ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
47.1 (June 2025): 19-35
e-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2025-47.1.2

Black Resistance against Racist Wastification in James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*

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In *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), James Baldwin revisits the lynching of Emmett Till, considered the major catalyst for the origins of the Civil Rights Movement, in a play that shapes the figure of the fourteen-year-old Black youth into its twenty-three-year-old protagonist, Richard Henry. The scene of his killing opens a story that breaks with temporal linearity and, over the course of its three acts, conscientiously resorts to several flashbacks in order to explore the antecedents, perpetration, and aftereffects of the murder. Following Zygmunt Bauman's theorizations in *Wasted Lives*, this article reads the design of segregation as a racial caste system that conceived of Black southerners as *human waste*. This theoretical framework helps to cast light on the mechanisms that white supremacists have historically made use of in their systemic subjugation of the African American community. Yet it also contributes to elucidating the strategies that Black activism has employed to counteract racism in the fight for racial justice and equality. The article concludes that the audience's traumatic confrontation with Till's dead body, the embodiment of the human waste of segregation in its crudest form, spurred resistance to the white supremacist *status quo* in the US South, triggering changes and transformations nationwide.

Keywords: James Baldwin; *Blues for Mister Charlie*; Emmett Till; human waste; segregation; Civil Rights Movement

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Resistencia negra frente a la producción racista de deshechos en *Blues for Mister Charlie*, de James Baldwin

En *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), James Baldwin revisita el linchamiento de Emmett Till, considerado uno de los catalizadores principales del Movimiento por los derechos civiles, en una obra de teatro que moldea la figura del joven negro de catorce años en la de su protagonista de veintitrés años, Richard Henry. La escena de su asesinato inicia una obra que rompe con la linealidad temporal y, a lo largo de sus tres actos, recurre concienzudamente a varias analepsis para explorar los antecedentes, perpetración y secuelas del crimen. Siguiendo los postulados teóricos de Zygmunt Bauman en *Wasted Lives*, este artículo interpreta el diseño de la segregación como un sistema racial de castas que concebía a los sureños negros como *residuos humanos*. Este marco teórico ayuda a identificar los mecanismos que los supremacistas blancos han usado a lo largo de la historia en la subyugación sistémica de la comunidad afroamericana. A su vez, también contribuye a dilucidar las estrategias que el activismo negro ha empleado para contrarrestar el racismo en la lucha por la justicia racial y la igualdad. El artículo concluye que la confrontación traumática con el cadáver de Till, el residuo humano de la segregación en su faceta más cruda, espoleó la resistencia al *status quo* supremacista blanco en el sur de los EE. UU., desencadenando cambios y transformaciones a lo largo del país.

Palabras clave: James Baldwin; *Blues for Mister Charlie*; Emmett Till; residuos humanos; segregación; movimiento por los derechos civiles

1. Introduction

Nine years after the Emmett Till lynching, James Baldwin revisits the traumatic incident in a dramatic work that, as he acknowledges in the opening note of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, "is based, very distantly indeed, on the case of Emmett Till" ([1964] 1995, xiv). In his analysis of the play, Brian Norman reflects on the latent presence of the Black teenager in the story, arguing that "Baldwin uses the polarizing figure of Till for an integration strategy: bring together segregated factions of society onto the same stage" (2008, 75). Baldwin recreates the tense pre-Civil Rights social atmosphere of the Jim Crow South on a stage that is divided by an empty aisle, with Blacktown on the left and Whitetown on the right, which serves as a metaphor for the segregated reality of the time. His fictionalization of the Till case dissects the racist society within which the actual lynching took place, and shapes the mythical figure of the young Till into the adult character of Richard Henry, who stands as the protagonist, and whose tragic fate permeates the story from beginning to end. This twenty-three-year-old musician returns to his native South to beat his heroin addiction after struggling with it in Harlem, ending up in a small town that has seen

few changes in the almost eight years since his departure. The killing of Richard opens a play that begins *in medias res*, warning the audience of every detail that might somehow explicate its violent beginning.

Blues for Mister Charlie was the first play to be produced about the Till lynching and has remained the most representative drama of the Till literary tradition ever since. A new title was not added to this genre until several decades later with *Dreaming Emmett* (1986), a short-lived play written by the African American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, but the experimental drama mysteriously disappeared from the stage following its first four-week run at The Capital Repertory Theatre in Albany, New York. As Christopher Metress notes in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, "after the 1986 production, Morrison collected every record of the play and had it destroyed" (2003, 106), apparently leaving no existing copy or printed record for posterity. Given Morrison's intentional erasure of *Dreaming Emmett* from the annals of literary history, Baldwin's 1964 play still stands as the major dramatic production of the Till literary tradition; which David Barr III's *The Face of Emmett Till* (1999), coauthored by Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, and Ifa Bayeza's Emmett Till Trilogy,[1] premiered in late 2022, have continued to expand over the last three decades.

The lynching of Till is, therefore, far from being assimilated into the US collective imaginary, especially due to its traumatic impact on the African American community. Roughly a month after the killing, Martin Luther King Jr. ponders on its repercussions in a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois, where he states that the Till case "might be considered one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the twentieth century" ([1955] 2007, 232). Indeed, when Till, a fourteen-year-old Black youth, decided to spend his summer vacations with his relatives in the Mississippi Delta, he could never have imagined the tragic imprint that his visit was going to leave on US history. As his cousin Simeon Wright, who witnessed the encounter between Till and a white cashier in a store in Money, Mississippi, that was the trigger for the later tragedy, describes in his book, coauthored with journalist and activist Herb Boyd: "For less than a minute he was in the store with Carolyn Bryant, the white woman working at the cash register. What he said, if anything, before I came in I don't know. While I was in the store, Bobo did nothing inappropriate" (2011, 50). Four days later, on the fateful day of August 28, 1955, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, Carolyn's brother-in-law and husband, respectively, kidnapped Till in the early hours of the morning, took him to a distant barn and beat him savagely before shooting him dead on the banks of the Tallahatchie River for allegedly flirting with, or saying something inappropriate to, Carolyn.

[1] The Emmett Till Trilogy, whose completed version launched the 2022-2023 season at Mosaic Theater in Washington, DC, consists of *The Ballad of Emmett Till* ([2008] 2022a), *That Summer in Sumner* (2022c), and *Benevolence* ([2018] 2022b).

From the discovery of Till's body floating on the river, to the disgraceful acquittal of his killers,[2] the Till case progressively gathered momentum, giving rise to a consciousness-raising narrative that galvanized the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Much of the case's overwhelming impact on US society resulted from its media coverage, especially the historic photograph that David Jackson captured at the funeral parlor in Chicago, Illinois. As Constante González Groba contends, "[t]he horrific picture of Till's disfigured body published in the September 15, 1955 issue of *Jet* magazine was emblazoned on the minds of many young blacks who, upon seeing it, thought that one day they would avenge his death" (2018, 179). Even before the publication of the photograph, Till's open casket funeral had already been attended by so many people that historian Devery Anderson documents that it "resembled a state funeral" (2015, 59). The social impact of the Till case was unprecedented, constituting what Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam describes as "the first great media event of the Civil Rights Movement" (1993, 437). The young Till bore witness to the vulnerability of Black life in the Jim Crow South, and contributed to exposing the human costs of racial segregation across the country.

This article argues that the traumatic confrontation with Emmett Till's dead body spurred resistance to the white supremacist *status quo* in the US South, triggering changes and transformations nationwide. Focusing on Baldwin's dramatic retelling of the Till case, the following analysis resorts to the nascent field of waste studies to conceptualize segregation as a racial caste system that conceived of Black southerners as human waste. This theoretical approach helps to illuminate not only the hegemonic narrative that sustained white supremacist ideology in the subjugation of the African American community, but also the major strategies that Black activism developed to fight against racism during the Jim Crow era. In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin channels on to the stage the major anti-racist theories of his time. While Meridian Henry, the father of the protagonist and a respected minister in the community, stands as the epitome of Martin Luther King's *nonviolent* approach, Richard Henry is clearly aligned with Malcolm X's *self-defense* philosophy. These perspectives combine throughout the story to buttress the anti-racist resistance existing in the fictional town, as the play puts both into conversation through two of its main characters. The different layers of the play ultimately demonstrate that, as Koritha Mitchell claims, "*Blues for Mister Charlie* is a complex play with much more depth than suggested by reviews from the 1960s and by the dearth of scholarly treatments today" (2012, 47).

[2] Months after their acquittal, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant sold their confession to journalist William Bradford Huie. The resulting article, titled "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," was published in *Look* magazine on January 24, 1956. Considering the Double Jeopardy Clause of the US Constitution, they could not be prosecuted again for the same crime.

2. The Human Waste of Segregation

Back in the mid-1950s, the anti-racist resistance to the rule of Jim Crow in the US South was beginning to dismantle a racial caste system that had come to substitute slavery toward the end of the nineteenth century. The period of Reconstruction after the Civil War had failed at providing Black people with full citizenship rights, and southern elites were succeeding at designing a newer scheme to subjugate them. When the US Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional in 1883, the rule of segregation was already brewing within southern politics. As Ibram Kendi argues in *Stamped from the Beginning*, "[w]ith Emancipation, racist ideas progressed to suit this new world" ([2016] 2017, 264), while the idyllic narrative of the Old South was laying the foundations of the New South. Georgia journalist Henry W. Grady channeled these ideas into his articles and public appearances, becoming one of the most prominent advocates of segregation. In an 1885 article for *Century Magazine* titled "In Plain Black and White," Grady declared himself a representative of the white South, adamantly defending that "the assortment of races is wise and proper, and stands on the platform of equal accommodation for each race, but separate" ([1885] 1890, 289-90). This statement underpinned the false notion that the Jim Crow laws, which were rapidly expanding through the 1880s, benefitted southern Blacks in the first instance. As Kendi puts it: "The system of separation had been created to ensure racial inequality, yet Grady propagated the notion that it was intended to ensure racial equality and bring racial progress" ([2016] 2017, 266). With the implementation of its basic structure, the legal apparatus of the Jim Crow South was to subjugate the African American community for almost a century.

In its new guise, the racial caste system that arose through segregation followed a similar design process in terms of its configuration, or rather reconfiguration, to that carried out during the outset of slavery.[3] In his groundbreaking *Wasted Lives*, Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman discusses the organization of human togetherness through order-building and reflects on the processes that take place during its initial design. As Bauman states: "Left to its own devices, unlit by the spotlights of the story and before the first fitting session with the designers, the world is neither orderly nor chaotic, neither clean nor dirty. It is human design that conjures up disorder *together with* the vision of order, dirt together with the project of purity" ([2004] 2021, 19). With the abolition of slavery after the Civil War, the world of the Old South was completely disrupted, but the architects of the New South succeeded in designing a new order that maintained the pillars of the so-called southern way of life, which resulted in what Wilkerson describes as "the purest legal caste system" (2020, 25) in the history of the US. This translated into second-class citizenship for

[3] Isabel Wilkerson's 2020 monograph *Caste* undertakes an extensive analysis of the race-centered system of subjugation in the US, relating it to the historical caste systems of Nazi Germany and India. As Wilkerson notes: "Each version relied on stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement" (2020, 17).

African Americans within a social order that regarded them as *human waste*, a concept that Bauman defines as "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" ([2004] 2021, 5). Segregated, separated, and expelled from white spaces, Black southerners were relegated to live out of the leftovers of white southern society.

The major victory of white supremacists after Reconstruction was rendering their vision of segregation a hegemonic narrative across the South, thus turning a great part of its population into human waste through a process of "wastification."[4] In the creation of this idyllic New South, Black southerners had to be segregated in order for the southern capitalistic economy to function fully, since the elites needed to fill the void in the free labor force left by slaves. Barbara Jeanne Fields analyzes the South's economic dependency on Black people during slavery in her article "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," where she argues that: "If the slaveholders had produced white supremacy without producing cotton, their class would have perished in short order" (1990, 112). Spreading racist propaganda was therefore paramount to the perpetuation of Black people's second-class citizenship and undermining their social status, and it primarily sought to continue their exploitation as cheap or even free labor. Following Mary Douglas's analysis in *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 1970, 12), Bauman contends that "no objects *are* 'waste' by their intrinsic qualities, and no objects can *become* waste through their inner logic. It is by being assigned to waste by human designs that material objects, whether human or inhuman, acquire all the mysterious, awe-inspiring, fearsome and repulsive qualities" ([2004] 2021, 22). These and other pernicious qualities were thus progressively assigned to African Americans once they had been transformed into human waste by southern racists, despite their fundamental role in the very underpinning of the New South.

Over the decades, resistance to this racial caste system was crushed by southern white supremacists, until Black activism started to win major victories in the legal arena. On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in the historical *Brown v. Board of Education* case. This was a critical blow to the Jim Crow legal apparatus, as it hinted at the beginning of its demolition, and a racist backlash rose up across the South. Happening amid the apparent winds of change for Black southerners, the Emmett Till case erupted in the Mississippi Delta, inflicting a traumatic wound on the African American collective imaginary that would spur the incipient Civil Rights Movement. Thanks to the visual coverage of the case, the image of Till's decomposed body led the country to a direct confrontation with the horrific by-products of the Jim Crow South. Reflecting on the disturbing nature of waste, Bauman contends that, trying to avoid it at all costs,

[4] Begoña Simal-González approaches the notion of "wastification" from an environmental and socio-economic perspective, conceptualizing it as a process "whereby the environment and the human inhabitants of certain areas of the world bear the brunt of the unsustainable, unequal configuration of globalized capitalism" (2019, 215).

"[w]e dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking" ([2004] 2021, 27). Yet the encounter is inevitable. The gruesome photograph of Till's remains and the images of his open casket funeral eventually served to, as his mother Mamie Till-Mobley herself stated, "[l]et the people see what they did to my boy" (quoted in Gorn 2018, 59), offering the country and the world an overwhelming glimpse of the actual human waste of segregation in its crudest form.

3. Racist Wastification in Blues for Mister Charlie

Influenced by Bauman's theorizations, Susan Signe Morrison states in *The Literature of Waste* that "[t]he equating of humans with waste allows for the disposal of such members of humanity via ostracism, defamation, exclusion, and even death" (2015, 10). The very first scene of *Blues for Mister Charlie* provides a perfect example of this dehumanizing practice: Richard Henry's dead body is dropped in front of the audience by his killer, Lyle Britten, after the white man lifts the corpse from the aisle section of the stage. Significantly, Baldwin's stage directions describe this liminal space between Blacktown and Whitetown as a disposal site: "For the murder scene, the aisle functions as a gulf. The stage should be built out, so that the audience reacts to the enormity of this gulf, and so that RICHARD, when he falls, falls out of sight of the audience, like a stone, into the pit" ([1964] 1995, 2). However, the body does not remain in the depths of the disposal site. In the actual Till case, the deep waters of the Tallahatchie River act as a similar dark pit where the killers attempt to hide their crime forever, but the currents mean that it is soon brought to the surface. In the play, it is not nature but the killer himself who stops Richard's body from remaining in the anonymity of the pit: "Lights up slowly on LYLE, staring down at the ground. He looks around him, bends slowly and picks up RICHARD's body as though it were a sack. He carries him upstage drops him" ([1964] 1995, 2). However, right at the beginning of the play, Richard's body remains untouched for a moment onstage, becoming the human waste of a racial caste system that the story will set out to dissect through examining the antecedents, perpetration, and aftereffects of the murder.

After this meaningful opening, the action continues with a brief scene including a play-within-the-play sequence where Meridian Henry, Richard's father and Blacktown's minister, trains three Black students on nonviolence by staging a racist confrontation. Mitchell ponders on this sudden transition in her analysis of the play, remarking that "the audience is forced to shift abruptly from witnessing the disposal of a dead body, which daily news reports assure them is anything but make-believe, to watching a staged rehearsal that further blurs the line between art and reality" (2012, 48). In a metadramatic performance where the three students, who are part of a group that meets in the church to organize their protests under the auspices of Meridian, seem to be anticipating Richard's confrontation with Lyle, the youth who is playing the role of the white supremacist offender uses the word "dirty" to verbally attack the

victim (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 2). This common, and apparently irrelevant, insult encapsulates a long history of pernicious association of a filthy nature to Black people in the white supremacist imaginary, which Carl Zimring thoroughly explores in his 2015 monograph *Clean and White*. According to Zimring, "[i]ncreasing scientific definitions of waste as hazard and of racial categories in the immediate antebellum period established a foundation for later racist constructions that posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people" (2015, 3). The language of waste and dirt was progressively used by whites in relation to Blacks, and assimilated by the latter, in order to perpetuate a racial subjugation that, prior to the Civil War, rested on the dichotomy of "enslaved" and "free." After abolition, Zimring contends, "white supremacists stained Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans with assumptions that their skin, bodies, and behaviors were somehow dirtier than the skin, bodies, and behaviors of 'white' people" (2015, 6). This hegemonic conception contributed to underpinning segregation for decades, becoming so entrenched into southern society that, as the student's racist slur shows in the performance, it defined white supremacist language and ideology.

The language of waste and dirt functioned, then, as a covert mechanism to produce and perpetuate white supremacy, but it worked alongside other exogenous strategies to strengthen the racial borderline. In the first flashback of the play, in Act I, which effectively acts as the audience's introduction to the protagonist, Richard and his grandmother, Mother Henry, discuss the conditions that have driven the young man back to the South, illuminating some of the strategies that physically maintain the divide between Black and white people:

> I'm going to remember […] all those boys and girls in Harlem and all them pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I'm going to remember all the dope that's flowed through my veins. I'm going to remember everything—the jails I been in and the cops that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. I'm going to remember all that, and I'll get well. I'll get well. (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 21)

Although Harlem was beyond the reach of Jim Crow, Richard did also experience the difficulties of Black life there, eventually struggling with drugs, police brutality, and his treatment in jail. Indeed, even in the Harlem of the 1950s, these three elements were becoming a frequent combination in the subjugation of Black people at the threshold of the mass incarceration era—as Michelle Alexander states in *The New Jim Crow*, "[h]istory reveals that the seeds of the new system of control were planted well before the end of the Civil Rights Movement" (2010, 40). In a vicious cycle that began with a community that racists had already stained, drugs would taint African Americans further, creating a common pretext for police authorities to beat them with impunity, and eventually toss them into a filthy jail, a recurrent disposal site of human waste.

Separated from normal life in the North during the 1950s, Richard has no other way out than the segregated South, where his social status only worsens.

Back in his native town to overcome his heroin addiction, Richard cannot assimilate finding himself again in the South. As he verbalizes in a conversation with his grandmother: "What I can't get over is—what in the world am I doing *here?* Way down here in the ass-hole of the world, the deep, black, funky South" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 17). Richard resorts to the language of waste and dirt to describe his native region, using scatological references as if to portray it as the sewer or the dumpster of US society. It was a place that he had sworn to never return to, but his years in Harlem had ground him down, rendered him "dirtier," and sent him back southward. Conversing with his grandmother, Richard jokes about his precarious condition, revealing a truth that he might not be willing to acknowledge: "You treating me like royalty, old lady—I ain't royalty. I'm just a raggedy-assed, out-of-work, busted musician. But I sure can sing, can't I?" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 17). Deep down, he considers himself a failure, an example of human waste that would perfectly fit in his abject conception of the South. Yet he stubbornly refuses to come to terms with his situation, and continues his personal crusade against the world, especially against the racial borderline of the Jim Crow South.

Compared to the northern divide, the southern borderline is further intensified by the regime of segregation, which generates a constant state of alert for white supremacists that turns them into dangerous guardians. Using garbage collectors as an analogy, Bauman notes that the major task of guardians is that, "[d]ay in day out, they refresh and make salient again the borderline between normality and pathology, health and illness, the desirable and the repulsive, the accepted and the rejected, the *comme il faut* and *comme il ne faut pas*, the inside and the outside of the human universe" ([2004] 2021, 28). In the Jim Crow South, the racial borderline is not a physical boundary like the walls of a dumpster, but a diffuse internal ordinance that permeates every aspect of life. This divide must be reproduced at all times, and fiercely protected by its guardians, in order to maintain its existence. As Bauman follows on with his conceptualization, "[t]hat borderline needs their constant vigilance and diligence because it is anything but a 'natural frontier': no sky-high mountain ranges, bottomless seas or impassable gorges separate the inside from the outside" ([2004] 2021, 28). It is the actual design of segregation that guarantees and perpetuates the basis of the southern racial borderline.

In this scenario, crossing the borderline usually leads Black people to a deadly outcome, as Richard's overt challenge to the southern *status quo* proves in the critical scene at the store. The sole flashback of Act II portrays the protagonist's first and only visit to Lyle's grocery, where Richard purposefully breaks southern racial etiquette, makes fun of Lyle and his wife, and knocks the white man down with no effort when Lyle tries to hit him with a hammer. This succession of events encapsulates the three major offenses that an African American could ever commit in the Jim Crow South. Richard first refuses to

play his expected role of subordination and deference to white people, then messes with the purity of southern white womanhood, and last subdues Lyle in front of his wife, thus debunking the alleged warrior-like masculinity of the white southern man. On his way out, Richard ridicules Lyle one last time: "Look at the mighty peckerwood! On his *ass*, baby—and his woman watching! Now, who you think is the better man? Ha-ha! The master race! You let me in that tired white chick's drawers, she'll know who's the master! Ha-ha-ha!" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 75). Richard's transgressive, and sometimes offensive, language constitutes a *leitmotiv* throughout the story and responds to one of the strategies that Baldwin uses in his play to trigger a reaction in the audience. As Nicholas Davis posits, "*Blues* is [...] an underrated achievement doomed to provoke discomfort because it renders lethal American dilemmas and inbred social phobias in their complete, unbeautiful intractability" (2005, 32).

Baldwin's representation of the fictional events in the story seeks to establish a continuous hyperbole wherein the different ideologies incorporated are pushed to the extreme. With this premise, the character of Richard, loosely based on Emmett Till, is shaped around the figure of an irreverent, unapologetic, and proud twenty-three-year-old man whose main driving force is to take vengeance on white people. This attitude stems from the tragic death of his mother in an alleged accident involving white men during his adolescence. As Richard acknowledges to his grandmother, "I been dreaming of that day ever since I left here. I been dreaming of my Mama falling down the steps of that hotel. *My* Mama. I never believed she fell. I *always* believed that some white man pushed her down those steps" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 20). The early loss of his mother inflicts on him a traumatic wound that fuels his transgressive behavior and, as he himself verbalizes, his hatred of white people: "I'm going to treat everyone of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world—oh, yes! They're responsible for all the misery *I've* ever seen, and that's good enough for me" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 21). The scene at the store thus reflects a deformed mirror image of the real fleeting encounter that triggered Emmett Till's lynching. In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the encounter between the Black youth and the white female storekeeper is reversed in terms of innocence and power, in that Richard is completely conscious of his behavior and in full control of the situation. However, the outcome turns out to be the same.

The flashback of Act II soon links with Richard's funeral and his father's climactic soliloquy. As in the opening scene, the audience is confronted with the sight of Richard's dead body, held in a coffin downstage on this occasion symbolizing his second fall in the play. Once again, the body is placed right in the middle of the aisle that separates Blacktown and Whitetown, a sort of grey zone that does not fully belong to any of the segregated communities. Facing the coffin, Meridian addresses both his congregation and the audience: "My heart is heavier tonight than it has ever been before. I raise my voice to you tonight out of a sorrow and a wonder I have never felt before" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 76). The killing of his only son devastates Meridian, who struggles to

find solace in his religious beliefs, and even hints at the beginning of an incipient faith crisis. As the minister acknowledges in his soliloquy:

> Now, when the children come, my Lord, and ask which road to follow, my tongue stammers and my heart fails. I will not abandon the land—this strange land, which is my home. But can I ask the children forever to sustain the cruelty inflicted on them by those who have been their masters, and who are now, in very truth, their kinfolk, their brothers and their sisters and their parents? What hope is there for a people who deny their deeds and disown their kinsmen and who do so in the name of purity and love, in the name of Jesus Christ? (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 77)

Meridian's dilemma not only touches upon his religious worldview, which invests in brotherly love and nonviolence, but also upon his intrinsic approach to race relations. White people's obsession with purity, alongside their history of violence against Black people, winds up inhibiting the minister's efforts to unite the two communities. Considering that southern whites conceive of cleanliness as paramount in order for someone to be considered an equal, the stain that they themselves have put on African Americans separates them into irreconcilable categories, thus underpinning the racial divide in the Jim Crow South. Coming to this realization, Meridian will, however, not drift away from his Christian beliefs, but he does struggle to find answers in his faith for the rest of the play.

4. Anti-Racist Strategies in Conversation

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin offers a succinct portrait of two historical approaches that fueled Black activism during the mid-twentieth century. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X became, respectively, the major representatives of the *nonviolent* and the *self-defense* philosophies in the US collective imaginary. In the sixth chapter of his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, published in 1958, King reflects on the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott and outlines his innovative strategy, arguing that "the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom" ([1958] 1986, 85). Malcolm X approached the fight against racism from a different perspective. In the 1964 foundational rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in Harlem, the iconic leader gave a speech that encapsulated his decades-long self-defense approach, which soon inscribed the historical "by any means necessary" motto into popular culture: "We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary" ([1970] 1992, 9). In his play, Baldwin ponders on these two historical strategies, putting them in conversation through two of his main characters. While Meridian stands as the epitome of King's approach, Richard is clearly aligned with Malcolm X's philosophy. Both characters and their respective approach combine throughout the story to buttress the anti-

racist resistance in the fictional community of the segregated town, conceived of as a metaphoric space in which to explore the conflicting intersections of race, class, and gender in the US South.

In this sense, the conversation between the two anti-racist strategies begins in the first scenes of the play. As Mitchell remarks, the metadramatic performance directed by Meridian, who is training the students in the non-violent method, seeks to "replicate the hatred that demonstrators will face on the street so that they have real practice in refusing to retaliate when provoked" (2012, 48). Meridian's nonviolent practice, however, escalates to a heated staging, involving racist slurs and a student spitting at another, that is interrupted by the appearance of more students onstage. Arriving from a demonstration protesting about Richard's death, Juanita, the former girlfriend of the deceased, enters the scene shouting "We shall overcome!" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 3). This civil rights chant, which is popularly associated with King's philosophy,[5] triggers a discussion with Lorenzo, a student who has moved closer to Malcolm X's precepts as a result of Richard being killed. As he complains:

> We've been demonstrating—*non-violently*—for more than a year now and all that's happened is that now they'll let us into that crummy library downtown which was obsolete in 1897 and where nobody goes anyway [...] And we *still* can't get licensed to be electricians or plumbers, we still can't walk through the park, our kids still can't use the swimming pool in town. We still can't vote, we can't even get registered. Is it worth it? And these people trying to kill us, too? And we ain't even got no guns. (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 4-5)

Fueled by Richard's death, the self-defense discourse grows within the group, despite Meridian's efforts to keep the students on the path of nonviolence. The minister himself sticks to his nonviolent approach, but conversations with his son portrayed in the flashbacks do shape Meridian's stand on the struggle for racial justice and equality in the end.

The representational function of these flashbacks goes beyond their formal characteristics in as much as they create a liminal space from which Richard emerges onstage. In her article, Mitchell contends that "Richard's appearances are not simple flashbacks; rather, he materializes in response to living characters" (2012, 51). The dramatic present is intertwined with the past every time the characters remember a relevant encounter with Richard—which reveals the author's intention to highlight the relevance of the past in order to understand the present. In doing so, Baldwin constructs this liminal space inhabited by Richard, whose presence onstage could not otherwise be materialized. Following Michael Taussig's anthropological notion of the

[5] In 1965, King delivered his historic "We Shall Overcome" speech at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Chicago. As Karen Weddle-West, provost of the University of Memphis, stated in relation to a 2018 exhibition of an original copy, "[t]he last three words in the document, penned by the Rev. Dr. King himself, are the three words that are most often associated with him and the civil rights movement: 'We shall overcome'" (quoted in Charlier 2018).

"space of death" (1987, 4) to explore African American literature, Sharon Holland conceptualizes it as a space where Black authors "are raising the dead, allowing them to speak, and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story of a death-in-life" (2000, 4). Considering the disruption of chronological time in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin is literally resurrecting a Richard who dies in the very opening scene and allowing him to interact with the rest of the characters and tell his story himself. From the "space of death" that he inhabits, as Holland contends, "Richard declares truths that his community resists, but he could not do so without having been brought forth by those who survived him" (2012, 52). These truths resonate in the group of nonviolent freedom fighters, especially after Richard's death, ultimately raising a self-defense consciousness among some of them.

One of the clearest reverberations of Malcom X's anti-racist philosophy can be found in the first flashback of the play. When the conversation between Richard and Mother Henry is coming to an end, the protagonist lets her catch a glimpse of his gun, as if to prove his total commitment to the self-defense strategy. As Richard tells his astonished grandmother, when she asks what he is doing with a gun: "I'm carrying it around with me, that's what I'm doing with it. This gun goes everywhere I go [...] This is all that the man understands. He don't understand nothing else. *Nothing else!*" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 22). This can be interpreted as Richard's declaration of intention. Yet the scene also seems to suggest his underlying concern. Why does he show his gun to his grandmother, especially as he is aware of her overt disapproval? And although Richard makes her promise not to tell his father about the gun, could it be possible that the protagonist was hoping his grandmother would stop him using it? Whatever the answer to these questions, Richard sticks to the self-defense strategy throughout the story, despite handing his gun over to his father soon after his conversation with Mother Henry. In the following flashback, the protagonist and Meridian open up to each other about the death of Richard's mother, which lays the groundwork for them coming to terms with their familial trauma. This bonding atmosphere pulls father and son closer, leading Richard to entrust his gun to Meridian: "Here. Grandmama saw this this morning and she got all upset. So I'll let you hold it for me. You keep it till I ask for it, okay? But when I ask you for it, you got to give it to me. Okay?" (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 36). Here, Richard's self-defense approach resorts to the judgment of Meridian's nonviolent philosophy, while the protagonist is subconsciously drawing his father closer and allowing him to gain more understanding of his son's worldview.

Meridian's anti-racist approach evolves over the course of the play, reaching a point in which his nonviolent teachings falter. The reconciliation with Richard after his return home and their profound conversations sow philosophical seeds in Meridian's consciousness that begin to blossom following the killing of his son. This traumatic experience, plus the anti-Black violence that he continues to witness in his community, pushes Meridian into a crisis of faith that reaches its peak with the disgraceful outcome of the murder trial. Like in the Emmett Till case, the jury passes a non-guilty verdict,

despite the vast amount of circumstantial evidence against the defendant. After the trial, Lyle tells Meridian the truth, triggering a brief final flashback in Act III that depicts the shooting and killing of Richard, who falls onstage for the third and last time. With the verdict and the confession, Meridian seems to resolve his inner dilemma. He begins to understand that the nonviolent strategy may not be enough to achieve justice, as the final conversation with Juanita and his liberal white ally, Parnell, show:

> Meridian: You know, for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. Maybe it will end with the Bible and the gun.
> Juanita: What did you do with the gun, Meridian?
> Parnell: You have the gun—Richard's gun?
> Meridian: Yes. In the pulpit. Under the Bible. Like the pilgrims of old. (Baldwin [1964] 1995, 120)

At the closing of the play, Meridian openly suggests that the path to equality may involve the combination of the nonviolent and self-defense strategies. His final realization echoes the historical evolution of these divergent philosophies. Debunking long-lived preconceptions, Peniel Joseph explores the revolutionary lives of King and Malcolm X in his book *The Sword and the Shield*, where he states that "Martin and Malcolm would never develop a personal friendship, but their political visions would grow closer together throughout their lives" (2020, 7). Through Meridian, Baldwin anticipates the King of his lesser-known final years, a leader whose nonviolent philosophy was conceding to more confrontational forms of social protest, more in tune with Malcolm X's approach. Significantly, the final disruption of the human design of segregation came after a long fight carried out by diverse sources of Black activism that held different perspectives on the means to be taken to achieve their common goal.

5. Conclusion

When Richard falls onstage in the final flashback of Act III, it is the third and last time that the audience must face the sight of his dead body, putting an end to the circular structure of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. His early death acts as a traumatic core throughout the play, binding all the characters together, and triggering changes and transformations in the segregated communities of the town. In each of its three acts, Richard's dead body remains onstage for some time, echoing the visual impact of the Till lynching, as well as the teenager's countless returns to national attention over the years—as Myisha Priest contends: "the body of 'the boy who never died' rises before us again and again" (2010, 1). During the dawn of the Jim Crow South, the exposure of Till's remains, the gruesome embodiment of the human waste of segregation, contributed to destabilizing the equilibrium of the system, for it forced US society to confront a reality that southern racists desperately wanted to keep hidden away at the disposal site. This disturbing sight is repeatedly portrayed in the play in an attempt

to stir the consciousness of an intergenerational audience that, despite the final fall of Jim Crow in the 1960s, has continued to witness the destruction of Black lives on an almost daily basis. Works such as *Blues for Mister Charlie* go beyond dramatic aesthetics, setting out on a moral quest to dismantle the still extant white supremacist mentality and advocate in its stead racial justice. In the end, as Baldwin reflects on his prefatory notes for the play: "We are walking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man's attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light" ([1964] 1995, xv).[6]

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[6] The research for this article was funded by the project "Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste" (ref. PID2019-106798GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the AEI (National Research Agency), and the Margarita Salas Postdoctoral Fellowship, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Universities and NextGenerationEU, 2022-2024. This work also benefits from the collaboration of the research groups "Cultures and Literatures from the United States of America" (Universidade da Coruña) and "Discourse and Identity" (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela).

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Received 21 October 2022 Revised version accepted 22 May 2023

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