

ESSAY

What “No Chart Can Tell Us”: Ordinary Intimacies in Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin

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Abstract

This essay reads James Baldwin in conversation with two unexpected interlocutors from the American nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois. What draws these historically distant and intellectually different thinkers together, their differences making their convergences all the more resonant and provocative, is a shared mode of attention they bring to the social crises of their eras. It is a mode of attention foregrounding how the often unobserved particulars and emotional registers of human life vitally shape civic existence; more specifically, a mode of attention provoking us to see how “a larger, juster, and fuller future,” in Du Bois’s words, is a matter of the ordinary intimacies and estrangements in which we exist, human connections in all their expressions and suppressions. Emerson names them “facts [. . .] harder to read.” They are “the finer manifestations,” in Du Bois’s terms, “of social life, which history can but mention and which statistics can not count”; “All these things,” Baldwin says, “[. . .] which no chart can tell us.” In effect, from the 1830s to the 1980s these thinkers bear witness to what politics, legislation, and even all our knowledges can address only partially, and to the potentially transformative compensations we might realize in the way we conduct our daily lives. The immediate relevance and urgency this essay finds in their work exists not in proposed political actions, programs for reform, or systematic theories of social justice but in the way their words revitalize the ethical question “How shall I live?” Accumulative and suggestive rather than systematically comparative or polemical, this essay attempts to engage with Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin intimately, to proceed in the spirit of their commitment to questioning received disciplines, languages, and ways of inhabiting the world.

Keywords: James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Waldo Emerson, intimacy, justice, democracy

Near the end of James Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), one confronts in three sentences all the beauty and burden of Baldwin's perception; that is, the way he recounts the extraordinary in the ordinary, asks us to share his awareness of its moral implications, and holds us accountable for blindness as much as for insight:

Jimmy comes out of the kitchen, with Arthur's drink, and hands it to him, and there is something very moving in the way he does this. It is probably impossible to describe it. Every gesture any human being makes is loaded, is a confession, is a revelation: nothing can be hidden, but there is so much that we do not want to see, do not dare to see.¹

These sentences show in condensed form a mode of attention operative throughout Baldwin's writing and thinking: his alertness to the profoundly significant meanings alive in the ordinary intimacies of everyday life. More broadly, these sentences illustrate what this essay takes to be a mode of attention Baldwin shares with two unexpected interlocutors: philosopher, poet, and American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), and sociologist, historian, and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963).

More than a century of turbulent history lies between Emerson, the "sage of Concord," and Baldwin, "the Harlem sage," a century including the peak and abolition of slavery in the United States, the Civil War and Reconstruction, World War I and II, the conflict in Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century, and the civil rights movement. Du Bois witnessed nearly all of it in his ninety-five years of life, a life remarkably overlapping with the lives of Emerson and Baldwin. What draws these historically distant and intellectually different thinkers together, their differences making their convergences all the more resonant and provocative, is their shared attention to the immediate and far-reaching consequences, for civic existence as well as private life, of the everyday human interactions in which we exist, including estrangement from ourselves, from each other, and even from our words. Nearly twenty years before the Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson observes a profound state of alienation impoverishing human life in all its forms: "We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other" amounting to "a frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without an aim."² "And herein lies the tragedy of the age," Du Bois writes from within the midst of post-Reconstruction America, "not that men are poor,—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,—who is good? not that men are ignorant,—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men."³ Baldwin, more than fifty years later, names this estrangement a devastating "failure, in most American lives, of the most elementary and crucial connections."⁴ It is a "depthless alienation from oneself and one's people" and equally, for Baldwin, a private and public tragedy.⁵ "Privately," he says, "we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and, internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster."⁶

This essay collapses historical distance, listening against historicist imperatives that have silenced the possibility of hearing these thinkers in conversation. Together their words carry beyond their times and place a charged account of how the ordinary intimacies in which we exist shape the fate of our national and private lives alike.

To be clear, this essay considers a conversation of this kind necessary precisely because of, rather than despite, the radically different historical and personal circumstances in which these thinkers wrote and spoke. For example, their points of convergence become all the more pertinent—even surprising—when one considers the fact that Du Bois and Baldwin faced race as a matter of life and death, whereas Emerson could consider it more philosophically as a matter of the health of democracy: “the civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded [. . .] that, man is one, and that you cannot injure any member, without a sympathetic injury to all the members.”⁷ As Du Bois puts it in one of his most prescient formulations, “the races” exist “side by side, united in economic effort, obeying a common government, sensitive to mutual thought and feeling, yet subtly and silently separate in many matters of deeper human intimacy” which constitutes an “unusual and dangerous development” in the process of social “transformation.”⁸ This essay demonstrates how these writers bring to the crises of their eras a shared mode of attention—an “angle of vision,” Emerson would call it—foregrounding how the often unobserved particulars and emotional registers of human life vitally shape the justness and unjustness of our shared social state.⁹ Put differently, it is a mode of attention provoking us to see how “a larger, juster, and fuller future,” in Du Bois’s words, is a matter of the ordinary intimacies and estrangements in which we exist, human connections in all their expressions and suppressions.¹⁰ Emerson names them “facts [. . .] harder to read.”¹¹ They are “the finer manifestations,” in Du Bois’s terms, “of social life, which history can but mention and which statistics can not count”; “All these things,” Baldwin says, “[. . .] which no chart can tell us.”¹²

The difficulty of accounting for what balks quantitative study, easy articulation, and seamless assimilation to extant paradigms for social change corresponds to the difficulty of assessing this mode of attention within disciplinary and ideological frameworks such as individualism, pragmatism, liberalism, socialism, Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, and aestheticism, frameworks through which scholars have debated these thinkers’ responses and contributions to the social questions of their times. One might say of all three writers what Michele Elam says of Baldwin when she finds that scholarship “often characterizes Baldwin as not occasionally out of step with his contemporaries but also ill-fit within the literary historical paradigms and aesthetic criteria that guide criticism.”¹³ In other words, the fact that these thinkers do not offer formal theories of social justice or systematic moral or political philosophies can obscure what they nevertheless contribute to these conversations and, for better and worse, make it easy to draw on them for different and sometimes competing ends.

Stanley Cavell gets at this dynamic when he speaks of a “pervasive puzzle in the reception of Emerson, namely that he has endeared himself both to politically

radical and to politically conservative temperaments.”¹⁴ Another version of this reception has been a tendency to read “Emerson the Transcendentalist” against “Emerson the Reformer.”¹⁵ Du Bois, who revised his thinking over the course of more than eighty years and who declared that “Programs of social reform are never complete or mutually exclusive,” has a similarly polarized and polarizing reception history, perhaps best summarized by Reiland Rabaka:

[M]ost of Du Bois’s critics have put forward a divided and distorted Du Bois, who is either, for example, a Pan-Africanist *or* a Europhile; a black nationalist *or* radical humanist; a social scientist *or* propagandist; a race man *or* radical women’s rights man; or a bourgeois elitist *or* dogmatic Marxist. Each of the aforementioned superficial ascriptions falls shamefully short of capturing the complex and chameleonic character of Du Bois’s discourse.¹⁶

Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz register a similar dynamic in Baldwin scholarship:

for too long one Baldwin has been pitted against another Baldwin, producing a series of polarities that has skewed our understanding: his art against his politics; his fiction against his nonfiction; his early writings against his late writings; American Baldwin against European Baldwin; black Baldwin against queer Baldwin. Baldwin himself spent a lifetime endeavoring to overcome these oppositions.¹⁷

Even scholarship deliberately sensitive to how the work of these thinkers resists simple appropriation for definitive political or pedagogical purposes remains bound to these very vocabularies, the given languages that leave these thinkers, at best, always uneasily situated and, at worst, falling short, compromised—politically, aesthetically, or both.

Accordingly, this essay attempts to let the writing of Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin build a different vocabulary; to let their words do more of the work sometimes overly done by the vocabularies and concepts we bring to them. This is not to say that critical conventions and disciplinary and conceptual frameworks fail to illuminate, make available, and productively complicate the work of these thinkers. The bodies of scholarship devoted to them are formative intellectual contributions. Nor is this an argument for some kind of necessarily false objectivity. Rather, and quite the opposite, this is a deliberate attempt to engage with these thinkers intimately and to proceed in the spirit of their methodological openness; specifically, their commitment to questioning received disciplines, languages, and ways of inhabiting the world, and their lifelong attempts to find forms adequate to express the American life they witnessed and the American life they envisioned. This essay, then, is accumulative and suggestive rather than systematically comparative or polemical; an attempt, following Baldwin, to read “the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be.”¹⁸ More precisely, the essay shows how these writers, throughout their careers, take the ordinary intimacies of everyday life to be measures of our shared social state, measures

in the sense that they reveal the state of our lives together. Finally, the essay suggests that Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin, from the 1830s to the 1980s, bear witness to what politics, legislation, and even all our knowledges can address only partially, and to the potentially transformative compensations we might realize in the way we conduct our daily lives.

"An appreciation of the urgency of the everyday," Michele Elam rightly suggests, "deeply informs Baldwin's aesthetic," and one might accurately say the same for Du Bois and Emerson.¹⁹ Du Bois, for example, in "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom" (1944), recalls discovering how sociological studies "far removed in time and space [. . .] lose the hot reality of real life"; fail to respond to "situations that called—shrieked—for action."²⁰ "I suddenly saw life, full and face to face," he says. "Facts, in social science, I realized, were elusive things: emotions, loves, hates, were facts [. . .]. Their measurement, then, was doubly difficult and intricate."²¹ Emerson's engagement with the everyday is a more broadly philosophical provocation; an attempt to reconnect us to ourselves, fellow persons, the natural world, and beyond, to put us in a position to live more deliberate ethical lives. "What would we really know the meaning of?" he asked in 1836. "The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body."²² Yet like Baldwin and Du Bois, he takes these "near," "common," and "familiar" matters, elusive as they may be, to indicate the health of society.²³

Indeed, the "subject of the Times," he reminds us in his "Introductory Lecture" to his series *Lectures on the Times* (1841), "is not an abstract question"; rather, persons—"these witty, suffering, blushing, intimidating figures"—constitute the times.²⁴ "We talk of the world," he admits, "but we mean a few men and women":

These are the pungent instructors who thrill the heart of each of us, and make all other teaching formal and cold. How I follow them with aching heart, with pining desire! [. . .] these have the skill to make the world look bleak and inhospitable, or seem the nest of tenderness and joy. I do not wonder at the miracles which poetry attributes to the music of Orpheus, when I remember what I have experienced from the varied notes of the human voice.²⁵

Emerson's turn to persons, notable in a thinker often considered insensitive to the finer affective registers of human relations, is not simply a turn to persons as such but to attitudes, expressions, habits, and sentiments that give face to "the Times," future as well as present.²⁶ "All that is in the world, which is or ought to be known, is cunningly wrought into the texture of man, of woman" he insists in "Love" (1841), and one gets a sense of this texture in his account of the age: "I find the Age walking about in happy and hopeful natures, in strong eyes [. . .] and think I read it nearer and truer so, than in the statute-book, or in the investments of capital"; "In the brain of a fanatic; in the wild hope of a mountain boy [. . .] in the love-glance of a girl; in the hair-splitting conscientiousness of some eccentric person [. . .] is to be found that which shall constitute the times to come."²⁷ These affective

states, dispositions, and inner lives, just as much as more manifest and quantifiable actions and interpersonal exchanges, “are the Age,” and in no small part its ills and ideals, its wrongs and rights, its declarations and silences. Baldwin will say, “As the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence.”²⁸

Thus in his 1842 lecture “The Transcendentalist” Emerson finds a telling “sign of our times” to be the motivations and reception of what he names the “separators,” the “many intelligent and religious persons” who “betake themselves to a certain solitary and critical way of living, from which no solid fruit has yet appeared to justify their separation.”²⁹ The most prominent “feature” in Emerson’s “portrait” of “these unsocial worshippers” is their exacting desire for fellowship, reflected in their uncompromising wish for “a just and even fellowship, or none.”³⁰ They “have even more than others a great wish to be loved” yet “loneliness, and not this love, would prevail in their circumstances, because of the extravagant demand they make on human nature.”³¹ Emerson’s casual conclusiveness leads one, on first reading, to take the sentence as a given, simply the unquestionable state of things. Yet is this demand for “a just and even fellowship” not a reasonable demand? an ordinary hope, even? Emerson throughout the lecture names it a “wish”: “It is really a wish to be met,” he says, “the wish to find society for their hope and religion, —which prompts them to shun what is called society.”³² One might say this “wish to be met” on just terms becomes a “demand” when it challenges the established order of things, its “extravagance” marking the distance between desired and extant states of human relations.

This mode of attention to “the Times,” this angle of vision focused on the particulars of individuals, takes prescriptive form thirty years later in Emerson’s *Society and Solitude* (1870):

If a man wishes to acquaint himself with the real history of the world, with the spirit of the age, he must not go first to the statehouse or the court room. The subtle spirit of life must be sought in facts nearer. It is what is done and suffered in the house, in the constitution, in temperament, in the personal history, that has the profoundest interest for us . . . These facts are, to be sure, harder to read. It is easier to count the census, or compute the square extent of a territory, to criticise its polity, books, art, than to come to the persons and the dwellings of men, and read their character and hope in their way of life.³³

It is undoubtedly “harder to read” these finer facts. The “census” and “statute-book” do not register a person’s character, sufferings, and aspirations; moral philosophy explores them primarily in abstract forms; politics address them only partially; and their consequences unfold largely beyond what legislatures can regulate. Furthermore, in the context of a nation supporting slavery, Emerson’s attention to the fate of a “wish” can seem grossly misplaced. So too can his attention, in the essay “Self-Reliance” (1841), to “lying hospitality and lying affection,” “hypocritical attentions,” “the affectation of love,” and “conformity.”³⁴ These attitudes and actions hardly seem pressing or quantifiable indices of a nation’s health and they do not exactly fall within the parameters, as it were, of what can—or should—be reformed.

Yet Emerson again and again seems to take them to be matters of immediate concern for human existence, generally, and civic life, more particularly. "If any man consider the present aspects of what is called with distinction *society*," he goes on to conclude in "Self-Reliance," "he will see the need of these [new] ethics [. . .]. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other."³⁵ It is a "society" in name alone when persons exist in a state of fearfulness, even fearing their neighbors, and a society in name alone when persons altogether fail to see, or to actively "consider," these "aspects" of their circumstances. Gathered together, these "facts [. . .] harder to read" present not only the individually lived experience of deteriorated human relations but also the frequently unperceived and sometimes willfully ignored ways in which human relations, arguably the very foundation of civic life, can suffer deterioration; for instance, in the moral blindness of widespread "conformity."

Du Bois articulates in more explicit terms how failing to address these "facts [. . .] harder to read" limits, from the outset, our endeavors toward a juster world, even limits one's capacity to imagine what that might be. "I have thus far sought to make clear the physical, economic, and political relations of the Negroes and whites in the South," he tells us near the end of Chapter IX in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903),

But after all that has been said on these more tangible matters of human contact, there still remains a part essential to a proper description of the South which it is difficult to describe or fix in terms easily understood by strangers. It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole. What is thus true of all communities is peculiarly true of the South, where, outside of written history and outside of printed law, there has been going on for a generation as deep a storm and stress of human souls, as intense a ferment of feeling, as intricate a writhing of spirit, as ever a people experienced.³⁶

Here the humanness of Du Bois's subject confounds the methodical proceeding of the historian and sociologist and asserts itself in self-consciously searching, lyrical language, marking a shift from the chapter's largely empirical and quantitative assessment to a description of what "our crude social measurements are not yet able to follow minutely."³⁷ In effect, to neglect these "little things which are most elusive to the grasp" yet necessary for "a clear conception" of communities and nations is to settle on a vision, say, of democracy, only partially conceived; it is, for example and recalling Emerson, to let stand forms of life in which a wish for "just and even fellowship" goes unheard, or unvoiced, or at best finds reception as "an extravagant demand"; and it is to take for granted that the current situation of human relations counts as "society" in the first place.

Put the other way around, Emerson's "facts [. . .] harder to read" and Du Bois's matters "elusive to the grasp" participate in what makes our shared social state just, and unjust, and how we come to know and define what just and unjust are,

and what these words mean to us, individually and collectively. “What does one mean,” Du Bois presses,

by a demand for “social equality”? The phrase is unhappy because of the vague meaning of both “social” and “equality” [. . .]. “Social” is used to refer not only to the intimate contacts of the family group and of personal companions, but also and increasingly to the whole vast complex of human relationships through which we carry out our cultural patterns.³⁸

Or in Baldwin’s account: “the reality behind the words depends ultimately on what the human being (meaning every single one of us) believes to be real. The terrible thing is that the reality behind all these words depends on choices one has got to make, for ever and ever and ever, every day.”³⁹ Indeed, the particular intensities of Emerson’s, and one might say Baldwin’s, prose—admonishments, exhortations, sometimes overbearing moral urgency—suggest that making articulate “the whole vast complex of human relationships through which we carry out our cultural patterns” requires writing perhaps somewhat extravagantly not only outside stylistic conventions but also outside disciplinary and epistemological boundaries.⁴⁰ Yet this extravagant writing, or “fugitive writing” in Du Bois’s suggestive locution, might better approximate the heart of human relations: “what is done and suffered,” Emerson says, “in the house, in the constitution, in temperament, in the personal history,” the “thousand and one little actions,” Du Bois finds, “which go to make up life” yet often exist “outside of written history and outside of printed law.”⁴¹

An archive of “excluded wisdom,” then, might best describe the achievement of Du Bois’s *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920).⁴² This evocative phrase, “excluded wisdom,” appears midway through the book when Du Bois says the “sources of [. . .] knowledge” upon which a just democracy depends are the “feeling and the experience” of individuals: “So soon as a nation discovers that it holds in the heads and hearts of its individual citizens the vast mine of knowledge, out of which it may build a just government, then more and more it calls those citizens to select their rulers and to judge the justice of their acts.”⁴³ The “foundation of the argument,” he goes on to say, is that “in the last analysis only the sufferer knows his sufferings and that no state can be strong which excludes from its expressed wisdom the knowledge possessed by mothers, wives and daughters”:

We have but to view the unsatisfactory relations of the sexes the world over and the problem of children to realize how desperately we need this excluded wisdom.

The same arguments apply to other excluded groups: if a race, like the Negro race, is excluded then so far as that race is a part of the economic and social organization of the land, the feeling and the experience of that race are absolutely necessary to the realization of the broadest justice for all citizens.⁴⁴

Du Bois devoted a lifetime to reclaiming the “sufferings,” “feeling,” and “experience” without which, in his account, the world will remain fundamentally unjust.

How, exactly, these matters become part of a nation’s “expressed wisdom”—in its laws, in its music and literature, and in the forms of life available to its citizens—is the question his oeuvre, in its extraordinary range and innovation, investigates, everywhere making clear that working toward an answer requires acknowledging the imbrication of civic and psychological life.

Darkwater and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940)—second and third after *The Souls of Black Folk* of what Du Bois calls “three sets of thoughts centering around the hurts and hesitations, that hem the black man in America”—perhaps give fullest voice to how “hurts and hesitations” “are absolutely necessary” to “build[ing] a just government.”⁴⁵ An “exposition and militant challenge, defiant with dogged hope” is how Du Bois defines *Darkwater*.⁴⁶ The “most powerful appeal for Justice ever published,” Joel Spingarn declared in his publisher’s statement.⁴⁷ This power lives not only in the exacting and prescient intersectional analysis by which the book explicates “the great social questions of the day” but also, if not more so, in a stylistic singularity ultimately inseparable from analytical rigor and suggesting what an appeal for justice must include beyond “sterner flights of logic.”⁴⁸ Du Bois tells his publishers that he “has tried to indicate, rather than describe, the vast emotional content of this social problem by inserting between the arguments bits of poetry and fancy, which interpret the bewilderment, the disappointment, the longing, and the faith of millions of men.”⁴⁹ This fine distinction, “indicate, rather than describe,” communicates a diagnostic intention: “bewilderment,” “disappointment,” “longing,” and “faith” are data, and “poetry and fancy” the necessary interpretive measures. Especially telling is the fact that Du Bois openly acknowledges in the “Postscript” the untenable terms of the book’s methodology.⁵⁰ Indeed, while the book’s formal structure separates “arguments” from “what may be poetry,” the “vast emotional content” ultimately overflows and transforms the designated forms of expression such that the numbered chapters and “what may be poetry” each rely on insights made available by the other.

One finds a representative example in *Darkwater*’s Chapter II, “The Souls of White Folk,” which charts the “descent into Hell” precipitated by “this new religion of whiteness.”⁵¹ Though the chapter systematically analyzes trade, war, religion, and the “greatness” of nations throughout world history, it does so in a way that fleshes out the lived human meanings of these abstractions; knows them, in other words, from within, viscerally. In other words, this chapter’s “logic” is emotional logic, in this case the emotional logic of a “practical morality” founded on white supremacy and an emotional logic with the power of the “elemental forces” that give it metaphorical body and bookend the chapter:⁵²

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea . . . Eastward and westward storms are breaking, —great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty [. . .]. If I cry amid this roar of elemental forces, must my cry be in vain, because it is but a cry, —a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?⁵³

A “harbinger of the late twentieth century’s whiteness studies,” in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s account, this chapter might theorize whiteness but it does so by

relentlessly exposing what theory alone can neither remedy nor rationalize through explanation.⁵⁴ “On the pale, white faces . . . I see again and again, often still and more often, a writing of human hatred, a deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions.”⁵⁵ For Du Bois, no quantitative measure can fathom the vastness of “human hatred,” yet this hatred demonstrably affects the economic, political, and spiritual state of nations, past, present, and future alike.

As much as *Darkwater* reflects the systematic rigor of Du Bois’s scholarship, it simultaneously speaks an insistently, defiantly human perspective, at once a specifically black perspective—“up from the heart of my problem and the problems of my people”—and the more general perspective of an individual’s inner experience. “We often forget,” he had said seventeen years earlier in *Souls*, “that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul . . . it toils and tires, it laughs and weeps its bitter tears, and looks in vague and awful longing at the grim horizon of its life, — all this, even as you and I.”⁵⁶ If an “artist,” as Baldwin once suggested, “is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian,” then perhaps it is in this way that Du Bois is most an artist: an historian of the “swaying and lifting and sinking of human hearts,” the inner life he takes to be essential “to the realization of the broadest justice.”⁵⁷

Just as Emerson insists on the consequence of “secret melancholy” or “frightful skepticism” for civic life as well as individual existence, so too Du Bois considers “bewilderment,” “disappointment,” and “longing” inseparable from what he calls, twenty years later, “that great national reservoir of knowledge without use of which no government can do justice,” a pointed reminder not only of the ongoing endeavor that justice is, but also an argument for a broader, more inclusive criterion by which we might measure its exercise and fulfillment.⁵⁸ Indeed, for Du Bois, “hurts and hesitations” are as much indices of civic existence as legal equalities and inequalities, and, as he suggests in *Souls*, sometimes more acute measures:

In a world where it means so much to take a man by the hand and sit beside him, to look frankly into his eyes and feel his heart beating with red blood; in a world where a social cigar or a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches, —one can imagine the consequences of the almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races whose separation extends even to parks and street-cars.⁵⁹

Du Bois knew painfully well how the most basic human interactions, often taken for granted, can go farther than legislative means toward righting unjust conditions. One finds a moving example in the final chapter of *Dusk of Dawn*, when he recounts the reception of “The Star of Ethiopia,” a pageant he wrote and staged in New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Los Angeles between 1913 and 1925.

A tremendous production celebrating “the history of the Negro race,” the pageant didn’t “pay dividends,” amount to a protest, or result in legislation, yet it offered a kind of poetic justice in response to what justice by other means could

not, and arguably cannot, address.⁶⁰ Du Bois makes this plain by quoting from the *Friend's Intelligencer* the remarks of “a settlement worker”:

I wish I could find the words I need to thank you for the beautiful thing you have given us in the pageant [. . .]. It was not only the pathos and the tragedy of the story that made the tears, but something deeper than that. In spite of the hurt, you'll keep right on being a poet, won't you, please?⁶¹

Du Bois, getting at “something deeper” than “the pathos and the tragedy of the story,” gets at something more “elusive to the grasp” than what might be narrativized, summarized, or quantified in formal discourse.⁶² Yet this extravagant pageant, for Du Bois, “was no mere picture, it was reality”—“excluded wisdom” made present—reality requiring, in Baldwin's terms, the “report that only the poets can make.”⁶³

Analogous in Baldwin's oeuvre to “The Star of Ethiopia” in Du Bois's oeuvre is the understudied *Nothing Personal* (1964), an ironically titled book that pairs Baldwin's writing with Richard Avedon's photography to document, borrowing Baldwin's terms, “All these things which sociologists think they can find out and haven't managed to do, which no chart can tell us.”⁶⁴ Reviews of the book tend to find it “extravagant,” “unconventional,” “a curiosity,” “daring experimentation,” “a wild diatribe against America,” and “a piece of exhibitionism.”⁶⁵ Particularly representative of its early negative reception is Robert Brustein's review in the *New York Review of Books*, 17 December 1964, which begins with the sentence: “Of all the superfluous non-books being published this winter for the Christmas luxury trade, there is none more demoralizingly significant than a monster volume called *Nothing Personal*.”⁶⁶ The book, he concludes, “pretends to be a ruthless indictment of contemporary America, but the people likely to buy this extravagant volume are the subscribers to fashion magazines, while the moralistic authors of the work are themselves pretty fashionable, affluent, and chic.”⁶⁷ Though this review, in theory, might make valid arguments about the political efficacy or inconsequence of *Nothing Personal*, its vehemence speaks more incisively to how the reviewer experiences the subjects the book treats and the turbulent social context out of which it emerges.⁶⁸

This “monster volume” juxtaposes various celebrities, institutionalized individuals, and anonymous ordinary persons—their eyes, fists, fingers, teeth—their faces and bodies open and exposed, marked by age, laughing, kissing, grimacing, all of them alike in the fullness of their humanness and unseemly physiognomic particulars. If Emerson names what “facts [. . .] harder to read” are—“what is done and suffered in the house, in the constitution, in temperament, in the personal history”—and if Du Bois shuttles between reclaiming these facts and theorizing their political significance, then *Nothing Personal* faces them: William Casby, Marilyn Monroe, Malcolm X, Allen Ginsberg, the Generals of the Daughters of the American Revolution, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Atlanta, and nameless yet nonetheless singular individuals on the curbs of New York, in a

psychiatric ward, and on a beach. The book effectively materializes what Emerson in 1841 could only describe:

why not draw for these times a portrait gallery? [. . .] let us set up our Camera also, and let the sun paint the people. Let us paint the agitator, and the man of the old school, and the member of Congress, and the college-professor, the formidable editor, the priest, and reformer, the contemplative girl, and the fair aspirant for fashion and opportunities, the woman of the world who has tried and knows.⁶⁹

The “portrait gallery” here envisioned is a “series of sketches” as revealing and inclusive as *Nothing Personal*. Similarly, the “angle of vision” from which Emerson asks us to witness an age appears in the book’s startling and impartial intimacy. Even the tortured camera angles and technologically disfigured images match the natural contortions of anguished flesh, making visible that “single whirlpool of social entanglement and inner psychological paradox” which Du Bois found “more significant for the meaning of the world today than other similar and related problems.”⁷⁰

Whether one takes these photographs to be relentlessly revealing portraits or, in Burstein’s assessment, “a titillating peek into the obscene and ugly faces of the mad, the dispossessed, and the great and neargreat,” one cannot fail to confront their affective intensity.⁷¹ In effect, *Nothing Personal* brings far too close those aspects of human life which people do not, and often cannot, see. Yet those aspects of life in no small way contribute, in Du Bois’s words, to “that great national reservoir of knowledge without use of which no government can do justice.”⁷² Put differently, if this is an “extravagant volume,” as more than one review suggests, making an “extravagant demand” on readers, then perhaps its extravagance matches the desperateness of the situation it embodies and recounts: “our absolutely unspeakable loneliness, and the spectacular ugliness and hostility of our cities,” “our unadmitted sorrow,” the “unloved streets,” and “Our failure to trust one another deeply enough to be able to talk to one another” which “has become so great that people with these questions in their hearts do not speak them”; or in Avedon’s words, “despair, dishonesty . . . things that keep people from knowing each other.”⁷³

What Emerson called “a frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without aim,” Baldwin laments almost word for word when he observes, “Everyone is rushing, God knows where, and everyone is looking for God knows what—but it is clear that no one is happy here, and that something has been lost.”⁷⁴ So too Baldwin’s wish for love, for the “ruling principle of our lives” to be “knowledge that human beings are more important than real estate,” suffers the fate of the transcendentalists’ wish, written off as an “extravagant demand,” or in Burstein’s words, a “simpleminded notion,” impossibly and irresponsibly “innocent.”⁷⁵ So mid-twentieth-century New York, through Baldwin’s eyes and ears, eerily raises the specter of Emerson’s nineteenth-century Concord. These resonances might tell us little about the historical particulars of mid-twentieth-century New York and nineteenth-century Concord, yet they conjoin Baldwin and Emerson’s remarkably similar angle of vision—and what they take to be vital measures of “the Age.”

Nothing Personal in many ways enables one to inhabit their angle of vision, to imaginatively follow the mode of attention this essay has been attempting to describe, and not simply because a camera literally directs one's eye. Consider this passage in which Baldwin walks us into the city, acquainting us with "the spirit of the age," as Emerson would say, not by going "to the statehouse or the court room" but by seeking it in "facts nearer":

Some rare days, often in the winter, when New York is cheerfully immobilized by snow—cheerfully, because the snow gives people an excuse to talk to each other, and they need, God help us, an excuse—or sometimes when the frozen New York spring is approaching, I walk out of my house toward no particular destination, and watch the faces that pass me. Where do they come from? how did they become—these faces—so cruel and so sterile? they are related to whom? they are related to what?⁷⁶

This report on the state of the nation tells in measures of human faces what "no chart can tell us." "We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other," recall Emerson saying a century earlier.⁷⁷ "We are weary of gliding ghostlike through the world."⁷⁸ "Subtly and silently separate in many matters of deeper human intimacy" were Du Bois's terms in 1903.⁷⁹ So in the hard, closed faces in the streets of New York Baldwin reads a "loveless nation," persons alienated from themselves, their pasts, their futures, and each other. "The faces he views," writes Joshua Miller, "like many of the faces Avedon captures, discount meaningful communication before it can even occur."⁸⁰ "The best that can be said is that some of us are struggling," Baldwin goes on. "And what we are struggling against is that death in the heart which leads not only to the shedding of blood, but which reduces human beings to corpses while they live."⁸¹ This radical estrangement is precisely what *Nothing Personal* confronts, or in Brian Norman's reading, "Baldwin and Avedon underscore the difficulty of human connection, and also the desire for it."⁸²

As *Nothing Personal* thus convicts us of "that death in the heart" it amplifies almost to an ethical imperative an encounter with what this essay has called a mode of attention. "People," Baldwin observes,

are defeated or go mad or die in many, many ways, some in the silence of that valley, where I couldn't hear nobody pray, and many in the public, sounding the horror where no cry or lament or song or hope can disentangle itself from the roar. And so we go under, victims of that universal cruelty which lives in the heart and in the world, victims of the universal indifference to the fate of another, victims of the universal fear of love, proof of the absolute impossibility of achieving a life without love.⁸³

These words attest to the profound consequences of what is perceived and ignored, consciously or not, and what is made possible and foreclosed in our lives with other persons. Baldwin confronts us here, not unlike Du Bois and Emerson, with the question of how one ought to live one's connections to the world. He brings to

our attention how “cruelty,” “indifference,” and “fear”—like “secret melancholy,” “hurts and hesitations,” “hatred,” and “desire”—are matters in response to which, and through which, our ethics find living form, even in the silence of “indifference to the fate of another.” These are matters at once deeply private yet public in consequence, common to any age and all circumstances be their particularities what they may. Attending to them means acknowledging the fact that much of human life remains beyond the reach of knowledge and beyond the reach of direct, administrable, and adequate justice.

Thus one might say *Nothing Personal* embodies most explicitly how, for all three thinkers, these “facts [. . .] harder to read” at once call for a response and bear witness to the efficacy of our responses, exposing, in particular, how social justice must happen at the level of our ordinary intimacies as well as find form in our institutions. Emerson, for example, insists in the essay “Politics” (1844) on the need to recognize “higher rights than those of personal freedom, or the security of property.”⁸⁴ A person, he says, “has a right to be employed, to be trusted, to be loved, to be revered.”⁸⁵ Du Bois strikingly echoes these terms in his account of the post-Civil War decades in which even the “powerful means” of the Fifteenth Amendment failed to realize “the ideal of liberty”: “The freedman,” Du Bois says hauntingly, “has not yet found in freedom his promised land,” for the “long-sought,” still sought freedom is “freedom of life and limb” and, equally and importantly, “the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire.”⁸⁶ Baldwin reiterates this post-Reconstruction American scene from within the midst of what he names “the latest slave rebellion, or what American newspapers erroneously term the civil rights movement”:

Malcolm asked [a sit-in student] a question which I now present to you: “If you are a citizen, why do you have to fight for your civil rights? If you are fighting for your civil rights, then that means you are not a citizen.” Indeed, the “legalisms” of this country have never had anything to do with its former slaves. We are still governed by the slave codes.⁸⁷

In effect, the civil rights and “higher rights” exercised and denied in the course of daily living and dying are the conditions actualizing “personal freedom” in practice rather than in theory or law alone, the conditions materializing “freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.”⁸⁸ Put differently, in Ivy Wilson’s terms, “citizenship is experienced affectively through the cultures of everyday life as much as it is produced procedurally within political systems”; or in Shireen Patell’s terms, “the force of law partially depends on extralegal or nonlegal bolsters—the cultural backdrop conditions the machinery of the law.”⁸⁹ Legislation cannot remedy the tragedy of the fact that “men know so little of men” nor can it regulate the harms and civilities, the atrocities and generosities, alive in our interactions and estrangements.

A “social cigar or a cup of tea together” might seem a grotesque nicety in the face of race riots, yet the humanity this gesture affirms and maintains, especially in

a time of "almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races," might indeed be a kind of compensatory justice, even if one questions whether it "means more," as Du Bois observed, "than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches."⁹⁰ Baldwin, in his fiction as well as nonfiction, would consider such gestures the proof and practice, if not the transformation, of civic life. As Robert Reid-Pharr suggests, Baldwin

understood, particularly during the period between 1954 and 1970 when the US civil rights movement was at full throttle, that progressive intellectuals need to hail and defend structural changes then taking place in the country while also modeling new forms of subjectivity and *intersubjectivity* for individuals and communities with no clear understanding of how they might continue to operate in a world in which basic social protocols were being called into question.⁹¹

One might better hear in this context Baldwin's declaration, "Freedom is beyond politics, though affecting politics and affected by it"; and again: "It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms"—critics of all three thinkers have indeed, in various ways, raised this objection—"but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation."⁹² The freedoms and higher rights of which Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin speak—working, thinking, loving, and aspiring—come to hold meaning, and are to be realized, guaranteed, and also lost, not solely by way of any or all of the laws that we establish and amend or fail to, but rather, in the innumerable, immediate, and morally consequential relations in which we exist. Put another way, these freedoms and rights find fuller expression and suppression in our everyday human interactions, even, as Emerson would have us observe, in "the glances of our eyes; in our smiles; in salutations; and the grasp of hands."⁹³ "Every gesture any human being makes," Baldwin affirms, "is loaded, is a confession, is a revelation: nothing can be hidden, but there is so much that we do not want to see, do not dare to see."⁹⁴

These, then, are the "facts [. . .] harder to read," these ordinary yet profoundly consequential matters of human life and relations, that Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin read in their times and would guide us to read, engage, and "know the meaning of" in our own. Put simply, these writers do not offer a program for civic or legislative social justice. Rather, they make legible and vital the less tangible and less quantifiable regions of civic life that nevertheless call for social justice. Consequently, these writers address not only what remains unaddressed in various efforts toward social change, but also what remains to be seen and to be heard. In effect, they challenge us to see how Du Bois's "larger, juster, and fuller future" depends on the potentially transformative compensations we might win in the way we conduct our lives together. Emerson and Baldwin are especially aware of how programmatic reforms and formal organizations can depart from their guiding principles, suffer "the blindness that prefers some darling measure to justice and truth," and can reduce human beings, in Baldwin's terms, to "merely a member of

a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science.”⁹⁵ “One of Baldwin’s great worries,” Lawrie Balfour notes, was “the ease with which moral and political ideals become twisted in the course of everyday life.”⁹⁶ As Baldwin himself observes, “I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified or may even be pulverized by the demands of life.”⁹⁷ He considers it the duty of writers, and Du Bois and Emerson are very much in this sense writers, to remain attuned—even vigilant, wakeful—to these “demands of life.” One might go so far as to say reading “all these things [. . .] which no chart can tell us” brings one face to face with the possibility of ethics as such; brings home the givenness of one’s relation to the world, one’s being fated to it, as it were, so fated to the freedom of how to live it.

Not by chance, then, does Emerson’s essay “Fate” open a book the title of which bespeaks this necessitated human freedom—*The Conduct of Life* (1860)—and not by chance does the essay begin by turning us from abstract meditations on “the theory of the Age” to the human individuals constituting the times:

It chanced during one winter, a few years ago, that our cities were bent on discussing the theory of the Age [. . .]. To me, however, the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times.⁹⁸

Indeed, much as we might, collectively and individually, bring insights to bear on the state of our world, we cannot “solve” it; say, in the way one would grasp the terms of a mathematical problem and solve it. Our world and our relations to it are not so composed or available to us such that all questions might be perfectly answered, wrongs completely righted, injustices adequately redressed, and losses fully mourned. Yet Emerson, perhaps most like Baldwin in this respect, maintains a deliberate commitment, in the face of human vulnerability and finitude, to where we find ourselves, standing amid infinite relations of reciprocal immediacy and moral consequence. “Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with.”⁹⁹ So Emerson resolved in “Experience” (1844) and so Baldwin resolves near the end of *Nothing Personal*: “Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have [. . .]. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.”¹⁰⁰ One hears in these sentences, as they hold us individually accountable for ourselves, what animates many of Emerson’s sentences, as well: an impassioned sense that “out of the strength and wisdom of the private heart shall go forth at another era the regeneration of society.”¹⁰¹ For in neglecting to nurture a living awareness of the relations in which we exist—in whatever form they may be—we all too easily can take them for granted, or give them up for lost, or as beyond our responsibility. “I have always felt,” Baldwin speaks from experience, “that a human being could only be saved by another

human being. I am aware that we do not save each other very often. But I am also aware that we save each other some of the time.”¹⁰²

One might say in the final analysis that these writers call for “the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars,” Baldwin’s sense near the end of *The Fire Next Time* (1963) of the “unprecedented price demanded,” which is at heart the humanism of Emerson, a perspective tasking us to keep sight of each other as human persons, and a perspective Du Bois explicitly echoes in 1905:

To induce [. . .] in men a consciousness of the humanity of all men, of the sacred unity in all the diversity, is not merely to lay down a pious postulate, but it is the active and animate heart-to-heart knowledge of your neighbors, high and low, black and white, employer and employed; it means [. . .] a reverent listening, not simply to the first line but to the last line of Emerson’s quatrain:

“There is no great, no small,
To the Soul that maketh all;
Where it cometh, all things are—
And it cometh everywhere.”¹⁰³

The “consciousness of the humanity of all men” upheld in this lecture complements Du Bois’s other responses to this era—for example, co-founding the NAACP—and undergirds his body of scholarship in which the public and private “realities of color” centrally matter. This perspective, in other words, exemplifies how more is needed in our endeavors to change the world than the politics we support, the laws we enact, and the disciplinary knowledges we privilege. Baldwin speaks in no uncertain terms of how he serves in his “proper role and function” as a witness such that “when the fight is over, a boy like me, in my youth, or a girl like my sister, in her youth, can find something they need outside of slogans and flags and programs: the belief in the human soul, which is the only thing that can really change the world.”¹⁰⁴

If this perspective is a form of idealism then it is an exacting idealism, idealism finding that the justness of our shared social state lives in the ordinary relations in which we find ourselves. Even amid national crises—Native American genocide in the nineteenth century, chattel slavery, a devastating Civil War, post-Reconstruction lynching, desegregation violence in the 1950s—Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin never lose sight of this interpersonal condition of civic life. Their mode of attention, which takes ordinary intimacies to be measures of our society, is a mode of attention without which, to borrow a phrase from George Schulman, “the inequality that law cannot reach” remains ever unaddressed and often altogether unperceived.¹⁰⁵ These writers insist on never forgetting “that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul,” that the “subject of the times is not an abstract question,” that “All lives are connected to other lives.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, one might say they fulfill the “responsibility” Baldwin claims for poets:

to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle, to bear witness, as long as breath is in him, to that mighty, unnamable, transfiguring force

which lives in the soul of man, and to aspire to do his work so well that when the breath has left him, the people—all *people!*—who search in the rubble for a sign or witness will be able to find him there.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, what this essay finds most provocative when hearing these writers as living interlocutors is the way their words make exquisitely clear how the “riddle” of our human interactions has shaped and vitally shapes the moral and political life of the United States.

Ultimately, then, the immediate relevance and urgency this essay finds in the work of these formative, searching, and humane critics of their American scenes lives not in proposed political actions, programs for reform, or systematic theories of social justice. Rather, this urgency exists in the way their words revitalize the ethical question “How shall I live?” In Baldwin’s terms, “out of what raw material will one build a self again? The lives of men—and, therefore, of nations—to an extent literally unimaginable, depend on how vividly this question lives in the mind.”¹⁰⁸ After all the “legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches,” after all the gathered data and theorization and debate, one walks into the street and must face it, and face one’s self in how one chooses to live it.¹⁰⁹ The “question of the times” will ever resolve itself into the practical question of “the conduct of life,” a question transforming the impasse of an unsolvable world into a matter of what happens and does not happen between us; what we make and unmake in our forms of life together.

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Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York, Dell, 2000), p. 560.
- 2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Essays: First Series*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971–2013), p. 43 (hereafter *CW*); Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” in *Lectures on the Times*, *CW*, vol. 1, pp. 201–16, 211.
- 3 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 103, 108.
- 4 James Baldwin, “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Vintage, 2010), pp. 140–4, 141; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, Vintage, 2007), p. 54.
- 5 James Baldwin, “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2012), pp. 119–25, 125.
- 6 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 89.
- 7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address Delivered in the Court-House in Concord, Massachusetts, on 1st August, 1844, on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” *CW*, vol. 10, pp. 301–27, 326.

- 8 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 50.
- 9 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Powers and Laws of Thought," in *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871*, vol. 1, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 134–51, 147.
- 10 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 51.
- 11 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Domestic Life," in *Society and Solitude, CW*, vol. 7, pp. 54–5.
- 12 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problem," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568 (2000), pp. 13–27, 25; James Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 148.
- 13 Michele Elam, "Introduction: Baldwin's Art," in Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1–21, 3.
- 14 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on A Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 21.
- 15 Donald Pease, "'Experience,' Antislavery, and the Crisis of Emersonianism," *boundary 2*, 34:2 (2007), pp. 71–103. See also John Carlos Rowe, who declares, "Emersonian transcendentalism and political activism in mid-nineteenth-century America were inherently incompatible." See Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 21.
- 16 W. E. B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 117; Reiland Rabaka, *Against Epistemic Apartheid: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Disciplinary Decadence of Sociology* (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p. 358.
- 17 See Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 3. Also see Conseula Francis, "Reading and Theorizing James Baldwin: A Bibliographic Essay," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 179–98.
- 18 James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, pp. 34–42, 41.
- 19 Elam, "Introduction," p. 7.
- 20 W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom" (1944), *Clinical Sociology Review*, 8:1 (1990), pp. 24–57, 46–7.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 22 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Addresses, CW*, vol. 1, pp. 49–70, 67.
- 23 *Ibid.* For rich conversation on the topic of Emerson and the ordinary, see the work of Stanley Cavell. Particularly relevant to the subject of this essay is what Cavell calls "Emersonian Perfectionism," a version of moral perfectionism in which the self engages in the ongoing work of moving toward one's next and better self, always calling one's self, and one's conformity with oneself, into question. This version of perfectionism is "essential to the criticism of democracy from within," requiring one to confront "the form of moralism that fixates on the presence of ideals in one's culture and promotes them to distract one from the presence of otherwise intolerable injustice." Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 3, 13.
- 24 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Introductory Lecture," in *Lectures on the Times, CW*, vol. 1, pp. 167–83, 168.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9.
- 26 In George Henry Calvert's account, Emerson's "intellect is busier than his feeling." See Calvert, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," in Robert E. Burkholder and Joel Myerson (eds.),

- Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, MA, G. K. Hall, 1983), pp. 155–62, 158–9. Lawrence Buell, a century later, finds in Emerson’s essay “Friendship” an “affective deficit.” See Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 82.
- 27 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Love,” in *Essays: First Series*, *CW*, vol. 2, pp. 99–110, 108; Emerson, “Introductory Lecture,” *CW*, vol. 1, pp. 169, 169–70.
- 28 James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 25.
- 29 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *CW*, vol. 1, p. 207.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 208, 207–8, 210.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 208, 209.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- 33 Emerson, “Domestic Life,” *CW*, vol. 7, pp. 54–5.
- 34 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays: First Series*, *CW*, vol. 2, pp. 41, 42, 30.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 43, emphasis in original.
- 36 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 86.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 38 Du Bois, “My Evolving Program,” p. 53.
- 39 James Baldwin, “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity,” in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, pp. 50–8, 50. For more on Baldwin and language, see Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001).
- 40 See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy; A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), for a narrative of American thinkers, beginning with Emerson, whose turn from the Western philosophical tradition and its epistemologies develops American pragmatism.
- 41 Du Bois, “My Evolving Program,” p. 47; Emerson, “Domestic Life,” *CW*, vol. 7, p. 54; Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 86.
- 42 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 69.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 45 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. xxxiii; Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 86; Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 69.
- 46 Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. xxxiii.
- 47 See Joel Spingarn quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *The Literary Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois* (White Plains, NY, Kraus International, 1989), p. 149.
- 48 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. xli
- 49 Quoted in Aptheker, *The Literary Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois*, p. 148.
- 50 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. xli.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 25.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 25.
- 54 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Introduction,” in Du Bois, *Darkwater*, pp. xxv–xxxix, xxix.
- 55 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 16.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. xli; Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 69.
- 57 James Baldwin, interview by Jane Howard, “The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are,” *Life Magazine*, 24 May 1963, pp. 86–90, 89; Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 86; Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 69.

- 58 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Revelation of Saint Orgne the Damned," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York, Library of America, 1986), pp. 1048–70, 1064.
- 59 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 88.
- 60 Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. 136.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 62 For a different reading, one "argu[ing] that through *The Star of Ethiopia* Du Bois sought to instruct his audience in the trappings of Progressive Era middle-class behavior," see Rebecca Hewett, "'Looking at One's Self Through the Eyes of Others': Representations of the Progressive Era Middle Class in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia*," *Theater History Studies*, 30 (2010), pp. 187–201, 188.
- 63 Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. 136; Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity," p. 51.
- 64 Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," p. 148. In Joshua Miller's terms, *Nothing Personal* is "one of [Baldwin's] most inventive and compact articulations of both the manifestations and the consequences of [intentional, self-directed ignorance]" yet the book "largely has been ignored by scholarly and critical establishments." See Joshua L. Miller, "'A Striking Addiction to Irreality': *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of the Photo-Text Genre," in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2000), pp. 154–89, 155, 174. *Nothing Personal* was republished by Taschen Books in 2017.
- 65 For "extravagant," see Robert Brustein, "Everybody Knows My Name," *New York Review of Books*, 17 December 1964; for "unconventional," see Amanda Hopkinson, "Richard Avedon," *Guardian*, 2 October 2004; for "a curiosity," see Brian Norman, "Baldwin's Collaborations," in Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 135–49, 137; for "daring experimentation," see Miller, "A Striking Addiction," p. 155; for "a wild diatribe against America" and "a piece of exhibitionism," see Karl Miller, "America," *New Statesman*, 4 December 1964, p. 891.
- 66 Brustein, "Everybody Knows My Name," par. 1.
- 67 *Ibid.*, par. 1.
- 68 In Brian Norman's reading, the book "disrupts feelings of national collectivity at the apex of civil rights struggles to end Jim Crow practices and white supremacy." See Norman, "Baldwin's Collaborations," p. 140.
- 69 Emerson, "Introductory Lecture," *CW*, vol. 1, p. 170.
- 70 Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. 1.
- 71 Brustein, "Everybody Knows My Name," par. 2. For a reading of *Nothing Personal* in connection to the photo-text form, see Miller, "A Striking Addiction," and Sara Blaire, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 165.
- 72 Du Bois, "Revelation," pp. 1063–4.
- 73 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948–1985* (New York, St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), pp. 381–93, 383, 383, 390, 387; Avedon quoted in Norman, "Baldwin's Collaborations," p. 136. Other assessments notably using the word "extravagant" include Karl Miller's review in *New Statesman*: "If it were easy to suppose, as he must surely do, that what he says here will help the Negroes, this extravagance would not matter much. As it is, the essay may inflame a bookish and converted few, but as a piece of propaganda it's more like a piece of exhibitionism" ("America," p. 891). Also see James Snead, "Baldwin Looks Back," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin* (New York, Chelsea House Publishers,

- 1986), pp. 141–5, 142: “With a blend of precision and extravagance unmatched in modern American essayists, Baldwin’s eye documents exciting yet exacting times.”
- 74 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *CW*, vol. 1, p. 211; Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” p. 384.
- 75 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” p. 391; Brustein, “Everybody Knows My Name,” par. 10.
- 76 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” p. 384.
- 77 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *CW*, vol. 2, p. 43.
- 78 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New England Reformers,” in *Essays: Second Series*, *CW*, vol. 3, pp. 147–67, 161.
- 79 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 50.
- 80 Miller, “A Striking Addiction,” p. 176.
- 81 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” p. 388.
- 82 Norman, “Baldwin’s Collaborations,” p. 137.
- 83 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” p. 391.
- 84 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics,” in *Essays: Second Series*, *CW*, vol. 3, p. 128.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 86 Du Bois, *Souls*, pp. 5, 15.
- 87 Baldwin, “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” p. 141.
- 88 James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), in *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 13–23, 15.
- 89 Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 13; Shireen Patell, “‘We the People Who?’ James Baldwin and the Traumatic Constitution of These United States,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 48:3 (2011), pp. 356–87, 371.
- 90 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 88.
- 91 Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “Effective/Defective James Baldwin,” in Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (eds.), *Of Latitudes Unknown: James Baldwin’s Radical Imagination* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 227–39, 230.
- 92 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, pp. 88–9.
- 93 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” in *Essays: First Series*, *CW*, vol. 2, p. 92.
- 94 Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, p. 560.
- 95 Emerson, “Introductory Lecture,” *CW*, vol. 1, p. 176; Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” p. 29.
- 96 Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said*, p. 82.
- 97 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 9.
- 98 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate,” in *The Conduct of Life*, *CW*, vol. 6, p. 1.
- 99 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essays: Second Series*, *CW*, vol. 3, p. 35.
- 100 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” pp. 392–3. See Dwight A. McBride’s introductory essay for more of this beautiful passage.
- 101 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Individual,” in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 173–88, 186.
- 102 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” pp. 388–9.
- 103 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Individual and Social Conscience” [originally untitled], *The Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Religious Education Association*, 12–16 February 1905, www.webdubois.org/dbIASC.html (accessed 4 April 2019).
- 104 Quoted in Rich Blint and Nazar Büyüm, “‘I’m trying to be as honest as I can.’ An Interview with James Baldwin (1969),” *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 113–29, 121.

- 105 George Schulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 90.
- 106 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 69; Emerson, "Introductory Lecture," *CW*, vol. 1, p. 168; Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," p. 389.
- 107 James Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," in *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 65–9, 69.
- 108 Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," p. 384.
- 109 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 88.

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