

# Circulating Emotions in James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* and in American Society

Av: Alexandra Cassel

Handledare: Kerstin Shands  
Södertörns högskola | Institutionen för Kultur & Lärande  
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**Abstract**

This essay explores how James Baldwin's short story *Going to Meet the Man* depicts racist attitudes toward African-Americans in American society. Further, this essay also shows how racism is linked to a circulation of emotions that unconsciously generates a xenophobic nation affecting even those who implicitly are regarded as genuine citizens of that community. By using two theoretical perspectives, Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies and some of Freud's concepts from psychoanalysis, this essay analyzes Baldwin's text and discovers how the American nation needs to accept and recognize its racist history, just as a child needs to acknowledge his or her fear when experiencing traumatic events. Baldwin's narrative reinforces racist stereotypes while at the same time using the text to write back to a society that at the time of writing had not expected, but indeed needed, an African-American man to publish a book from a white man's perspective.

Keywords: Ahmed, America, Baldwin, emotions, fear, Freud, psychoanalysis, racism, sexuality, stereotypes, uncanny.

## **1.0 Introduction**

In 1492, Christopher Columbus marked the beginning of the European, white settler colonization of America. The Europeans proved to be people who considered themselves as superior to other ethnic groups. Not only did they treat the native peoples in cruel, inhuman, and disrespectful ways in order to develop a capitalist economy, when they had made themselves at home and regarded the land as their own, the Europeans travelled to the continent of Africa where they brutally kidnapped millions of people whom they brought back to America to work as slaves. The abolition of slavery in 1865 did not do much for African-Americans. Even a hundred years after the abolition, there was still discrimination against the African-American population in many parts of America, and especially in the South. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement sought to create equal rights for all citizens. However, African-Americans in contemporary America are still struggling with persistent xenophobia which the slavery gave rise to.

### **1.1 Aim**

This essay seeks to explore how two theoretical perspectives, the psychoanalytic concepts of the uncanny and repression, on the one hand, and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies, on the other, may be useful in an analysis of James Baldwin's short story *Going to Meet the Man*. The aim of this essay will be further to determine if an analysis of *Going to Meet the Man* may indicate how racist attitudes toward African-Americans in American society are linked to a circulation of emotions that unconsciously aims to strengthen the nation and the citizens who are included in the dominant discourse.

### **1.2 Going to Meet the Man**

By studying texts written in the past, our understanding of contemporary society may be enhanced. This essay will focus on the short story, *Going to Meet the Man*, published by the African-American author James Baldwin in 1965. It is a narrative that explores issues such as racism, socially constructed values, sexuality, and identity. Baldwin's protagonist, Jesse, is a white man and a deputy sheriff in the American South. When the story begins, Jesse is lying in bed with his wife, Grace, feeling sexually frustrated due to sudden impotence. While Grace eventually falls asleep, Jesse remains awake, thinking about previous events. His thoughts wander to an episode he has experienced earlier that day and to a man he has physically and

mentally abused in the jail where he works. He also thinks about how he as a child witnessed the lynching of an African-American man on a hot and sunny summer day. After a very vivid depiction of the lynching, Jesse's thoughts return to the present moment and, as "the nature again returned to him," he discovers that he has an erection (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 207). Grace is now awake and Jesse has sex with her, overwhelmed and excited by his racist and violent thoughts.

## 2.0 Theoretical Framework

In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of Baldwin's text, certain concepts from psychoanalysis and contemporary critical theory may be helpful. In particular, for an analysis of the seemingly never-ending wave of xenophobia and the ongoing debate about mass incarceration in America, the theory of affective economies can be useful. As this essay will suggest, Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis may be an interesting starting point when reading Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*. Moreover, this essay will propose that the persistent racism in contemporary American culture could be compared to an unsettling image of the uncanny. As this essay will argue, psychoanalytic theory may explain how Jesse's childhood trauma may be a primary reason for his sudden impotence. At the same time, the theory of affective economies may shed light on how the protagonist's childhood trauma in Baldwin's story might be understood in part as a result of circulating emotions in society.

In his book *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*, Anthony Elliott takes a theoretical approach to exploring Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis. Elliott creates an image of Freud as a professional whose ambition with psychoanalysis had a higher purpose than those free associative conversations that took place on the couch in his private clinic. As the eminent psychoanalyst Freud himself puts it,

I recognized ever more clearly that the events of human history, the interactions between human nature, cultural development, and the precipitates of primeval experiences ... are only the reflection of the dynamic conflicts among the ego, id, and the superego, which psychoanalysis study in the individual – the same events repeated on a wider stage. (Elliott 40)

By making this statement, Freud corroborates Elliott's theories of how it seems impossible to

avoid personal agony due to society's peremptory requirements, as modern culture in itself is repressive. Along these lines, Elliott finds that sexuality and unconscious desire play key roles in the reproduction of a society, and he arrives at the conclusion that too much repression "leads to intense hostility and rage" (41). Elliott also refers to the critical theorist Theodor Adorno who claimed that "[i]n psychoanalysis ... nothing is true except the exaggerations" (Elliott 3). This means, according to Elliott, that the characteristic features that distinguish Freud's work have provide important insights into society's processes. Elliott refers further to the psychological neurosis which Freud calls "castration anxiety" as a metaphor for "the destructive and brutal nature of social relationships promoted in an age of multinational capitalism" (3). It may also be of importance to mention Freud's psychoanalytic term 'repression' "which is the 'forgetting' or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious" (Barry 92-93). In addition, Elliott's interpretation argues that Freud's concept of 'repression' reveals submerged, covert identities that contain traces of "fear, anxiety or shame" (Elliott 5).

Although some may object that humans "have feelings," Sara Ahmed argues in her essay 'Affective Economies' that feelings are not private, nor do they only exist inside the body. Instead, emotions "create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Ahmed 117). That is, attitudes in society are shaped and developed through a circulation of emotions between bodies (120). To outline her theory of affective economies, Ahmed uses economic metaphors and terms such as 'capital,' 'economic,' and 'value.' Inspired by Marx's "critique of the logic of capital" (120), Ahmed also connects the process of circulating emotions to the circulation and exchange of capital, which, according to Marx, "creates surplus value." Besides claiming that emotions are shaped and developed through circulation, Ahmed emphasizes the fact that the emotional capital "is produced only as an effect of its circulation." Importantly, it is not the circulation in itself which increases the value, but the "accumulation of affective value over time" (120). Xenophobia can also be seen in the way money and capital are regarded and treated in American society. Western capital is considered as "clean money" whereas money used by "the other" is "dirty money," money that the white supremacy believes they have the right to freeze or block in order to protect the nation against an imagined threat (Ahmed 128).

Furthermore, Sara Ahmed asks what happens when a society cannot see the difference between those who pose a potential threat and those that are harmless (136). She argues that

[h]ate cannot be found in one figure, but works to create the very outline of different figures or objects of hate, a creation that crucially aligns the figures together and constitutes them as a “common” threat. ... hate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. (Ahmed 119)

In other words, the circulation of xenophobic emotions and hatred gradually contributes to the difficulty of distinguishing between those who are considered harmless and those who may be dangerous to others. When whites consider themselves to be entitled to certain rights and certain areas of land, emotions of fear begin to circulate as confusion arises in connection with trying to identify who is a valid member of a society (Ahmed 118). Over time, this process leads to the reproduction of a segregated nation and an imagined community where only white people are included (Ahmed 123).

As a result of this circulation, the theory of affective economies becomes ‘uncanny’ when hidden, racist ideas are manifested in a scary reality. In his book, *The Uncanny*, Freud uses the term ‘unheimlich’ to describe the creepy or eerie, a concept that, like Ahmed’s theories, as I will argue, can be applied to both Baldwin’s short story and to American society. According to Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, psychoanalytic criticism is paying attention to a work’s hidden and manifest content. A work’s hidden content is related to the unconscious mind while the more obvious content is related to the conscious mind (Barry 100). Barry’s explanation corresponds to F.W. J. Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as “that which ‘ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light’ “ (Freud 132). Freud, on the other hand, discusses several translations of the word ‘uncanny’ in order to show the word’s ambivalent meaning (Freud 2-4). A direct translation of Freud’s own explanation: “What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (4), gives the following meaning in English: “What is secret becomes scary.” However, not everything that is secret becomes frightening. When the German word *heimlich* is translated into “not strange, familiar ... intimate [and] homely” (Freud 126), the sentence can instead be read as “What is familiar becomes unfamiliar.” Along such lines, as this essay will suggest, racism could be seen as an uncanny repetition of something hidden or secret in terms of an inherited, false knowledge perceiving white Americans as superior to African-Americans.

Furthermore, the uncanny is found in the terrifying notion that it is the oppressor who

needs protection. White supremacists' love of the nation in combination with a fear of losing it, leads to a perceived need to protect the nation against the alleged threatening body, i.e. African-Americans. Ahmed argues that

[t]he ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilization of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to love. The emotion of hate works to animate the ordinary subject, to bring that fantasy to life, precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim. (Ahmed 118)

The fantasy of whites being the superior race often involves the idea of the white subject as builder of the nation and therefore the rightly appointed host of that nation (Ahmed 118). According to Ahmed, the white supremacists' perceived fear of the threatening body that is seen as invading the nation (psychologically and physically) makes them think of themselves as victims. This fear "*does something*; it reestablishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface. ... But what is very clear here is that the object of fear remains the black man" (Ahmed 126). In summary, this fear leads to "a turning toward home" (Ahmed 130) that unites people in emotions of love of the nation, despite the fact that the actual effect is mobilized hatred of the other.

In this essay Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is used as a theory that partly explores how the protagonist Jesse acts as a child and later as a deputy sheriff. Freud's theory is indeed an interesting starting point and seemingly relevant in the analysis of Jesse. However, using Freud's concepts from psychoanalysis also calls for a presentation of the critique against his ideas. Jane Gallop, an American writer and academic professor with an interest in topics such as feminism and psychoanalysis, mentions the criticism against Freud in her article "Reading the Mother Tongue: Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism." Gallop argues that during the 1970s, when feminism began to gain momentum, "Freud and his science were viewed by feminism in general as prime perpetrators of patriarchy" (Gallop 314). Gallop further refers to Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* in order to show how Freud was a key contributor to the "masculine culture" (314). In connection with the publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970, Kate Millett became a prominent figure in the revolution against the patriarchal society. She states that Freud incorrectly based his theory on early childhood experiences and biological differences between gender rather than observing how society and culture contribute to shape humans. Furthermore, she argues that Freud refused to accept

women's symptoms as general dissatisfaction with their position in society (Millet 179), and that he built these ideas on “the information supplied by women themselves, the patients who furnished his clinical data, the basis of his later generalities about all women” (180).

While criticism of Freud still exists within the feminist movement, Peter Barry displays British feminist Juliet Mitchell's defense of Freud in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Mitchell argues that

Freud doesn't present the feminine as something simply 'given and natural'. Female sexuality (indeed, heterosexuality in general) isn't just there 'naturally' from the start, but is formed by early experiences and adjustments, and Freud shows the process of its being produced and constructed ... (Barry 125)

This quote illustrates a standpoint that can be correlated to how today's feminist movement generally consider how sex and gender is created, due to the fact that Mitchell points at Freud's idea of sexuality as produced and constructed in contrast to the idea of sex and gender being influenced by biological factors.

Finally, as this essay will argue that the circulation of feelings such as fear contribute to reinforce xenophobic attitudes in contemporary American society, it may be of importance to apply Mitchell's interpretation of Freud's ideas on white people's perceived fear of African-American's alleged desire of revenge. Today, we may use the idea of a constructed sexuality, based either on Freud's or contemporary feminist ideas, as means to challenge the stereotyped images of hyper-sexualized African-Americans. Furthermore, the animalistic castration during the lynching in Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* may also be interpreted as a demonstration of how the white society worked to maintain African-Americans' inability to defy their oppressors. Moreover, Baldwin argues that “one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.” (Notes of a Native Son 597). By considering the white fantasy of African-Americans as constructed, may the ongoing social castration of African-Americans in today's society be challenged and eventually lead to a brighter future for all Americans, regardless of their skin color.

### 3.0 Previous research

There is a growing collection of written material about James Baldwin. The studies that have been conducted concern themes such as white terrorism, the myth of the racist South and America's contemporary society as a traumatic result of a violent history. While some of the research on Baldwin's work is highly interesting, for the purposes of this essay and its analysis of *Going to Meet the Man*, I find it most useful to focus on previous research that deals with the themes of circulating emotions, racist attitudes in society, and the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and the uncanny. However, the themes mentioned above will also be addressed.

In her article, "The Social and Moral Cost of Mass Incarceration in African American Communities," Dorothy E. Roberts uses the expression "structural favouritism" which equals the term 'structural racism' (Roberts 1279), a term often linked to white supremacy. Where structural racism is present, an uncanny feeling grows from the fact that white people in America are implicitly regarded as genuine citizens whereas African-Americans signify 'the other' or the bogus citizens. Pointing to the difficulties when it comes to proving racial motivation as an explanation for mass incarceration of African-Americans, Roberts emphasizes that public authorities seldom admit to their racist attitudes (1279-1280). Instead, according to Roberts, embedded mechanisms such as "racial hierarchies" and "how whites benefit from 'structural favoritism' " in society form the basis for a situation where more African-Americans than whites are being imprisoned for drug-related offenses, although more whites, in percentage terms, are using drugs (1279). Consequently, it can be argued that reality is uncanny when authorities act from inscrutable and seemingly unreliable grounds.

Supposedly, the laws that exist in an ideal community are the same in a society where structural racism is embedded. In her article, "'We the People,' Who?: James Baldwin and the Traumatic Constitution of These United States," Shireen R. K. Patell argues that all societies consist both of laws that are manifested by the state and "hidden laws" that are built on unspoken assumptions (Patell 356). With the concept of hidden laws in mind, Patell analyzes Baldwin's writing and concludes that America's traumatic and xenophobic history needs to be accepted by the contemporary society before it is possible to create a common and workable future. Patell refers to Baldwin's archivist and biographer, David Leeming, who argues that a country with a violent history may indeed have a bright future. Leeming claims that all laws, hidden and constitutional, need to be taken into account in order to establish the basis of the nation's "progress and justice" (Patell 359). Baldwin himself

reminds us that “the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society ... they both alike depend on the same reality” (Patell 362). On the one hand, Patell may be right when she agrees with Baldwin that all people in America, regardless of background, desire the same thing: the American dream. But on the other hand, one may still insist that although the oppressor and the oppressed depend on the same society and desire the same thing, the oppressed are precisely that: *oppressed*. The oppressed people in a society, those who suffer from structural racism, will continue to be segregated unless the state makes peace with its past.

Moreover, both the police in today’s society and the crowd in *Going to Meet the Man* act out of an uncanny and false notion that whites are superior to African-Americans. According to Patell, this notion is a fantasy on which America is built, one that “defines a nation in denial” (Patell 361). In her article, Patell turns to Baldwin’s essay “The Price of the Ticket” in order to explain how the people in America knew nothing of these racist ideas before they were introduced to them by “the architects of the American State” (359), politicians who, in Baldwin’s mind, prioritize money over humans. The views of the people included in the fantasy, of the police who perform the ongoing mass incarceration of African-Americans, and of Baldwin’s violent crowd at the lynching in *Going to Meet the Man* thus originate from the same source: the state. Patell argues that “[t]he mob is not the other of the law but one of its creations; the mob embodies the violence that law coolly institutes as order” (359). In making this comment, Patell urges us to explore Ahmed’s idea of how emotions circulate in society and how emotions of hatred in the past still contribute to contemporary events. Ahmed agrees with Patell’s view of the idea of white superiority as a fantasy. In addition, Ahmed argues that the fantasy is realized through “the mobilization of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to love” (Ahmed 118). Thus, based on previous research, one can conclude that white supremacists act out of love of the nation and for those included in the imagined community, while the circulation of hatred against African-Americans subconsciously continues with support from hidden and manifest laws.

Exploring “the white supremacist’s shudder of abjection before his racial Other” (Weisenburger 6), Steven Weisenburger argues in “The Shudder and the Silence: James Baldwin on White Terror” that Jesse’s racist attitudes clearly show through physical expressions and violent fantasies about African-American women based on ideas which in the past used to be explained as natural reactions to racial differences. By referring to nineteenth-century literature about physical differences and “natural repugnance” (5), Weisenburger also supports Patell’s claim that whites in general and Jesse in particular are

“locked up” in a white supremacist-fantasy (6), and argues further that Baldwin considered the so-called natural shudders of abjection as a means to justify a racist society.

Literature reflects society in different ways. Although it might be unintentional, the political climate and the author’s personal views may become visible between the lines. Weisenburger investigates the connection between Baldwin’s story *Going to Meet the Man* and the violent events that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement in 1965. As Weisenburger presents a timeline of Baldwin’s movements, it is clear that Baldwin wrote *Going to Meet the Man* during the time period that led up to an event known as “Bloody Sunday” (5). On March 7 1965, a protest march was conducted between Selma and Montgomery in the state of Alabama. For instance, Baldwin’s character ‘Big Jim C.’ is thought to be the racist county sheriff Jim Clark who led the attack on the marchers on 7 March. Jim Clark, “state troopers and a ‘posse’ made up of deputies and volunteers from Dallas county” were armed with cattle prods, guns, fire hoses, dogs and bullwhips when they tried to stop the marchers, mostly African-Americans, from protesting against racial inequalities (Carlson, “Jim Clark”). The connection of a real person to the short story reveals Baldwin’s commitment and devotion for the Civil Rights Movement and its progress.

Secondly, Weisenburger argues that not only does hate reproduce itself, but “the violence proceeds from a profound phobia galvanizing whites’ exterminationist desires” (Weisenburger 5). According to Weisenburger, the lynchings of African-Americans may be seen as a synecdoche for whites’ wish to kill all African-Americans. Similarly to Patell and Baldwin, Weisenburger argues that it is necessary for America to recognize its history in order to move towards a harmonious future and stop the reproduction of racism (5). If not, Weisenburger continues, the “white terrorism” will spread like a disease “through generations of men” (10).

## **4.0 Analysis**

### **4.1 The Uncanny**

Like the circulation of xenophobic emotions, feelings of uncanniness seem to constantly undulate back and forth in society. Jesse is an innocent, eight-year-old boy when his parents one day let him watch the cruel lynching of an African-American man. The uncanny consists in the space that emerges between Jesse’s involuntary exposure to a xenophobic environment as a boy and his own racist thoughts as an adult. Baldwin seems to convey a message between the lines of how the child is innocent, is deeply upset and scared, and has many

questions that he does not dare to ask. Against this background, I would like to suggest that there is a certain degree of sadness in Baldwin's picture of Jesse as an adult. Jesse seems to represent a society that needs to make peace with its past in order to achieve a harmonious future.

A feeling of uncanniness is also present in Baldwin's description of the events before the lynching: It is a sunny day; families have dressed up in fancy clothes and talk about how much food they have brought with them. "It was like a Fourth of July picnic" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 200), Jesse thinks to himself as he watches cars passing by his house. Excited by the day's preparations, he asks if they are going on a picnic. His father replies that they indeed are going on a picnic, one that Jesse "won't ever forget" (200). In an instant, Baldwin turns brightness and excitement into eeriness and the uncanny. Possibly with the abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July speech in 1852 in mind: "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim" (Douglass 13), Baldwin creates an uncanny scene when he combines a familiar, beautiful summer day with a little boy's awakening to an unfamiliar and scary reality.

#### **4.2 Shivering and Fear**

Weisenburger may have a point when he claims that it is "the white supremacist's *shudder* of abjection before his racial Other"(6) that constitutes the basis for both Jesse's violent attitudes towards African-Americans and his sudden impotence. What Baldwin seems to strive for in his depiction of the lynching and the horrible assault in the cell, is to convey how the rage can continue to circulate despite the fact that both acts are unfortunate. One can also assume that fear of African-Americans was, and still is, a taboo subject among white supremacists. Therefore, I will argue that Freud's theory of psychoanalysis more accurately captures the fear depicted by Baldwin than Weisenburger's idea of a 'shudder of abjection' does. On the basis of these statements, I would like to suggest that fear poses a fundamental threat to the white supremacy, and this fear may involve the fear of not being good enough or white enough and thus the risk of being excluded from the white, first class community. Repressed memories and repressed fear seem to create a kind of fear that dehumanizes African-Americans, conquers moral and common sense and further explains why Jesse considers the man he abuses a scapegoat instead of regarding him as a man who never had a chance to live as a full member of society.

Baldwin creates parallel worlds by going back and forth in time and giving voice to the

characters both as children and as adults. For instance, while they are on their way home from the lynching, Jesse lies between his parents in the car's front seat. Suddenly he comes to think of his friend, Otis, an African-American boy of the same age that Jesse usually plays with. Later in the story, Baldwin reveals that Jesse worried about Otis already on the way to the lynching. At the point of traveling to the lynching, Jesse has not yet completely come to terms with what he may expect of the day that lies ahead of him. However, he soon realizes that there is a connection between his friend Otis and "the bad nigger" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 201) who has been accused of attacking an old woman. The connection is obviously their skin color. Against the background of Jesse witnessing the horrible lynching, and because the two boys have not met in a few days, Jesse is concerned about his friend. "[T]he thought of Otis made him sick. He began to shiver." ... 'He is tired' " (199), says Jesse's mother when she notices the boy's shivers. Nevertheless, it is not until Jesse lies in bed when they have returned back home that his feelings are beginning to enter the process of repression where thoughts are being rejected into the unconscious mind. Confused and scared after what he has gone through that day, Jesse longs for his mother's secure embrace. Although only eight years old, Jesse refuses to call on his mother and tries to go to sleep alone in his bed. Instead of getting consolation, he hears his parents comfort each other. By using Freud's idea of psychoanalysis, this day and the subsequent evening where Jesse's parents have sex, is what I think Anthony Elliott refers to when he writes that "psychical disorder is the product of sexual abuse or actual assault" (Elliott 17). Children who are left out and forced to listen to the parents' sexual activities rather than getting consolation and answers to their questions, only hours after they have witnessed a lynching and castration of a man, are exposed to a trauma "that in turn shaped neurosis in [Jesse's] adult life" and one of the obvious reasons for Jesse's impotence (17).

More than thirty years later, Jesse is shivering again. As mentioned in the introduction of this essay, Jesse lies in bed thinking about an episode he had experienced earlier that day. The African-American man who had annoyed sheriff Big Jim C. by not queuing properly outside the courthouse was beaten and whipped before he was incarcerated in jail. When Jesse came to the courthouse that day, his task was to stop the African-American men from singing. The African-American man inside the cell was considered the ring-leader and the one Jesse was convinced could stop the singing. In order to stop him from singing, Jesse "put the prod to him" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 192) over and over again. Ahmed's theory of emotions in circulation fits in when trying to understand how these horrible actions may occur. Like his ancestors, Jesse contributes to the spread of xenophobia when he, by his

violent actions, repeats the irrevocable experiences of his childhood. Although the incarcerated man is the victim who first comes to mind, the circulation of hate creates new victims making Jesse one, too. As Jesse looks at the unconscious man on the cell floor, he shivers vigorously. The violence Jesse witnessed as a child comes back into his conscious mind through his own violent actions and is seemingly channeling all the fear he has hidden inside himself for over thirty years. The forty-two-year-old Jesse is shaking with fear, just like he did when he was only an eight-year-old child.

### 4.3 Singing

Jesse's repressed memories from the traumatic experience of the lynching are brought to life by the Afro-Americans' songs. In the same way Jesse's mother believes that Jesse is tired when he is shivering after the lynching, Jesse's wife, Grace, supposes that it is the fact that Jesse has been "working too hard" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 189) that is the explanation for his impotence. None of them put any energy into finding a deeper explanation for Jesse's impotence, and once again it is worth taking Freud's theory of psychoanalysis as well as the concept of repressed memories into consideration. Being the one who has carried out the horrific beatings and used the prod on the man in the cell earlier that day, Jesse's vigorous shivering has brought the past into his conscious mind. The repressed memories have until that day been protected by his mind's "defence mechanisms," which Barry explains as a "psychic procedure for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions" (Barry 94). Thus, it is not an innate or natural reaction in white people that cause the shivering, but as shown here, a reaction caused by fear on all occasions.

### 4.4 Reverse Roles

As an African-American author, Baldwin explores the issues of xenophobia from a white man's perspective, emphasizing Jesse's self-image of being under siege while at the same time pointing to the image of the African-American man as a 'scapegoat' described also by Weisenburger (3). By doing so, Baldwin follows two paths delineated by Steven Weisenburger who argues that representations of lynchings either suggest that whites perform lynchings in self-defense because they have been "diminished and besieged" or portray African-Americans as "scapegoats" in order to strengthen dominant ideas of the nation and the white supremacy (3). In *Going to Meet the Man*, Baldwin writes:

He tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the

niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read! Any preacher would tell you that. He was only doing his duty: Protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves. (Baldwin 195)

By counting backwards, we can figure out that if the now forty-two-year-old Jesse witnessed the lynching when he was eight years old, it may have been carried out sometime in the early 1930s, a point in time when slavery had not been abolished for a very long time. However, Jesse's expressions "not his fault" and "only doing his duty" portrays him as the victim or as someone without the possibility to make a different choice. As Jesse disclaims any responsibility on the grounds that he only performs his assigned duties as a Deputy Sheriff, he continues to reproduce the image of African-Americans when he thinks they are rebelling against a system designed by God where whites are first class citizens. Furthermore, as mentioned in the section presenting the theoretical framework, an uncanny feeling may grow from the idea that it is the oppressor—the people who kidnapped millions of people a hundred years earlier—who are themselves in need of protection. White supremacists' love of the nation in combination with a fear of losing it leads to a perceived need to protect the nation against the alleged threatening body, i.e. the African-Americans. On the way home from the lynching, Jesse mentions Otis. He realizes that his friend may be in trouble and expresses his anxiety to his parents:

"But Otis didn't do nothing!" ...

"Otis *can't* do nothing ... We just want to make sure Otis *don't* do nothing' ...

And you tell him what your Daddy said, you hear?"

(Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 199-200)

In this dialogue, Jesse's father exposes his son to his own racist values. Those covert threats of violence towards Otis are precisely the breeding ground that I argue works to fortify the kind of fear that Ahmed would describe as the 'glue' between emotions in circulation. Emotions in circulation create a breeding ground for xenophobia, as when children of Jesse's age are taught racist attitudes of the kind that Jesse's father adheres to. The subsequent process involving emotions that are growing in size and intensity and affecting more and more people, could be seen as part and parcel of a discussion that connects Baldwin's story with the theories of Ahmed and Freud at the same time as it points to the relevance of the

discussion Roberts conducts about mass incarceration in US society.

#### 4.5 Structural Racism

Lynchings of African-Americans in the past could be further compared to today's American society where structural racism appears to be an underlying reason for the tendency of the police to indiscriminately imprison African-American people who allegedly constitute a threat to the nation. Similarly to the police, the crowd who visits the lynching in *Going to Meet the Man* is united in their hatred and fear, a combination of strong emotions. Weisenburger's idea of how racism will spread like a virus if society does not take responsibility for its history enables us to reach a deeper comprehension of the scene where Baldwin gives a poignant and vivid description of the lynching:

The black body was on the ground, the chain which had held it was being rolled up by one of his father's friends. Whatever the fire had left undone, the hands and the knives and the stones of the people had accomplished. The head was caved in, one eye was torn out, one ear was hanging. But one had to look carefully to realize this, for it was, now, merely, a black charred object on the black, charred ground. (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 206)

The brutal approach reveals a traumatized society in which only the reproduction of hatred can justify an event in which a living person is burned, physically abused and castrated. Patell discusses the contradiction between the ideal nation and the actual nation, a fantasy, which the white supremacy refuses to give up. Hanging in chains over an open fire, the man is already in a terrible and inferior position. Eight-year-old Jesse witnesses the crowd attacking the man simultaneously, seemingly as one body of rage, a human crowd embodying the fantasy created by the circulation of hate, fear and love.

As I have argued in this essay, it is fear that constitutes the basis of racism in society. In *Going to Meet the Man*, the theme of racism is present throughout the story. Baldwin illustrates an idea of how white people's fear come from a fantasy of African-Americans' inherited desire of revenge. However, in his non-fiction essay *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, Baldwin discusses the real relationship between black and white Americans. Without explicitly mentioning the word racism, he explains that it would be too "exhausting and self-destructive" for African-Americans to let hate be the foundation of their relationship (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 107). Baldwin further argues that "[h]atred ...

never failed to destroy the man who hated,” (108). Instead, he suggests that the future in America must be built on equal power and acceptance without rancor, a future he thinks can only come to exist if people in their hearts are truly free of hatred and despair. In the following excerpt, I will return to the situation in *Going to Meet the Man* where Jesse’s African-American friend Otis sets an example of how white people’s fear of reprisal may come to surface:

“We didn’t see Otis this morning,” Jesse said.

“You haven’t seen Otis for a couple of mornings,” his mother said. That was true. But he was only concerned about *this* morning.

“No,” said his father, “I reckon Otis’s folks was afraid to let him show himself this morning.”

“But Otis didn’t do nothing!” Now his voice sounded questioning.

“Otis *can’t* do nothing,” said his father, he’s too little.” ... “We just want to make sure Otis *don’t* do nothing.” ... “And you tell him what your Daddy said, you hear?”

“Yes sir,” he said. (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 199)

In this dialogue Baldwin creates an uncanny atmosphere by using an eight-year-old boy, Otis, to represent all African-Americans. Otis symbolizes an indefinable group of people that from an early age needs to be silenced in order to not pose a threat to the white supremacy. Baldwin also shows how racism circulates within the family and later into the community by the grown-up Jesse as he involuntarily inherits his father's fear of African-American's alleged desire of reprisal.

Furthermore, autobiographer David Leeming brings up Baldwin’s personal view on racism in his book *James Baldwin: A biography*. He refers to a letter written by Baldwin to his younger brother in the early 1950s:

[w]hen the white racist confronts the black man, what he sees is not the individual but a ‘nightmare’ of his own creation. Above all, he said, ‘you must take care not to step inside’ his nightmare, his guilt, and his fear, his hatred. To step into the nightmare is to justify it and to relinquish the soul’s freedom and control over one’s life. To enter the nightmare is to become a ‘nigger.’ (Leeming 111)

The message Baldwin conveys in the letter is similar to the message found in *Going to Meet the Man*. The man who is lying badly beaten on the cell floor where Jesse works, is an African-American man who refuses to step into the nightmare that Jesse is trying to project on him. He is fighting against Jesse's xenophobic behavior and Baldwin shows how the power balance between the oppressor and the oppressed is moved when Jesse's childhood memories slowly come back. As Jesse discovers that the man on the floor is the same boy he used to talk to when he worked as a mail order deliveryman in the past, Jesse's repressed fear enters his body and mind. The fear is so strong that he, "to his own horror," (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 194) gets an erection. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Baldwin uses the bible to emphasize how Jesse justifies his actions through the expressions "not his fault" and "only doing his duty" (195) while he at the same depicts a man "whose sexuality is tragically imprisoned in the myth of black sexuality that dominates his psychic world" (Leeming 295). *Going to Meet the Man* shows how sexuality and racism are intertwined in a stereotypical and complex fantasy of how African-Americans are believed to be. Jesse considers himself to be a good man, and perhaps his racist attitude is explained by Baldwin's idea of how people cling to their hate in order to avoid the pain that comes with guilt and confession.

## 5.0 Conclusion

This essay's aim is to explore how two theoretical perspectives, Freud's psychoanalysis along with Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies, may be useful when analyzing James Baldwin's short story *Going to Meet the Man*. The aim of this essay is further to show how Jesse's racist attitudes as an adult and the xenophobic mind set in American society are linked to a circulation of emotions. By using Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies, I have found that Baldwin's short story reveals a world beyond the obvious. Despite the straight language and the horrible lynching, there is a subtle message between the lines. It is found in the fact that Baldwin with his African-American origins writes from the white man's perspective. African-American men are often portrayed with sexual innuendos and there may be a reason to consider how such an analysis of Baldwin's short story would look like. However, in this essay I have argued that fear constitutes the basis for the violent and racist attitudes Afro-Americans are exposed to and have suffered throughout history. The ultimate way to prevent a man from having an equal place in society is by castrating him. To further prevent the spread of this undefined threat, a threat in which African-Americans may have

children and consequently form a group that is growing and expecting rights in a society where whites consider themselves owning the rights to dominate, death is the only thing that can bring a harmonious future to the white supremacists. This fear, I believe, is at the core of the conflict, and it prevents the American society from recognizing its own xenophobia. Similarly, it is Jesse's repressed experiences that prevent him from recognizing his fear. Uncontrolled fear, if repressed too long, as Anthony Elliott suggests, "leads to intense hostility and rage" (Elliott 41). Jesse is portrayed as a hard-working man who has left his childhood experiences behind. The unconscious has a powerful effect on our actions and when Jesse is reminded of the lynching, the repressed fear comes back as an anxiety that, in turn, is manifested through aggression and blind rage. Moreover, when Jesse encounters the African-American man in the cell as he arrives in the jailhouse, Jesse represents the authorities and the white supremacists who in their fantasy unconsciously justify violence as a means to further repress their fear. It is the same, unreliable police and authorities that operate in contemporary American society. Out of a fear of the alleged dangerous body of African-Americans, the police may mass-incarcerate people who do not necessarily pose a threat to society.

Baldwin's fictional 1930s and 1960s society in *Going to Meet the Man* demonstrate how open racism operates. Patell argues that structural racism in contemporary American society will continue to be segregated unless the state makes peace with its past. My conclusion is that the state has a great responsibility to call a halt to the persistent xenophobia. When the police act from seemingly unreliable grounds, the state helps to reproduce racism. Finally, I will argue that it is not only the circulation of emotions such as fear that maintains racist attitudes, but also the inherited fantasy described by Ahmed and Patell in which whites are considered superior to African Americans, that needs full attention from the state from now on. Or, as argued by Weisenburger, xenophobia will continue to spread like a virus and instead strengthen the image of the American society as a representative of the uncanny, a society that is based on a set of values which consist of repressed fear instead of love for one another and the nation.

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