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"I Was a Kind of Bastard of the West": James Baldwin's Search for

National Identity in Exile

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Abstract

Throughout the last two decades many scholars went through the study of the controversial figure of James Baldwin. His powerful writing built up the framework of what it began to be known as the Civil Rights Movement. This movement meant the outbreak of many writers, preachers and politicians who gave their talent up in order to introduce the Negro problem to the world. Nevertheless, James Baldwin claims in his autobiographical notes in *Notes of a Native Son* that "one of the difficulties about being a Negro writer [...] is that the Negro problem is written about so widely' and he adds later that `it is not only written about so widely; it is written about so badly" (Baldwin,1998:6-7). Due to the fact that the Negro problem was written about to such a great extent and in such a bad way, he opted for getting away from America to France. Baldwin confessed; " by the time I was twenty-four I had decided to stop reviewing books about the Negro problem- which, by this time, was only slightly less horrible in print than it was in life- and I packed my bags and went to France" (Baldwin,1998:6). Exile in James Baldwin's life was the way out for finding himself in many ways; first of all, exile was supposed to be an inspiration in terms of literary creation. Second, and most important, exile was the only way to think about his identity as a negro, and most particularly about his national identity. Baldwin locates himself, as he says, in a 'self-destroying limbo' that does not allow him to move on until he finally knows where he comes from and where he belongs to. In order to understand the concept of his national identity uneasiness, let me quote James Baldwin's own words: "I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa" (Baldwin,1998:7). He finds himself in the middle of nowhere, he is American on the one hand, but he has an African origin on the other. It is this uneasiness what characterizes James Baldwin's constant search for national identity and what forces him to go abroad. If one would ask -where does he belong to? - and - where does he come from?- I would answer with a very clear statment by James Baldwin in which he says: "I love America more than any country in the world" (Baldwin,1998:9). Thus I will try to demonstrate, by focusing on James Baldwin's books of essays, to what extent he feels American especially when he is abroad.

**''I love America more than any country
in the world, and, exactly for this reason,
I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually''**

James Baldwin

1. Introduction:

Mostly known for his fearless and clever writing during the Civil Rights Movement in the second half of the twentieth century, James Baldwin began his literary activity at a very early age, almost two decades before he became a popular critical writer of the American panorama of the sixties and the seventies. His incapability of carrying out a prolific and creative literary career in New York City, together with his desire to open his eyes and see beyond the American border, encouraged James Baldwin to ship up to a ten years long expatriation in France. A very young James Baldwin came to Paris in 1948; a tiny suitcase and little less than forty dollars in his pocket were the few personal belongings that crossed the ocean with him. Baldwin himself explains in his autobiographical notes: "By the time I was twenty-four I had decided to stop reviewing books about the Negro problem- which by this time, was only slightly less horrible in print than it was in life- and I packed up my bags and went to France" (Baldwin, 1998:6). Once in Paris, and as a newcomer who did not know a single word of French, he noticed at a first glance that the City of Light was no longer the city he had read about. In his early book of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) Baldwin depicts the situation and the atmosphere that could be breathed at that time:

> I considered the French an ancient, intelligent, and cultured race, which indeed they are. I did not know, however, that ancient glories imply, at least in the middle of the present century, present fatigue, and quite probably, paranoia; that there is a limit to the role of intelligence in human affairs; and that no people come into possession of a culture without having paid a heavy price for it. (Baldwin, 1998; 102)

James Baldwin spotted a post World War II Paris which was undergoing plenty of social and political changes. Distress and uncertainty were two adjectives that characterized the Parisian life of that time, and James Baldwin found the right place for the development of his desire to know about his identity . Away from American criticism and now living as a complete foreigner in the Old World, Baldwin found

himself in a situation in which writing was the only way to deal with his ghosts and fears. The incapability of establishing any conversation gave James Baldwin the opportunity to thoroughly think about what it meant to be an African American, and above all, what it meant to be American. "The American in Europe is everywhere confronted with the question of his identity, and this may be taken as the key to all the contradictions one encounters when attempting to discuss him" (Baldwin, 1998: 98). As Henry James claimed and later on Baldwin quotes in *Nobody Knows my Name*; "It is a complex fate to be an American [...] and the principal discovery an American writer makes in Europe is just how complex this fate is" (Baldwin, 1998; 137).

This particular last point is the main reason for having chosen James Baldwin as an object of study in this essay. There have been many writers who have dealt with the Negro problem[1] from different viewpoints, nevertheless, he was one of the few writers who dared to "not only reveal the working of the black-on-white dichotomy at the heart of the grand narrative of American national identity, but that he also offers a dynamic, migratory, and heterotopic model of richly hued and multidimensional American identity" (Zaborowska, 2009: 180-181). Like a sort of soothsayer James Baldwin's works seemed to foresee what composes modern-day America. He was one of the pioneers in talking about concepts that are nowadays much taken for granted among us, such as "racialized national identities"[2] or new Americanness. "His work always pointed toward an utopian re-visioning of American identity" (Scott, 2009: 142) and it defined the starting point of a reassessment of the real meaning of "being an American".

James Baldwin's early work seems to diverge considerably from his later work; *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows my Name* (1959) are crucial books of essays that will be of great help in order to understand the topic that we are dealing with in this

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[1] Note that the term 'Negro' in this essay is by no means offensive, but on the other hand, James Baldwin uses the term to address black Americans.

[2] These two terms appear in Zaborowska's essay. See the references at the end of this paper.

essay. Although Baldwin wrote over and over again about the Negro problem, the aforementioned books are the ones which specially focus on the issue of Americanness and national identity from the viewpoint of an expatriate African American. Surprisingly, and unlike other authors, the essay is the literary genre that better fits James Baldwin and better gathers his powerful writing; and it is for this reason that this essay will use as a main reference his collected essays, although his uncollected essays will provide some useful information too. In addition, further articles by different scholars will help to support my thesis throughout this essay.

In order to give sense to the present writing, three interrelated questions will be the base of this research. They are in fact three questions that James Baldwin asked himself for the major part of his lifetime; where he came from, where he belonged to, and what it meant to be an African American. The response to these questions requires a profound analysis of many aspects that characterized James Baldwin's life and work. Nevertheless, I could make an early claim by saying that America and Baldwin are two terms which cannot stand separately, but quite the contrary, the latter one is attached to the former one.

2. Expatriation:

Many particular reasons have been given for Baldwin's leaving. Nevertheless, two of them are the main ones. On the one hand, a young writer with almost no experience and full of eagerness decided to follow in "the footsteps of a number of expatriate American writers, including Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and Gertrude Stein" (Field, 2009:10). Young James Baldwin was very fond of Richard Wright before he left to France. They both had a close friendship and Wright was a kind of mentor to James Baldwin. In addition, "at the time, among African Americans, France had

reputation as welcoming black artists with open arms" (Kenan, 2009: 33). Many writers and jazz musicians felt that France offered them the opportunity to be treated like "artists" and not like simple "black American artists" like they were treated in the United States. The appeal of the Old World together with the idea of undergoing a bohemian experience in which he could "find a place, wherever it might be, where he could write" (Kaplan, 2009: 8), made James Baldwin pack his suitcase up and leave America. Even though Baldwin was a black writer, he insisted on breaking free of the rage of the Negro problem which did not let him grow artistically. At that moment Baldwin did not consider himself to be particularly a "Negro problem writer", but on the contrary, he was trying to see beyond the two traditional attitudes towards the colour problem, and as Baldwin claims, he found "it difficult to say which attitude has caused" him "the most pain" (Baldwin, 1998:7). He clearly reflected this feeling in the following fragment:

> I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here [...] I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them. (Baldwin, 1998: 137)

On the other hand, the second and most important reason for Baldwin's willing expatriation was his endless search for identity. Identity could be considered as the main concern in James Baldwin's work. His condition as an homosexual African American made him establish different means of accepting himself. Setting aside his sexuality, Baldwin defines identity as "the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which the robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned" (Baldwin,1998:537). It is, at least, interesting to observe in this fragment how Baldwin considers his identity to be a crucial part which his self wears like a piece

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of clothes, and at the same time this piece of clothes does not have to be too tight to the individual because, otherwise, one cannot feel the real self beneath the external clothing of one's identity. Considering that he defines himself to be, above all, an African American abroad, Baldwin dresses his self with the robes of his national and racial identification since he has no further identity to be bound to. In addition, this fragment shows an understanding of a dynamic identity which, like we do with clothes, we can put on and take off as we please. Therefore, identity is presented as something which is not fixed at all.

His feeling of displacement is even more noticeable in this fragment: "I know, in any case that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line in my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa" (Baldwin,1998:7). Although his past was historically set in Africa, Baldwin never identifies himself with that continent, but on the contrary, he claims " I'm not an African; I've never been to Africa; I'm walking only from my experience in this country and my experience in the West" (Baldwin,2011:12). Instead of adopting an "Afro-centric" point of view, as many African-American celebrities did during the fifties and sixties, Baldwin opted to go to Europe so that he could seek for his ties with the country which had created him. Once in Europe, away from American blindness, he was able to appreciate many perspectives which had been hidden from him before.

James Baldwin came to Paris as a twenty-four year old writer who, as we have mentioned before, had neither money nor any notion of what he was about to undergo in the Old World. He very accurately depicts his impression of Paris and Parisian life in his essay *A Question of Identity* (1955):

> For Paris is, according to its legend, the city where everyone loses his head, and his morals, lives through at least one *histoire d'amour,* ceases, quite, to arrive

anywhere on time, and thumbs his nose at the Puritans- the city, in brief, where all become drunken on the fine old air of freedom [...] It is limited, as legends are limited, by being- literally- unliveable, and by referring to the past. It is perhaps not amazing; therefore, that this legend appears to have virtually nothing to do with the life of Paris itself, with the live, that is, of the natives, to whom the city, no less than the legend, belongs. The charm of this legend proves itself capable of withstanding the most improbable excesses of French bureaucracy, the weirdest vagaries of the *concierge*, the fantastic rents paid for uncomfortable apartments, the discomfort itself, and even, the great confusion and despair which is reflected in French politics. (Baldwin, 1998: 93-94)

The well-known legend of Paris, the City of Light and freedom, together with the nonconformity of many young Americans, resulted in the rise of a growing American student colony in Paris. The members of the student colony, who were actually not "studying anything that they couldn't study at home in far greater comfort" (Baldwin, 1998:92), had a common denominator that reduced itself to the fact that they had served the U.S Army during WWII. Furthermore,

it was certainly no love for French tradition [...], it was no love for their language which they don't, beyond the most inescapable necessities, speak; nor was it any love for their history [...], it was no love for the monuments, cathedrals, palaces, shrines, for which, again, nothing in his experience prepares them [...], it was not even any particular admiration, or sympathy for the French (Baldwin, 1998: 92-93)

what made them stay in Europe. On the contrary, Baldwin considers the American student colony in Paris to be an amorphous social phenomenon which is located in "a kind of social limbo" (Baldwin, 1998: 94). The ex-GI[3] components were dragged by an inner question which obliged them to remain in the Old World seeking for something which they could not find in America, something which can only be named as Identity. It was a matter of time that the majority of the members of the so-called American Student Colony realized the critical situation which Paris was undergoing. The very foundations of the refined French culture was collapsing like never before, and many of those young Americans decided to put an end to their bohemian experience in Europe. James Baldwin observed this phenomenon and very accurately wrote:

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[3] "GI" is the acronym standing for Galvanized Iron that, in WWI and WWII, was the material which the soldier's equipment was made of. Later on this acronym described any member of the U.S army.

> With the air of a man who has but barely escaped tumbling headlong into the bottomless pit, he[4] tells you that he can scarcely wait to leave this city, which has been revealed to the eye of his maturity as old, dirty, crumbling, and dead. The people, who were, when arrived at Le Havre, the heir of world's richest culture, the possessors of the world's largest *esprit*, are really decadent, penurious, self-seeking, and false, with no trace of American spontaneity, and lacking in the least gratitude for American favors. (Baldwin, 1998: 95)

In this fragment American spontaneity is praised to be the key point of an American society which, away from European decay, started to be the leader of the world. Besides, it is notorious for Baldwin that, at that time, America was constituted by a series of values and principles that did not resembled those governing Europe. In other words, "only America is alive, only Americans are doing anything worth mentioning in the arts, or in any other field of human activity: to America, only the future belongs" (Baldwin, 1998: 95-96). Even though Baldwin harshly criticized certain American politics and social attitudes, he did not reject the fact that American singularity is in all senses what made him proud of his national identity.

In spite of his black condition, James Baldwin did not receive any unfavourable treatment in Europe, but on the contrary, the African American in Paris was treated like a peer among the components of the American student colony as well as by the French citizens. Baldwin's journey to a small village in Switzerland made him become aware of the situation of the black American in exile. In that place he underwent a revealing experience in which a group of children shouted at him the word *Neger*. He wrote;

> "there is a dreadful abyss between the streets of this village and the streets of the city in which I was born, between the children who shout *Neger* today and those who shouted *Nigger* yesterday [...] I am a stranger here. But I am not a strange in America and the same same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence occasioned in the American soul (Baldwin, 1998:124)

The word *Neger* that those children shouted in the village had no other offensive meaning than the simple astonishment that children showed when they observed someone who was rare, even exotic, to them. Nevertheless, when this word is said in

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[4] "He" refers to the figure of the American Student in Paris.

America it acquires a series of connotations long rooted in the American social consciousness. Baldwin concludes by adding that "the lexicon of Europe is not that of America, and the significance of the Negro in the European imagination has very little to do with the displacement the Negro causes in the American mind" (Baldwin, 1998:602). The image of the black man rests, therefore "on ignorance, and however expedient this ignorance may be, it is sustained by the objective conditions" (Baldwin, 1998:604). We must take into account that, although African Americans had a different consideration in Europe, this does not imply that there was no racist exclusion like the one in America. At that time France was hit by a massive arrival of people from every former French colony. The post-colonial impact that France was undergoing when Baldwin was staying there gave birth to the emergence of plenty islamic and African neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Paris. Baldwin soon came to realize that "the Arabs of Algeria and other Africans from the French colonies were at bottom of the French social and economic ladder, and, as Baldwin soon dicovered, they suffered in much the way his people suffered in America" (Kenan, 2009:34). It is no surprise that "Baldwin identified with this segment of society and would come to live in what was known as the Arab quarter of Paris" (Kenan,2009:34). Unlike other American writers who did not have much relation with the marginated and lower class, Baldwin spent the major part of his time in islamic cafés. He usually picked his fountain pen and notepad and remained in those places smoking and drinking for hours while trying to capture the essence of his experience abroad. Later in his life Baldwin realized how enriching experience this mingling with everyone had been, and he wrote:

> This perpetual dealing with people very different from myself caused a shattering in me of preconceptions. I scarcely knew I held. The writer is meeting in Europe people who are not American, whose sense of reality is entirely different from his own. They may love or hate or admire or fear or envy this country- they see it , in any case, from another point of view, and this forces the writer to reconsider many things he had always taken for granted. This reassesment, which can be very painful, is also very valuable (Baldwin,1998:140)

3. African-Americanness:

The question of identity is, as I have mentioned before, the main pilar on which James Baldwin's literature is sustained. This question is not, however, "a question which limits itself to those who are, so to speak, in traffic with ideas. It confronts everyone, finding everyone unprepared; it is a question with implications not easily escaped, and the attempt to escape can precipitate disaster" (Baldwin, 1998: 98). Indeed, the search for identity caused confusion to many Americans in exile who, after having spent a certain time in Europe, had decided to go back home with no clear answer to the question of their identiy. Nevertheless, the Americans who still remained, like Baldwin, sooner or later came to realize that " in the heart of the confusion he[5] encounters here which he came so blindly seeking" (Baldwin, 1998:100). Baldwin presents the topic of one's own identity as being a tangled task which only the individuals who keep on searching may finally reach a satisfactory conclusion. Furthermore, Baldwin, and unlike many other writers who presented the topic of identity, "offers a priviledged vantage point from which to understand how he came to conceptualize his own encounter between 'himself and the world' " (Kaplan and Schwarz, 2009:5). We observe, therefore, that the European Baldwin turns out to be necessary in order to understand the American Baldwin.

One of the first discoveries that James Baldwin did about his national identity was the fact that white and black Americans who lived in Paris established strong ties which were absolutely unconceivable if they had been in America. Baldwin claimed:

> The fact that I was the son of a slave and they were the sons of free men meant less, by the time we confronted each other in European soil, than the fact that we were both searching for our separate identities. When we had found these, we

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[5] In this quote Baldwin uses an figurative way of talking about himself by addressing the reader with the personal pronoun in third person singular *He.* This type of address is rather common in some of his essays and gives the text a narrative essay-like style that, otherwise, would turn out too autobibliographical.

seemed to be saying, why, then, we would no longer need to cling to the shame and bitterness which had devided us so long (Baldwin, 1998:137-138)

Both whites and blacks were in search of the same thing and they shared no other difference which went beyond the purely physical aspect of their skin complexion. They both came from the same place, they spoke the same language, they shared the same traditions, the same history and the same gastronomy ; in short, they were the sons of the same system. These aspects, which were not taken into account in America, resulted so clear now to Baldwin. He went on; "it became clear in Europe [...] that we knew more about each other than any European ever could [...] no matter where our fathers had been born, or what they had endured, the fact of Europe has formed us both was part of our identity and part of our inheritance" (Baldwin, 1998:138). After two years of a troubled stay in Paris, Baldwin began to understand the real meaning, as well as the problem of being an American and more particularly and African American. He called this process "the reconciliation" with his own country, and he added that once he was able to accept his role in American society he "was released from the illusion that" he "hated America" (Baldwin, 1998:138). Having got rid of the burden of his hatred towards America, Baldwin started a period of prolific research on the fields of his Americanness.

When trying to define the term "American" James Baldwin realized that, unlike other terms such as "French" which embodies one single meaning, this term is full of a series of hues that make the word rather dubious to determine. Furthermore,

if one examines for a second, or if one tries to define, the proper noun "American", one will discover that the noun equates with a catalogue of virtues, and with something called, plaintively enough, "I Am an American" Day. To be an American means, I gather- check me out, you think about it- that, though Greeks, Armeninans, Turks, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Scots, Italians, may be corrupt, sexual, unpredictable, lazy evil, a little lower than angels, Americans are not- quite overlooking the fact that the country was settled by englishmen, Scots, Germans, Turks, Armeninans, etc. Every nation under heaven is here, and not, after all, for a very long time. (Baldwin,2011:90-91)

Surprisingly, to be an American for Baldwin is nothing more than being part of that gigantic group of people of multiple origins who are settled in the American continent. The idea of America here is presented as a kind of international melting pot that houses a wide range of cultures which in a certain way were in need to get away from their birthplace. This is, therefore, a straightforward attack to the common belief of the beginning of America and the American myth which white Americans strongly believed in. Baldwin reinforces this comment by claiming that:

> the people who settled the country, the people who came here, came here for one reason, no matter how disguised. They came here because they thought it would be better here than wherever they were [...] It is important that one begins to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myth it has created about its past, which is another way of saying that it has entirely denied its past" (Baldwin, 2011:91).

The creation of the myth in which America is depicted as "the land of the free and the home of the brave"[6] stumbles with this criticism. The people who settled in America had the perfect opportunity to establish a new life that they could not have in Europe, but those who made their living in Europe did not, like Baldwin says, "get on the *Mayflower*" (Baldwin,2011:91). America is a country which has its foundations grounded on a multi-diverse society which is the product of a series of migrations from all over the world. Thus, the myth that Americans had created about their origins had nothing to do with the real past of the nation. Another issue is whether those Italians, Irish, Turks, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Dutch and Greeks that Baldwin talks about in the previous quote, managed to adopt a new identity which was the only thing that unified the multiple cultures found in America. In this case we can see the "transformative nature of the immigrant experience in America" (Zaborowska,2009:195) which gave birth to the so-called white American. Indeed, white Americans completely ignore the fact that, if we take for granted the assumption made by Baldwin, they were also

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[6] This is a fragment of the The Star-Spangled Banner which is the hymn of the U.S.A.

bastards of the West who have taken "race as a construct rather than an essence" (Zaborowska,2009:195) in order to justify their attitude towards the second most important group of Americans, that is to say, African-Americans.

Baldwin presents the story of the African-American as the story of a self-made man. Black Americans are "the oldest Americans, and the *only* ones who never wanted to come here" (Baldwin, 2011:91). He was taken out from his native land and forced to start a new life. He spoke a language that no one knew, he lived in a place that it was not his, he had a complexion that no one had. All the attributes that were once the foundation of his own identiy were now erradicated, as if they had never existed. Futhermore, the American Negro "did the dirty work" , and for sure, "without that strong back, the American economy, the American nation, would have had vast amount of trouble creating that capital which we are now so proud, and to which we claim Negroes have never contributed anything" (Baldwin, 2011:91). It is clear, therefore, that what represented America over the last century, that is to say, the so-called capitalist system which in theory respected their personal freedom, had been built upon the principles of slavery and subjugation of the black American community. On the other hand, the fact that the African American helped to such a great extent to construct present-day America, gave him the right to claim his more than deserved American identity. It is as if the fact of working and growing the land created the figure of the African American and at the same time made him a full-right citizen. Baldwin claimed in his essay *Black English: A Dishonest Argument* (2011); "*We*[7] have no models. The black American has no antecedent. *We*, in the country, on this continent, in the most despairing terms, created an identity which had never been seen before in the history of the world" (Baldwin,2011:158). The uniqueness of the black American became

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[7] Use of the personal pronoun "We" in italics in order to highlight the exclusiveness of the African American in the world. Baldwin presents a distinctive use of personal pronouns in italics to differentiate certain groups.

noticeable for Baldwin when he compared his situation with the situation of the Africans immigrants who lived in Paris. He wrote that there were some Haitians in France who were "able to trace their ancestry back to African kings"(Baldwin,1998:125). This was not the case of the African American whose origins were to be found in the deep south rather than in Africa where they had little or no knowledge of that strange and exotic land. For this reason, the black American found himself bound to a land, to a language, to a religion that he had to take as his own. James Baldwin defends his assessment of the situation by stating that

> the battle for his identity has long ago been won. He is not a visitor to the West, but a citizen there, an American; as American as the Americans who despise him, the Americans who fear him, the Americans who love him- the Americans who became less than themselves, or rose to be greater than themselves by virtue of the fact that the challenge he represented was inescapable. He is perhaps the only black man in the world whose relationship to white men is more terrible, more subtle, and more meaningful than the realtionship of bitter possessed to uncertain possessor. His survival depended, and his development depends, on his ability to turn his peculiar status in the Western world to his own advantage and, it may be, to the very great advantage of that world (Baldwin,1998:127-128)

The fact that black Americans were full American citizens was a reality long taken for granted by them. White Americans, on the contrary, did not seem to accept this fact and, according to Baldwin, here is where the Negro problem started off. Despite the name, the Negro problem should have been re-named as the "White problem" because there was not any objection made by African Americans against their own condition; but rather the opposite, white Americans were not able to accept the relevant role played by African Americans in the formation of their country. Baldwin claimed himself that "there has never been in this country a Negro problem. I have never been upset by the fact that I have a broad nose, big lips, and kinky hair. *You*[8] got upset"(Baldwin,2011:61). The fact that James Baldwin adopted a rather critical position toward the Negro problem together with the obvious American pride that he manifested

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[8] Once again Baldwin uses the italics to refer in this case to white Americans.

in his works, were enough reasons for the abundant attacks that our author received by the hand of many black radicals such as Eldrige Cleaver and Amiri Baraka[9] (Field,2009:10). Many pro-African and Islamic leaders claimed that the way Baldwin wrote about America did not support the Civil Rights movement by any means. Needless to say that his sexuality was also one of the arguments given to attack him. In fact, Baldwin kept himself away from any radical position which, as I have mentioned in the introduction, caused him more pain than joy. Furthermore, he never favoured one position over the other (i.e. For or Against), but quite the contrary, he always bet for taking a broader and a more international point of view on the matter. Unfortunately, black radicals took those arguments as a clear betrayal of the movement. Other critics argued that James Baldwin spent a big part of his lifetime living abroad and therefore he could not be fully engaged with the events which were taking place in America.

> This was an argument that was rehearsed by a number of civil rights and Black Power militant during the sixties and seventies who were doubtful about Baldwin's credentials as a black revolutionary[...]And it is clear that there were occasions when Baldwin himself believed he needed to abandon his privilege of distance and return to the struggle. But if we follow this line of thought too strictly another dichotomy opens up, assuming that "real politics" is confined only to the frontline of the struggle (Kaplan,2011:8-9)

In spite of the fact that Baldwin acted in most cases as an observer rather than as an active militant of the Civil Rights movement, he devoted the major part of his literary works to analyse the complexity of America in order to understand what it meant to be an African American. Therefore, I might conclude this third section of my essay by giving a revealing quote where Baldwin clearly explained what it meant to be an African American:

> To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend- which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn- and who yet spoke out of the most passinate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy

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[9] These names appear in Randall Kenan "James Baldwin, 1924-1987: A Brief Biography".

of life. Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. (Baldwin,1998:474)

4. Conclusion:

Even though the search for national identity in exile has been the key point in this essay, many other aspects of Baldwin's life and work have given us a broader and a more complete understanding of the main topic. First of all, Baldwin's approach to his national identity was motivated by the fact that he always contemplated his experience abroad as a cotinuum. In other words, he did not see his condition of expatriate as a choice between "either America or Europe" but, on the other hand, as a continuum in which Europe helped him to deal with America. The dialectic relationship between America and Europe -between the American Baldwin and the European Baldwin- was constant in Baldwin's works and this evolved "into a complex imaginative geography that was peculiarly his" (Kaplan,2011:8). Baldwin was in need to see beyond his home country that violated his privacy to the extent of having to get away to Paris. He feared his own future as a black writer in a country where black writers were devoted to write about the Negro problem in a way in which race and victimization of the black American were the focus of the literary production. Nevertheless, Europe gave Baldwin the opportunity to evaluate the so-called Negro problem under a radically different approach. This experience made him become aware that, in fact, the debate was not whether black Americans were or were not the victims, but how black Americans could claim their American identity as an indisputable evidence of their uniqueness. It became obvious very soon that out of the U.S borders black and white Americans had more in common and knew more about each other than no one else knew, neither African immigrants in Paris nor Europeans.

Second, this essay has approached the work and life of James Baldwin by studying his "literature in its complex historic and cultural context" (Zaborowska, 2009:184). The kind of literary works that Baldwin wrote should not be analysed in a regular way because they were all based on a highly historico-political and autobiographical basis but at the same time they present an excellent and agile narrative style in English. In fact, Baldwin might be considered an heir of the essayistic tradition of the Jeremiad[10] genre that other African American writers, such as Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, carried out before. In any case, his writings turned out to be very appreciated on the one hand, but very controversial on the other one. This categorization in between admiration and criticism gave birth to the particular and powerful way in which Baldwin captured his thoughts in his essays –out of the most passionate love for America and the most visceral contempt toward those who considered themselves to be true Americans but were not able to accept the crucial role that the African American played in the formation of their beloved country-.

If we look at the very beginning of this essay three questions were given; Where he came from, where he belonged to, and what it meant to be an African American. These questions are not questions of mine but they were questions that Baldwin asked himself once. Therefore only James Baldwin can answer with his own words by saying that; "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny. They have no other experience besides their experience on this continent and it is an experience which cannot be rejected, which yet remains to be embraced"(Baldwin, 1998:32). In brief, Baldwin and America are two concepts which cannot be by any means split up.

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[10] The Jeremiad is a long extended literary genre among African Americans in which the writer manisfests himself in a way that he seems to be preaching. Its content is full of profetic claims and , to a certain extent, he foresees society's future which otherwise will be doomed.

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