WALKING THE DIVIDING LINE: DELINEATING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND RACE IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* AND *THE FIRE NEXT TIME*

SUIVRE LA LIGNE DE DEMARCATION. DEFINIR L'IDENTITE SOCIALE ET LA RACE DANS *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* ET *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* DE JAMES BALDWIN

MERGAND PE LINIA DE DEMARCARE: CONTURAND IDENTITATEA SOCIALA SI RASA IN OPERELE LUI JAMES BALDWIN „GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN" SI „THE FIRE NEXT TIME"

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Abstract
Race understood as a social and ideological construction has been the subject of much debate in American literature and literary theory. The present article endeavors to analyze James Baldwin's "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "The Fire Next Time" by focusing on the concept of race as a cultural and social construction provided by an American history shaped by slavery, segregation and on-going racial discord and incongruity.

Résumé
La race en tant que construction sociale et idéologique a fait l'objet de nombreux débats dans la littérature et la théorie littéraire américaines. Le présent article se propose d'analyser "Go Tell It on the Mountain" et "The Fire Next Time" de James Baldwin en accordant une attention particulière au concept de race entendu comme une construction culturelle et sociale issue d'une histoire américaine façonnée par l'esclavage, la ségrégation ainsi que par la discorde et la disparité raciales perpétuelles.

Rezumat
Rasa înteleasă ca un construct social şi ideologic a fost subiectul multor dezbateri în literatura şi teoria literară americană. Articolul de faţă îşi propune să analizeze operele lui James Baldwin „Go Tell It on the Mountain" şi „The Fire Next Time"concentrându-se pe conceptul de rasă văzut ca un construct cultural şi social dat de o istorie americană influenţată puternic de sclavagism, segregare şi o continuă discordie şi distonanţă rasială.

Key words: *race, ideological/cultural construction, social rift, double consciousness.*

Mots-clés: *race, construction idéologique et culturelle, rupture sociale, double conscience.*

Cuvinte cheie: *rasă, construct ideologic şi cultural, ruptură socială, conştiinţă dublă.*

In a country built upon migration which embraced from its very foundations the noble ideals of the Enlightenment and the necessity for its citizens to benefit from freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness, the plight of a considerable section of its population became in the early decades of the 20th century the focus of a keen literary endeavor to present to the public the other side of the coin.

Born in the Jazz Age, during the emerging Harlem Renaissance movement, James Baldwin will grow up in a poor African-American community in New York, absorbing both the strict religious customs and the social tension that oozed out of every corner and backstreet of his native Harlem. Highly sensitive to every shade of hate and love, acceptance and rejection that he encountered in his step-father's home, he learned as a young man that the whole American society was built on a rather schizoid identity, a double-consciousness that kept his community away from all the benefits and rights of the founding documents of the republic. Having inherited the literary tradition of Richard Wright, James Baldwin choses to write out of despair, out of anguish triggered by the seemingly inescapable boundaries of his condition, out of a desire to save himself and his family, to find a voice of his own that would enable him to make his presence known to a world that ignored the terrible fate and fight of the Afro-American, and ultimately to find a way to a better world where the color of the skin would not dictate the sentence to a hopeless future. Even knowing the difficulty of facing two different worlds, two different standards of evaluation – one of them belonging to the white audience whose laws, ethics and attitudes he despised – Baldwin nonetheless proceeds in transposing his rebellion and search for justice in among others, his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and his lengthy essay *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

One of the first to draw attention to this social ambivalence and the double consciousness it can construct in the souls and minds of young and socially innocent African-American children was W.E.B. DuBois in his seminal 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*:

> After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is the 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, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – 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… (DUBOIS,1998, 869)

However this debate about the condition the African-American inhabits in the U.S. society is not new. In a country built on immigration, on a conglomerate of different ethnic groups, various languages, religions, social rituals and patterns of behavior, the debate about the nature and the structure of the resulting nation loomed large in the previous century, ranging from the "melting pot" theory to the multicultural trend or the post-ethnic approach. All of them touched upon, if only briefly in some cases, on the issue of race and racial discrimination and the peculiar lack of acceptance and integration of the African-American community as compared to the relatively smooth evolution and assimilation of other (European) ethnic groups. Considering that the concept of "race" was initially associated with the sense of belonging to a particular ancestry, kinship, lineage or later on even ethnic group, in the middle 1940s and 1950s the relative easy integration of the "white ethnics" into the mainstream society gave hope to many social thinkers that a similar process could happen in the case of non-white ethnic groups. That was not the case though, such theorists ignoring the devastating consequences the centuries of slavery and segregation had upon the public perception of the African-American community.

Initially the concept of race and its utility were restricted to the conscription based solely on the physical traits of individuals to various groups which severely lacked the legal, social and economic prerogatives of their "white" fellow citizens. As underlined by Henry Yu in his article "Ethnicity and Race", the advent of the cultural theory will change all that.

> Race before the rise of the theory of culture was a much broader category, referring to a person's ancestral stock and including all traits, physical or behavioral, associated with membership in that race. […] The spread of the theory of culture, however, created two mutually exclusive categories that were analytically separate, with cultural traits utterly divorced from the workings of the body. [...] in particular, sociologists such as

> Robert E. Park shifted the definition away from physical characteristics to the awareness of these physical traits and thus made race a matter of consciousness. Thinking that a group of people was racially different and thus should be treated badly was a matter of prejudicial thought and attitude, and antiracism came to be defined as the elimination of such attitudes. This shift of race from physical to an awareness of the physical was crucial in creating a new category of analysis, what Park labeled racial or cultural consciousness. (YU, 2001, 111)

Thus cultural theory gave to the members of the Afro-American community the possibility to become self-conscious regarding the existence of a "black culture". It also meant that this group couldn't be expected to "change behavior" like other European migrant groups just to "lose themselves within a newly expanding category of white". Race was proved to have no grounding in biology, yet the importance that the existence of a certain set of physical attributes had upon the lack of social integration and welfare for millions of American citizens was undeniable. According to Mia Bay race is nowadays considered to be "an ideological and social construction rather than a natural phenomenon. But throughout the 19th century, most Americans understood race as an objective scientific classification of human variation." (BAY, 2001, 212). Given this tremendous evolution, several scholars among whom Joshua Lane dedicated ample research to racial categories present especially in American history that was continuously shaped by slavery, segregation, racial tensions, thus proving once more that "race matters":

> Racial distinctions remain at the core of American history and experience. Racial profiling and racial discrimination continue to the present; though historians have come to understand race as a cultural invention, it nonetheless has exerted, and continues to exert, real power over Americans' lives. [...] Race matters because identity politics have always mattered to Americans. (LANE, 2001, 147)

James Baldwin, as an African-American writer starting his artistic career in the mid-20th century came to realize that he faced a wall of both ignorance and indecision when he, along with other Civil Rights Movement militants and fellow artists tried to convince authorities and the larger public of the desperate need to change the laws and attitudes in the country in order to allow the Black people to enjoy the same Constitutional rights and privileges, the same equal standing in front of the law, the same social and economic opportunities as the rest of the citizens. What made it harder for him as an artist was the fact that his community had traditionally lacked a voice that would tell *their* story from *their* perspective. Until then only the white man made his voice heard. Only *their* memories could create the counterhistory which could tear apart the silence to which the slaves and their descendants had been previously sentenced to. It was a time when the Afro-Americans felt that they could speak for themselves and bring their own definition of what it means to be American rather than just accepting and trying to fit into other people's fixed boundaries.

> In a culture whose dominant historical voice has been white, there is a vital need for African Americans to present their lives, past and future as of equal importance in the 'American story'. [...] The slave was an Other or a mirror against which the whites measured themselves and their value systems, and to assume the inferiority of the African thus bolstered the power of the whites. The master/slave system was grounded in denials: of black history, identity, humanity, community, knowledge and language. These were all seen as means through which slaves might assert themselves and ultimately question their condition in relation to the dominant group. To deny or erase these was, therefore, a method of control, a device to deny slaves' identity and history and enforce an impression of being adrift, worthless and devoid of ancestry. (CAMPBELL &KEAN, 2006: 78, 79, 80)

Baldwin's writings have all attempted to enable the black man to make his voice, rage and revolt known to the mainstream society, to enable him to stand tall and challenge the white world's vision and assumption about the real place of the African-Americans in the society and art world of the United States. It is the awareness of DuBois's famous double-consciousness of the Afro-American that compelled many writers from this community to find their own way of telling their story and history, to challenge the imposed public silences and cruel denials to one's own freedom and rights. After all, the U.S. citizenship has *whiteness* as a privileged grounding while *blackness* represented the metaphorical limit of its impermeable boundaries. As noticed by Nikhil Pal Singh in his article "Rethinking Race and Nation" America's universalism was "built around an exception, leading to tortuous but creative efforts to accommodate the racism internal to the nation-state's constitution. For most of the US history this problem was simply resolved by defining black people apart from any representation of the national interest". (SINGH, 2009, 10)

In his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a bildungsroman with strong autobiographical influences, James Baldwin manages to create a remarkable vivid image of Harlem and its three institutions that shaped the life of the Afro-American individual: the storefront church, the violent street and the often fragile, on-the-breaking point family. One of the best dimensions of this novel according to Bernard Bell's analysis in his work *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, is represented by "the soul-stirring eloquence and resonance of their pulpit oratory and black music as they plumb the depths of our suffering and the possibilities of our salvation" (BELL, 1987, 219). The novel centers on John Grimes' initiation into manhood which parallels his initiation into the workings of the church as both the depository of the possibility of personal spiritual salvation and hope and that of this institution's slippages into manipulation, search for worldly power and personal glorification.

> Exploring the theme of salvation for poor urban blacks, it reveals how the dogma and rituals of the storefront Pentecostal church exploit the black Southern migrant's sense of sin , shame, and sorrow in the "promised land" – the Northern ghetto – and force him to choose between salvation and damnation. (BELL, 1987, 223)

Coming from a family whose members migrated in the 1920s from the South to escape horrendous racial persecution and segregation and searching for a better future in the North, the members of the Grimes family face the same lack of opportunities and bitter poverty on the streets of Harlem too. This atmosphere of moral degradation was mostly the result of the low standard of life. If most people did not fight the all-encompassing misery and gave in to despair and carelessness, young John would try desperately to fight his condition. His attempts to clean the carpets of dust reach symbolical proportions as his Sisyphus-like fight with the dust leaves no hope for a change, for a brighter, cleaner future but only the useless toil and distress of the present:

> He felt that should he sweep it forever, the cloud of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. It became in his imagination his impossible, lifelong task, his hard trial, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse was to push a boulder up a steep hill only to have the giant who guarded the hill roll the boulder down again, and so on, forever, throughout eternity. (BALDWIN 1966, 29)

Symbolically, the giant he cannot fight seemed to be the power of the white man whose oppression the young boy constantly felt in every instant of his life. The only refuge he could find was in the welcoming arms of the church, the only place where the influence of the oppressor could not reach. Thus the most important dimension of the African-American identity was the religious one since it provided a source of identity, cohesion for the community and relief for the individual confronted with a world utterly hostile to him/her. Being denied access to proper education and politics, religion often acquired their functions: it offered standards upon which the African-American would build his/ her life, it gave directions and guidance to the whole community. The preacher was also the community leader whose influence went far beyond the spiritual dimension of the sermons. This is why in the eyes of his family John was destined to become a great leader who would lead his people to deliverance or at least a better life. Life in the ghettoes was centered on two "institutions": the church and the street, the first one offered shelter from the danger and temptations of the latter. The service at the church supplied them with the joy they lacked the rest of the time and their tremendous power of belief was equally proportional with the daily humiliations and miseries. As Bernard Bell mentions: "on the one hand prayers are used to establish and reinforce a common ethnic bond by tracing the history of black Americans from the plantation to the ghetto; and on the other, they are used as a symbol of blind faith in a religion of social oppression and emotional desperation." (BELL, 1987, 226) The trance-like devotion of the church members finds an explanation in their transferring the pains and distress into a desperate prayer to God for deliverance from the slavery of a sinful world and especially from the bondage of oppression.

> Brother Elisha sat down at the piano and raised a song […] Elisha hit the keys, beginning at once to sing, and everybody joined him, clapping their hands and rising and beating the tambourines […]. They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy […]. […] the Power struck someone, a man or a woman; they cried out, a long wordless crying, and, arms outstretched like wings, they began to shout. Someone moved a chair a little to give them room, the rhythm paused, the singing stopped; only the pounding feet and the clapping hands were heard;

then another cry, another dancer, then the tambourines began again, the voices rose again, and the music swept on again, like fire, or flood, or judgement. (BALDWIN 1966: 14, 15,16)

Nonetheless the captivating beauty of the black music and tradition means little to John when in an effort to win his independence from under the stern hand of his step-father Gabriel, a man of Lord himself, the young man ends up choosing education over religion. This act of defiance did not come from hatred of all things pious, but as a rebellious act against their representative, the brutal and unforgiving step-father. The whole community viewed the young Grimes as a future preacher, thus a future leader, but in an effort to find his own way in the world, John rejects this imposed mission and searches for another way of emancipation, beyond the "protective" wing of the church. He dares to replace religion in an effort to become someone, to resemble the white man. He refuses the traditional path of the Afro-American community of seeking advancement in life and consciously chooses the much blamed way of the oppressor to succeed. The temptation of the white world proves to be too alluring:

> For John excelled in school […] and it 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 in his mind like a great brass gate, opening outward for him a world where people did not live in the darkness of his father's house, did not pray to Jesus 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 […]. He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star, he drank expensive whisky and smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package. (BALDWIN, 1966, 21)

Testifying for the ambivalent sentiments of the Afro-Americans towards both the African and the American culture is another incident from the life of Elisabeth, John's mother. Confronted with the whites' museum which seems to her to be as "cold as tombstones", the woman is however equally unable to establish any contact with her African heritage which she gladly ignores: "she could not find, between herself and the African statuette, or totem pole, on which she gazed with such melancholy and wonder, any point of contact. She was only glad that she did not look that way." (BALDWIN, 1966, 191) Facing the present, she voluntarily ignores past and future, history and politics in the name of the privilege of living each day to the fullest with its joys and sorrows. Her son is equally torn between the rejection-temptation antinomy of the Black-White worlds. He starts by looking objectively to the city's white, well dressed persons who pass by him if not with contempt than at least with indifference, making him feel like an intruder in their heaven. Then, in a compensatory movement he remembers that they will all receive their punishment for their sinful existence while the virtuous blacks will receive their deliverance from pain. Nonetheless, morally degraded as they are, John still would like to be one of them:

> *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 the houses did not rise, piercing as it seemed, the unchanging clouds, but huddled flat, ignoble, close to the ground, where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark and where the unconquerable odor was of dust, and sweat, and wine, and homemade gin. In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation forever; 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. (BALDWIN, 1966, 38).

These confused feelings were not only those of a child, but of a whole community torn between its pride and its need of deliverance from the bondage of racism and found in a sensitive process of seeking an identity of its own. In the words of Bernard Bell:

> To achieve his identity John must accept the legacy of his people – the people that walk in darkness; he must go down into the valley of the shadow of death and discover the inner light and strength that comes only through suffering. He must make his peace with the reality of socialized ambivalence in white America – of being simultaneously a native son and a stranger in his father's house and his own land – and be neither enslaved nor dehumanized by it. Rather, he must be strengthened by the grace of God to go tell it on the mountain. (BELL, 1987, 232)

James Baldwin excelled not only in writing fiction, but he was also an excellent essayist as proven among other instances by the publication of *Letter from a Region in My Mind* which appeared first in the *New Yorker*, then reprinted again in 1963 in *The Fire Next Time* alongside another short but powerful essay *My Dungeon Shook*. At the time the author was touring the

Southern states speaking in favor of the Civil Rights Movement and advocating the cause of the black Americans. In the description he gives of his native Harlem, the diseased society reduced to the limits of endurance, to a pathological state of mind, will inevitably express itself accordingly. Despair led to violence, often to a fratricide one. Not being able to raise their hand against white racism, segregation and indifference, they turned against each other and against themselves. Moreover, the ghetto was seen as a prison for the African-American who was not meant to reach beyond this confined space. He/she was supposed to limit himself/herself to mediocrity, to a low degree of ambition, to have no goals and no hopes, so as to render him easily controllable by the white people:

> You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (BALDWIN, 1967, 18)

As he confessed in the letter to James, his nephew, the danger of the streets made the young writer turn to religion as a means of escape, with the Harlem's churches performing the function of sublimating violence, in an area where the despondent, hopeless state of the community turn crime into a real possibility. Nonetheless he soon discovered the corruptible side of the church, its lack of justice and of true Christian spirit, the poor members being tricked into giving the money for charitable actions while the preachers would enhance their income as a result. The bitter taste of the experience as a preacher accomplishes a final disillusionment with the world; until then he had learned that the world was wicked for all people and especially bad for the black ones, but now his last hope and refuge fell down in ruins: "being in the pulpit was like being in the theater; I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion worked." (BALDWIN, 1967, 55) In this letter one can glimpse the worried uncle trying to teach his young nephew how to recognize the warning signs of the dangerous temptations of young age and especially give him an insight in the seriously deficient workings of the American society.

> What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; nothing changed. But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances. […] My friends were now "down-town", busy as they put it "fighting the man". They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping: lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man" – the white man. (BALDWIN, 1967: 28, 31)

However, looking towards the future, the most impressive answer to these problems the author could find is the one expressed at the end of the essay where the times to come contain a double edged virtuality of a promise or a curse, all depending upon how people will decide to handle the present. A starting point can be that of rediscovering beauty, the beauty of people, the beauty of a world which has seen too many horrors. It may seem at first to be superfluous and inappropriate, but finding a hope for the future must start with a positive approach. Rediscovering beauty means rediscovering our own humanity, our dignity, our capacity to be kind, tolerant, forgiving. Seeking beauty in the most deplorable conditions is a sign that hope has not died yet:

> When I was young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty*? For the black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. […] If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the 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. If we do not dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in a song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!* (BALDWIN, 1967: 140, 141)

This call for the reconciliation of the two sides made appeal to the humanity within us so as to avoid a future that might have been even worse than those grim days when the only hope was represented by the light brought by the emerging Civil Rights Movements. For him the color of somebody's skin was not a human or personal reality, it was a political reality. James Baldwin's real country was not the U.S.A. or an African or European state, it was, as he metaphorically put it

in the title, a region in his mind, a spiritual country from where the artist sent letters to all who wanted to listen to him, to read and understand his message of tolerance and mutual acceptance . As he confessed, in the end he was not a Christian, not a Black, but an artist who had the power to transcend all barriers, all limitations in order to reach everybody. It was/is the duty of each individual to find his/her own way in life, to transcend all borders be them of race, religion, sex or nationality since only the personal search for solutions is worthwhile, common, collective solutions having been proven by history to be less effective and fulfilling.

Written in an era of profound social changes in the American society, Baldwin's books which have been scrutinized here, still keep beyond the archive-like images of a life confined in the trappings of the mid-20th century Harlem ghetto, an undercurrent of validity, of veracity regarding some unsolved issues of racial inequality and discrimination in the present American society that still need to be addressed.

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