

“The Time is Always Now:” James Baldwin in Trump's America

Abstract

Gone is the optimism regarding race relations that dominated the early years of Obama's presidency. Trump's meteoric rise has given Americans pause, and in this time of potential reflection, it is important to re-examine James Baldwin. This essay analyzes Baldwin's understanding of race from the inception of racism in America until its theoretical end, combining Baldwin's novels and essays to propose practices that will help America move beyond the racial problem that has haunted its history. James Baldwin's demand of individual reflection upon one's system of reality necessitates the end of political demonology, as well as a reframing of rhetoric regarding American exceptionalism.

Introduction

In May of 1961, Robert F. Kennedy made what “sounded like a very emancipated statement,” predicting that in the next forty years there would be an African-American president.¹ When Barack Obama was elected president forty-odd years later, Kennedy's words were lauded as prophetic. Inherent to Kennedy's prediction is the assumption that achieving the highest office in the land would mark the arrival of racial equality to America. Throughout his work, James Baldwin insists on a realistic view of race relations, rejecting individual achievement as a sufficient measure of racial progress. An African-American becoming president is not a guarantor of racial equality to Baldwin because “white power remains white. And what it appears to surrender with one hand it obsessively clutches in the other.”² From Baldwin's perspective, Donald Trump's success is not unexpected—rather, it is white America's response to

¹ James Baldwin, "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?" (speech, March 7, 1965).

² James Baldwin, *Collected essays*, p. 839.

having “let” Barack Obama win the presidency.³ Instead of focusing on individual, successful African-Americans as a measure of progress, Baldwin frames the solution to racial inequality as the duty of white America:⁴ “White people,” Baldwin writes, must learn “how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this...the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”⁵ Trump’s success as a backlash candidate demonstrates a need to reevaluate American race relations, posing a daunting question: How can America move forward when perceived progress is erased by backlash? Equality is reliant on the efforts of every American citizen, and this daunting obstacle is surmountable if America moves beyond the exceptionalism and demonology that partisans vacillate between today.

Baldwin distinguishes between the roles of individuals and systems in perpetuating inequality. Baldwin’s fiction offers in-depth studies of individual interaction with acceptance and innocence. To apply these concepts to the American system, collectively, Baldwin’s essays are used. Selection of Baldwin’s writings is limited to the 1950s and 1960s to construct a consistent theory from his disparate works. By exploring Baldwin’s explanation of oppression and how the act of self-acceptance removes the ‘need’ for the “Negro problem,” this project explores how America can theoretically move towards racial equality in the age of Trump.

³ While critiquing Robert F. Kennedy’s prediction, Baldwin reinterpreted Kennedy’s words as follows: “We’ve been here for four hundred years and now he tells us that maybe in forty years, if you’re good, we may let you become president.” (see Baldwin, “Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?”)

⁴ In a 1968 interview with *Esquire*, Baldwin states that “White, by the way, is not a color—it’s an attitude. You’re as white as you think you are. It’s your choice.” He also writes that “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.” With this in mind, the term ‘white America’ is used throughout this essay to describe Americans that fail to accept themselves, a condition that can be altered, unlike skin tone. (see *Esquire* Editors, “James Baldwin: How to Cool It,” *Esquire*, October 09, 2017, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a23960/james-baldwin-cool-it/>; Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, pp. 345-346., respectively)

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

Literature Review

One approach to analyzing Baldwin's political theory has been to contextualize his work in relation to other prominent political thinkers. Attempts include comparisons to W.E.B. Du Bois,⁶ investigations of the different implications of love for Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.,⁷ a look at the similarities between Baldwin's pragmatism and Cornel West's,⁸ and even a comparison to Socrates.⁹ Attempts to liken Baldwin to recognized political theorists are an inevitable consequence of Baldwin's reticence to identify his beliefs on the political spectrum. These investigations are useful insofar as they contextualize James Baldwin's political thought. However, much of the ambiguity and diversity in Baldwin's thought is inevitably lost in likening his work to that of others.

Attempts to contextualize Baldwin's theory, likening his work to that of prominent thinkers, are complemented by a body of literature that places Baldwin on the political spectrum. Specifically, an effort has been made to explore Baldwin's role as a radical civil rights activist. This body of literature includes explorations of his late-life association with radicalism and how Baldwin's sexuality influences his portrayal in both the radical and mainstream media.¹⁰

Problematically, William Lyne frames Baldwin as a radical civil rights activist *throughout* his

⁶ Lawrie Balfour, "'A Most Disagreeable Mirror: Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness.'" In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

⁷ Fredrick Harris, "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House That Race Built," *Transition*, no. 115 (2014): 52-67.

⁸ Ulf Schulenberg, "'Where the People Can Sing, the Poet Can Live: James Baldwin, Pragmatism, and Cosmopolitan Humanism,'" In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

⁹ Joel Alden Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America," in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017).

¹⁰ Douglas Field, "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor," *Callaloo* 27, no. 2 (2004)

career,¹¹ not simply in his later—more radical—years. Portraying Baldwin’s work throughout his life as radical has an element of truth to it. For instance, Baldwin often discusses bourgeois socioeconomic anxiety and its role in perpetuating inequality. However, despite the Marxist undertone to such critiques, Baldwin remains fastidiously anti-radical in the 1950s and 1960s. After dining with Elijah Muhammad, a prominent proponent of black nationalism, Baldwin compared Elijah’s rhetorical habits—that is, the “glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another”—to those of Nazi Germany.¹² Discussion of Baldwin’s career as a radical therefore requires significant qualification, a process which Lyne’s other work on Baldwin acknowledges by noting Baldwin’s radical views of class as well as his insistence upon inclusion in the American project, which is diametrically opposed to black nationalism.¹³

Other scholars work to define and contextualize principles in Baldwin’s political theory. Innocence is an oft-investigated concept,^{14,15} and the literature on the topic includes explorations of the relationship between Baldwin’s conception of freedom and the illusory ‘systems of reality’ perpetuated by American innocence.¹⁶ Identity is also of interest, from examinations of

¹¹ William Lyne, "Gods Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism," *Science & Society* 74, no. 1 (2010).

¹² Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 334.

¹³ William Lyne, "No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office," *African American Review* 34, no. 1 (2000).

¹⁴ P. J. Brendese, "The Race of a More Perfect Union: James Baldwin, Segregated Memory, and the Presidential Race," In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

¹⁵ George Shulman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics," In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

¹⁶ Nicholas Buccola, "What William F. Buckley Jr. Did Not Understand about James Baldwin: On Baldwin’s Politics of Freedom," In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

individual identity and acceptance,¹⁷ to research on Baldwin's conception of collective racial identities.¹⁸ Thematic explorations of Baldwin's work have increasingly used Baldwin's fiction as a lens to understand identity and other axioms in Baldwin's universe.^{19, 20} Others place Baldwin within a religious framework: as a proponent of "prophetic rhetoric;"²¹ as shaping his conception of identity from his critique of religion;²² or as drawing from "his father's Christianity" for inspiration.²³ Thematic exploration of Baldwin is critical, and the nuance and breadth of his work demands such effort. However, these thematic works are limited in their ability to draw a path to equality in America from Baldwin's theory.

This project seeks to address the limits of thematic exploration as a means to suggest adopting a set of best practices. These limits are addressed by looking at Baldwin's explanation of racism in America from its beginning to its theoretical end. This holistic approach affords a better understanding of the institutions and practices that need to change in order to accomplish racial equality. However, in taking such a broad approach to Baldwin's work, the nuance inherent to each concept discussed within suffers to an extent. With this in mind, further thematic work that takes a similarly holistic approach to interpreting Baldwin is necessary. This project also

¹⁷ Emmanuel S. Nelson, "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community," *Melus* 10, no. 2 (1983)

¹⁸ Balfour, "A Most Disagreeable Mirror:" Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness."

¹⁹ Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Go Tell It on the Mountain: James Baldwin and the Politics of Faith." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

²⁰ Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America."

²¹ Shulman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics."

²² Kevin Birmingham, "No Name in the South: James Baldwin and the Monuments of Identity," *African American Review* 44, no. 1/2 (2011): 221-34.

²³ Vincent Lloyd, "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, by Susan Jane McWilliams. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

contributes to the growing body of literature that treats both Baldwin's essays and novels as viable means to understand the ever-elusive thinker.

Fiction as a Microcosm

Baldwin's fiction demonstrates the importance of acceptance and love to human life on the individual level. Both *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (*Mountain*) and *Giovanni's Room* are explorations of "what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody,"²⁴ which is precisely the root of the "Negro Problem." Understanding human nature on an individual level is essential to understanding and solving the racial issue: "the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person."²⁵ The individual accounts in Baldwin's novels show the importance of individual acceptance, and how a crisis of acceptance inevitably destroys one's ability to love, serving as a microcosm of the crisis of acceptance and inability to love that white America faces.

James Baldwin's first novel, *Mountain*, offers a semi-autobiographical account of Baldwin's childhood. The father figure in *Mountain*, Gabriel,²⁶ presents himself as a man of God throughout the novel, a man who is saved and who saves. Gabriel's inability to accept himself as anything other than a pious man of God leads to him using his power irresponsibly, becoming an oppressor. As a young man Gabriel drinks heavily, waking up in ditches frequently. Returning from a night at a "harlot's house," Gabriel reflects on the fact that his mother "lingered only" in

²⁴ James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014.

²⁵ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 208.

²⁶ Gabriel is a semi-fictionalized representation of Baldwin's stepfather. Both were pastors who Baldwin describes as angry and domineering.

this life for his “surrender to the Lord.”²⁷ Listening to his mother’s pleas, Gabriel knows what he desires—to be a pious, *perfect* man of God:

For he desired in his soul, with fear and trembling, all the glories that his mother prayed he should find. *Yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord’s anointed,* His well-beloved, and worthy, nearly, of that snow-white dove which had been sent down from Heaven to testify that Jesus was the son of God. He wanted to be master, to speak with that *authority* which could only come from God.²⁸

Gabriel’s motivations for becoming a man of God—to wield the moral authority entrusted to men of the cloth—are perverse. However, Gabriel’s efforts to be a pious man “worthy...of that snow-white dove” lead him to preach so voraciously that “his tongue was loosed and he was filled with the power of the Holy Ghost.”²⁹ Gabriel never wavers in his system of reality, embracing the identity of a pious preacher so unfailingly that he cannot accept responsibility for his depraved actions. Instead Gabriel maintains innocence, deploying his preferred pronoun—harlot—to castigate the women he believes responsible for his failures.

Gabriel views women in the quasi-biblical dichotomy between chaste women of faith and indecent temptresses. His description of an ideal woman—the wife he finds promptly after accepting God—illustrates this dichotomy: Deborah “kept her communication to yea and nay, and read her Bible, and prayed,”³⁰ fasting with Gabriel unbidden. “What better woman could be found?” Gabriel muses, “She was not prancing lewdly through the streets, eyes sleepy and mouth half-open with lust, or to be found mewling under midnight fences, uncovered, uncovering some

²⁷ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, New York: Dial Press, 1963, pp. 118-119

²⁸ Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁰ Baldwin, *Mountain*, p. 127.

black boy's hanging curse!"³¹ Gabriel uses this dichotomy to justify his unfaithfulness to Deborah, even after his affair with Esther results in a child. Instead of accepting responsibility for the life he co-created, Gabriel protests his innocence before both Esther and God. Gabriel refuses to leave his wife for Esther, and in doing so he absolves himself of blame:

I ain't the first man been made to fall on account of a wicked woman...How you going to be ruined? When you been walking through this town just like a harlot, and a-kicking up your heels all over the pasture? How you going to stand there and tell me you been *ruined*? If it hadn't been me, it sure would have been somebody else.³²

Esther points out the flaw in Gabriel's logic, reminding him that "it *was* you,"³³ but Gabriel continues to protest his innocence: Esther tempts him, he falls "on account of" this "wicked woman," he equivocates. Gabriel refuses to assist Esther beyond stealing his wife's money to help Esther move away, conveniently removing the representation of his sin from his city.

By refusing to accept responsibility for his actions, feigning an 'innocence' that his false sense of reality—that of the pious, irreproachable preacher—demands Gabriel to maintain, Gabriel sends Esther and her child into a cruel world alone. The consequences are apparent, as Esther dies during childbirth. Esther's son Royal returns, but Gabriel stubbornly clings to his innocence as he watches Royal grow up, failing to intervene as Royal (according to Gabriel) "ran headlong, like David's headlong son, towards the disaster that had been waiting for him from the moment he had been conceived."³⁴ Gabriel's assumption regarding Royal's life proves prophetic, as Royal is stabbed to death in his early twenties. Gabriel breaks down upon hearing this, showing

³¹ Ibid., p. 142.

³² Ibid., p. 175.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

the toll of his affected innocence. Witnessing his tears, Deborah remarks that she would “have raised [Royal] like [her] own...and he might be living now.”³⁵ Gabriel simply needed to tell his wife the truth, accepting responsibility for his actions, and Royal could have been saved. By absolving himself from any blame because his actions are irreconcilable with his constructed identity, Gabriel sends Esther away to die alone, and then watches his first-born son die while fully capable of saving him. A person who cannot accept themselves is not only incapable of love, but inevitably harms themselves and those around them.

While Gabriel’s character in *Mountain* illustrates the role of religious values in perpetuating an “innocence which constitutes the crime,”³⁶ religion is left untouched in *Giovanni’s Room*. Instead, Baldwin explores the lives of two white men dating in Paris, demonstrating that acceptance is a universal precondition for a just life. The afflicted character in *Giovanni’s Room* is David, whose system of reality hinges upon Hella, his estranged fiancé. Upon meeting Giovanni, David’s system of reality—the denial of his homosexuality—is tested. David meets Giovanni in a Parisian gay bar, Giovanni serves him cognac with a side of conversation, and they connect immediately. Foreshadowing the havoc to come, David feels a wave of dread as he leaves the bar with Giovanni: “I wished...that I had been able to find in myself the force to turn and walk out—to have gone over to Montparnasse perhaps and picked up a girl. Any girl.”³⁷ David’s aversion to his identity stems from traditional conceptions of masculinity, and he believes that he will lose his masculinity in accepting his homosexuality.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 200.

³⁶ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 292.

³⁷ James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, New York: Vintage, 2013., p. 80.

Giovanni serves as a catalyst for David's identity crisis, proving to be disarming and loving. Briefly, David moves in with Giovanni.

Once their relationship exits the honeymoon phase, David begins to retreat into his false system of reality. Giovanni is fired from the bar for refusing sexual quid pro quo, and money grows tight for both men. Fearing the worst, Giovanni asks David if he is going to leave. David promises that he would never do such a thing, and Giovanni remarks, "I do not know what I would do if you left me."³⁸ Unbeknownst to Giovanni, David has every intention to leave. Days before Giovanni begs David to not leave him, David receives word that his fiancé Hella is returning to Paris. Upon hearing this news, David renews his allegiance to heterosexuality, his false sense of reality. He does so via conquest, trying to "find a girl, any girl at all,"³⁹ subsequently seducing an acquaintance. His conquest awakens troubling thoughts: "I felt that I was doing something very cruel (to her). But I could not stop."⁴⁰ Masculinity reasserted via conquest, David discards Giovanni for Hella—failing to tell Giovanni—upon Hella's arrival in Paris. David states that he "hoped to burn out, through Hella," his "image of Giovanni and the reality of his touch...to drive out fire with fire."⁴¹

David maintains his 'innocence' in abandoning Giovanni, doing his best to love Hella. He equivocates, reflecting on the clutter of Giovanni's room, as though he abandoned the man he loved due to bad hygiene. When David is forced to confront his former lover, the fact that his false sense of reality has inevitable consequences shows: Giovanni "was sobbing, it would have

³⁸ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 245.

been said, as though his heart would break. But I felt that it was my heart,” David thinks, “which was broken. Something had broken in me to make me so cold and so perfectly still and far away.”⁴² Despite seeing Giovanni’s pain, David stays with Hella, not to save himself but rather to save his false system of reality. Giovanni, abandoned and jobless, kills the man who had fired him for refusing sexual quid pro quo. Unable to accept responsibility for his actions, David strives to maintain his system of reality—to love Hella—only to find Hella “stale...[and] uninteresting, her presence grating.”⁴³ David, amidst his shattered illusion, is terrified:

I think that I have never been more frightened in my life. When my fingers began, involuntarily, to loose their hold on Hella, I realized that I was dangling from a high place and that I had been clinging to her for my very life. With each moment, as my fingers slipped, I felt the roaring air beneath me and felt everything in me bitterly contracting, crawling furiously upward against that long fall.⁴⁴

Hella eventually finds David in a gay bar, seducing another man. She flees, heartbroken, and David finds himself alone.

Baldwin does not differentiate David’s crisis from a stereotypical attempt to reconcile masculinity with homosexuality, dedicating *Giovanni’s Room* to recounting the damages inherent to an inability to accept oneself, of which the inability to love is the most prominent. By refusing to accept his identity, David destroys Giovanni’s life, harms Hella, and becomes a shell devoid of feeling. David employs innocence—the idea that he is heterosexual and in love with Hella, thus ‘proving’ that his relationship with Giovanni is a fabrication—to justify his actions. He holds power over both Giovanni and Hella, and uses this power irresponsibly, displaying the

⁴² Ibid., p. 239.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 318.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 319.

importance of acceptance to every individual, no matter if they are an oppressor, the oppressed, or a peculiar mix of the two. Humans, even if only in possession of a modicum of power on the individual level, like David or Gabriel, possess the potential to wreak havoc upon themselves and others via a lack of acceptance. David also shows that stepping beyond one's system of reality and facing the crimes one has committed under the pretense of innocence can be incredibly terrifying, but incredibly necessary. All of these principles remain consistent on the collective level.

White America's Collective System of Reality

On the individual level, Baldwin's fiction shows that the standard to which one holds themselves—who they wish to be and thus fervently believe they are, whether it be a pious, perfect man of God or a paragon of heteronormativity—can act as a shield, ensuring the perpetuation of affected 'innocence' regarding the crimes in which they are complicit. Baldwin believes that this concept is generalizable to the white American population as a whole. The illusion—the flawed system of reality under which Americans operate—is inextricably linked to the constitutional precepts of freedom and equality, and Baldwin states that “the myth, the illusion, that this is a free country...is disastrous.”⁴⁵ The illusion of freedom is further protected by American exceptionalism, the idea that “our state is a state to be envied by other people,”⁴⁶ preventing anyone from questioning the nature of freedom in America.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 199.

When in possession of a false sense of reality, practicing empathy is impossible.

Recalling Gabriel, who is unable to see his sin due to his self-perception of piety and subsequent assumption of innocence, Baldwin puts forth the example of a southern sheriff, unable to fathom African-American protestors' motivations: "The Mississippi, or the Alabama, sheriff... really does believe when he's facing a negro, a boy or a girl, that this woman, this man, this child, must be insane to attack the system to which he owes his entire identity."⁴⁷ The sheriff believes that the American promise of freedom for all is genuine, despite this promise not being genuine for African-Americans. By clinging to his false sense of reality, the sheriff is unable to empathize, to understand the afflictions of his fellow countryman. Baldwin refers to this affliction as the "plague called color,"⁴⁸ which harms both white America and African-Americans.

This plague is beyond the control of a single individual, creating enemies out of countrymen. To illustrate this point, Baldwin summarizes the lot of a police officer tasked with patrolling the "hideous" projects of Harlem,⁴⁹ whose "presence is an insult...even if they spent their entire day feeding gumdrops to children" because they represent the oppressive white America that relegates African-Americans to the projects.⁵⁰ The policeman finds himself in a dilemma:

He has never, himself done anything for which to be hated...and yet he is facing, daily and nightly, people who would gladly see him dead, and he knows it...He cannot avoid observing that some of the children, in spite of their color, remind him if his own

⁴⁷ Baldwin, "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?"

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 174.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 176.

children...He can retreat from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature.⁵¹

Baldwin treats this tendency to retreat from empathy into animosity as natural due to the existential fear which comes with facing the reality—the inequality—in America. Instead of reevaluating their system of reality, white Americans ‘retreat into a callousness,’ avoiding empathy and instead turning to the illusion of American greatness and equality.

Unable to empathize and unwilling to reconcile the lofty idea of liberty with American reality, white Americans equivocate, seeking to demonstrate that their identity is genuine, paralleling David’s behavior. Baldwin critiques an oft-heard refrain that seeks to prove the authenticity of American freedom, the idea that since a few prominent African-Americans ‘had made it,’ freedom is in fact for all. Successful members of a minority do not prove that America is “the land of opportunity...It proves nothing of the sort...” Baldwin asserts that “a few have always risen—in every country, every era, and in the teeth of regimes which can by no stretch of the imagination be called free.”⁵²

Baldwin’s explanation for how African-Americans are initially excluded from the promise of ‘freedom for all’ hones in on class anxiety.⁵³ Two complimentary freedoms exist for white America: the freedom to succeed and the freedom to fail. The freedom to fail generates American “social paranoia:” “Where everyone has status, it is also perfectly possible, after all, that no one has. It seems inevitable, in any case, that a man may become uneasy as to just what

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

⁵² Ibid., p. 173

⁵³ Baldwin is elusive in regard to the roots of racism in America, and he would likely object to attributing racism to a single factor. However, throughout Baldwin’s work, class anxiety is seen as the primary motivation behind *collective* racism. Other explanations Baldwin suggests are focused on specific groups or individuals (see *Faulkner and Desegregation*), rather than white America as a whole.

his status is.”⁵⁴ If one fails in an ‘exceptional’ state like America, their actions are at odds with their constructed identity. This tension ensures an innate need to establish superiority to prove oneself worthy of the fabricated but exceptional American identity. The anxiety to avoid failure has been treated with the balm of racial superiority, until superiority is simply an axiom ‘helplessly believed:’

[White Americans] have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible their lives may be...and no matter how far they fall, no matter what disaster overtakes them, they have one enormous knowledge and consolation which is like a heavenly revelation: at least they are not black.⁵⁵

Perceived superiority stemming from a fear of losing class status allows for the creation of a ceiling for African-Americans, which is in turn the floor for white Americans: “In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there*, and *where he is*, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall beneath him. We must never allow ourselves to fall that low...”⁵⁶ The white American system of reality is thus responsible for creating and perpetuating racial inequality. By lauding freedom in an ‘exceptional’ nation, white America creates the impetus for—and the blindness to—racial subjugation: to prove themselves exceptional and thus in harmony with their constructed identity, white America needs to establish superiority over a portion of society; the illusion of freedom also prevents white America from recognizing that the subjugated portion of society (who is supposedly already free) in fact needs to be freed.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

⁵⁵ Baldwin, "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?"

⁵⁶ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 219.

These concepts have been ingrained in American society for hundreds of years, displaying the scale of the problem Baldwin confronts. The inherent inequality of African-Americans is the unstated precept upon which the American myth is built, but as the African-American “moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.”⁵⁷ The systems of reality that cause discord for David and Gabriel took a lifetime to construct, and need only the action of one man to be undone, yet both men are unable to enter into acceptance or love. The collective system of reality in America has been established for over two centuries and requires collective action to undo. Echoing the existential fear that David feels when forced to face his false system of reality, Baldwin reflects on how unlikely it is that America will overcome an existential fear to reevaluate its system of reality: “Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun turning and the stars aflame...Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one’s sense of one’s own reality.”⁵⁸ Acting to change one’s world naturally puts one at risk, because to “act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.”⁵⁹

Insulation via Innocence

The American system of reality begins to crumble when the dominance of white America at the expense of African-Americans is brought under close examination. It is incredibly difficult to avoid the injustice of degrading fellow humans—who are no more deserving of their

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 294.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

circumstances than the next American—even if one “is gifted with the merest mustard grain of imagination.”⁶⁰ Recall the policeman who patrols Harlem: he stops short of reexamining his system of reality, despite the tension between his morals (‘freedom for all’), and the reality he sees in the “hideous” ghetto. This decision affords one option: to retreat further into one’s system of reality, “into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature.” The policeman in the ghetto, like Gabriel with Esther, retreats into innocence. He tells himself that he is not to blame for his victim’s circumstances, and in doing so washes his hands of culpability like a veritable Pontius Pilate. The refusal to accept any responsibility, instead preserving innocence, is harmful, as “no one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart: for his purity, by definition, is unassailable.”⁶¹

The innocence of America is synonymous with ignorance for Baldwin, and insulates the American myth—the collective system of reality—from the inconvenient truth. White Americans “have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it *and do not want to know it.*”⁶² To know one’s crimes, however, would be to reevaluate one’s sense of reality, and the fear of such an endeavor is prohibitive. It is easier to remain in illusion. In the illusion, one is innocent and therefore comfortable. To be accountable for one’s crimes on an individual level is difficult enough, as Gabriel and David show, but to be accountable for the collective crimes of the country—“for destroying hundreds of thousands of lives”—is even more daunting.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 277.

⁶² Emphasis added. Ibid., p. 292.

Innocence in the face of one's crimes is hard to maintain, but Baldwin points to a technique which enables the perpetuation of innocence: finding a convenient scapegoat. Just as Gabriel diverts blame onto 'harlots,' the Northerner diverts blame onto the Southerner: "...in freeing the slave, [the North] established a moral superiority over the South... The North was no better prepared than the South, as it turned out, to make citizens of former slaves, but it was able, as the South was not, to wash its hands of the matter."⁶³ In establishing moral superiority over the South, the North collectively mirrors Gabriel, placing shared blame solely upon the scapegoat to maintain innocence. To explain dissatisfaction and the refusal of African-Americans to "remain in their 'place,'"⁶⁴ the North and South both look outside their communities in search of an explanation that maintains innocence. The South "blames 'outside' agitators and 'Northern interference.'"⁶⁵ When the North "has trouble with the Northern Negro, it blames the Kremlin."⁶⁶ Establishing moral authority over another guilty of the same crimes is an effective tool for maintaining innocence, on both the individual and systemic level. By blaming others and lapsing into whataboutism, neither the North or the South have to face the reality of the African-American plight in America.

Acceptance: African-Americans

The United States must honestly reexamine American identity. Though Gabriel and David show the difficulty of individual acceptance, they also show the primacy of individual

⁶³ Ibid., p. 213.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 181.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

acceptance: systemic change must begin with individual acceptance, which will theoretically catalyze a norm cascade in the form of the collective acceptance of an objective American identity and the rejection of American myths that perpetuate subjugation. In the face of daunting odds, Baldwin remains optimistic: "...we can scarcely fail to arrive at a very grim view of it [American life]. But I think we have to look grim facts in the face, because if we don't, we can never hope to change them."⁶⁷ The racially neutral "we" Baldwin invokes serves as a reminder of the importance of acceptance for all Americans, regardless of skin color. Regardless of one's current role as the oppressor or the oppressed, any American can become an oppressor, a theme that David and Gabriel reaffirm as members of persecuted minorities wielding power irresponsibly.

Baldwin suggests that the order of acceptance is essential: the African-American community should act first so that love has a chance to break the spell of innocence that lingers over white America. "The really terrible thing, old buddy," Baldwin writes to his nephew, "is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope."⁶⁸ Here, Baldwin again portrays love as transcendent force—recall that once white America learns "how to accept and love themselves and each other," that "the Negro problem will no longer exist..."⁶⁹ Love can save white America—it could save Giovanni and Royal—but love is difficult, and to love your oppressor is a "terrible thing."

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 294.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 334.

Acceptance is also critical to the African-American community for their survival. If one fails to accept their history and themselves, one will likely buy into the American myth instead. If African-Americans accept this false reality, this false inferiority, the results could be disastrous. Disposing of innocence and accepting reality is a matter of life or death for the oppressed: “It was this commodity [innocence] precisely which I had to get rid of at once, literally, on pain of death.”⁷⁰ If one clings to innocence, they remain blind to the need to take action. With their agency surrendered, African-Americans can fall into believing what white America says about them. “The details and symbols of your life,” Baldwin reminds his nephew, “have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people said about you.”⁷¹ It is of paramount importance that African-Americans look beyond the false American sense of reality which can only degrade them.

Baldwin’s father serves as a reminder of the dangers inherent to failing to accept one’s self and history in the African-American community: His father “had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him.”⁷² In an interview, Baldwin states that for his parents, the church “was the only means...of expressing their pain, their despair.”⁷³ This insight into the centrality of the church in African-American life helps explain Gabriel’s determination to adhere to his constructed pious identity—the church is his only coping mechanism, his only means of escaping the inferiority white America impresses upon him, and he needs to maintain his relationship with

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁷³ James Baldwin, "James Baldwin with Kenneth Clark," interview by Kenneth Clark.

the church at all costs. Therefore, by listening to “what white people said about him,” Gabriel becomes an oppressor, destroying his moral life and the lives of those around him. The tendency to abuse power after failing to accept oneself and one’s history is a concern both individually and collectively for African-Americans. Baldwin views the Nation of Islam’s effort to preach black nationalism as problematic, as the constructed history and identity they preached could only result in more oppression:

The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this. If one is permitted to treat any group of people with special disfavor because of their race or the color of their skin, there is no limit to what one will force them to endure, and since the entire race has been mysteriously indicted, no reason not to attempt to destroy it root and branch. This is precisely what the Nazis attempted.⁷⁴

The constructed history and reality that the Nation of Islam rhetoric creates differs from the white American reality, preaching the superiority of the African over the ‘white devil.’ However, any constructed reality is useless to Baldwin, regardless of whose superiority it establishes.

Acceptance of history and reality are essential for the African-American community as a whole:

“the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past.”⁷⁵ This acceptance is empowering, allowing the remembrance of the “long line of improbable [African-American] aristocrats—the only genuine aristocrats this country has ever produced,”⁷⁶ oft-forgotten in the white washed history of America. By accepting their past and themselves, African-Americans can catalyze white acceptance via love, avoid believing their perceived inferiority by recognizing the heroes in their past, and escape becoming oppressors.

⁷⁴ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 334.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

Acceptance: White America

Baldwin's prescription for white acceptance appears distinct from his prescription for African-Americans. He places emphasis on the importance of white Americans accepting themselves, whereas his counsel to African-Americans generally places emphasis upon accepting one's history. However, these two modes of acceptance are indistinguishable from one-another. To accept oneself, one must accept their history. While the facts that each group must accept vary, acceptance is universal, transcendent of racial and sexual lines. It is a precondition for just living, and those who fail to accept themselves inevitably become oppressors of those around them, doing harm to themselves in the process: "whoever debases others is debasing himself."⁷⁷

With the false American system of reality so deeply embedded, Baldwin believes that acceptance is more difficult for white America than for African-Americans. Therefore, blame and guilt are counterproductive concepts that distract from the goal of forging a new American identity: "Guilt is a luxury that we can no longer afford. I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason."⁷⁸ By forgoing blame and counseling African-Americans to accept white Americans, Baldwin fights the fear in reconsidering—and potentially losing—one's system of reality.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 334.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 713.

It is also important for white Americans to reconsider the concept of ‘making it’ in America, which is a root cause of perceived African-American inferiority. To investigate this American paranoia, Baldwin contrasts American society with European society:

A man [in Europe] can be as proud of being a good waiter as of being a good actor, and, in neither case, feel threatened...the actor and waiter can have a freer and more genuinely friendly relationship in Europe than they are likely to have here. The waiter does not feel, with obscure resentment, that the actor has ‘made it,’ and the actor is not tormented by the fear that he may find himself, tomorrow, once again a waiter.⁷⁹

To set aside social paranoia in favor of feeling one’s “own weight, his own value,” white Americans have a chance to love themselves. In loving and accepting themselves *as themselves*—instead of measuring one’s success as relative to the other—white Americans can set aside the fear that creates the need for an inferior ‘other.’ White Americans can then accept responsibility instead of feigning innocence, and in doing so accept their identity. Then, “the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”

Implications: Demonology

Donald Trump’s electoral success has kept racial injustice in the foreground, bringing white supremacists face to face with Black Lives Matter activists throughout the country. It is hard to feign innocent ignorance at such a time. However, it is tempting to wash one’s hands of blame relative to a Nazi. Just like the Northerner in the 1960s, Americans today should not insulate themselves from responsibility by establishing a moral high-ground from atop which they can equivocate. The fact that one is further removed from the crime of racial oppression than a Southerner in the Jim Crow South—or a tiki-torch-touting Trump-ite—does not diminish

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

the fact that is the crime. However, attempts to blame a select few, a “basket of deplorables,”⁸⁰ for an *American* problem have been easy to find in the Trump era.

From Trump’s first electoral success on, it has been the priority of every American pundit to explain *why* Americans would support a real estate mogul for president. Viewed as a backlash candidate, President Donald Trump makes sense: “The racial and ethnic isolation of whites at the zip code level is one of the strongest predictors of Trump support.”⁸¹ “Trump won white women (+9) and white men (+31). He won white people with college degrees (+3) and white people without them (+37). He won whites ages 18–29 (+4), 30–44 (+17), 45–64 (+28), and 65 and older (+19).”⁸² The rise of Trump and the alt-right displays the racial resentment that has existed since the inception of America, simply in a different form than previous iterations. However, many seek to countenance the Trump supporter as something un-American—a deplorable—or as a symptom of working-class disaffection. These equivocations are familiar attempts to maintain innocence. Blaming the economic circumstances of the white middle class echoes prevarications made in Louisiana thirty years ago, when David Duke won forty-three percent of the vote in a Senatorial race. “There is a tremendous amount of anger and frustration among working-class whites,” an expert said at the time, “particularly where there is an economic downturn.”⁸³

Someone has certainly plagiarized those words to explain Donald Trump’s success. Like it or

⁸⁰ Katie Reilly, "Hillary Clinton Transcript: 'Basket of Deplorables' Comment," Time, September 10, 2016, <http://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>.

⁸¹ Jonathan T. Rothwell, and Diego-Rosell, Pablo, *Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump* (November 2, 2016).

⁸² Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President." The Atlantic, September 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>.

⁸³ Adam Serwer, "The Nationalist's Delusion," The Atlantic, November 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-nationalists-delusion/546356/>.

not, we are a guilty nation with a racial problem in our DNA. Political demonology and branding Donald Trump as a “convenient symbol of hate” will do nothing but worsen our racial dilemma,⁸⁴ entrenching American innocence.

Implications: American Exceptionalism

Another means to destroying the collective innocence that maintains an illusory system of reality in America is pushing back against American exceptionalism. To say that America is great and free implies that there is no work to be done for equality. If Donald Trump is not simply dismissed as a “convenient symbol of hate,” his ascension to the most revered office in America can serve as a focusing point, showing that the American experiment is far from over, and that the American dream is far from achieved.

To cease praising American exceptionalism would be to deprive American politicians of their bread and butter. It would make a nation that prides itself for its unique spirit uncomfortable, but this discomfort is a prerequisite for the honest individual appraisal of our collective reality. Baldwin says that he has a “distrust of all those words [such as] ‘democracy’ or ‘peace’ or ‘peace-loving’ or ‘warlike.’”⁸⁵ However, “all these imprecise words are attempts made by us all to get to something which is real and which lives behind the words.”⁸⁶ These words can therefore have value, but only if America actively works to reconcile them with reality. More precisely, these words can have value if white America accepts their meaning in an imperfect

⁸⁴ Malcolm X, *My Voice Helped Save America*.

⁸⁵ James Baldwin, “The Artist's Struggle for Integrity” (speech, 1963).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

union, an act that requires diligence and an active framing of these exceptional terms: “the reality behind these words depends ultimately on what the human being (meaning every single one of us) believes to be real...on [the] choices one has got to make, for ever and ever and ever, every day.”^{87, 88} Ironically, the framing of American exceptionalism epitomized by the slogan “Make America Great Again” is a more productive frame than the assumption that we *are* great, as it insists upon taking action. Of course, it is flawed in several ways: first, in suggesting that America was great and that we should regress to find greatness; and second, in the fact that the *type* of action taken by the Trump administration does not reflect responsibility, acceptance, and love, opting for intolerance and militance. However, suggesting that America is not great is preferable to assuming that it is.

In critiquing American exceptionalism Baldwin does not insist upon casting aside the love for country so often associated with exceptionalism. Instead, he insists that he “love[s] America more than any other country in the world, and exactly for this reason I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”⁸⁹ To attack American exceptionalism, to insist that America can be better, does not necessitate a hatred of America. Hate and anger have little value, and burning indictments of the American countenance are unnecessary in attacking American exceptionalism. The task is to do away with the idea that America is exceptional because it is *already* a champion of human freedom. The grand image of a city on a hill does not need to die, but it must be an aspiration to strive for “every day,” not an unassailable fact.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ The connection between this speech and an active framing of terms related to American Exceptionalism was suggested to me by Professor Melvin Rogers.

⁸⁹ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 9.

Conclusion

Baldwin's theory regarding the "Negro problem" has explanatory power, but is limited in practical applications. The individual necessity to take responsibility for one's actions, one's place in history, is inherently limiting. To attack the collective innocence of white America is essential to ending racial injustice, but even if Americans engage in less political demonology, even if the calls of American exceptionalism fall on deaf ears, the fear of reassessing and reinventing one's reality still exists. Both Gabriel and David are genuinely loved—recall that loving white Americans provides them with their best chance to love and accept themselves—and fail to overcome the fear of reevaluating their systems of reality. Instead, they cling to innocence, even though it is a tattered, incomprehensible facade. To have Americans collectively examine their identity is a nigh impossible task. Perhaps this is why Baldwin's later works are frequently criticized for their "bitterness."⁹⁰

Humanity can be better than it is. America can be more than it is. James Baldwin sketches the silhouette of how this process should unfold: Every person must surrender innocence and honestly appraise their life, from their history to their identity. In accepting their true identity, and thus their responsibility, Americans can find their personal freedom. Failing to do so, failing to accept oneself, is a recipe for disaster and domination. Though American oppression is thoroughly entrenched, though affected 'innocence' is pervasive, "the challenge is in the moment, the time is always now."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Lyne, "God's Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism."

⁹¹ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 214.

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