cultural forms, is a product of the fusion of the cultural assemblages of both African and European origin.

Call and response is clearly visible in the overall structure of *Just above*. The entire narrative is generated by Hall's need to address and reassess his brother's ambiguous

and problematic legacy in his own eyes as well as the world's. Another decisive push, a call, comes from Hall and Ruth's son, Tony, who confronts his father on the issue of Arthur's sexuality: "What was my uncle—Arthur—like?" (*Just above* 27). Hall's narrative may be regarded as a response to Tony's question, and, to take this to another level, as a response to the questions of the new generation. Another call is heard as Hall demands his dead brother to enable him to tell the story: "Oh. Oh. Oh. Arthur. Speak. Speak. Speak" (*Just above* 5). Although Arthur obviously does not respond to the call, Hall responds to himself by struggling to tell his younger brother's story to the best of his ability.

The narrative itself is ambiguous, because Hall, whose sexuality may be described as somewhat conventional, seems to be embarrassed by Arthur's homosexuality. This becomes manifest especially in his faltering attempt to answer Tony's question about Arthur's homosexuality and his relationship with Jimmy:

> Tony's eyes do not leave my face. I talk to his eyes.
>
> "Yes. I know a lot of men who loved my brother—your uncle—or who thought they did. I know two men—your uncle—Arthur—loved—"
>
> "Was one of those men Jimmy?"
>
> Lord. "You mean—Julia's brother?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> Good Lord. "Yes."
>
> Tony nods.
>
> "I know—before Jimmy—Arthur slept with a lot of people—mostly men, but not always. He was young, Tony. Before your mother, *I* slept with a lot of women"—I do not believe I can say this, his eyes do not leave my face—"mostly women, but—in the army—I was young, too—not always. You want the truth, I'm trying to tell you the truth—anyway, let me tell you, baby, I'm proud of my brother, your uncle, and I'll be proud of him until the day I die. You should be, too. Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a lot of things, he was nobody's faggot." (*Just above* 28; original emphasis)

This passage does reveal Hall's embarrassment over Arthur's sexuality, but it seems to me that some critics have tended to exaggerate this point. In *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, Keith Clark goes as far as to claim that Hall's description of Arthur is deprecatory, that "there is something inherently disconcerting about Baldwin's representation of the black gay male artist whose sexual identity is characterized by both narrative veiling and sexual stereotypes" (60). It is true that, as a result of Hall's role as the narrator, Arthur himself seems to lack a voice and agency in the narrative, and there are some instances in the text which may be read as symptoms of Hall's discomfort with Arthur's sexuality, but, contrary to Clark's suggestion (*Black Manhood* 58-59), this does not necessarily render the entire narrative heteronormative. Hall's embarrassment alone does not, in my view, warrant such a reading, because his portrayals of Arthur's homosexual relationships never adopt an evasive or condemning

tone or attitude; instead, they are, without exception, sympathetic. Hall's statement concerning Arthur being "nobody's faggot" should not be regarded simply as a manifestation of the former's "anxiety about homosexuality" (*Black Manhood* 57), as Clark argues, but, rather, as a refusal to attach any label to Arthur. Instead of being a heteronormative filter through which Arthur's queer story becomes distorted and diluted, Hall appears as what may be called an unreliable narrator, because his detailed depictions of Arthur's homosexual encounters are necessarily based on imagination and speculation.

I am also inclined to disagree with Clark's reading of the scene early on in the novel, in which Hall reprimands Arthur for looking "like a sissy" (*Just above* 20). Clark takes this as an indication of "the author's sexual taxonomies and his flawed conceptualization of an African-American, homosexual subject" (*Black Manhood* 59). While this may certainly be taken as an implication of Hall's discontent with Arthur's budding deviant sexuality, the text offers possibilities for a different kind of reading: "He cracked up, and started doing imitations of all the most broken-down queens we knew, and he kept saying, just before each imitation, 'But I *am* a sissy.' He scared me—I hadn't known he was so sharp, that he saw so much—so much despair, so clearly" (*Just above* 20; original emphasis). This scene is clearly more complex than a straightforward expression of disgust for "sissies," for men regarded as effeminate. Rather, it exposes the suffering and fear which being categorized as a sissy involves. More than being afraid of Arthur's unconventional sexuality per se, Hall appears concerned about the amount of suffering which the heteronormative categorizations of the intolerant world would impose on Arthur.

This is also where the concepts of *performativity* and *interpellation*[21] become relevant. Arthur's "sissy performance" may be read as an act or performance of non-hegemonic, unconventional sexuality which, in effect, makes him a "sissy." This reading is based on Judith Butler's well-known argument according to which "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 901). What is at stake here is the profound fluidity and constructedness of identities in general. As an example, Butler discusses "the medical interpellation which […] shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming, the girl is 'girled,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender" (*Bodies that Matter* 7). This interpellation also pertains to other areas of identity, such as race and sexuality, and is a constant process repeated throughout the course of one's life by various different institutions and authorities. As Butler points out, "[t]he naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (*Bodies that Matter* 8). She also maintains that this entails the movement away from "the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 900-01; original emphasis). Arthur's sexual identity is, then, to quote Butler's words, "performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent

[21] The concept of interpellation has been defined by Louis Althusser as the operation by which ideology "'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)" ("ISA" 163; for more, see 160-65).

that it is performed" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 907). In other words, the act which Arthur performs is not expressive of any fixed underlying sexual identity, but instead, in accordance with Butler's argument, it "effectively constitute[s] the identity [it is] said to express or reveal" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 907-08). Or, to quote what reads as Baldwin's rejection of essentialist identities in *Just above*: "Shades cannot be fixed; color is, eternally, at the mercy of the light" (*Just above* 503).

In general, Clark's claim that Arthur is defined by sexual stereotypes appears exaggerated. In addition to the incident discussed above, on no occasion in the text is Arthur defined as a homosexual, gay, queer, or by any other label connoting unconventional sexuality. Also, at the end of their discussion, Hall asks Tony: "'didn't me and your mother raise you right? didn't I—we—tell you, a long time ago, not to believe in labels?' He looks away from me. Then, 'Yes. You did.'" (*Just above* 28-29). This is clearly a manifestation of the fundamental message of not only *Just above* but the entirety of Baldwin's oeuvre, that is, the discrediting of the oppressive power of labels and the categories which they stand for. I would suggest that the novel actually goes beyond Clark's criticism by questioning the very categories of homosexuality which he seems to deem integral to the story. This is a manifestation of Baldwin's incredulity towards labels such as "gay" and "homosexual" and, in effect, towards any categorizations which oversimplify and impoverish the complexity of humanity. To quote Baldwin's words spoken in an interview by James Mossman: "those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are 20th-century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I've never, myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were" ("Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour" 54).

5.3 AGAINST RACISM: BLACK MUSIC AS A UTOPIAN RESOLUTION

Ideologies of racism underlie the entire narrative of *Just above*. They are encountered explicitly in the discussions between the characters concerning segregation, black nationalism, lynchings, and everyday survival, and, importantly, in the experiences portrayed by the text. Music appears as an important form of resistance against racism; that is, it is the main vehicle of the utopian desire to open the ideological closures of the text and to imagine resolutions. The purpose of this section is, firstly, to explicate the ideological closure of racism in the novel and, secondly, to explore the ways is which black music counters the ideologies of white supremacy.

It is interesting to notice that the narrative quite frequently assumes an essayistic tone in order to discuss social issues, particularly those pertaining to race. At those points, the level of the story and its characters fade into the background and give way to a distinctly polemical and explicitly political register of the narrator's voice:

> I looked around me. A black man does not look around him in the same way a white man does: there is a difference. In a way not too unlike the way I have learned to live, more or less, with my fear of flying, I have learned to live in a white world. It may sound banal, or unfriendly, but it must be said: when a black

> man looks around him, he is looking, after all, at the people who control his social situation, if not his life, at the people his children will encounter, win, lose, or draw, at the people who menace everything and everyone he loves. And, though this fact controls every single aspect of their lives, the people he sees when he looks around him, either do not know it, or pretend not to know it. Yet they use, and are protected by this power every hour of every day. In the humiliating, dangerous, disastrous, or bloody event, it will make no difference what they know or don't know. All that will matter is what they do, and he knows what they will do: they will kill him, or allow him to die. If one of their number protests this, and attempts to protect him, this white person then becomes not only worse than a nigger, he becomes a traitor—a reproach—and the two, the black and the white, are dispatched together. (*Just above* 342-43)

All of Baldwin's novels contain explicitly polemical and political passages, but they are principally narrated through the actual events of the story and via dialogue. In *Just above* this is taken further than before, up to the point where the narrative is interrupted by lengthy polemical passages, which are highly reminiscent of Baldwin's essays. While this may, in accordance with the ideals of realism, be regarded as a flaw which diminishes the value of *Just above* as a novel, it seems justified to read it as an indication of the overarching retrospective nature of Baldwin's final novel, which not only looks back on and revisits the central themes and locations of his earlier work, but also incorporates features of other genres and literary forms which he has worked with: fiction, autobiography, essay, and drama. In this sense, *Just above* seems to reach for a thematic and formal closure of Baldwin's career as a novelist. This transcendence of the categories of literature may be read in Jamesonian terms as the ideology of form, as a generic message pointing towards the cultural revolution of the Baldwinian postcategorical utopia. This is a powerful analogy which further intensifies and supports Baldwin's thematic endeavour to undermine the categories of race, sexuality, and gender.

The strength of racism becomes particularly visible as the narrative follows Arthur several times to the Southern states, as he travels around the country performing in protest meetings and fund-raising rallies in the late 1950s and the 1960s. These pieces of immersion narrative establish the South as a mythical place, simultaneously terrifying and fascinating. As Arthur, Hall, and Peanut are travelling through the Southern landscape, Hall, immersed in his thoughts, adopts the point of view of a fugitive slave:

> The land was flat: no cover. Then I heard dogs yelping, yowling, barking through this landscape, looking for me. I heard the men breathing, heard their boots, heard the click of the gun, the rifle: looking for me. And there was no cover. The trees were no cover. The ditch was a trap. The horizon was ten thousand miles away. One could never reach it, drop behind it, stride the hostile elements all the way—to Canada? Round and round the tree: no cover. Into the tall grass: no cover. That hill over yonder: too high, not high enough, no cover. Circle back, no cover; pissing as you run, no cover; the breath and the hair and the odor and the teeth of

> the dogs, no cover; and the blood running down, the tears and the snot and the piss and the shit running out, dragged by dogs out of the jaws of dogs, forever and forever and forever, no mercy, and no cover! (*Just above* 399)

This passage combines collective memory and individual presence by diverting from linear time. This terrible history is a part of the black heritage, in accordance with Gilroy's view of the memory of slavery as the unifying factor of African Americans and the whole black diaspora. In spite of this, Arthur, Hall, and Peanut feel drawn to the South, the main scenery of the centuries of slavery:

> I think Arthur had to find out something, wanted to see for himself, exactly what had changed on these roads since he had traveled them last. Peanut was willing to teach him; Peanut was endlessly willing to see. And they both, for different reasons, in their different fashions, wanted to see what I saw, wanted to see it through my eyes. I think that they felt, obscurely—and I think I understand this—that what I saw, since I was seeing it for the first time, would cause all three of us to see what no single one of us would have been able to see alone. (*Just above* 396-97)

These passages point to the inherent forms of oppression within Western modernity which, as Gilroy puts it, "lost its exclusive claim to rationality partly through the way that slavery became internal to western civilisation and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror" (39). In other words, racism is not an issue external to modernity; rather, it is an inherent part of modernity itself. The latter quote from *Just above* also underlines the communality of African American and diasporan experience, which may be read as challenging the notion of American individualism and as an attempt to resolve the problematic, oppressive tendencies of modernity.

Although the most vivid and dramatic depictions of racial terror in the text take place in the South, the presence of racism is visible also in New York, for example as Hall narrates the reactions of white personnel at a shop:

> There can be a great many advantages to being black; for example, in those years anyway, when you walked into such a store downtown, everybody dropped whatever they were doing and hustled over to serve you at once. If you had any sense, you didn't give them a lecture on how you knew they'd come rushing over to you because they knew you were a penniless thief. No, you smiled, and you smiled at the house dick, idly buffing his fingernails next to the panic button, and let them try to guess where you carried your wallet, if you had one. (*Just above* 99)

The fact that racism is a viable force not merely in the South is further evidenced in the text as the family of Hall and Arthur discuss the process of desegregation in Washington. Their father argues that "[t]hey ain't going change their laws for us—it just ain't in them.

They change their laws when their laws make *them* uncomfortable, or when they think they can see some kind of advantage for *them*—we ain't, really, got nothing to do with it" (*Just above* 300; original emphases). These examples confirm the significance of racism, in its various guises, as one of the forces shaping the everyday existence of black American characters in the novel.

Arthur's role as a gospel singer is political to begin with, because it carries the burden and power of black Christianity and black culture in general. What makes it overtly political on the surface level of the narrative are the various references to and depictions of Arthur's participation in the civil rights movement. This is also where the revolutionary utopian potential of black music receives its clearest manifestation. An example of this can be found in the novel at a fund-raising rally in a church in Atlanta during one of Arthur's trips to the South, as the text first underlines the ideological closure of racism:

> The "motorists" outside carried guns and clubs and had not been assigned to this place, this evening, for the purpose of protecting our lives. They were there to protect their stolen property, every inch of this land having been stolen: the government of the United States once passed laws protecting my "owners" against theft. Our lives had meant nothing then; our lives meant nothing now. The impulse and the assignment of the motorists was to find an opportunity to hang us. (*Just above* 405)

The policemen and other white people surrounding the church represent the ideologies of white supremacy, and their function is to uphold the status quo of racial oppression sanctioned by legislation. The air of fear inside the church is, however, drastically transformed when Arthur begins to sing a gospel song, "God Leads His Dear Children Along":

> It was an old song: it sounded, at this moment, and in this place, older than the oldest trees.
>
> > *Through shady, green pastures,*
> > *So rich and so sweet*
>
> There was an indescribable hum of approbation and delight: for, at this moment and in this place, the song was new, was being made new.
>
> > *God leads His dear children along.*
>
> I watched my brother with a new wonder, feeling the power of the people at my back, and all around me. *It seemed to us, to us who heard him, that he was singing about us*. And so it did, as though a design long hidden was being revealed. *He* is—*us*. (*Just above* 406; original emphases)

The power of community and tradition conveyed by this passage expresses a utopian impulse, a desire for change, which stands contrary to the stagnating ideological force of white supremacy. This is an instance of the functioning of the dialectic of ideology and utopia in the text. The principal antinomy of the novel is manifested through the ideological closure of racism or racial terror, which gives rise to the utopian impulse of resistance, the impulse to open up the closure. The ideological closure of racism is countered by the utopian impulse of black music and religion; a process in which Arthur becomes the field of force which hosts this antagonistic encounter and, simultaneously, the vehicle of utopian transformation.

The trope of call and response assumes an important role in this scene; first implicitly, without any audible signs, without language:

> Without a sound, I heard the church sing with him, anticipating one line, one beat, ahead of him.
>
> *God leads His dear children along.*
>
> He looked straight out at the people, raising his voice, so that the motorists and the governor could hear […].
>
> The church had still not made a sound: it was as though all their passion were coming through that one voice. And now, it was not only this time and this place. The enormity of the miles behind us began to be as real as the stones of the road on which we had presently set our feet. […] The church had still not made a sound, yet it was filled with thunder. […]
>
> If I had been among the motorists, or if I had been the governor, I think I would have been afraid. I might even have fallen on my knees. I was rocked from the very center of my soul, I was rocked: and still, the people had not made a sound. (*Just above* 407-08; original emphasis)

The power of shared cultural memory and tradition enables the audience to anticipate Arthur's performance, which binds them together and creates a strong sense of community. This is an instance of how cultural and social memory functions, as James Fentress and Chris Wickham point out in *Social Memory* (1992), "as an expression of collective experience: social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future" (25). This feeling of unity increases as Arthur's call begins to arouse more and more response from the crowd:

> I felt a vast heaving, a collective exhaling, as though no one had been able to breathe until Arthur had reached the end of the beginning of the song. And now, indeed, I heard the voice of an old woman, saying, as out of the immense, the fiery cloud of the past, *yes, child, sing it,* and Arthur stepped forward, stretching out his arms, inviting the church to bear witness to his testimony:

> *Have you been through the water?*
> *Have you been through the flood?*
>
> And the answer rolled back, not loud, low, coming from the deep, *Yes, Lord!*
>
> *Have you been through the fire?*
>
> The organ and the drum and the people responded, and the choir now joined Arthur:
>
> *Are you washed in His blood?*
>
> And that mighty silence fell again, as Arthur paused, threw back his head, throwing his voice out, out, beyond the motorists and the governor, and the blood-stained trees, trees blood-stained forever. (*Just above* 408-09; original emphases)

The response of the people spurs the singer on, until Arthur's voice shifts, from a single voice singing a song, to a multitude of voices carrying the burden of the centuries of oppression, an array of voices which reaches far beyond the here and now, on that evening in that church in Atlanta, and adopts a role and function as a protest against racial discrimination. This scene also encompasses the constituents of what Werner defines as the gospel impulse (269): the people in the church are bearing witness to the burden of the history of racial discrimination and, simultaneously envisioning salvation, a better future. At that moment, gospel adopts the function, as Werner suggests, of "connecting past with future" (220), and becomes a form of resistance in the present. In other words, the collective memory of slavery is restored to the surface and the present of the narrative and becomes a requisite for imagining alternative futures.

The scene in the church in Atlanta may be read through the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which Pierre Nora defines in "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" as sites of memory, "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (284). This is based on his definition of memory and history, according to which "memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority" (286). Werner Sollors has elaborated on Nora's thinking by suggesting that history tends to entail principles and practices of exclusion, and that "what is called 'memory' (and Nora's *lieux de mémoire*) may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary 'History'" (quoted in O'Meally and Fabre 7-8). The collective memory of slavery and its *chronotopes*[22] evoked by the call and response

[22] According to M. M. Bakhtin's definition, a chronotope is "[l]iterally, 'time-space.' A unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented. The distinctiveness of this concept as opposed to most other uses of time and space in

strategy between Arthur and the audience is evidently an instance of such counterhistory, or, as Gilroy puts it, the counterculture of modernity, which seeks to undermine the claim to universal authority of the version of history endorsed by Western modernity.

In this context, the gospel song "God Leads His Dear Children Along" is reconceptualized as a chronotope in which the spatio-temporal history of black America is condensed. It carries the memory of slavery and other forms of institutionalized racism, the pain and the fear, and, on the other hand, the strategies of resistance and survival, the relief and the hope, all interwoven into the texture of the song and the shared communal experience of the fund-raising rally. Spatially speaking, this marks the tension between the relative shelter of the church and the danger posed by the surrounding representatives of white supremacy. In temporal terms, the song and the collective act of call and response bring together the history and present of racial terror and the civil rights movement which represents the hope for change; that is, the song encompasses the past, the present, and the future. This is the utopian dimension of African American culture represented by a gospel song.

What must not be ignored, however, is the fact that there are certain ideological contradictions in the tradition of black Christianity. The first source of ambivalence is the ideological role of Christianity in justifying the institution of slavery and the alleged inferiority of the peoples of African descent. The second is the ambivalent function of Christianity among African Americans as not exclusively a revolutionary but also a reactionary force which has tended to render progressive impulses harmless by endorsing passive and fatalistic attitudes. As Mikko Tuhkanen points out in his "The Optical Trade: From Slave-Breaking in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* to Self-Breaking in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*," the ambivalent role of religion becomes manifest in African American texts which "suggest that spirituality, *like everything else*, is an inherently double-edged tool whose potential for dismantling the master's mansion is never clearly separated from its ability for neat housekeeping," and that this ambivalence must be acknowledged in order to avoid simplifying generalizations and for black religion to have any reconstructive power (100; original emphasis). In *Just above*, this ambivalence comes through in the way in which the text comments on the lyric of "God Leads His Dear Children Along": "*Are you washed in His blood?* And that mighty silence fell again, as Arthur paused, threw back his head, throwing his voice out, out, beyond the motorists and the governor, and the blood-stained trees, trees blood-stained forever" (*Just above* 409; original emphasis). In other words, the text problematizes the conception of being washed in the blood of God by juxtaposing it with the powerful metaphor of the bloodstained trees which instantly evoke images of blacks lynched and mutilated by white mobs.

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literary analysis lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are utterly interdependent. The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 425-26). Gilroy makes use of the concept by establishing the image of the slave ship as a chronotope which encompasses the memory of slavery and its various implications shared by the peoples of the black Atlantic (see *The Black Atlantic* 4).

It must also be pointed out that Julia's vocation as an arrogant and hypocritical child preacher, who, in effect, stops her terminally ill mother from seeking medical help by persuading her to trust the power of God instead (see *Just above* 115-17), further questions and undermines any simple reading of black Christianity as a purely redemptive and progressive force. The contradictions of Julia's role are articulated in the narrative: "a child evangelist was, after all, something in the nature of a holy freak-show, and also, something more than that, something which spoke of the promise and the prophecy fulfilled" (*Just above* 64). The freak-show aspect of her sermons is aptly portrayed by this passage:

> She was dressed all in white, and standing on a platform which was hidden by the pulpit. This was a special, collapsible platform, constructed by her father, and she looked at him as she stood there, and as he stood up to read. The hidden platform looked like a wooden box, with a rope handle. When her father opened it, with his boyish flourish, the box became a handrail, sometimes painted gold. This contraption, and her father, traveled with Julia everywhere: and made Julia's appearance in the pulpit seem mystical, as though she were being lifted up. (*Just above* 63)

Julia represents black Christianity in a commercialized and commodified form, because she is an important source of income for her family, especially for her father, who acts as her manager, apparently motivated purely by financial gain. As an embodiment of the simultaneously passivizing and corrupted, and, on the other hand, redemptive and progressive effects of religion, Julia is an important figure, who informs the reading of the ideological closure of racism and particularly the proposed utopian resolution by revealing its contradictory nature.

The textual strategies of *Just above* may be read in terms of what Jameson refers to as the ideology of form; that is, "the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sing systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation" (*PU* 98-99). The novel emerges as a field of force in the conjuncture of the sign systems of Western literary traditions and, on the other hand, the oral storytelling traditions of African origin. It responds to the fundamental social contradictions created and maintained by the subjugating ideological forces of modernity by constructing utopian resolutions through both Euro-American and African narrative devices. In the process, the gospel song becomes reconceptualized as a chronotope, as a vehicle of the spatial and temporal history of the black diaspora which becomes functional through the practice of the trope of call and response. In this way, the text posits black music in general and the gospel song in particular as the main vehicle of resistance against the forces of racism.

5.4 "WHAT HE'D DONE TO THEIR SONG—OUR SONG": BLACK CULTURE AND THE IDEOLOGICAL CLOSURE OF HETERONORMATIVITY

It is crucial to notice that *Just above* is not content to establish itself uncritically as a part of the black counterculture of modernity. Rather, it questions and contests the heteronormative ideological tendencies within black culture, and thereby reaches beyond the horizons of black counter-modernity towards the horizon of postcategorical utopia. As I will show in this section, the main vehicle of this political act is Arthur, who represents the traditions of black music and Christianity but, simultaneously, violates and challenges their conventions through his transgressive sexuality. This is manifested in the novel particularly in the way in which the depictions of the performances of the gospel quartet are criss-crossed with implications of homosexuality and, on the other hand, in the use of gospel lyrics and religious language to portray the sexual acts between Arthur and other men. This may be viewed as a process of queering the gospel tradition; that is, transgressing the limitations and taboos imposed on the concept of sexuality in the context of the black counterculture of modernity.

Heteronormativity seems to be the ruling principle within late modernity as far as the concept of sexuality is concerned. The presumption that heterosexuality is the "natural" and "normal" mode of sexuality is inextricably woven into the ideologies, practices, customs, and institutions within Western modernity. As Diane Richardson argues in "Heterosexuality and Social Theory," "[h]eterosexuality is institutionalised as a particular form of practice and relationships, of family structure, and identity. It is constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category; as universal and monolithic" (2). In her *Heterosyncracies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (2005), Karma Lochrie offers the following definitions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, suggesting that while these two are closely related, they are not identical or interchangeable:

> "Heterosexuality" expands on a specific desire for the opposite sex and sexual intercourse to include moral and social virtue. "Heteronormativity," in brief, is heterosexuality that has become presumptive, that is, heterosexuality that is both descriptive and prescriptive, that defines everything from who we think we are as a nation, to what it means to be human. […] It is also a heterosexuality that excludes others from these same meanings and communities. (xii)

This is in line with Judith Butler's seminal account of what she calls the *heterosexual matrix*, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and, later, *heterosexual hegemony*, in *Bodies that Matter*. According to her suggestion, the heterosexual matrix is a specific formation of hegemonic and normative power, in a Foucauldian sense, which creates "the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire" as its effects; in other words, "those identity categories […] are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (*Gender Trouble* xxix; original emphasis). The connection between institutional power and heterosexuality is an important issue, because it underscores the ideological dimension of sexuality in general and normative heterosexuality in particular.

The prevalence of heteronormativity in African American culture must not be overemphasized, because this phenomenon obviously does not run parallel with the category of race in the sense that it would be a predominantly black issue. Rather, as Sedgwick suggests, homophobia seems to be related to patriarchal rule per se: "most patriarchies structurally include homophobia" (4). It is also important to acknowledge the fact that the significance of heteronormativity has varied considerably in different contexts and periods of African American history and culture. For example, the relatively tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality within the circles of artists in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance differ remarkably from the more strict views within the Black Power and Black Arts movements. As A. B. Christa Schwarz points out in *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003),

> [t]o some extent, male same-sex-interested Renaissance artists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than other Harlemites who desired members of the same sex. They could partake in all aspects of Harlem's gay world—the lower-class world with speakeasies and buffet flats, the bohemian parties and studio meetings—and had their own gay networks offering protection, intimacy, and support. (23)

To a certain extent, Baldwin's views on sexuality and his own sexual lifestyle seem to have been influenced by the relatively liberated cultural climate of the Harlem Renaissance. Again, it is important to avoid making exaggerated generalizations, however, because, according to Schwarz, "[a]ssessments of attitudes toward homosexuality within black urban communities vary widely" (14). She also points out that the attitudes of black bourgeoisie, in particular, may rather have been characterized by an inclination towards sexual respectability and "normality" in order to counter the popular stereotype of black people as "sexually suspicious and excessive" (15).

Heteronormativity is visible in African American culture in various ways. Firstly, black Christianity has played an important part in shaping the ways of thinking in black communities. In spite of its emancipatory objectives concerning issues of race, African American Christianity has usually adopted a negative stance towards sexual minorities either through overt discrimination or, as Beverley A. Greene argues, by a "'don't ask, don't tell' policy of denial" (948). It must, however, be pointed out, as Clark (*Black Manhood* 59-60) and Phillip Brian Harper (*Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* [1996]) do, that church choirs have often functioned as a context in which, to quote Harper, "young black men both discover and sublimate their homosexuality, and also as a conduit to a world of professional entertainment generally conceived as 'tolerant,' if not downright encouraging, of nonnormative sexualities" (*Are We Not Men?* 13). As Clark notes, this is a part of what happens in *Just above*, but, in my view, it is important to notice that Arthur's nonnormative sexual desire is not merely sublimated, but also experienced in practice with Crunch, the guitarist of the gospel quartet. Keeping in mind also the fact that the world of professional entertainment does not appear to be devoid of homophobia (see, for example, *Just above* 13), I take issue with Clark's claim that Baldwin's portrayal of Arthur does not "challeng[e] American and

African-American verities that resoundingly condemn homosexuality" (*Black Manhood* 60). As will become evident later in this section, this is precisely what *Just above* does.

As suggested above, another important context of black heterosexism can be found in the masculinist ideologies of black radicalism particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Clark, the radical movements of that period and their conceptions of idealized blackness were tainted by "corrosive and ubiquitous sexism, misogyny, and homophobia" (*Black Manhood* 7). The ideologies of Black Power defined blackness through the categories of race, gender, and sexuality, but tended to replicated the same value systems of white heterosexist patriarchy which they had sought to oppose. As Gates argues in the article "The Black Man's Burden," "homophobia […] is an almost obsessive motif that runs through the major authors of the Black Aesthetic and Black Power movements. In short, national identity became sexualized in the 1960s, in such a way as to engender a curious subterraneous connection between homophobia and nationalism" (234). The concept of black masculinity is crucial in this respect. As E. Patrick Johnson suggests in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), the idealized black masculinity customarily "epitomizes the imperialism of heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia" and appears "as always already heterosexual" (36). He also points out that as a result of the brutal history of the violent subjugation of black men in the American context "the black homosexual becomes the site of displaced anger for the black heterosexual, the scapegoat used to thwart his own feelings of inadequate manhood" (37).

These attitudes are clearly manifested in African American literature. Clark points out that "[t]he defining feature of black men's protest discourse is its valuation of patriarchal masculinity, which has represented the normative model black writers emulate while simultaneously contesting white male authority" (*Black Manhood* 81). Amiri Baraka's "Civil Rights Poem," which uses derogatory references to homosexuality to attack Roy Wilkins, a prominent civil rights activist, leader of the NAACP, and supporter of non-violence, is an apt example:

> *Roywilkins is an eternal faggot*
> *His spirit is a faggot*
> *his projection*
> *and image, this is*
> *to say, that if i ever see roywilkins*
> *on the sidewalks*
> *imonna*
> *stick half my sandal*
> *up his*
> *ass* (quoted in Harper, *Are We Not Men?* 50)

Another infamous manifestation of the presence of homophobia and heteronormativity in black radical thought is Eldridge Cleaver's attack against James Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* (1968) as a result of the latter's nonnormative sexuality. Cleaver accuses black

intellectuals of racial betrayal and regards black homosexuality as an example of this: "The white man has deprived [the black homosexual] of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on 'whiteness' all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against 'blackness'" (128-29). He goes on to proclaim that "[t]he racial death-wish is manifested as the driving force in James Baldwin" (129). Unfortunately, as Harper suggests, the blatant homophobia seems to be one of the most persistent parts of the ideological legacy of the "'Black Arts' nationalism" of the 1960s (*Are We Not Men?* 11). Traces of this are visible in more recent products of African American culture, for example in the lyrics of various rap artists, such as Ice Cube and DMX. An excerpt from "Horny Little Devil" by Ice Cube may serve to illustrate this point:

> Little devil wanna fuck me out my pay
> But horny little devil true niggaz aren't gay
> And you can't play with my Yo-Yo
> and definitely can't play with me you fuckin homo
> Cause we'll blow your head off
> And turn that white sheet into a red cloth (*Death Certificate* [1991])

Just above stands in decided contradistinction to the heterosexist ideologies which the black counter-modernity and its cultural products contain. Following the central tendency of Baldwin's works, it seeks to transcend such narrow and oppressive ways of structuring the world, identities, and experience and the discriminative power of the concomitant categorizations. This is evident in the text in various ways. Arthur is, again, the centre around which the political urgency is organized, the vehicle which carries the polemical counter-countercultural message of the novel. The homosexual relationships which he has with Crunch and, subsequently, with Jimmy, are charged with political significance as they contest and, at least momentarily, transcend the limitations and taboos of the heteronormative ideological climate which surrounds them.

It must also, on the other hand, be pointed out that the novel seems to suggest that sexual desire between males is not, after all, all that uncommon. Firstly, Hall reveals a rupture in his seemingly essentialized heterosexual identity by depicting his homosexual experiences in the Korean War:

> And I had fucked everything I could get my hands on overseas, including two of my drinking buddies. I had been revolted—but this was after, not before, the act. Before the act, when I realized from their eyes what was happening, I had adored being the adored male, and stretched out on it, all boyish muscle and throbbing cock, telling myself, What the hell, it beats jerking off. And I had loved it—the adoration, the warm mouth, the tight ass, the fact that nothing at all was demanded of me except that I shoot my load, which I was very, very happy do to. And I was revolted when it was over, not merely because it really was not for me,

> but because I had used somebody merely as a receptacle and had allowed myself to be used merely as a thing. (*Just above* 317-18)

This passage can be read in numerous ways. It could, to a certain extent, be regarded as an affirmation of Hall's thinly disguised disgust of homosexuality, in support of the views expressed by Clark (*Black Manhood* 60) and Scott (*JBLF* 143, 160-61). I would, however, like to suggest an alternative reading. What Hall detests is, again, not necessarily homosexuality per se, but, rather, any act or mode of intercourse, sexual or not, which reduces the participants to mere objects, reifies them as instruments of momentary pleasure. This may be regarded as an allusion to the golden rule of ethics, as expressed in one of the main theses of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which stresses the importance of treating people as ends in themselves, rather than as mere means of attaining certain ends (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* 96). To be sure, the text does at times imply Hall's discomfort with Arthur's sexuality, but it seems to me that the fact that Hall ends up establishing a conventional family based on heterosexuality does not automatically make him homophobic or even heteronormative.

The alleged heteronormativity of the narrative is also interrupted by Peanut's account of his homosexual encounter with another member of the gospel quartet, Red. Reminiscing about his friendship with Red, who has later become a criminal and a drug addict, Peanut goes into a detailed depiction of their sexual exploration long ago on a rooftop:

> I put one arm around his shoulder and held him tight, and I took his dick out with the other hand, and I started to work on him. He asked me to do it real slow, because he was so hot already. I loved him so much that night, because, in a way, he'd just taught me something new that I could do for him, that we could do to each other. (*Just above* 427)

This does not, in my view, read like a heteronormative narrative. Perhaps what some critics have been looking for in the text is some evidence of what might, conversely, be termed homonormativity, insisting that homosexuality should have been narrated from Arthur's, that is, an exclusively gay point of view. Certainly, that would have given Arthur himself a voice and, as Clark puts it, "articulate[d] his own unique history of racial and sexual difference" (*Black Manhood* 58), but it seems to me that *Just above* reaches far beyond the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy by narrating Arthur's queer story from his brother's non-queer point of view, which does, however, frequently assume a tone so intimate and passionate that it cannot, in my view, be mistaken for a heteronormative narrative. Hall's voice, which keeps on wavering between regret, shame, passion, and sympathy, may be read as another attempt to transcend the categorizations of sexuality.

Arguably the most important gesture against the heteronormative tendencies within black religious and musical traditions is the way in which *Just above* first sexualizes and then queers the tradition of gospel music. Early on in the novel, the text suddenly

plunges into an erratic passage which serves as a description of the various dimensions of the life of a gospel singer. As Scott points out, Hall, the narrator, "improvises between the beat ('oo-ba oo-ba'), a disconnected collage of sex talk and phrases from gospel songs" (*JBLF* 145):

> *Jesus is all this world to me motherfucker hold on this little light of mine oo-ba shit man oo-ba oo-ba if I don't get my money hal-ay-lyu-yah! I don't want to hear that noise Jesus I'll never forget you going to have you a brand-new asshole you can't crown him till I oo-ba oo-ba boom-boom-boom yeah and how would you like till I get there a band-new cock and when the roll is why? you don't like called up yonder oo-ba oo-ba swinging on sweet hour of prayer my old one no hiding place! No more? Jesus I'll never forget man dig them oh they tell me titties man oo-ba oo-ba oh shake it off Mama an uncloudy cat's digging day you down below how did you man feel when you yeah baby keep digging come it ain't half hard yet out the wilderness oh baby! leaning don't go nowhere yeah sister fox oo-ba oo-ba yeah leaning oh you precious freak you leaning on oh don't it look good to leaning you now on the Lord come on back here 'tis the old yeah you stay ship right there of Zion it going be beautiful my soul I'm going let you have looks up a little taste to Thee.*
>
> Lord. And yet: they walked by faith. (*Just above* 14-15; original emphasis)

While this passage sounds like something that the boys of the gospel quartet might have come up with in order to amuse each other, it can also be seen as a means of negotiating the tensions of their lives in multiple simultaneous but largely incompatible contexts and concepts: the church, the streets, faith, sexuality, and poverty. The peculiar, almost rap-like medley, which uses both sacred and secular language, juxtaposes gospel and sexuality, and reads like a survival strategy and an expression of resistance in the world of social inequality and hardship. What this means is that the political significance of the novel moves from the thematic level to encompass also the level of language. This may also be articulated according to Foucault's conception of heterotopia, discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, as a discursive breakdown and destruction of syntax.

Just above adopts an explicit stance against the heteronormativity within black counterculture through a process which may be termed the queering of the gospel. What this means is a process of deconstructing and undermining the normative position of heterosexuality and, by extension, of any essentialized conceptions of identity. This transgressive function performed by the text is evidenced, firstly, by the way in which a performance of the Trumpets of Zion, following the falling in love of Arthur and Crunch, is narrated:

> He paused again, threw back his head to get the sweat out of his eyes, trusting every second of this unprecedented darkness, knowing Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place; they had never sung together like this before, his voice in Crunch's sound, Crunch's sound filling his voice,

So
I know
none
don't tell me, I know, I know, I know!

as though Crunch were laughing and crying at the same time

but the righteous
so true!
none
don't you leave me now!
but the righteous
and I hate to see that evening sun go down!
none
amazing grace—!
none but the righteous
yea, little fellow, come on in!
shall see God.

Crunch and he ending together, as though on a single drum. He opened his eyes, bowed his head, stepped back. Red and Peanut looked as though they had been dragged, kicking, through a miracle, but they were smiling, the church was rocking, Crunch and Arthur wiped their brows carefully before they dared to look at each other. Peanut struck the chord, *Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh*, and Crunch stepped forward with the guitar, singing, *somebody touched me and*, they sang, *it must have been the hand of the Lord!* (*Just above* 200-01; original emphases)

As they sing together, Arthur delivers a phrase, the call, to which Crunch responds. The intertwining of gospel lyrics and sexual allusions in this excerpt are obvious, particularly in phrases such as "yea, little fellow, come on in" and "somebody touched me and […] it must have been the hand of the Lord." The first phrase is interesting also because it is clearly an instance of the call and response strategy, with Crunch and Arthur signifyin(g) on each other, and, most significantly, on the tradition of gospel music in particular and of the black counterculture of modernity in general. This is where the political urgency of the text reaches its zenith by establishing a connection between homosexuality and the tradition of gospel music, which, in the context of the heteronormative tendencies of the black counterculture of modernity, becomes a transgressive, socially symbolic *act* rather than a *symbolic* act (see *PU* 81).

What further adds to this queering of the gospel tradition is the fact that, in addition to introducing sexual allusions to a performance of gospel, the text, conversely, uses gospel lyrics to describe acts of homosexual love. The first instance of this occurs shortly after the gospel performance quoted above:

> *So high, you can't get over him.*
>
> Sweat from Arthur's forehead fell onto Crunch's belly.
>
> *So low*—and Crunch gasped as Arthur's mouth left his prick standing in the cold, cold air, as Arthur's tongue licked his sacred balls—*you can't get under him*. Arthur rose, again, to Crunch's lips. *So wide. You can't get around him*. It was as though, with this kiss, they were forever bound together. Crunch moaned, in an absolute agony, and Arthur went down again.
>
> "Little fellow. Baby. Love."
>
> *You must come in at the door*. (*Just above* 211; original emphases)

This explicit passage interlaces the lyrics of an African American spiritual, "My God Is So High," with a depiction of the love-making of Arthur and Crunch. It is also important to note the phrase "little fellow," which appears both in the scene of the gospel performance and in this passage, thereby connecting these two parallel textual strategies of challenging and transgressing the heterosexism evident in black religious and musical cultures.

The intertwining of homosexual desire and gospel music is manifest in the novel also in the context of the relationship between Arthur and his pianist, Jimmy. An example of this occurs as they are practicing:

> So he stopped, and turned toward Jimmy to indicate a break; but Jimmy, very deliberately, with great impertinence, and looking Arthur straight in the eye, banged out the opening of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."
>
> Arthur caught his breath, and nearly cracked up, but had no choice but to follow Jimmy's lead:
>
> > *Grant it, Jesus,*
> > *if You please.*
> > *Daily, walking, close to Thee.*
> > *let it be,*
> > *dear Lord,*
> > *let it be.*
>
> I had no idea, then, of course, how direct, and as it were, sacrilegious, Jimmy was being […] but, however that may be, his call was very direct and moving, and brought from Arthur a response which seemed to ring out over those apocalyptic streets, and caused me, and the two men standing at the church door with me, to look back and see where that sound was coming from. (*Just above* 561-62; original emphasis)

The song is recontextualized as Jimmy's confession of his love for Arthur, a call to which Arthur responds, and this response defiantly encounters the racist, homophobic world outside of the church and, simultaneously, the air of heteronormativity inside the church.

Towards the ending of the novel, Hall's narrative, which focuses on Arthur and Jimmy practicing and the sexual attraction between them, is repeatedly ruptured by a flashforward to the scene with which the novel begins: Arthur lying on the floor of the men's room of a pub in London. This is how the text builds a tension between Arthur and Jimmy's relatively happy life together and Arthur's tragic, untimely death. Perhaps the most significant shift in the narrative occurs immediately after one of these prolepses, as Hall finds himself incapable of telling the entirety of Arthur's story, that is, of articulating this antinomy between the agonizing road leading to Arthur's death and, on the other hand, his happiness and love with Jimmy. As a consequence, Hall hands the role of the narrator over to Jimmy: "Perhaps I must now do what I have most feared to do: surrender my brother to Jimmy, give Jimmy's piano the ultimate solo: which must also now, be taken as the bridge" (*Just above* 547).

Hall's reluctance to relinquish his position as the one to tell his brother's story is not, in my view, a token of Hall's homophobia or heterosexism, because his narrative has underscored a wholehearted acceptance and support of Arthur's relationships with both Crunch and Jimmy. What critics such as Clark (*Black Manhood* 48-64), Scott (*JBLF* 120-69), and Dixon (135-40) have tended to downplay is the significance of what the text directly reveals about Hall's stance concerning Arthur's sexuality:

> I once heard myself shouting at some asshole white producer, who was giving me some mealy-mouthed crap about my brother's private life being a problem, *If he likes boys, then buy him a bathtubful, you hear? Buy him a* boatload! *What the fuck do* you *like?* […] And I remember, saying to him, in simple fairness to Arthur, *Anyway, that's not exactly my brother's problem:* and it wasn't. (*Just above* 13; original emphases)

In addition to defending Arthur against the prejudice within music business, Hall also expresses his attitude to Arthur in person:

> And [Arthur] looks at me again, more than ever my baby brother, and I dare to say, "I love you. Don't forget it. And, whatever makes you happy, that's what you supposed to do, and whoever makes you happy, that's where you supposed to be."
>
> He looks at me again, and something seems to fall from him. Then, "Okay. I love you, too." (*Just above* 560)

According to my reading, Hall's embarrassment, evident in the quotation above and in various other points in the novel, cannot be explained by labelling his attitude as heterosexist or homophobic. Rather, it should be read in terms of his fear of the attitudes of the black community and the rest of the heteronormative world of modernity and their harmful effects on Arthur.

Having received the position of the narrator, Jimmy offers insights into the turmoil of Arthur's final years. It is exactly the antinomy of carrying the weight of the tradition and

his transgression of its ideological legacy which becomes established as the ultimate reason for Arthur's untimely demise:

> Arthur got hurt, trapped, lost, somewhere in there. I had to deal with some of his old friends, lovers, leeches, from Paris to London to Amsterdam, to Copenhagen: all Arthur wanted was for the people who had *made* the music from God knows who, to Satchmo, Mr. Jelly-Lord, Bessie, Mahalia, Miles, Ray, Trane, his *daddy*, and *you*, too, mother-fucker, *you*! It was only when he got scared about what *they might think of what he'd done to their song—our* song—that he really started to be uptight about our love. (*Just above* 577; original emphases)

What Jimmy's words addressed to Hall show, is that Arthur is not afraid of having betrayed merely his musical ancestors, but also his community. As Scott points out, the source of this antinomy can be traced to the issue of internalized homophobia which Arthur cannot transcend and which fuels his negative self-judgment stemming from the "fear that those he loved most are ashamed of him," "that his father, his brother, and the tradition they represent […] disapprove of what he has done to 'their song'" (*JBLF* 161).

Towards the ending of the novel, Hall resumes his role as the narrator, but the text still foregrounds the feelings of shame and guilt which Arthur cannot escape, although he knows that his fears may be blown out of proportion:

> He wonders what I, his brother, Hall: what I think of him, really. He wonders if Paul, his father, is dead, in the grave, because he was ashamed of his son. And, at the very moment that he knows that he knows better, he also knows that he does not know, will never be released from the judgment, or the terror, in his own eyes. For he knows that it is he, and only he, who so relentlessly demands the judgment, assembles the paraphernalia of the Judgment Day, selects the judges, demands that the trumpet sound. He wants to state his case, and be released from the judgment: but he can be released from the judgment only by dropping the case.
>
> > *Lord knows,*
> > *I've got to stop believing*
> > *in all your lies,*
>
> but anguish is real, and has massive consequences. It is true that our judgment flatters the world's indifference, and makes of us accomplices to our doom: but to apprehend this, and change it, demands a larger apprehension of our song. (*Just above* 579; original emphasis)

Arthur's anguish is real, but so is the homophobic world in which he has lived all his life. While there are some enclaves of acceptance and love within that world, they are not, in the end, protective enough to silence the heteronormative murmurs of the voices of the

tradition of black religion and music, of the black counterculture of modernity. As a result of the crushing crossfire of the pressures of white racism and, on the other hand, heterosexism, both black and white, the connections between Arthur and his song, between him and his family, and between him and his lovers are fatally damaged.

* * *

In this chapter, I have aspired to help rescue *Just above* from the neglect of three decades and assign it in its place, not only in the tradition of African American literature, but as a part of the black counterculture of Western modernity. The significance of black musical traditions is crucial in this process, because music is the primary instrument of resistance to the oppressive ideologies of modernity in the novel. The gospel song is, therefore, reconceptualized as a chronotope which articulates the difficult and dangerous paths between the past and the future, the memory of slavery and the hope for change, ideology and utopia, and condenses all of these in the fleeting present of protest and resistance in the narrative.

This would, in my view, already be enough to establish *Just above* as an important part of Baldwin's oeuvre and the literary canon of the black diaspora, but the political impetus of the novel reaches beyond the confines of black counter-modernity, towards that distant, elusive horizon of what I have called postcategorical utopia. The text challenges the heteronormative tendencies within black cultures, inherited from the very ideologies of Western modernity, by queering the tradition of gospel music, that is, by juxtaposing the lyrics of the songs with depictions of transgressive sexual acts and gospel performances with sexual allusions, in order to reveal restrictions and taboos which have been inscribed in the songs and the traditions and ideologies they represent. As a result, the Baldwinian vision of postcategorical utopia may be read in Jamesonian terms as a cultural revolution, a paradigm shift characterized by the nullification of the essentialized categories which define lives and identities within the confines of modernity.

The incident with which the narrative sets off, does, however, raise some urgent questions which require further consideration. Should Arthur's tragic demise, trapped between the ideologies of racism and heterosexism, be taken as an indication of the ultimate failure of Baldwin's project of postcategorical utopia and, in effect, as a proof of the primacy of eschatology over utopia in African American cultural tradition? Should the untimely death of the transgressive and subversive figure, who represents the impulse of transcending social categorization and functions as an embodiment of Baldwin's faith in a New Jerusalem, be regarded as a token of a loss of faith, of giving in and submitting to the oppressive power of the categories of race, sexuality, and gender? My point is that the complexity of *Just above* defies the simplicity of such readings. Although Arthur falls prey to the forces of the suppressive ideologies of modernity, partly replicated by its black counterculture, the utopian impulse of the novel is carried on in Jimmy's words:

> I will testify that, to all the gods of the desert, and, when they have conked my throat with sand, the song that I have heard and learned to trust, my friend, at your brother's knee, will still be ringing.
>
> And will bring water back to the desert, that's what the song is supposed to do, and that's what *my soul is a witness* is about. (*Just above* 576; original emphasis)

The song remains, but its message has been altered, repeated with difference. The story of Arthur's life and death has signified on the original meaning of this old spiritual, "My Soul Is a Witness," by disposing of the reservations which it has contained. The song can now bring water to all those who struggle to survive in the desert, without limitations in terms of the categories according which human beings have been redeemed or condemned. Reconceptualized in this way, the song becomes Baldwin's ultimate tabernacle of postcategorical utopia, the vision of New Jerusalem which continues to live on.

6 Conclusion: Postcategorical Utopia and Messianic Time

In this thesis, I have constructed political readings of three of James Baldwin's novels and the ways in which they may be seen as contributions to, and elaborations of, the larger, all-embracing thematic undercurrent of his work, at times clearly visible on the surface, while more implicit at other times: the ideal of postcategorical utopia. I started out by constructing a theoretical apparatus based on Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious and moved on to elaborate my own conception of the dialectic of ideology and utopia as a fundamental dynamic of literary texts. This has enabled me to explicate Baldwin's novels in terms of their political content in the Jamesonian sense, in which both content and form are regarded as ideological and as having content in their own right (see *PU* 98-99). The way in which I shaped and formulated the theoretical premises laid out by Jameson into a usable analytical tool is what may be regarded as my contribution to literary theory. Each of the analytical chapters focused on a particular novel by reading it within a particular hermeneutic horizon of Jameson's tripartite theory. This approach allowed me to trace the functions of the politics of race and sexuality in each novel and on each of these levels. At this stage, it is appropriate to look back at what has happened to Baldwin's vision of a better world, to what I have conceptualized as postcategorical utopia, during the course of this study.

Baldwin's debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, may be seen as his initial endeavour to map and to contest the power of social categorization in the form of narrative fiction. The analysis identified the strictly categorized home of the Grimes family as the central ideological closure of the novel, constructed by the experiences of white racism and poverty, and the consequent defence mechanism of religious fundamentalism adopted by Gabriel Grimes, the father of the family. The utopian projections of freedom, envisioned by his stepson, John, assumed the primary focus of reading. These projections were conceptualized in terms of spatiality, because each of them is connected to a certain location. They were then read in terms of heterotopias, that is, physical spaces of otherness which allow the utopian impulse to occur, and, subsequently, in terms of utopian enclaves, that is, heterotopias turned from real into imaginary spaces and projections of a better future.

It is important to notice that, at this point, the ideological closures in *Go Tell* encompass the rather narrow scope of the black family and community and that white

racism functions as what may be thought of as an absent cause of these closures. In other words, although white racism is not immediately present within the Grimes family or the black Christian community, it is evidently the main reason behind the ideological closures. At this stage, the idea of postcategorical utopia becomes manifest in a rather implicit way, that is, it is not particularly highlighted by the text. There are, however, implications which attest to its omnipresence beneath the surface level of the narrative. One of the most significant occasions is John's encouraging encounter with an old white man in Central Park, which may be read as a distinctively postcategorical moment implying the possibility of transcending the categories of race and sexuality. The fundamental symbolic act of the narrative occurs towards the ending of the novel in the ecstatic scene at the storefront church where John's religious conversion becomes a transgressive combination of spirituality and homosexual implications. This is how the novel seeks to open up the ideological closure of racism and fundamentalist Christianity.

Chapter 4 provided a reading of Baldwin's largely neglected fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. What I especially wanted to emphasize is the fact that, despite its alleged shortcomings, *Tell Me* is an integral and unique part of that larger narrative, emerging at the intersection of despair and hope, which Baldwin's work constitutes. The central ideological closure was seen as constructed by the structure of transgressive relationships which challenge the conventional categories of race, sexuality, and social class. The interracial relationship between Leo and Barbara, the homosexual relationship between Leo and Christopher, and the interracial sexual encounter between Barbara and Christopher constitute a triangle of postcategorical love, a representation of the Baldwinian ideal of love which transcends the confines of conventional identity categories. This was identified as the ideologeme which the novel transmits in the dialogue between opposing ideologies within the second horizon of the theory of the political unconscious. As a result of these transgressive relationships, Christopher is transformed from a budding criminal into a militant civil rights activist. In other words, the triangle of love produces what may be regarded as the ultimate embodiment and personification of the Baldwinian conception of love in the form of the syncretic figure of Black Christopher, a black man who challenges the categories of race and sexuality and represents the hope for a better world. At this stage, the ideal of postcategorical utopia has been transformed from the implicit implications of the first horizon into a more tangible personification of the ideologeme of the Baldwinian conception of love.

In my analysis of Baldwin's last novel, *Just above My Head*, this all too often ignored text was placed in the third and widest Jamesonian horizon, in which the issues of racism and heteronormativity were seen as produced and maintained by the ideological tradition of modernity. *Just above* reacts against white racism through the story of the famous gospel singer, Arthur, especially his experiences of racism during his tours in the South, and thereby joins what Paul Gilroy regards as the black counterculture of modernity. The political impetus of the novel does not, however, stop there; instead, the text pointedly challenges the issue of heteronormativity within both Western modernity and its black counterculture. This becomes manifest particularly in the way in which the text intertwines homosexual allusions with performances of gospel music and, vice versa,

gospel lyrics with depictions of homosexual love. Here the political urgency of postcategorical utopia reaches its summit by attaching itself to and, simultaneously, attempting to subvert the heritage of modernity and its black counterculture. To put this in more properly Jamesonian terms, *Just above* opens up the horizon of the cultural revolution of postcategorical utopia by constructing anticipatory, albeit fleeting, scenes of and allusions to a better world, no longer ruled by oppressive identity categories.

As a result of these readings, it must be concluded and emphasized that Baldwin's novels do not construct any detailed and clearly delineated utopias per se, in the sense that Thomas More's *Utopia* and numerous other literary works do. Baldwin places the characters of his novels in a hostile and strictly categorized world in which no utopian enclave can offer more than a fleeting and fragile state of safety and happiness. Instead of actual utopian communities or societies, these texts offer utopian moments which occur on a smaller scale, occasionally on the level of family and, more frequently, on the level of interracial or homosexual relationships between individuals. As a consequence, the postcategorical utopia never actually arrives within these novels, except in a metonymical way in the guise of those momentary glimpses generated in the texts by means of the transgressive relationships which challenge the oppressive categories according to which political and social power is distributed within late modernity.

It is crucial to understand, however, that these relationships and the characters they involve carry enormous allegorical significance, because they maintain and measure our capacity to imagine social change, which is exactly what Jameson regards as the most important task of the concept of utopia (see *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* xvi). In other words, instead of detailing precise utopian programs or societies, Baldwin's novels carry the utopian impulse which keeps alive the possibility of change. They construct fleeting moments of transcendence, glimpses of a world in which identity categories would cease to function as instruments of power and oppression. In so doing, they open up the elusive horizon of postcategorical utopia which can be imagined and touched upon, but not permanently attained in these texts.

The fact that postcategorical utopia never actually seems to arrive inevitably evokes issues of temporality. What this means is that the idea of postcategorical utopia must be thought in terms of *messianic time*, as discussed by such philosophers as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and John D. Caputo. This suggested connection between utopia and messianic time becomes articulated in John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (1997) as follows: "[m]essianic time is prophetic time; the time to come is the time of the justice to come, that disturbs the present with the call for justice, which calls the present (*au-delà*) itself. For the most unjust thing of all would be to close off the future by saying that justice is present, that the present time is just" (81; original emphasis). In other words, the political function of utopia is to keep the future open in order for a more just order of things to be able to emerge.

Caputo points out that Blanchot's conception of messianic time is based on a division of time into "ordinary, lived time (*temps ordinaire*)," and "an 'other' time—[…] a time without the present" (77; original emphasis). This is reminiscent of Benjamin's view,

which emphasizes "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 265). In other words, messianic time appears in the present as fleeting glimpses of another time to come. According to Caputo, the present of messianic time may be defined as follows: "*This* now, the Messiah's now, belongs to messianic time and is not the now of ordinary time; the messianic now does not maintain the *maintenant* of *temps ordinaire* but breaks it up, breaks it open, and opens it up to what is coming, which is the very structure of messianic time" (80; original emphases). The logic of change as a central feature of messianic time is further underscored by Caputo, as he, discussing Derrida's views, suggests that "[t]he messianic idea turns on a certain structural openness, undecidability, unaccomplishment, nonoccurence, noneventuality, which sees to it that, in contrast to the way things transpire in ordinary time, things are never finished, that the last word is never spoken" (78). This also complies with Benjamin's view of the philosophy of history, which is, according to Richard Wolin, "the history of salvation" (*Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* [1982]).

It seems evident that this conception of messianic time is in accordance with the definition of the utopian impulse, used in this study, as a force which seeks to open up ideological closures. This "structural openness" which enables us to imagine history as leading to redemption and salvation is exactly what is at stake in Baldwin's novels. Their visions and implications of an alternative future and a better world do not transpire in ordinary time; rather, they exist in and, simultaneously, construct a messianic present, which opens up the horizon of postcategorical utopia and allows us the revelation that the categories around which life within late modernity is largely organized are not fixed, natural, or immutable but are, instead, constructed, ideological, and inherently mutable.

One more important aspect of Baldwin's vision of postcategorical utopia requires further attention. It must be emphasized that Baldwin's endeavour to undermine the tyrannical power of identity categories does not indicate a desire to erase difference, to force individuals to conform to one big category. This is where Baldwin's thinking is ultimately connected to Fredric Jameson's conception of utopia. As Adam Roberts points out, Jameson is suspicious of the traditional utopian thinking which is largely based on exclusion and repression, that is, the problems are not solved but repressed and pushed away (108). Roberts argues that "[f]or Jameson, the danger of Utopian thinking is that it assumes a uniformity, a conformity: it has often been imagined as a place where everybody is happy *in the same way*, where people miraculously fit harmoniously with other people because nobody sticks awkwardly out from the whole" (108; original emphasis). This kind of a world would actually be the opposite of Baldwin's thinking, which seems to endorse the idea of accepting and living with difference, and acknowledging the fact that each and every human being contains various identities. As he maintains in "Freaks," "we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other" (828).

It is interesting to notice that the Baldwinian ideal would, to a remarkable extent, seem to comply with the formulation which Jameson offers in *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990):

> a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature: not the beings of Thomas More, in whom sociality has been implanted by way of the miracle of the utopian text, but rather those of the opening of Altman's *Popeye*, who, no longer fettered by the constraints of a now oppressive sociality, blossom into the neurotics, compulsives, obsessives, paranoids, and schizophrenics whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and the fauna of "human nature" itself. (102)

The "neurotics, compulsives, obsessives, paranoids, and schizophrenics," who Jameson takes as examples, could be replaced by blacks, gays, or lesbians, for instance, because the members of these marginalized groups have been—and, in many cases, still are—regarded as "sick," as deviations from the norm. This is exactly what the Baldwinian ideal of postcategorical utopia points to: a world in which the categories of sexuality, race, gender, class, et cetera, would cease to function as tools of oppressive power according to which human beings can be classified.

The vision of postcategorical utopia is not diluted or undermined by the suspicion that it may exist only in messianic time; that it may never actually come into being. It may be argued that the hope for a better future and the impetus for change which it generates are crucial elements of humanity, and this is exactly what Baldwin's teleological agenda subscribes to. He is convinced that, as human beings, we have a responsibility to cater to the impulse towards a better world, New Jerusalem, postcategorical utopia. The significance of constant change and mutability and the ideal of supreme postcategorical love are what Baldwin's thinking is ultimately based on. This becomes manifest in what may be regarded as one of the most eloquent expressions of Baldwin's antiessentialist thinking:

> For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out. (*Nothing Personal* n.p.)

Beneath Baldwin's defiance of essentialist definitions and categorizations lies the notion of postcategorical love. It is what gives rise to the principles of hope, duty, and continuity and assigns human beings the obligation to guard the possibility of a better world. This is what the vision of postcategorical utopia ultimately connotes.

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