THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SAID

JAMES BALDWIN
AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

LAWRIE BALFOUR
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Speaking of Race

The Silences of the Majority

What could be more democratic than conversation among citizens about issues of national importance? What matter is in greater need of honest, thoughtful attention than the ongoing significance of race in American public life? Though convinced that the appropriate answer to the first question is "nothing" and the answer to the second is "none," I have misgivings about the rage for racial dialogue. But why? One answer might simply be fatigue. Late in 1997, the New York Times summed up President Bill Clinton's national conversation on race with the following headline: "The Honest Dialogue That Is Neither." The article reflects the weariness many Americans feel about "the country's never-ending discussion of race."

Yet weariness is an inadequate response when matters of injustice are at issue. And neither the inconclusiveness of the president's initiative nor the disconnection of the dialogue from substantive policy measures alters the urgency of the need for race talk. Consideration of Lani Guinier's call for "a broad public conversation about
issues of racial justice provides a threefold explanation why such a conversation is so crucial to the health of American democracy. First, there is Guinier's own experience as a nominee for the position of assistant attorney general for civil rights. Among the lessons of her abandonment by the president and widespread public misrepresentation, certainly, is how the denial of the importance of race can serve to distort the efforts of anyone who aspires to address and oppose racial injustice. In the context of such denial, Guinier's efforts to imagine policies to achieve the promises of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were read as a sign of an unhealthy preoccupation with race. Her ideas about how to ensure that a broader range of voters would have influence in political outcomes were, without examination, reported to be undemocratic. Perhaps if the nomination had taken place in a climate in which more Americans were willing to engage in an open discussion about the exclusion of African Americans and other minority groups from adequate political representation, Guinier would have been recognized to be supremely fit for the job. Perhaps, under such circumstances, there would have been a greater acceptance of innovative alternatives.

My disquiet with the prospects for racial dialogue does not stem from a quarrel with any of this, however. Nor does it reflect a belief that the circumstances of Guinier's aborted nomination have no broader political significance. For her call to conversation resonates at a second level: it reminds Americans that the very possibility of achieving racial justice is threatened by the inability to talk constructively about race. The susceptibility of Guinier's proposals to mischaracterization suggests a general unwillingness to probe the relationship between a racist history [as distinguished from a racist past] and democracy in America. The susceptibility of Guinier herself to the racially coded epithet of "quota queen" indicates the dishonesty of claims that race does not matter in the "post-civil rights" era. For behind the drama of the nomination, a much larger story about race and exclusion was played out—and is being played out still. Despite the expansion of formal equality and the rise of individual African Americans to positions of power, a line between "white" and "black" Americans persists. It persists in income levels, residential patterns, incarceration rates, life expectancy, and a variety of other empirical measures. Furthermore, the existence of a color line in public opinion about the scope of racial injustice and the justification of policies designed to overcome it indicates how much still needs to be said.

Guinier's call for dialogue also makes sense at a third and even more general level, the level of democratic theory. Like many contemporary democratic theorists, she endorses the idea that political accountability is enhanced by the inclusion of the widest possible array of voices in reasoned public deliberation. This deliberative ideal has been championed both as a means of legitimating political decisions—ensuring that they are indeed democratic—and as a means of enlarging citizens' sense of their own powers and responsibilities. Where issues of racial injustice are concerned, the idea of public deliberation is especially compelling. It provides a way of rooting out violations of the promise that ascriptive identity, racial or otherwise, is irrelevant to American citizenship. Furthermore, the process itself can be transformative. Participation in public deliberation can provide an enhanced sense of agency to citizens whose experience of exclusion has alienated them from political activity while simultaneously undermining other citizens' obliviousness to their own racial privilege. Properly regulated, deliberation enables the participants to become their better selves by endowing them with an understanding of a common, rather than only their particular, good.

If the call for public dialogue is a reasonable response to Guinier's own experiences, if it responds to what is perhaps the most intransigent failure of American democracy, and if it corroborates a central insight of democratic theory, what could possibly be troubling about it? This question generates an outpouring of others: How, I wonder, would members of a society with a history of denial about the significance of racial injustice even begin to engage in frank conversation? Should reluctant individuals be forced into the conversation? Would all voices be weighed equally? Or ought some voices to be recognized as more authoritative than others? Ought anyone to be excluded? Related to concerns about who would do the talking lurk even more unsettling questions about the character of the talk itself. What discursive resources are available to make honest dialogue possible? What limits, if any, ought to be placed on what is said? Ought racist considerations to be allowed in the name of open
exchange? By what criteria would racist considerations be distinguished from non-racist ones?

What this by no means exhaustive stream of questions suggests is how complicated and delicate an undertaking racial dialogue must be. The stakes are high. When what is at issue in the conversation is the humanity of some of its participants, every word may do new damage. And when the issue has been such a subject of evasion as the significance of the color line, what is not said may be as revealing as what is said. The impact of this predicament on Americans' ways of talking to one another about race is that too often there seem to be only two, unacceptable, alternatives. The first alternative, "race-blind" discourse, not only fails as a solution to racial inequalities but also condemns to silence those Americans whose race does get noticed. By moving too quickly into the future, race blindness reinforces American racial innocence; it signals a refusal to grapple with the past and with the dilemmas of the present. Indeed, the pretense of not noticing race threatens to make Americans not so much blind as deaf and dumb: deaf to the anguish engendered by the color line and dumb about how that anguish relates to the promises of American democracy. Even when the demand for race blindness issues from a commitment to racial justice, it impoverishes public discourse and allows discussion of issues as disparate as welfare reform, multicultural education, affirmative action, and anticrime measures to serve as codes for an ill-defined complex of assumptions associated with race. It allows race, in turn, to be associated with blackness.

If appeals to race blindness stymie honest struggle with issues of racial justice, however, the second alternative may be worse. High levels of racial segregation in American neighborhoods and discrimination in American workplaces provide just two indicators of the vigor of what Judge Leon Higginbotham calls "the precept of black inferiority." Perhaps under such circumstances, the subtler, subterranean forms of racism that lurk beneath the surface of public discourse ought to be left undisturbed. For what surfaces as frankness may simply be expressions of racism, formerly discredited, reemerging in a new guise. "Re-racing," according to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "is the thrill of today's social discourse." She continues:

The process of having e-raced blacks now provides the moral distance from the racings of the past so that one can rest comfortably in the belief that, although talking "honestly" now sounds suspiciously similar to the pre-civil rights justification for everything from sterilization to lynching, this race postreform discourse is different. Un-cracing is not old-style racism; it is merely putting certain commonsense observations and facts back into social discourse in the spirit of candor rather than prejudice.11

Because she has written so persuasively about the ways that the presumption of race blindness serves to undergird racial hierarchy, Crenshaw's warning is especially troubling.12 Her reservations emphasize the dangers of bringing race, uncritically, back into public conversation. She shows how, in spite of the abolition of racial slavery and legal segregation, powerful assumptions about race and humanity remain unchallenged.

That these assumptions are so much a part of the fabric of everyday living makes this predicament a peculiarly democratic one. While racial injustices violate the promise of freedom and equality that is the birthright of all American citizens, these wrongs may be resistant to democratic remedy. This is not a new worry. It was, for example, the apprehension of Alexis de Tocqueville. Proposing the impossibility of multiracial democracy, Tocqueville remarks, "It can happen that a man who will rise above prejudices of religion, country, and race, and if that man is a king, he can bring about astonishing transformations in society; but it is not possible for a whole people to rise, as it were, above itself."13 The acuity of Tocqueville's warning is borne out by the predicament of the post-civil rights era: the inadequacy of formal equality as an antidote to racial injustice. If the civil rights activism of mid-century redefined the boundaries of the imaginable, the limitations of the laws and court decisions impelled by that activism indicate the need to stretch those boundaries still further. Widespread acceptance of the principle of racial equality represents genuine progress. Yet resistance, particularly by white Americans, to mechanisms designed to implement the principle points to the limits of that progress. Despite tremendous gains, recent appeals for a national dialogue about race and the difficulty of engaging in such a dialogue signal the failure of the American people "to rise above... itself" simply by declaring race to be irrelevant to citizenship.

It is in such a context, I argue, that democratic theorists, and in-
deed anyone interested in the possibility of multiracial democracy, have much to learn from the writings of James Baldwin. Able to convey his experiences as a black citizen in a white-dominated society to readers of all races, Baldwin plumbs his own history for clues to the possibility of democracy in an environment where race figures so powerfully and, often, so silently. Relentlessly, he probes the exclusion of African Americans and struggles to create a language that will make the meanings of such exclusion real to a resistant populace. Although much of Baldwin’s best writing was published in the postwar period, before the passage of the historic civil rights legislation of this century, he anticipates the limitations of such legislation. Understanding that Americans are capable of living with far more racial injustice than they are comfortable admitting, Baldwin identifies the underlying forces that have continued to deny African Americans the enjoyment of equal citizenship even after his death.

At bottom, Baldwin believes that the inclusion of African Americans as full members of American society requires a frank examination of residual, often unadmitted, traces of the assumption that blacks are somehow less than fully human. “We have all had the experience of finding that our reactions and perhaps even our deeds have denied beliefs we thought were ours,” Baldwin observes. “And this is the danger of arriving at arbitrary decisions in order to avoid the risks of thought.” Among the most vulnerable of those beliefs is “the arbitrary decision that Negroes are just like everybody else.”

Refusing to mistake the spread of arbitrary beliefs for progress, Baldwin suggests an alternative approach, one that neither accepts the pretense of race blindness nor condones the kind of “un-eracing” described by Crenshaw.

Although Baldwin is an enemy of racism, and he made a substantial contribution to the undoing of overtly racist policies and institutions during his life, his greater triumph resides in his ability to identify and articulate the meanings of what I call race consciousness. As a descriptive term, race consciousness conveys the ways in which “whiteness” and “blackness” are noticed (or not noticed) in daily life. Race consciousness describes the underlying complex of associations that shape Americans’ sense of identity, influence everyday encounters, and frame responses to questions about racial injustice. Baldwin’s unflinching evocation of the psychological, cultural, and moral dimensions of the color line reveals how “seeing by skin color” fundamentally shapes Americans’ outlook on the world. Baldwin’s exploration of race consciousness provides a way of capturing the mind-set of the women and men who inhabit a society in which, “without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.” And it indicates why old attitudes cannot be, painlessly, superseded.

Listening for the unsaid that contradicts what has been spoken, Baldwin relies on his readers’ awareness of a subterranean reality that exists “deeper than conscious knowledge or speech can go” and that, in some way, directs the course of their existence. By retelling his own experiences, Baldwin conveys the both/and of race consciousness. He reveals the personal resonance of democratic ideals in a society in which “racism is both irrational and normal.” Defying racial orthodoxies, Baldwin holds that race is both meaningless, that is, a fiction, and meaningful, or real in its effects. Baldwin’s approach is phenomenological, for it explores the ways in which racial divisions in the United States are lived and how racial injustices are felt. And it is hermeneutical, insofar as it accentuates the impossibility of escaping the bounds of context. At the same time, Baldwin is circumspect about the authority of the traditions and of the language within which he operates; his inquiry into the power of social meanings is oriented toward a future in which those meanings are transformed.

By going to the level of assumptions and unacknowledged beliefs, the notion of race consciousness provides a way of casting a broad net and pulling in a wide range of conscious and unconscious associations between race and blackness, Americanness and whiteness. It enables Baldwin not only to criticize overt expressions of racism but also to describe phenomena that are untouched by the concept of racism as a consciously held creed or the idea of racial discrimination as a category of discrete, intentional acts. To say that Americans are race conscious in this sense does not necessarily entail a deliberate devaluation of black lives. But race consciousness coexists comfortably with such devaluation. For it enables many Americans to sustain the idea that democratic ideals have been largely realized even as they know that not all citizens enjoy genuine free-
dom and equality—even as they know that these citizens are disproportionately black. Despite the widespread rejection of the beliefs that upheld Jim Crow segregation, the case with which the blame for racial inequality is shifted to the shoulders of the disadvantaged suggests the continuing force of the idea that blackness indicates deficiency. The concept of race consciousness thus helps to articulate how racial injustices get taken for granted. But it also does more than that.

As elaborated by Baldwin, race consciousness has not only a descriptive meaning but a normative meaning as well. If the persistence of a racially unjust status quo can be explained, in part, by the silent workings of racial assumptions or beliefs, then opposing such a status quo involves becoming conscious of those assumptions and beliefs. Baldwin conveys the substance of race consciousness in this second sense in a letter he wrote to Angela Davis in 1971, as she awaited trial on charges of kidnapping, conspiracy, and murder: “Some of us, white and Black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation. If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name.” Or, similarly, in the closing passage of The Fire Next Time:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, hand in hand that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.

Consciousness, for Baldwin, is the active awareness and acceptance of the ways that circumstances shape an individual’s life and the attempt to make those circumstances articulate in order to bring about change. Race consciousness in the normative sense thus entails the acknowledgment of race consciousness in the descriptive sense. In this regard, Baldwin’s conception of consciousness echoes Antonio Gramsci’s claim that transformation is only possible through “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.” Such a reckoning with history is a crucial first step toward political change. And Baldwin, in describing his role as “a sort of an emotional or spiritual historian,” implies that his own writing aims to plumb those traces for clues to an improved future. The kind of consciousness Baldwin advocates is morally and politically imperative as long as Americans’ inability to talk honestly about race perpetuates racial injustice.

Two significant worries attend my use of the term “race consciousness.” Amy Gutmann makes a strong case for substituting the term “color consciousness” for race consciousness, reasoning that the latter term perpetuates mistaken assumptions about the scientific basis of racial categories. While I share Gutmann’s concern that “race is a fiction that often functions sotto voce as a scientific fact in the identification of individuals,” I maintain that “race” is a fiction with a history too embedded in American experiences to be replaced by “color.” Baldwin would agree, emphatically, that biological conceptions of race—and the cultural notions of black deficiency that have superseded them—need to be thoroughly discredited. But he would also argue that the survival of racial categories after their exposure as a fiction demands attention.

Another danger of defining race consciousness as I have is that it obscures the multiplicity of experiences compressed into the categories “white” and “black” and excludes those which it cannot subsume. The black-white line is not, by any means, the only racial division in the United States, and racial divisions are not the only cleavages. But insisting that American preoccupation with this line merits specific consideration is not to deny the power of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, or the ways that the multiple dimensions of identity intersect. Nor does it entail a hierarchy of suffering, obliterating or devaluing the experiences of other groups of Americans who have also been denied full enjoyment of the promise of equality and freedom. I argue instead that the ease with which Americans conflate race with blackness and Americanness with whiteness requires further investigation. Moreover, because the fates of African Americans have been so intimately linked to the definition of American citizenship from the time of racial slavery to the present, their experiences provide a crucial measure of the degree to which American democratic promises have been realized.
In examining Baldwin’s work, therefore, I neither offer an account of his historical significance as a public figure nor provide a new assessment of his literary achievements. Instead, I put to Baldwin the questions of a political theorist and read his answers as those of a moralist and social critic, a troublemaker with incredible rhetorical gifts and deep democratic commitments, recognizing all the while the pitfalls of confining Baldwin to a single label. My aim is to mine Baldwin’s writings for an account of race consciousness in order to understand how degrading assumptions continue to prevent recognition and redress of black citizens’ claims of injustice and to apprehend the political significance of those claims. To that end, I trace the development in Baldwin’s writing of such issues as the kinship of racial hierarchy and American democracy, the importance of history to an understanding of present injustices, and the meaning of freedom and equality. And I argue that Baldwin’s social criticism deserves careful attention for its insights into the dilemmas of the post–civil rights era. For Baldwin reminded his contemporaries and reminds his readers today that thinking about democratic politics involves investigating the silences and listening for the echoes that reveal the ongoing power of race in a society where white supremacy is supposed to have been permanently discredited and blackness is no longer an acceptable justification for dehumanizing treatment.

“I’m a witness . . . I write it all down.”

James Arthur Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924. The oldest of nine children living at home, Baldwin grew up in claustrophobic and desperately poor conditions. At war with his father, a laborer embittered by the struggle to keep his family alive and a minister who took “his conversion too literally” and viewed his son’s intellectual ambitions as damned, Baldwin rebelled.31 As a teenager, he rebelled by becoming a holy-roller preacher and outshining his father in the pulpit. Later he rebelled again by leaving the church altogether and moving to Greenwich Village with the determination to become a writer. Doubly alienated from the world of his growing up as an artist and a homosexual32 and vulnerable to the deep injuries of race and class that followed him to the Village, Baldwin believed that he could neither work nor live in the United States. Hence, he followed the trail of Richard Wright and other black artists and fled to Paris in 1948. He spent the rest of his life, until his death in France in 1987, as a “commuter” to the United States.33 Despite the flight, however, Baldwin never fully removed himself from American public life. Whether writing from Paris or Istanbul or Hollywood, he established himself as one of the most important intellectual forces of the civil rights era. And his insight extends beyond the specific struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Anticipating the work that would remain undone after the achievement of access to the ballot and the end of legal segregation, Baldwin’s writing endures as an acute inquiry into the character of American democracy. Before turning to a more detailed examination of Baldwin’s political thought, it is worth pausing briefly to say something about his career as a public figure and as a writer. Baldwin is rightly remembered as an energetic participant in the fight for black freedom. He took part in voter registration drives, went on speaking tours for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other organizations, and made appearances with a wide range of black leaders that included Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Huey Newton. Baldwin’s political influence climaxed in 1963, when The Fire Next Time made best-seller lists, Time magazine featured him on its cover, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy sought his advice about black Americans’ perspectives on American politics. But Baldwin’s status suffered as the 1960s wore on. By the end of the decade, he was confronted by public assaults on his masculinity—and his blackness—by younger black nationalists and began to wonder if he that he had, in fact, been used as “the Great Black Hope of the Great White Father.”34

To a significant extent, the decline of Baldwin’s political fortunes simply reflected larger changes. It bears remembering that in this same period Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized the limitations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Seeing that neither legislative triumph would mitigate entrenched poverty in the United States or address American militarism abroad, King was less sanguine about the possibility of realizing his dream.35 Also at
this time Malcolm X opened the door to collaboration with whites and SNCC split apart over a decision to exclude them. Moreover, the years after 1963 witnessed the killing of Malcolm and King and many others. Baldwin felt those deaths acutely, and he suffered, as did many partisans of racial justice, in the desultory decades that followed.

More fundamentally, Baldwin fell out of fashion politically because of his appreciation for the complexity of American racial dilemmas—an appreciation that had always made him an unlikely political figure. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recalls, "by the early '60s his authority seemed nearly unchallengeable. What did the Negro want? Ask James Baldwin." Yet, Gates adds, "the puzzle was that his arguments, richly nuanced and self-consciously ambivalent, were far too complex to serve straightforwardly political ends." With equal vehemence, Baldwin rejected liberal calls for incremental change and militant demands for total opposition. And he found himself, as a result, alternately embraced and reviled by both whites and blacks, mistaken for an assimilationist and a racist. Refusing the choice between integration and separation as a false one, he showed that integration would amount to annihilation for black Americans until white Americans admitted the degree to which they too would have to change (hence the famous line attributed to Baldwin, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?"). And, at the same time, he understood that separation required denial of the fact that the futures of white and black Americans were already too intertwined to be uncoupled.

Not conforming easily to the role of a political leader, Baldwin made his signal contribution as an artist. "I want to be an honest man and a good writer," he announced at the outset of his career. And, to that end, Baldwin wrote for almost his entire life. He published six novels, two plays, short stories, poetry, a children's book, a screenplay, and dozens of essays. As the volume of critical literature devoted to his writing and the profusion of epigraphs bearing his name attests, Baldwin was extraordinarily successful. Although he saw himself as a novelist and hoped to become a great playwright, critics have generally held Baldwin to be a master of the essay and a good novelist of uneven achievement. While my focus is on the essays, I draw on Baldwin's fictional works for amplification of his ideas.

Much has been made of the impact of Baldwin's political activi-

ties on the quality of his writing. As Darryl Pinckney notes, "The darkening of the civil rights struggle coincided with a fall in Baldwin's overall critical fortunes." But it would be a mistake to view Baldwin's career as an object lesson about the incompatibility of politics and art. That Baldwin wrote less prolifically in the years after 1963 is true. That the essays produced in those years lacked the acuity, the ambivalence, and the distance of Baldwin's earlier work is a more problematic claim. Indeed, what I find remarkable about the trajectory of Baldwin's essays across nearly forty years is their continuity. Without suggesting that Baldwin's life and writing are static or denying alterations in tone that diminish the rhetorical force of the later work, I emphasize elements of Baldwin's social critique that a reader can find in all phases of his career. I draw most extensively from Baldwin's earlier essays—for they are more completely realized than the pieces that follow The Fire Next Time—but I recognize moments of extraordinary power in the later essays as well. By focusing on continuity, I aim to discourage the impulse to read Baldwin's work as a before-and-after story that ignores, for example, Baldwin's stunning indictment of white Americans in one of his celebrated early essays: "The white man's world, intellectually, morally, and spiritually, has the meaningless ring of a hollow drum and the odor of slow death." Likewise, I hope to challenge dismissive comparisons of an essay like No Name in the Street with Baldwin's more ambivalent, younger work by warning against readings that neglect the ambivalence in his concluding paragraph:

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

My point is that Baldwin's essays are neither dated, stuck in a time that has passed, nor timeless. Rather, they perceive with enormous clarity the obstacles to multiracial democracy that bedeviled both his time and our own.
When asked to define his vocation, Baldwin calls himself a witness to the truth. He relates witnessing to artistic practice, explaining that the artist's job is to pierce the skin of society and uncover the turbulence disguised by the appearance of order on the surface. Taking explicit issue with Plato's strictures about the danger poets pose to the republic, Baldwin contends that the artist is an indispensable "disturber of the peace." The artist bears witness to the precariousness of human lives and endeavors and the consequent necessity of embracing responsibility in the face of uncertainty and change. Baldwin's witnessing thus involves the investigation of the underlying forces that have sustained the color line. He uncovers the fears and the interests that promote the idea that racial identity provides a clue to a person's character. Such reliance on racial markers, he warns, assures Americans of the health of the polity by making racial injustice appear inevitable or natural. Consequently, Baldwin uses his rhetorical gifts to give public voice to stories—especially stories about the lives of black Americans—that belie the myths of American democracy.

To identify Baldwin as a witness to the suffering of black Americans is not to conclude that there is a single black experience or that Baldwin speaks for all African Americans. Indeed, Baldwin disavows the impulse to make him a spokesman. Accounting for what he sees as the limitations of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Baldwin contends that Wright was handicapped by "the necessity thrust on him of being the representative of some thirteen million people." He reasons that it is a false responsibility [since writers are not congressmen] and impossible, by its nature, of fulfillment. The unlucky shepherd soon finds that, so far from being able to feed the hungry sheep, he has lost the wherewithal for his own nourishment: having not been allowed . . . to recreate his own experience." Baldwin's witnessing thus asserts no authority beyond that of his own life. "A spokesman assumes that he is speaking for others. I never assumed that I could," Baldwin explains. "What I tried to do, or to interpret and make clear was that what the republic was doing to black people it was doing to itself." And the only materials Baldwin has to prove his case, he avers, are the details of his own experience. Witnessing entails "[g]o[ing] through extraordinary excavations with your own shovel and your own guts." Autobiography, by this account, becomes a critical, political act.

It is Baldwin's appreciation of his own singularity, no more singular than any other individual's but irreducible still, that enables Baldwin to call himself a witness. His background [urban, northern, and poor], his social position [male, gay, unmarried, black], and his language [moralizing and poetic] bespeak a black American experience. Baldwin at his most eloquent fights white Americans' embrace of him as the eloquent black man. This is not an appeal to idiosyncracy and it generally does not result in an indulgent form of self-exposure. Rather, Baldwin's perception of the singularity of all human experiences, in concert with an extraordinary capacity for description, enables him to link the unnoticed dimensions of the ordinary to the ambitious reach of the ideal and to demonstrate how, on the American terrain, race permeates both.

Allusive, vivid, complex, and, most crucially, aware of their own incompleteness, Baldwin's essays sustain the tension between general claims about the meanings of African American experiences and the singularity of individual experience. Baldwin thereby uses his life to convey what Theodor Adorno identifies as the fragmentary or the contingent character of all human lives:

The relationship to experience—and the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories—is the relationship to all of history. Merely individual experience, which consciousness takes as its point of departure, since it is what is closest to it, is itself mediated by the overarching experience of historical humankind. . . . The essay . . . does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal. Its weakness bears witness to the very nonidentity it had to express.

This appreciation of contingency and sensitivity to the particular is connected to profound moral commitments. Baldwin's power as a social critic resides in his capacity to use that description in such a way that the moments that are his subject are at once fleeting instances of his own experience and universally human. Despite his humanist longings, however, Baldwin refuses to ignore the countervailing evidence of the particular, which constantly undermines the claims of the universal.
That having been said, the aspiration to "render the transient eternal" by giving it form in social-critical writing is a treacherous one. Foremost among the dangers of making broader claims about the meaning of any individual experience of suffering or oppression is that of believing that this experience exceeds all others in depth or intensity. This is particularly so when that experience has been denied a public voice. Once having gotten the attention of a wide readership, Baldwin sometimes falls prey to such a temptation: either he loses sight of the plight of other oppressed Americans, or despite his rejection of the violent reduction of African Americans, male and female, old and young, into some category called "the Negro," his writing implies that what is most condemnable about such reductionism is what it takes from black men. Although such inferences reinforce what Stuart Hall calls "the innocent notion of the essential Black subject," the sum of Baldwin's writing undermines the idea that such a subject exists.

Conversely, Baldwin's best writing also refuses to reduce white women and men to a single, homogeneous group. The tension inherent in this undertaking is clear from the way that Baldwin takes "Americans" to task. His primary target, clearly, is those who profit from racial hierarchy and have the most to lose from admitting its existence. So "Americans" means, first and foremost, white Americans. And Baldwin is rightly regarded today as a pioneer in the investigation of whiteness, a forerunner of contemporary critiques of white supremacy. Yet he also maintains that not all white Americans are deaf to claims of racial injustice, and not all black Americans can hear. Furthermore, he rejects attributions of racial guilt as fruitless. By making Americans his target, Baldwin attempts to undermine white supremacy without denying the humanity of either white or black people. What Baldwin conveys, in other words, is the significance of racial injustice "in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity."

Eschewing dreams of transcendence, Baldwin aims to dissect and to expose the social anguish of his time. "Penetrating," a recurring word in the book reviews that Baldwin wrote early in his career, connotes insight and intimates violence and pain. It also describes the kind of operation required to overcome a tradition of denial. By penetrating his own and his fellow citizens' attachments, anxieties, and fears, Baldwin discredits the idea that racial injustice grows out of a kind of backwardness that needs only to be exposed to right thinking in order to be overcome. He offers instead a moral psychology of the color line, an unflinching portrait of the men and women, white and black, whose lives are circumscribed by that line. And he looks to his own history and the larger story of the United States as a critical tool, "since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations."

His is a vocation animated by principle and frustrated by practice. Convinced that the persistence of the color line cannot simply be eliminated by its exposure as a violation of democratic principles, Baldwin's essays inhabit the space between principle and practice. Thus when, as a young writer, Baldwin allows that "the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life," he is not advocating the abandonment of principles at all. Instead, he shifts attention away from the principles themselves to their significance in the context of his life. The dual conviction that principles cannot be conceived or elaborated apart from human experiences and that those experiences repeatedly undermine the possibility that the principles will be realized lends an indispensable ambivalence to Baldwin's writing. The ferocity of his moralizing stems from an acute awareness of the distance between principles and practice, and yet his appreciation of human finitude makes him suspicious of the meanings of the principles themselves. Responsibility, being fully human, follows from the recognition of that limitation. Further, it points to what he would see as the greatest obstacle to thinking beyond race consciousness:

It is exceedingly difficult for most of us to discard the assumptions of the society in which we were born, in which we live, to which we owe our identities; very difficult to defeat the trap of circumstance, which is, also, the web of safety, virtually impossible, if not completely impossible, to envision the future, except in those terms which we think we already know.

When the inherited terms are political or moral and the setting in which they are elaborated is a racially hierarchical one, he argues, the project of articulating their meanings must balance an interest in their achievement with a suspicion of the ways in "which we think we already know" them. Baldwin's job as a social critic is to show
how the meanings of those inherited terms are deliberately unknown and to call attention to the experiences that are excluded from consideration when the content of the terms is taken for granted.

One term to which Baldwin dedicates a great deal of his energy is "democracy." Although he does not offer a concise definition, Baldwin fashions one indirectly. His narrative recreation of his own and others' American experiences intimates that, beyond guarantees of formal equality and the rights of citizens embodied in the Constitution and the civil rights legislation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, democracy requires the provision of the basic conditions of individual flourishing. And individual flourishing precludes substantial disparities in power and resources. Like Tocqueville, Baldwin understands that institutions alone are not definitive, that mores, traditions, "habits of the heart" shape the polity in critical ways. Like Tocqueville, he also warns against mistaking conformity for equality and giving up too easily the possibility of freedom. Baldwin goes beyond Tocqueville, however, in putting injustice at the center of the story he tells. Considering democracy in America through the lens of black experiences, Baldwin demonstrates how far the United States is from the point at which each citizen can reasonably anticipate an opportunity to fulfill her or his own possibility. A genuinely democratic society, he avers, is one in which no citizen can be said to be free until every citizen is.

Over and over, Baldwin reminds his readers that participating in a democracy requires staking one's life on the good faith of others. For members of a society who know its underside all too well, he points out how appeals to principle mean nothing without explicit attention to the principle's relation to practice. Among Baldwin's great accomplishments is his capacity to give voice to the sense of justified distrust experienced by the more vulnerable members of society and to unsettle the assumptions that protect the less vulnerable from assessing honestly the accomplishments of American democracy. Not noticing how much trust—in the good will of one's neighbors, in the efficacy of political participation, in the fairness of the justice system—serves as an underpinning of democratic conviction is a privilege of inclusion. Like racial privilege and other forms of inherited power, it is often invisible to those who enjoy it. As Annette Baier notes, "We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted." Putting his own experience of public dishonor and the alienation it engenders to the service of social change, Baldwin makes "watchful distrust" a democratic virtue.

By reading his experiences as those of all African Americans, of all Americans, of all human beings, Baldwin offers African Americans' American history as a basis for assessing the demands of democracy. His account of African Americans' ambivalent relationship to the promises of American democracy reverberates in Patricia Williams's reflection on the meaning of "rights": "To say that blacks never fully believed in rights is true. Yet it is also true that blacks believed in them so much and so hard that we gave them life where there was none before; we held onto them, put the hope of them into our wombs, mothered them and not the notion of them." Baldwin rarely speaks of rights, yet one might substitute the word "democracy" for "rights" and have a truly Baldwinian statement. Williams's words are particularly apt, for she sees the distance between rights as a concept and as a tangible, spiritual, emotional reality, and she uses language to bring the two sides into relation. In rendering that relationship as one of mothering, moreover, Williams shares Baldwin's preoccupation with the fate of the children—all children—who are endangered by the denial of the humanity of some. The purpose of such a comparison is not to suggest that Williams deliberately follows Baldwin's example or that the power of her writing should be judged by its affinity with Baldwin's. Instead, I mention this point of similarity to show how poetic economy can give voice to the most complex relationships between principle and practice. And I argue that democratic theorists—and all democratic citizens—need to attend to the witness of those citizens who have confronted the untrustworthiness of democratic ideals and who know that those ideals can only be realized through the active effort to make them worthy of trust.

James Baldwin's Democracy

If the conceptual tools that inspired and supported the fight against racial slavery and legal segregation are indeed inadequate an-
titudes to persistent racial injustice, what new or newly interpreted tools are available? And how does Baldwin assist in the effort to imagine alternative discourses of politics? My answer to these questions proceeds at two levels: I contend that Baldwin's essays enhance the capacity of political theories to rise to the challenges of race consciousness by inhabiting and illuminating the spaces between democratic ideals and American practices; and I argue that Baldwin, by simultaneously exposing race as a dangerous illusion and as a feature of American life too central to be eliminated by fiat, contributes to an emancipatory politics as well.\textsuperscript{61}

Despite Baldwin's declaration that "all theories are suspect," his essays speak directly to the concerns of political theory.\textsuperscript{62} The power of political theory resides in its capacity to serve as a bridge between philosophical principles and historical practices while providing a critical perspective on both. Theoretical consideration of the persistence of the color line is thus crucial to moving beyond the assertion that American citizens are by definition free and equal to the investigation of why, in fact, they are not. Although political theories take many forms, many of which contain vital resources for understanding the connections between racial injustice and democracy in America, a concentration of intellectual energies on elaborating political principles has muted the voices that speak to their violation. For political theorists, particularly those concerned with the conditions of democracy, who aspire to answer Judith Shklar's call to "give injustice its due," Baldwin's essays provide invaluable guidance.\textsuperscript{63} They do so by reorienting the focus from the level of principle to the murky region between principle and practice.

Baldwin's ability to discern the resonances of political principles in everyday life illuminates the meanings of the principles and evokes what Stuart Hampshire calls "the tension of unrealised possibilities."\textsuperscript{64} Directing his readers' attention to lived experiences Baldwin refutes claims to race-blind individualism without taking up the banner of an identity politics that itself forces the heterogeneity of individual experiences into narrow categories. He exposes the power and the ambiguity of racial identity, thereby promising to breathe life into often sterile debates about individual rights and the import of group membership. And he shows that taking stock of the specificity of African American experiences—not merely as an aspect of "difference" or an ascriptive category like any other, but as a basis by which the achievements of American democracy should be judged—is essential to the examination of racial injustice.

The simple-minded premise underlying this argument is that political theorists, no less than other human beings, are shaped by history and tradition. The kinds of deafness that stymie public debates about racial injustice can also inhibit theoretical inquiry. Baldwin shows how the presumption that political theoretical reflection can transcend race consciousness, "the prejudice against prejudice itself,"\textsuperscript{65} disables theorists from differentiating between prejudices worthy of celebration and those that deserve rejection. And it stifles the imagination in ways that prevent contemporary theorists from addressing the limitations of formal equality as a means of redress for racial injustice. "We take our shape... within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth," Baldwin advises his readers, "and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed."\textsuperscript{66} Baldwin discerns the degree to which Americans rely on racial markers as guideposts in their efforts to locate themselves and make sense of a volatile world. Race serves as a kind of crutch, according to Baldwin, propping up a sense of confidence in American democratic achievements. Such confidence is particularly misplaced at a time when the need for new accounts of multiracial democracy—accounts that take seriously the degree to which American experiences are shaped by reliance on racial markers—presents an opportunity for democratic theory to demonstrate its relevance to political life.

One way to understand Baldwin's contribution to democratic theory and practice is to view his work as witness as a form of situated social criticism. Situated social critics, according to Michael Walzer, are those members of society who expose "the false civility, the polite conventions, that hide the injuries of class or race or gender and that turn values into ideologies."\textsuperscript{67} There are limitations to the comparison, for Walzer's conception of social criticism is itself susceptible to the charge of hiding or overlooking injuries of race.\textsuperscript{68} Yet the extent of agreement between Walzer and Baldwin is evident in both Baldwin's practice and his reflections on his responsibilities as a witness. Demanding the realization of American democratic
promises, Baldwin invokes the shared values of freedom and equality when he takes his fellow citizens to task. And in his ruminations on the responsibilities of the writer, Baldwin makes the sort of connections between embeddedness, moral commitment, and opposition that animate Walzer’s accounts of social criticism. Baldwin notes that

even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere. He may leave the group that produced him—he may be forced to—but nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carries with him everywhere. I think it is important to know this and even to find it a matter for rejoicing, as the strongest people do, regardless of their station. On this acceptance, literally, the life of a writer depends.69

Acceptance, as Baldwin uses it, is a heavy word.70 It captures both his sense of human limitations and his insistence that they not engender despair. For the writer, acceptance involves seeing and reminding others of the gulf between “the myth of America”71 and how Americans actually live. Like Walzer’s critics, Baldwin’s artist or writer “must never cease warring with [his society], for its sake and for his own.”72 Like Walzer, Baldwin sees this warring as a necessary outgrowth of love.

Although the tasks of criticism and those of theorizing are different, Walzer’s account of their interrelation sheds light on the ways Baldwin’s essays can enrich theoretical inquiry. Walzer explains that the work of social critics can both inform and be informed by philosophical disputes about the substance of moral or political principles. Because the principles are not immediately knowable, the work proceeds through interpretation. In both cases, the grounds of the analysis are provided by the society from which the theorist or critic comes.73 But this is not to say that the meaning of the principles is unvarying, uncontested. Indeed, Baldwin’s relentless inquiry into the causes and effects of racial injustice suggests that interpretation is always linked to struggle.74

If Baldwin’s essays are always political, however, they are not always obviously so. Even those pieces that do provide straightforward political commentary may interweave assessments of the Algerian war for independence, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act with childhood memories of his mother holding a piece of velvet.75 Furthermore, Baldwin’s fluency in the theological language of sin and love, mystery and communion, suggest that his essays inhabit a purely private world. Preoccupied with personal transformation, Baldwin constructs no theory of the just society. Worse still, he has relatively little to say about specific political institutions and offers no systematic analysis of the economic injustices he describes so vividly. As Harold Cruse notes, Baldwin even publicly asserts that his interest lies elsewhere, far from “all this sociology and economics jazz.”76 But no reader of Baldwin’s essays ought to miss the deliberate linkages of race and class in Baldwin’s writing. While he frequently writes from the vantage point of individual experience, the experiences whereof he speaks are clearly shaped by systemic forms of inequality. When he describes the isolation of women and men confined to urban ghettos in the language of damnation, for example, he is also speaking eloquently to the public consequences of unequal distributions of power and wealth.

For this reason, I reject as unhelpful attempts to draw lines between Baldwin’s “political” essays (especially where “political” is meant to be derogatory) and his nonpolitical works, or claims that “his voice broke” when he got drawn into the civil rights struggle.77 Rather, I draw from the entirety of Baldwin’s corpus, and I focus most of my analysis on Baldwin’s early essays, for there one perceives most clearly the radicalism of his project. By radicalism, I do not mean allegiance with any particular political platform. Instead, I use the term as it is articulated by civil rights activist Ella Baker: “We are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning: getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.”78

The means that Baldwin devises are literary. His facility with language, his acuity in articulating the interrelation between matters generally considered private or personal and larger systems of power explodes restricted conceptions of politics. The experiences he re-
lates are too multilayered and his analysis too ambivalent to be reduced to a single political agenda. Yet Baldwin's accent on the moral crystallizes something of the deeper significance of events and conditions that are always also political and material. When, for example, Baldwin considers the meaning of freedom, he allows that "it can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms." "But," he avers, "the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation." What emerges from this jumble of observations is a strong, if not always clearly defined, sense of the interrelation of race and politics and morality, of current events and "the spiritual state" of the nation.

Consideration of one of Baldwin's least overtly political essays, "Stranger in the Village," attests to his significance as a democratic thinker. Written for Harper's magazine in 1953, the essay relates Baldwin's sense of radical dislocation in the "white wilderness" of alpine Switzerland, where he went to write in the early 1950s. "From all available evidence," Baldwin begins, "no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came..." Not only is he a black man in a place where the villagers proudly report to him the number of Africans whose souls have been "bought" through their donations at church, but he is also a writer in a town where the only typewriter is his own. If "Stranger in the Village" dwells on personal details, however, it is not content to remain there; if it presents itself as a chronicle of life in Europe, the essay quickly disrupts the comfort of its American readers. "Stranger in the Village" is a meditation on American democracy and a condemnation of white supremacy. In it, Baldwin rings changes on the themes that preoccupy him throughout his career and that mark him as a distinctively democratic writer. He displays a passionate individualism, a belief in the value of every human life that is linked to a deep sense of the harms of exclusion and powerlessness; he offers an account of how individuals are formed by their history and how American history has given rise to twin dangers of rage and innocence, twin threats to the health of the polity; and, finally, he makes a plea for the kind of transformation necessary for the realization of democratic possibility in the United States.

Because Baldwin is so aware of his own status, not only in Switzerland but also in Harlem and Paris and elsewhere, as an oddity, his celebration of individuality often takes a negative form. His praise of human singularity is linked to an account of the painlessness of exclusion and to the denial of humanity that is at its root. Hence, in "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin presages the titles of his later books, Nobody Knows My Name and No Name in the Street, remarking: "Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it" ("Stranger," 161). In lieu of elaborate arguments for individual recognition or respect, he provides a phenomenology of exclusion, a phenomenology, moreover, of the experience of excluding as well as that of being excluded. He shows how anonymity harms and how the enforcement of others' anonymity reassures. The essay is both funny and angry as it recounts how the villagers greet Baldwin as "a living wonder" without any sense that he might be a human being like themselves. While their desire to touch his hair and their speculations about his smile or about whether his skin color could rub off on them are not meant to hurt, they deny Baldwin status as a person: "No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted" (161). A slight sentence, much shorter than so many Baldwin writes, and buried in the center of a paragraph, this statement captures the basic ontological imbalance that is fundamental to white supremacy. As Baldwin goes on to say, "What is crucial here is that, since white men represent in the black man's world so heavy a weight, white men have for black men a reality which is far from being reciprocal (166)." The reaction of the villagers to this black stranger is importantly unlike American racism. Still, Baldwin's recollections of his experiences in Switzerland provide the occasion for reflection on the ways in which his individuality is deliberately denied in the United States. The children of the village who greet him with cries of "Neger! Neger!" ("Stranger," 161) obviously do not grasp how the words resonate for Baldwin. Knowing too well the sting of their English equivalent, however, he uses the experience to introduce a discussion of the availability of the word "Nigger!" in the United States and a diagnosis of what that availability reveals about the state of American democracy. Not only does the word deny him recognition as a human being and a citizen, he contends, it suggests...
the effect that the denial of his individuality has had on American society as a whole. It is an indicator of "the war [his] presence has occasioned in the American soul" (168).

Baldwin's celebration of the individual and his understanding of the impact of exclusion and powerlessness on an individual's sense of identity are connected to an unsentimental appraisal of the human weaknesses that make democracy such a risky undertaking. Chief among the weaknesses he detects is a desire to exclude. When, for example, Baldwin describes the other visitors to the village—"invalids who come for the curing qualities of the waters and create in the village the atmosphere of "a lesser Lourdes"—he notes how even the most decrepit among them is capable of reminding him of his status as an outsider, a freak:

There is often something beautiful, there is always something awful, in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties, a faculty he never questioned until it was gone, and who struggles to recover it. Yet people remain people, on crutches or indeed on deathbeds; and wherever I passed, the first summer I was here, among the native villagers or among the lame, a wind passed with me—of astonishment, curiosity, amusement, and outrage. ("Stranger," 160–61)

Notable in this passage is Baldwin's articulation of the idea of human equality. All human beings, according to Baldwin, are both beautiful and vulnerable, and they are vulnerable not only to illness and death but also to assumptions of superiority. Such equality, Baldwin intimates, is especially terrifying for white people, whose status in the world has gone unquestioned for generations. This dimension of Baldwin's writing enables him to discern and describe the forces undergirding American exclusions and to offer an account of why declarations of formal equality are inadequate to eliminate everyday racial injustices in the American context. Also worth noting in this passage is Baldwin's unwillingness to demonize people who thoughtlessly cause him great pain. Baldwin's appreciation of his own weakness secures him from entertaining fantasies of revenge and supports his refusal of separatist solutions.

Baldwin's individualism is not abstract. Indeed, it is unintelligible apart from an acknowledgment of the historical circumstances from which each individual develops. Citing James Joyce, Baldwin proclaims that history is "a nightmare" ("Stranger," 162–63), and he rejects as illusory attempts to define individual identity apart from those circumstances. Chief among the circumstances he identifies as constituting the foundation of American identities is the legacy of racial slavery and Americans' troubled relationship to a past they cannot admit. It is the nature of American slavery, he maintains, that accounts for the centrality of the question of black humanity for Americans ever since. The effect of this anxiety is not purely internal. Baldwin notes that the troubled constitution of American identities, black and white, engendered the bloody sequence of "lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession" (173) that defines American racial history.

"Stranger in the Village" identifies two responses to this history, two themes that recur throughout Baldwin's essays. One response is what Baldwin calls "the rage of the disesteemed." The essay thus gives voice to the justified anger engendered by the experience of habitual disrespect. And it illustrates how such rage hobbles some citizens, thereby preventing interracial understanding and warping society as a whole. No matter how deeply felt, this rage must be dissembled if the "disesteemed" hope to survive. Baldwin's comment that such rage "is one of the things that makes history" indicates the nuance of his thinking. Neither does he accept the idea that the oppressed are completely powerless victims. Nor is he lured by the romance of a revolution in which the oppressed simply turn the tables on their oppressors ("Stranger," 165). The relationship between "the disesteemed" and those who humiliate them is, as Baldwin presents it, always more complicated.

Far more devastating for the prospects of democracy is the second response to American racial history: innocence. By innocence Baldwin means a willful ignorance, a resistance to facing the horrors of the American past and present and their implications for the future. This unwillingness to confront those horrors accounts for the resistance of racial injustices to remedy by formal, legal measures. For innocence sustains a mind-set that can accommodate both an earnest commitment to the principles of equal rights and freedom regardless of race and a tacit acceptance of racial division and inequality as normal. "Stranger in the Village" provides an account of
the effort required to enable white Americans, in particular, to sustain the kind of double-think that justifies a racially unjust status quo. "There is," Baldwin asserts, "a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté ("Stranger," 166). According to Baldwin, the product of that will power is the lumping together of African Americans into an undifferentiated mass represented as "the Negro." But such efforts are never sufficient to eliminate the anxieties engendered by the unspoken awareness that racial injustice is commonplace and that its victims are human beings with feelings and aspirations of their own. Thus he writes that "Americans attempt until today to make an abstraction of the Negro, but the very nature of these abstractions reveals the tremendous effects the presence of the Negro has had on the American character" (170–71).

"Stranger in the Village" extends the critique of racial innocence, showing how the refusal to acknowledge injustices regularly done to African Americans fosters a skewed sense of right and wrong more generally. Baldwin argues that, although Americans consider themselves to be free of European aristocratic traditions, they also project onto Europe an Edenic past in which blacks did not exist.83 One result of this longing is a redoubled desire to divide the world into good and evil and to banish any evidence that Americans are anything but good. Using the first-person plural that implicates himself in the critique, Baldwin writes:

The American vision of the world—which allows so little reality, generally speaking, for any of the darker forces in human life, which tends . . . to paint moral issues in glaring black and white—owes a great deal to the battle waged by Americans to maintain between themselves and black men a human separation which could not be bridged. It is only now beginning to be borne in on us . . . that this vision of the world is dangerously inaccurate, and perfectly useless. For it protects our moral high-mindedness at the terrible expense of weakening our grasp of reality. People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who remains in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster. ("Stranger," 174–75)
essay with a statement that expresses simultaneously the facts as he sees them, his highest aspirations, and a dire warning about the folly of racial innocence: "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" ["Stranger," 175].

"A New Consciousness"

If Baldwin is right, then the primary significance of race is not that it is the deepest or most painful fault line in American lives but that "it is a symptom of all the problems in this country." Lani Guinier's suggestion that race functions in American society much like a canary in a coal mine helpfully illustrates Baldwin's point: when the canary ails it signals that the air in the mine is unsafe; when African Americans live shorter lives, in poorer neighborhoods, with less access to economic or political power than white Americans, it indicates the unhealth of the polity. Baldwin would agree with Guinier that Americans have too frequently responded by finding fault with the canary, seeking ways to fix the bird rather than clear the mine of its toxic atmosphere. And his essays probe further. They demand a direct confrontation with the complex of fears and interests that prevent Americans from admitting that the mine is poisoned.

Baldwin's appreciation of the habits of the heart that have allowed racial injustices to thrive even after legal barriers to equality have been destroyed has yet to be adequately recognized. The chapters that follow constitute a first step toward that recognition, an examination of Baldwin's contribution to democratic theory and practice. What joins the chapters is an interest in the ways race consciousness tests the limits of fundamental political or moral principles. Animating this interest is an intuition that matters of race are suppressed precisely where the commitment to those principles is called into question by the countervailing evidence of practice.

In the second chapter, I consider Baldwin's contribution to recent debates about democracy and difference. Baldwin's essays, I argue, expose flaws in presumptions of race blindness, on the one hand, and attempts to define an authoritative racial identity, on the other. Not content simply to reject the former as naive and the latter as di-

visive, Baldwin provides a probing account of why those claims are so powerful. One way to understand how Baldwin negotiates a path between the two alternatives is to consider race consciousness as a kind of double consciousness. Although he never uses the term made famous by W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk, Baldwin goes beyond Du Bois in showing double consciousness to be an apt metaphor not only for black experience but also for American experience more broadly. He explores the kinds of twoness that are engendered in both white and black imaginations as a result of living with the color line. Written from the perspective of a racially ambiguous we, Baldwin's essay "Many Thousands Gone" intimates how the constitution of an "American" identity has been connected to the degradation of black Americans. Baldwin asks how the American "we" is constituted and how far "we" have really traveled from "our forebears, whose assumption it was that the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us." Furthermore, because race consciousness does not exhaust the meanings of double consciousness, this chapter also investigates other doublenesses in Baldwin's essays. In particular, I examine Baldwin's treatment of the interrelation of racial and sexual identity. And I conclude that the subtlety of Baldwin's exploration and refutation of the attempt to reduce identity to positive and negative poles exposes the limitations, as a way of realizing democratic ideals, of "the politics of recognition."

The third chapter probes the racial images that sustain American double consciousness and hinder the recognition of African Americans as individuals and as citizens. Baldwin's deft exposure of the ways racial images render black Americans generally visible and individually invisible shows how these images perpetuate the sense that African Americans are somehow different from "normal" citizens. Because disputes about the dangers of emphasizing victimization in making claims of injustice—racial and otherwise—have become so central in contemporary public discourse, this chapter focuses on Baldwin's rejection of the image of black Americans as victims. Here I read Baldwin against the grain. In contrast to critics who argue that Baldwin's career was dedicated to reinforcing the idea of black victimhood, I argue that the subtle stories rendered in the essay "Notes of a Native Son" demonstrate how Baldwin man-
ages to decry victimization without either reducing the victims to their oppression or allowing their experiences to be eclipsed by systemic injustices. "Notes of a Native Son" not only demonstrates the humanity of the individuals whose lives are obscured by racial images but also raises questions about what the images reveal about the society that refuses to relinquish them. Baldwin's narratives convey beautifully what Judith Shklar calls the "sense of injustice." That is, they call attention to the experience of injustice and demand that any claim to democratic achievement be evaluated in light of that experience. Baldwin thereby reveals the urgency and the difficulty of apprehending the political import of black suffering: he exposes the fragility of the line between personal or private hurts and matters of public concern. And, in doing so, he provides a powerful response to Shklar's appeal to take injustice seriously.

How do racial images survive after overt racism has been publicly discredited? The fourth chapter provides one answer by looking more closely at Baldwin's critique of American innocence. Innocence, according to Baldwin, is a kind of deliberate blindness or deafness, a refusal to acknowledge uncomfortable truths. What makes Baldwin's critique so powerful is that it simultaneously alerts his readers to the connections between innocence and white privilege and refutes simplistic attributions of guilt to white people. Instead, he exposes the damage done by anyone who refuses to abandon the dream that race can be painlessly transcended—what he calls the "dream of all liberal men"—and suggests how the temptation to assert racial innocence hobbles both democratic practice and democratic theory in the American context. Contrasting Baldwin's social-critical essays with Michael Walzer's account of the practice of social criticism, this chapter explores how a theorist whose work equips him to grapple with issues of racial injustice nonetheless evades these issues. Baldwin's example, I argue, supports Walzer's claims about the importance of social criticism to political theory. But it also cautions that the work of social criticism is no guarantee of immunity to racial innocence. Hence, Baldwin demands that the critique of American democracy be more thoroughly situated in the experiences of citizens whose membership has historically been marginal or incomplete. The implication of Baldwin's critique of innocence is that theorists, no less than other citizens, need to be-

come more actively race conscious and to accept the uncertainties that such a stance entails.

Returning to the questions raised about the possibility of "a broad, public conversation about issues of racial justice," the fifth chapter focuses on problems of language. It reads Baldwin's essays as a guide to the delicate work of making space for the stories that have been left out of public discourse without doing violence to the stories themselves. Baldwin's feelings about the English language he commands so remarkably are ambivalent, yet his essays represent an attempt to create an English language that will give voice to a history that has largely been denied. He redeployed the words of his inheritance to lay bare their meanings in the lives of the people who use them—and, in so doing, suggests that democratic principles cannot be substantially known until they have been considered from the perspective of individuals who have been largely excluded from their enjoyment. By following Baldwin's elaboration on equality and freedom in The Fire Next Time, this chapter essays to convey how these most familiar of democratic ideas are experienced by Americans who have no reason to take their meaning for granted.

The afterword extends the discussion of the preceding chapters, asking what they imply about democratic possibility in the post-civil rights era. What is the practical import of essays that speak so magnificently about "America" and the effects of the color line in an era marked by accelerating globalization and the multiplication of racial distinctions? If attempts to transcend race are simply exercises in racial innocence, then what is to be done? Despite his abiding distrust of programmatic solutions, I maintain that Baldwin's call to consciousness provides a powerful model for contemporary critics of white supremacy. Old-fashioned though his moralism may appear, and responsive to the particular political needs of another era though it may be, Baldwin's political thought is nevertheless still vibrant. And it still has a great deal to teach about how revolutionary the effort to overcome racial injustices must be.