

## Fiction Absolute and Ethics: Tom Wolfe's *Back to Blood*

SAHAR JAMSHIDIAN

University of Teheran, Kish Campus  
The Islamic Republic of Iran  
jamshidian84ir@ut.ac.ir

HOSSEIN PIRNAJMUDDIN

University of Isfahan  
The Islamic Republic of Iran

### ABSTRACT

*Tom Wolfe once more in his last novel Back to Blood (2012) has taken the issue of race and ethnic tensions as one of its primary themes and this time he has chosen the city of Miami, home to the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any US major metropolitan area. This novel looks into the interethnic relationships among the Cuban immigrants, Haitians, and American whites and blacks. Applying Emmanuel Levinas's theory of alterity and ethics of sensibility to Back to Blood could be rewarding since it sheds light on the interethnic tensions present among different groups of people whose only concern is their own 'blood' and their own race. We argue that Wolfe's novel, read in terms of ethics of sensibility, with its emphasis on the responsibility of one for the naked, universal Other, reveals how altericide and indifference towards the plight of the Other lie at the heart of most interethnic tensions and conflicts.*

*Key words: Emanuel Levinas; ethics of sensibility; alterity; fiction absolute; interethnic tensions*

### INTRODUCTION

The population of Miami in South Florida has dramatically increased since 1960s as a result of the massive immigration of Cubans to the region after the Cuban revolution. Since then, Miami which had already suffered from the white/black segregation typical of the cities of American South, has faced new tensions and conflicts in the wake of the growing population of Cubans and their subsequent economic and political success. Living in a multicultural city, Miami's inhabitants are always inclined to see ethnicity as the root of all their problems even when the conflicts have nothing to do with ethnic differences (Stepick, Grenier, Max Castro, Dunn 2003, p. 150). Such an attitude widens the gap among different ethnic groups building entrenched defensive walls which exclude Others from the circle of those with whom the self feels likeness and kinship. *Back to Blood (BB)* as a social novel tries, with some success, to analyze and elaborate on the main problems of interethnic relationships in Miami by fictionalizing some of the most controversial issues of this city such as the problems of Cuban and Haitian refugees and immigrants or the hostility between American blacks and Cuban cops said to have its root in police brutality and misuse.

Early in the novel, Nestor Camacho, a Cuban cop in the Marin Patrol, is ordered by his American superior, Sergeant McCorkle, to bring a Cuban refugee down the ship mast so the coast guards can take care of this illegal alien and the police be able to ease the flow of traffic caused by Cubans gathered on the bridge "demanding that he be given asylum" (*BB*, p. 42). Nestor confronting this task is caught in a moral dilemma; he has to choose between his duty to obey his superior's order and his moral responsibility to the refugee and the Cuban community who will hate him for arresting a Cuban refugee just some meters away from freedom. However, for him this is not a serious dilemma since he is so concerned with his job in the elite unit, the Marin Patrol, that he will not do anything close to outright

insubordination which would result in his expulsion from this unit (BB, p. 34). He knows that by starting insubordinate confrontation with his commander at a crucial moment of a run, “at the moment when the entire department was waiting for them to get some idiot down off the top of a mast in Biscayne Bay! He’d be finished!” “*Canned! Kicked out!*” (BB, p. 34). Nestor who does his best to get recognition by the Americano Sergeant follows him to the deck “like a dog” (BB, p. 36) and just being signalled at by the sergeant, means bliss to him. “That look was the equivalent of the Medal of Honor! The Sergeant had acknowledged him as a member of the courageous brotherhood of cops!” (BB, p. 42). The refugee, on the other hand, who looks “like a clump of filthy, sodden laundry” has been brought to the Biscayne Bay near the U.S. shore by the Cuban smugglers and now is “shout[ing] to the crowd on the bridge and appeal[ing] to them by reaching out with his hands contorted, palms up, into the shape of a pair of cups” (BB, p. 38). The guy up the mast claims to be an anti-Fidel dissenter, however, for the police force “right now that don’t matter. Right now you gotta get him down from there. We got eight lanes a traffic on the causeway, and nothing’s moving” (BB, p. 42). Neither Nestor nor the police force cares about the fate of the refugee. Both are deaf to his pleas for mercy: in the words of Emanuel Levinas, they have committed altericide.

Emanuel Levinas, Lithuanian-born French-Jewish philosopher and religious thinker, in the twentieth century has given special attention to the ‘ethics of alterity.’ He claims that “ethics is first philosophy” (Levinas 1991, p. 48), that is, ethics cannot begin with ontology (most traditional philosophies are ontological), but ontology must begin from ethics since ontology cannot encounter the Other as an absolute Other, but approaches it in order to conquer it. In Levinas’s revolutionary ethics, the Other is not reduced to the same, to the self or to the known, but its difference is respected and it exists on its own terms with no reference to the self. Consequently, the otherness of the Other remains intact. The self in its encounter with the Other does not question, classify or name it; on the contrary, the self is called into question by the presence of the Other and has to justify its freedom. In this relationship the Other calls the self’s dogmatism, egoism and arbitrary freedom into question and by commanding Thou shalt not Kill puts the responsibility for the Other on the self’s shoulders. This openness towards the Other, the Self’s vulnerability and exposure to the Other, suffering for the suffering of the Other, substitution for the Other define what Levinas means by sensibility (Levinas 1991). The face of the Other which expresses weakness, absolute exposure and isolation, in other words, death, gives rise to a kind of paradoxical feeling in the self which tempts the self to commit murder and at the same time commands Thou shalt not Kill (Levinas 1998)

### NESTOR AND THE OTHER

In this novel, Nestor ignores the refugee as the other and becomes uneasy only by confronting the ‘Cries! Exhortations! Imprecations! Ululations! Supplications! Boos!’ from Cubans on the bridge who would hate him as soon as they find out that it is he who arrests the refugee and denies him his freedom. Nestor who is “fixated upon an audience of one —Sergeant McCorkle,” “stare[s] at the man on the mast without any longer *seeing him*” (BB, pp. 45-6, italics added). Unable to heed the face of the other, he contemplates on the meaning of guilt.

What is guilt? Guilt is a gas, and gases disperse, but superior officers don’t. Once they sink their teeth in, they’re tenacious as a dog. Possible disapproval of a mob of his own people wasn’t remotely as threatening as the disapproval of this blue-eyed sandy-haired *americano* (BB, p. 45).

The narrator comments that it is a “real slime! The cops were going to arrest a poor refugee on top of a mast and send him back to Castro and they were using a Cuban, a turncoat

Cuban, to do the dirtiest work, but none of this quite reached the rational seat of *justice* in the left hemisphere of Nestor's brain" (BB, pp. 46, 37, italics added) who only prayed not to be embarrassed in front of Sergeant McCorkle.

Up the mast, Nestor looks straight up "at the face of the man on the mast [...the refugee] knows what's happening, [. . .] Every time his *hunter* grabs the rope to pull himself up higher, the filthy clump can feel a little jolt in the bosun's chair" (BB, p. 47, italics added). The refugee is "looking him right in the face! ... What an expression... the cornered animal ... the doomed rat... drenched, dirty, exhausted ... panting ... [is] barely able to utter a cry for miraculous salvation" (BB, p. 48). Nestor listens to his entreaties:

*Te suplico! ; Te suplico!*"I'm begging you! You can't send me back! They'll torture me until I reveal *everybody!* They'll destroy my family. Have mercy! [. . .]I beg you for asylum! I beg you for a chance! (BB, p. 48)

All the same, the egoist Nestor knows if he does not obey the order and fulfill his duty, he is "bucked back down to patrolman—or worse" (BB, p. 47). Only when "the man's face changes from aghast... to terrified [and] he starts to rise from the bosun's chair to flee," Nestor can see himself responsible for the death of "the poor man whose only sin was trying to put one foot on American soil!" (BB, pp. 49-50) Thus, he goes to much trouble to save the life of the refugee and hand him to the Coast Guard which makes him a hero in the eyes of his colleagues and most importantly Sergeant McCorkle who "doesn't have to say a word—it's all right there in his face. Nestor Camacho is now... *a cop... a real cop... as real as they make 'em...* Nestor Camacho enters Heaven. . . [he goes] coasting, coasting, coasting into euphoria" (BB, p. 55).

According to Kant's ethics, however, Nestor is a dutiful police officer who is doing the right thing. The aim of Kantian ethics is "the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality" (2006a, p. 5) called the *Categorical Imperative* which commands us to perform actions which could be derivable from universal principles. The Categorical Imperative tells us to act on those principles which are laws, that is, they are universal. For Kant, there is only a single Categorical Imperative which is: "*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*" (2006a, p. 31). As for Nestor, he might create his maxim in this way: everyone is allowed to disobey the law (and his superior's order) to prevent alienation from his own community. In order to test the universality of his maxim he has to ask himself what would happen if everybody did that. A rational being, according to Kant, can see that if anyone would disobey the law in order to care for his own community, anarchy would emerge. Consequently, this maxim fails since he cannot suggest it to others and will it to be a universal law. Moreover, as Alweiss argues, Kant believes that a civil society is possible only if the members respect the State laws and the principle of universality is also possible "only within a civil condition, namely, in conditions where I, like everyone else, am bound by the same rights and regulations" (Alweiss 2003, p. 214). Thus, as long as a conflict exists between an external legal law (duties of right) –such as the military law in the case of Captain Vere in Melville's *Billy Budd* or the immigration law in the case of Nestor –and the personal moral convictions (duties of virtue) –Captain Vere's sympathy towards innocent Billy Budd or Nestor's responsibility towards the refugee and his community –Kantian ethics prefers the former to the latter (Alweiss 2003).

Kant has also paid attention to the right to hospitality in *Toward Perpetual Peace* whereby a stranger has a right "not to be treated in a hostile manner by another upon his arrival on the other's territory" as long as "he behaves peacefully" since all human beings have "the right of common possession of the surface of the earth . . . and originally no one

has more of a right to be at a given place on earth than anyone else” (2006b, p. 82). Despite Kant’s early stance which

seems at first to extend the cosmopolitan law to encompass universal hospitality *without limit*,” as Jacque Derrida notes, his right to hospitality is limited to and “dependent on treaties between states, . . . dependent on state sovereignty, especially when it is a question of the *right of residence* . . . dependent on and controlled by the law and the state police” (2005, pp. 20-22).

Therefore, the stranger who has the “right to visit” not the “right of a guest,” “can be turned away if it can be done without causing his death” (Kant 2006b, p. 82). Accordingly, Kant’s right to hospitality justifies Nestor’s dutiful action which is compatible with the state’s law considering the illegal aliens. Furthermore, Nestor’s self-centred ambitions and his egoistic motivations to do his duty may reduce the moral worth of his action in the Kantian sense, but they do not make it wrong. As Allen Wood contends, for Kant, contrary to the agent-based theorists, motivations cannot make an action right or wrong. For Kant, self-love, self-preservation, and having a good reputation are not bad motives. At worst, these motives “do not represent a morally pure disposition, and they produce actions in conformity to duty only contingently and precariously” (Wood 2011, p. 63). From this perspective, then, though an egoist, Nestor has done the right thing when he has performed an action compatible with his legal duty which would prevent anarchy in a civil state.

#### EMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE REFUGEE OTHER

Contrary to Kantian ethics, Levinas would evaluate one’s moral action based on one’s response to the alterity. Human beings, according to Levinas, gain their selfhood not by asserting their right to freedom but by seeing themselves called to responsibility by the face of the Other. Having experienced Holocaust, Levinas cannot easily submit to the politics and laws of the states in our human relations. This of course does not mean that in his view laws, states, and legal institutions are redundant and in the case of inter-human relationships should be ignored, rather his priority of the radical relationship between the self and the Other over the legal system and political discourse calls attention to the fact that laws are not final and perfect, hence must be under perpetual investigation and examination. In this regard, Jess Sims draws a parallel between Levinas’s ethics of alterity and Schmittian exceptionalism which would explain Levinas’s attitude concerning the conflict between a justice as an ethical face to face relationship and a justice as a universal and objective law. Sims observes that for Levinas, “nothing that concerns justice, including all political and juridical institutions, is outside the control of the responsibility of the one for the other”; this priority of the Other is what “resists the reduction of justice to the application of rules” (2009, p. 226). He concludes that “the relation with other is not only exceptional in its being outside the system of rules, but in its logical and methodological priority over that system –justifying both itself and the rules to which it is an exception” (2009, p. 226). Although Sims is apprehensive about such exceptionality which would justify anything, Roger Burggraeve sees Levinas’s priority of the Other to the established rules as a great opportunity for reviewing, reforming and improving the ethical and humane nature of each socio-political rule (2002). Considering Levinas’s justice which is motivated by the face of the Other in a society where there is no difference between all the Others, far or near, Burggraeve maintains that “nothing —neither politics, law, the State, institutions and society, nor labour, technology, money, business and all other forms of ‘exchange’—can exempt itself from responsibility of the one-for-the-Other” (2002, p.146). Under the influence of Levinas, Derrida also claims that Kant’s cosmopolitanism and hospitality under the domain of legal authority has been abused by the law and the state

police in cases concerning the protection of asylum seekers. Therefore, the face of the Other forces Derrida to question the juridical limits and ask for more restricted legal powers which would become more respectful of the human rights and particularly the right to asylum since “justice does not end with law. Nor even with duties (devoirs), which, in a still wholly paradoxical way, must, should go beyond obligation and debt” (2003, p. 133).

While the United States resettles more refugees than any other country working with the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), it suffers from its own shortcomings which have worsened after the September 11 terrorist attacks (Farnam 2005, p. 131). Applying Levinasian ethics to the American immigration law, Marie Failinger claims that the Supreme Court, while dealing with illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, does not see the face of these people. Instead, it “concentrates its gaze on legal sentences, clothed in the majestic indifference of the law that masks the brute force of the sovereign power” (2007, p. 322). Failinger contends that since the Other resists possession, resists the self’s power and frightens the self’s secure world with the height of his need, the Other’s radical difference is translated into “the real dangers [of ] human smugglers, drug smugglers, gang members” and is considered as destructive to the self’s security, freedom and wealth (2007, p. 331). Therefore, law makers who see responsibility for the Other as optional, justify their own violence upon the stealthy intruder on the grounds of the stranger’s possible violence. One way to reject one’s responsibility to the Other is to prevent his arrival at the borders. The interdiction of many ships coming to the U.S. shore, though it contradicts non-refoulement principle, is considered as a legal law enforceable even for the Cuban refugees after the introduction of Clinton’s wet foot/ dry foot law. *Back to Blood* seems to question the justice behind this law and looks at this law from the point of view of the Other. However, given Wolfe’s peculiar brand of conservatism manifested in his support for George W. Bush who in 2005 announced his intention to “turn back any refugee that attempts to reach our shore” (cited in Legomsky 2009, p. 162), the modality of this questioning needs some unpacking.

Describing the status of the Cuban refugee, the narrator of *Back to Blood* emphasizes luck and chance instead of justice underlying the wet foot/dry foot law. With this law the United States’ responsibility to the asylum seekers is limited to those who could luckily flee the American Coast Guards on the high seas and reach the American soil. In the case of the Cuban refugee, if he is lucky enough to set foot on the American soil, he will be granted asylum,

but if he was apprehended on or in the water, he would be sent back to Cuba unless he could convince a Coast Guard investigator that he would face ‘a credible threat,’ such as Communist persecution. [ . . . ] Wet foots are *out of luck*. The Coast Guard takes them to Guantánamo, where they are, in essence, released into the woods, like an unwanted pet (emphasis added *BB*, p. 43).

Those refugees who could flee the prosecution of the Coast Guards and subsequently reach the US border are referred to an asylum officer for a credible threat determination and can apply for asylum. An asylum seeker who convinces the officer can enter the regular asylum process otherwise; the person may request a review by an immigration judge. If asylum is not granted an eligible person can be protected by not being allowed to return to the country of persecution but instead be sent to a third country. The Cuban refugee in this novel gets as close as eighteen meters from the US shore but he is stopped at the port of entry and is interviewed by the Coast Guard right on the deck of a ship and his claim is quickly dismissed with no chance of renewing his application before the immigration judge. The Coast Guard decides about the fate of the Cuban refugee on the spot, the process is “pretty simple and it can happen very fast. If it’s a Cuban, they give the person... a hearing right there on the Coast Guard cutter” (*BB*, p. 105). They do not “bring him ashore and have a hearing [ . . .

since] the person's Cuban and they bring them into a police station or a holding pen or a jail or anywhere else, then they get asylum automatically" (BB, p. 106). Therefore, the decision about the credible threat and asylum is "all up to the one man, the hearing officer. He either believes them or doesn't believe them. He does it all right there on the deck. That's the entire proceeding. It's over in no time" (BB, p. 106). As can be seen, the kind of privilege the Cuban immigrants enjoy in America, ironically works against wet feet whose cases have to be dealt with quickly on the deck.

The process of hearing and judging the stories told by the refugees is so complex that cannot be done in such a short time. Moreover, the process itself seems rather arbitrary which makes one even more suspicious of the outcome. The hearing officers will dismiss the claim if "they're too vague, they can't come up with dates or a timeline, or they can't tell you who exactly is threatening them. [or] if the story's too, you know—too pat. It sounds rehearsed, or memorized, and they're delivering it by rote" (BB, p. 106). As Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman have noticed in the UK and US asylum policies, asylum hearings are dominated by a search for the truth as determined by the asylum officers who decide whether the applicant's story contains "sufficient organization, coherence and detail" (2008, p. 5). The asylum seeker must provide details with high consistency and accuracy on the assumption that that this is what normal people can do and if they provide details which differ they are assumed to be lying. This is ironical as many people who have "suffered trauma, remember things somewhat differently each time" (Bohmer & Shuman 2008, p.138).

Besides such shortcomings in the asylum system, this system is discriminatory against applicants based on their fame. As Hannah Arendt maintains, "Only fame will eventually answer the repeated complaint of refugees of all social strata that 'nobody here knows who I am'; and it is true that the chances of the famous refugee are improved just as a dog with a name has a better chance to survive than a stray dog who is just a dog in general" (1967, p. 287). The Cuban refugee on the mast claims to be Hubert Cienfuegos and a member of an underground organization called El Solvente. However, John Smith, a white journalist, declares that he could not find anybody with such a name or any group called El Solvente by calling people he knew in Cuba (BB, p. 106). Though this piece of information might cast doubt on the authenticity of the Cuban refugee, it can also be an evidence that if the applicant is not a famous leader of some famous dissent group, he has little chance of proving his case in such a short time, which is further exacerbated by the fact that "the hearing officer can't subpoena witnesses" (BB, p. 106), while in the absence of fame and written documents, the presence of a witness can be very decisive. "So it's a judgment call, I guess you'd say" (BB, p. 106). Moreover, if the refugee had rehearsed or memorized the story, it seems illogical that he did not claim to be a member of a more famous underground group and instead reduced his chance by mentioning a non-existent group.

### CUBANS AND LEVINAS'S THIRD PARTY

Nestor Camacho while performing his legal duty does not think about the just or unjust nature of such laws from the point of view of the Other. His self-interested ambitions do not allow him to imagine being in the position of this asylum seeker who comes uninvited to him in need and puts responsibility on his shoulders. In contrast to Nestor, members of the Cuban community reject *The Miami Herald's* narrative which makes Nestor out to be a hero and instead, identify with the Other and see themselves responsible for the refugee's freedom. The refugee's unfortunate arrest puts the freedom Cubans in America enjoy into question and calls them into responsibility. The Cuban community encountering the refugee Other, are able to feel his suffering and put themselves in his place; they cannot be indifferent to the

injustice of the law of wet foot/dry foot since they know his fate could easily be their own fate. Just as Robert Antelme, survivor of Buchenwald, Gandersheim and Dachau, bears witness to the fear of the student from Bologna chosen at random for death by the SS officer and saves his death from oblivion, Cubans show their non-indifference towards the plight of the Other by gathering on the bridge, witnessing the fear in the face of the refugee and supporting him against the law which strengthens the solidarity among the Cuban community. As Lisa Guenther notes, Antelme's memory of the death of Bolognian student and the randomness of the selection for death whereby one man will be killed while the other will survive, produces a

“strange feeling of solidarity among the prisoners, a feeling of being utterly replaceable, of each murder being potentially one's own. . . , a feeling of being stripped naked by the violence which I was spared, but my neighbor was not, a feeling of substitution for the Other in the midst of remaining oneself” (2012, p. 68).

Levinas's concept of 'substitution' and 'dying-for' the Other, as Guenther notes, does not necessarily mean “the martyr's gesture of self-sacrifice,” but represents a “feeling of being affected by the death of the Other to the point of feeling 'replaceable by absolutely anybody at all'” (2012, p. 76). Similarly, Nestor's father, Camilo, who together with his parents and his wife came to the US shore in a homemade dinghy more than twenty years ago, can 'substitute' himself for the refugee Other when he recognizes that the same thing could have happened to him:

*All that* was life or death! We almost died! Twelve days on the ocean in an open boat! There wouldn't *be* no Officer Nestor Camacho without *all that!* He wouldn't *exist!* If some big cop had arrested us eighteen meters from shore and sent us back, that woulda been the end of all of us! You woulda never been nothin'! (*BB*, p. 76)

Camilo rejects Nestor's justification that he was “carrying out *a direct order!*” and he was under pressure because of “all six lanes of traffic backed up on the causeway, Friday rush hour, the worst,” reasoning that carrying out direct orders are not always right: “So do Fidel's people! They carry out direct orders, too —to beat people and torture people and 'disappear' people and take everything they have” (*BB*, p. 77).

Members of the Cuban community, therefore, respond to the command of the Other pleading in need for mercy by recognizing their responsibility for the Other; however, they are as guilty as Nestor and the police force in ignoring the rest of the Others. The Cubans call Nestor *Traidor* since he has betrayed one of his own —one of the Cubans and not because he has ignored his responsibility for the refugee as an unknown Other. The Other that Cubans feel responsible for is not the naked face of the universal Other with no specific race, skin color and shape. They limit their responsibility only to the Other to whom they feel likeness or sameness, someone from their own race, their own people, their own blood which would exclude all the Others who are different from them, while Levinas's Other belongs to the human race and goes beyond the racial kinship. Moreover, Levinas brings justice to all Others by recognizing the third party present in the Other. According to him, if in the proximity of the self and the Other only this one other in front of me existed, there would have been no problem. But this exclusive asymmetrical responsibility for the Other is interrupted by the emergence of the third party; by recognition of all Others in the 'naked' face of this one Other here and now (1991, p. 158). The third party is “other than the neighbour, but also another neighbour, and also a neighbour of the other, and not simply his fellow” (1991, p. 157). Justice and equality of all are possible only “in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off” (1991, p. 159). Cubans in *Back to*

*Blood* feel responsible only for the Cuban refugee, whereas they are indifferent to the fate of all those Haitians facing the unjust and discriminatory US immigration laws.

Cubans began arriving in South Florida during the Cold War and were welcomed wholeheartedly from the beginning by the US officials who were in war with the Soviet Union and the Castro's communist regime. Cubans were classified as refugees, escaping from persecution in Cuba, so they were fortunate enough to receive permanent residency after one year in the US regardless of their status as a legal immigrant or an illegal alien. Upon their arrival, they benefited from the US government's unprecedented generosity which provided the early immigrants who were mostly from the elite class with opportunities which guaranteed their economic and political success in America (Stepick & Stepick 2009, Croucher 1999). *Back to Blood* points to this privileged and remarkably distinguished migration status the Cubans enjoy in America and compare it with that of Haitians:

..the Cubans have a sort of most-favoured-migration status. . . . If they've committed a crime in American waters, they'll be prosecuted, but they can't send them back to Cuba. . . . And if the person has done nothing more than try to get into the country illegally, the only thing that happens is, they're sentenced to a year's probation and they walk away a free person (*BB*, p. 106-7).

In contrast, Haitians, considered not as refugees but as economic migrants, despite the horrific repression, poverty and political chaos they experience in their home country, have to apply for asylum while detained for a long period before being rejected (Gibney 2004). Being black, most Haitians are forced to settle down illegally in little Haiti around the previously segregated districts in Miami, black slums such as Liberty City and Overtown where they suffer discrimination not only from the White Americans and the White Cubans but also from the native blacks and no one officially points to this unjust and discriminatory immigration law in order not to antagonize them and to celebrate the diversity. However, it should be pointed out that *Back to Blood* falls short of questioning America's policy which incessantly demonises the Cuban government and Castro's regime and remains silent about the America's unjust treatment of Cuba which puts limits on Wolfe's ethics.

In the same way that Cubans are indifferent to the plight of the Haitian Others and focus on their own prosperity and their own freedom in America, they also ignore the discrimination the native blacks face in this country. As Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick (1994) postulate, the early Cuban exiles in Miami might have deplored or been bewildered by the unfamiliar scenes of racial segregation, denial of the blacks into the theatres or into the white only beaches or restaurants, but when it came down to money and jobs the Cubans like the white Americans simply by ignoring blacks pushed them aside into their subservient status.

Although in reality the Cuban immigrants did not take jobs from blacks and instead replaced whites (Portes & Stepick 1994, Croucher 1997), their indifference towards the black Other, the lack of responsibility for all the prejudices against them as well as some instances of racially charged police brutality aimed at blacks created resentment between American blacks and Miami Cubans. The race riots of the 1980s stemmed primarily from blacks' response to the police brutality and the misuse of force which made blacks in slums like Overtown and Liberty City, look upon Cuban cops "as foreign invaders who one day dropped from the sky like paratroopers and took over the Police Department and started shoving black people around" (*BB*, p. 286). Incidents such as the one in 1980 when a Cuban cop was accused of murdering an African American businessman raised black anger since "an all-white jury found [the accused cop] innocent, and he left the courtroom free as a bird" despite the fact that "two of the Cuban's fellow cops testified against him at his trial, saying they were there and saw him do it" (*BB*, p. 229). Such obvious racially charged police brutality continued to be the basis of the ethnic relationships in Miami; therefore, "in case after case,



you had Cuban cops accused of knocking African Americans' lights out. Liberty City, Overtown, and other African American neighbourhoods became lit fuses and the bomb always went off" (BB, p. 230). Likewise, more than twenty years later, blacks' attitude towards Cuban police officers remains the same and when one of the blacks is elected as a police chief, he is looked upon as a "Traitor in Chief" who helps the "Cubans beat up on [his] brothers" (BB, p. 230-1).

### FICTION ABSOLUTE

Such hostilities prevail among ethnic groups when they allow previous struggles define all the aspects of their relationships in the present; when they stick to their own scenarios to interpret today's events which would separate them further and keep the fire of hatred alive. Tom Wolfe in his 2006 Jefferson Lecture *The Human Beast* refers to such scenarios as 'fiction absolute' and defines it as "one of the most puzzling and in many cases irrational phenomena of our time" according to which "each individual adopts a set of values which, if truly absolute in the world –so ordained by some almighty force –would make not that individual but his group . . . the best of all possible groups, the best of all inner circles."

Wolfe says that he first noticed it when he read a book by Samuel Lubell called *The Future of American Politics*. Lubell in his investigations about the outcome of 1984 presidential election encountered a small Midwestern town founded before the turn of the 19th century by Germans. Germans still dominated the city and despite the fact that Harry Truman, the Democrat nominee, would have been a more rational choice, the city voted for Thomas E. Dewey. His research revealed that nobody in this town ever forgot that in 1917, a Democrat President, Woodrow Wilson, had declared war on Germany that had "besmirched their honor as people of German descent. And now, two World Wars later, their minds were fixed on the year 1917, because like all other human beasts, they tended to champion in an irrational way their own set of values, their own fiction absolute" (Wolfe 2006). Therefore, in the absence of religion, "everybody still has to believe in *something* . . . Everybody . . . all of them... it's *back to blood!*" They "*blindly, irrationally*" believe that "only our blood, the bloodlines that course through our very bodies, unite us . . . '*La Raza!*' . . . '*The Race!*' cries the whole world" (BB, p. 22). Race and blood, thus, become the basis for every human beast's 'fiction absolute' according to which they build up a fence around their own race, mistrust and exclude all Others.

Similarly, the relationships between Cubans and blacks in Miami are based on each group's 'fiction absolute' through which reality is infiltrated, that is, an event is considered as 'fact', 'truth' and 'reality' whenever it is compatible with their version of truth. Therefore, when a Haitian student in de Forest claims that his Cuban teacher has knocked him down to the floor, consistent with the idea that Cubans are always "pushing black people around," this 'story' is accepted by all as 'reality,' while in fact, the reverse is true (BB, p. 615). Likewise, when Nestor and Sergeant Jorge Hernandez arrest a black drug dealer in a crack house, the story released in YouTube gains credence though it is inaccurate. The YouTube version of the attack has omitted the first part of the story concerning the black drug dealer attacking Sergeant Hernandez and squeezing his throat. In this video recorded by a cell phone by an unknown person, the world sees a helpless black prisoner lying face down, struggling with pain to take breath, under arrest at the mercy of two Cuban cops,

Both of them are humiliating their black prisoner, mocking his manhood, calling him a subhuman Moron, [. . .] a black man who, so far as the viewer knows, has done nothing? . . . In this video there is no indication whatsoever of the life-or-death crisis that precipitated this vile "abuse," . . . nothing [about the black man] wrapping his huge hands around the Sergeant's neck, that he was within one second of murdering him by crushing his windpipe. (BB, p. 415-6)

The omitted “first half of the story, the *crucial* half” does not let the viewer understand that “faced with death, even a cop experiences an adrenal rush immensely more powerful than all chains of polite conversation and immediately seeks to smother his would-be killer with whatever vile revulsion comes surging up his brain stem from the deepest, darkest, most twisted bowels of hatred” and without this half, “the second half becomes fiction! A lie!” (BB, p. 417) Blacks who watch this video on YouTube do not doubt the truth of this story since it is congruent with their belief about Cubans. They believe that Cubans are “cruel bastards who live for pushing *los negros* around and abusing them and dissing them and calling them monkeys and pieces a shit and then treating them like monkeys and pieces a shit” (BB, p. 412) and this video proves that they are right. They feel assaulted and humiliated by these Cuban cops and by threats of riot they make the mayor force the police chief, Cyrus Booker, fire Nestor and Sergeant Hernandez. Chief Booker though an African American himself, knows that when someone is fighting for his life, he is not himself and in that moment “the feeling of fear turn[s] into pure hate [. . . and] every vile thought you’ve ever had in your head—the animal in you is likely to say it out loud” (BB, p. 427-8). Chief Booker confesses that “the *words* bother” him, however, he also understands that in a crack house with dope come guns and any cop should be afraid entering one of these houses regardless of the race of the cops and the drug dealer (BB, p. 428). Although Chief Booker is able to overcome his prejudices and the ‘fiction absolute,’ in the first meeting with the mayor, in fear of losing his position, his salary of \$104,000 and his house in Kendall, he stoops to the mayor’s order and relieves Nestor and Sergeant Hernandez from duty. Later on, when Chief finds out that Nestor has also investigated and revealed the truth about the case of the Cuban teacher and the Haitian student in de Forest, he feels *shame* for the unjust treatment of Nestor by the mayor.

Levinas’s concept of shame undergoes a radical change after 1945 and his experience of the Holocaust. In his early work *On Escape*, published in 1935, he defined shame as an inability to escape ourselves, as being chained to oneself, as “the sheer visibility of our being, of its ultimate intimacy.” Intimacy is “our presence to ourselves,” which reveals “not our nothingness but rather the totality of our existence” (2003, p. 64). Contrary to this early stance, as Clifton Spargo has rightly noticed, later on Levinas considers the capacity for shame and capability of feeling guilty as highly ethical and signs of humanity (2006). In *Diachrony and Representation*, published in 1985, Levinas talks about an implicit ethical command not to remain indifferent to the other’s death and suffering. Even if a person is not directly guilty of a wrong done to another person, he will feel remorse and shame for other people’s wrong-doings. This person feels shame not because of his own misdeed but because other people matter to him, their sufferings are meaningful to him; moreover, he feels shame because he feels responsible for them. Chief Booker capable of overcoming his prejudices and the fiction absolute is also able to feel shame not because of what he has done, but rather because he is witnessing an injustice done to the Other. Unable to be indifferent to Nestor who has been misjudged by the mayor and the black community, he disobeys his superior and “no more hold[s] back... He was *doing* it... risking all... even the house in Kendall so beloved by his beloved wife” (BB, p. 616) for the sake of the Other.

## CONCLUSION

*Back to Blood* intimates that the self is responsible for the Other whether he likes it or not. To be a human being one should be capable of both ‘substituting’ oneself for the Other and feeling shame for the injustices done to the Others. The Other, however, is not just the Other with whom one feels likeness, but one whose difference has not been reduced to the same by

being labelled and categorised according to one's 'fiction absolute.' The 'face' of the Other is 'naked' and universal and includes all the Others for whom the self is responsible. Wolfe depicts a city, populated by different ethnicities, which suffers from lack of concern with ethics of sensibility so that "everybody hates everybody" (BB, p. 424). This is a city in which though most often conflicts are not inherently ethnic –not blacks versus whites, immigrants versus Americans – the inhabitants, used to see events through their own fiction absolute, put the blame on racial and ethnic differences and interpret everything according to the established hateful relationships, regardless of reality.

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