

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY AWARD

Beyond Understanding: James Baldwin's Pragmatist Aesthetics

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Abstract

This essay establishes a philosophical connection between James Baldwin and the philosopher William James by investigating how the pragmatist protocol against “vicious intellectualism” offers Baldwin a key resource for thinking through how anti-black racism might be dismantled. While Richard Wright had earlier denounced pragmatism for privileging experience over knowledge, and thereby offering the black subject no means for redressing America’s constitutive hierarchies, uncovering the current of Jamesian thought that runs through Baldwin’s essays brings into view his attempt to move beyond epistemology as the primary framework for inaugurating a future unburdened by the problem of the color line. Although Baldwin indicts contemporaneous arrangements of knowledge for producing the most dehumanizing forms of racism, he does not simply attempt to rewrite the enervating meanings to which black subjects are given. Articulating a pragmatist sensibility at various stages of his career, Baldwin repeatedly suggests that the imagining and creation of a better world is predicated upon rethinking the normative value accorded to knowledge in the practice of politics. The provocative challenge that Baldwin issues for his reader is to cease the well-established privileging of knowledge, and to instead stage the struggle for freedom within an aesthetic, rather than epistemological, paradigm.

Keywords: James Baldwin, William James, pragmatism, epistemology, Richard Wright

Surveying America’s intellectual landscape in 1945, Richard Wright recounts the history of pragmatism, stretching from William James to John Dewey, as a barren chronicle of “intellectual labors to allay the anxieties of modern man, adjurations to the white men of the West to accept uncertainty as a way of life, to live within the vivid, present moment and let the meaning of that moment suffice as the rationale for

life and death.”¹ Wright levels an attack against pragmatism’s consecration of unmediated experience, accusing the philosophical protocol of calcifying America’s deeply hierarchized racial anatomy by foreclosing action, and encouraging passive forms of living that are the exclusive luxury of white men unvisited by racial violence. Uncannily analogous to capitalism, pragmatism mystifies: its stress upon the vivid and uncertain present conceals and naturalizes the cultural, economic, and especially historical determinations that shape reality. In failing to offer either a diagnostic template or a program for political change, pragmatism’s doctrine of radical presentism implicitly coaches the black subject to genuflect to the legislative understandings of black life that circulate within America, what Wright termed the “three-hundred-year policy of ‘knowing niggers and what’s good for ‘em.’”² Admonishing pragmatism for its placatory attempt to “mak[e] ourselves feel secure in an arid and senseless world,” Wright suggests that a different set of intellectual protocols must be deployed to properly combat America’s devastating structural and constitutive imbalances.³

Wright’s essay, which serves double-duty as a charged political statement and a foreword to St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton’s landmark sociological study of black life in Chicago, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), proposes that the alternative to the pragmatist preoccupation with the flux of experience is a sensitive accumulation of data communicative of life under Jim Crow. He salutes Drake and Clayton for their exemplary mimesis of reality: they make Chicago a “known city,” engaging in a project of exact documentation that Wright aligns with his own aesthetic aims.⁴ Effacing the borders between the sciences, sociology, and literature, Wright burdens thick and precise social description with transformative potentiality. For Wright, only new aggregates of knowledge, produced by black authors and pitched primarily at white audiences, have the capacity to “violently” revise “accustomed ways of thinking” and stimulate new habits of “understanding,” the only force capable of overhauling America’s asymmetrical racial structure.⁵ In anticipation of what Charles W. Mills would later formulate as the “epistemology of ignorance,” Wright brings into view how white Americans have deliberately sealed the realities of black life within an “alien realm,” and he relates the urgent need to foreground the “Negro personality, Negro conditions of life, Negro feelings, and the ardent and oftentimes bitter nature of Negro aspirations.”⁶ Raising the stakes of his claim, Wright characterizes this cultivation of understanding as necessary to barring the possibility of a young black leader—akin, he startlingly suggests, to Hitler—from rising in one of America’s abject ghettos with the capacity to harness the legitimate discontent of the oppressed classes and wage war against America’s hegemony. In Wright’s interpretation, Hitler’s success resided in his ability to “organize those men whose reality the Western world could not see”: he tapped into a population typically excluded from the dominant epistemological frame.⁷ To avert such a future, what is dim, hazy, and strange—that is, black life itself—must be made sharp, focused, and familiar, a task that Wright sees as impossible within the pragmatist framework.

While Wright found no shortage of allies engaged in the work of systematically producing a knowledge of black life—he gestures toward a burgeoning chorus of

scientists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, poets, and novelists engaged in a similar undertaking—this essay charts an alternate intellectual trajectory, examining how James Baldwin, while not explicitly operative within a pragmatist lineage, disavows the epistemological procedures that Wright conceptualizes as indispensable for structural reformation. Unearthing an additional layer to their well-documented Oedipal struggle, I contend that Baldwin's critique of Wright might be partially grasped as turning on Baldwin's unspoken allegiance to the pragmatist principles articulated by James at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although Wright's preface conflates pragmatism into a unified discourse, and thereby distorts significant distinctions among a heterogeneous cluster of thinkers, I begin with a brief excursion through the thought of William James—the philosopher Wright most frequently cites—to get at the heart of Wright's critique.⁸ I then turn to Baldwin's essays, where he resists the call to raise black life to the level of white cognition, and instead seeks to dismantle the epistemological field as a whole. Without enlisting Baldwin as a pragmatist *à la lettre*, it is this essay's contention that his consideration of how to overcome America's entrenched racism tacitly draws upon James's philosophical reevaluation of knowledge's primacy. Opening up this pragmatist dimension of Baldwin's thought foregrounds his trenchant rethinking of deeply embedded assumptions that accord an often taken for granted importance to the function of knowledge in political action. Baldwin offers an adapted account of Jamesian philosophy, suggesting that the continued cultural preoccupation with knowledge is inimical to the imaginative energies that are required for rebuilding the world. The challenge Baldwin issues to his reader is to stray beyond the confines of epistemology, and to instead cultivate an everyday aesthetic practice that could serve as the locus of transformative political action.

Wright's appraisal of William James's legacy places the novelist squarely in an extended critical tradition that has long read James's philosophy as characterized by, to borrow Cornel West's phrase, "political impotence."⁹ Although a rich body of literature has decisively corrected the misidentification of Jamesian thought as politically sterile, aloof, and naïve, Wright's critique illuminates the hazards attendant on the nearly programmatic dismissal of knowledge in favor of pure experience, particularly in the scope of contending with America's racial asymmetries.¹⁰ James himself, it must be noted, was not a silent witness of racism. Taking a public stance on the "lynching epidemic," he implored his readers to bring an expedient end to the practice, and reprimanded newspapers for entrenching "custom into an established institution" by framing the responsible agents of lynching as "leading citizens."¹¹ He was similarly attuned to the racist anatomy of America's imperial interests in the Philippines, which he assessed as a repellent staging between "the white man's burden" and "benighted brown people."¹² Wright does not, however, hold James accountable for a personal failing to speak directly against racism: rather, he suggests that the implications of James's pragmatist philosophy—particularly its relish for the pre-cognitive realm—incubate a species of political quietism that underwrites America's constitutive hierarchies.¹³

Contending with Western philosophy's historical devotion to ascertaining knowledge, James provocatively labeled his enemy "vicious intellectualism."¹⁴ Knowledge, he suggests, affords practical mastery, endowing one with a capacity to shape and manage the world, but it is discontinuous with life, and secured only at the cost of renouncing any engagement with reality. Characterized by "refinement," the bleaching of color and ironing of texture, knowledge, for James, is established only through the willful repression, exclusion, and erasure of the "wildness" of reality: "It is no explanation of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a way of escape."¹⁵ To reach the "inner life of the flux," James recommends the audacious abandonment of the mistaken notion that "concepts give us knowledge," and instead prescribes living within the inherent instability of reality.¹⁶ True freedom, according to James, comes from total immersion, from plunging into the chaos of ordinary life and restoring "our naturally cordial relations with sensible experience."¹⁷ But such a plunge, Wright suggests, can be disabling, and risks suspending the receptive individual within the realm of immediate perception, obscuring the political forces that contour experience, and foreclosing practical action. James's doctrine was partially fashioned as a mode of resistance against the repressive bureaucratization and homogenization of modern capitalism—what the philosopher caustically describes as "regulating and administering by system the lives of human beings."¹⁸ Wright, however, suggests that the passivity that haunts the pragmatist hymn to pure experience not only acquiesces to the status quo, but also leaves the individual even more susceptible to the instruments of social control.

What emerges as a principal site of difference between Wright and James is the sense of responsibility both feel toward the "unclassified residuum" conventionally excluded from epistemology.¹⁹ James affirms the irreducible singularity of the "residuum," which he proclaims to be a site of freedom precisely because it eludes intellectual capture. The philosophical precepts he sets forth are catastrophic for Wright, for whom the "residuum"—the lived experience of the black subject—demands recovery: racialized life must be brought into contact with dominant discourses for the purposes of their revision. Implicitly weighing the damage of James's injunction to "say no more" and "leave life to teach the lesson," Wright argues that pragmatism's incapacity to make racialized life intelligible fortifies America's racist hierarchy, and condemns the black subject to continue languishing in the shadows.²⁰ Eliding how two of America's leading black intellectuals, W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, were openly grateful for their time spent in James's Harvard classroom, Wright diagnoses the pragmatist fixation with unadulterated experience as incapable of redressing the problem of the color line. Echoing and extending an earlier critique by John Dewey, who had written how James's grasp of the laboring classes was severely "limited by his experience," having been "brought up an aristocrat" and "lived a sheltered existence," Wright outlines the underpinnings of white privilege that support Jamesian pragmatism.²¹ Against the fetishization of the wildness of experience, Wright implicitly operates within the parameters of a dominant Enlightenment legacy that could heuristically be called Cartesianism. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes this intellectual genealogy

as emphasizing “human agency in the production of knowledge,” which is alone believed “to shape the sphere of politics.”²² In line with this position, Wright attests to the importance of making known the studiously “forgotten jungle of black life,” an activity he positions not as a destination but rather an essential way station on the road to sweeping national reform.²³

The essays of James Baldwin, however, depart pointedly from Wright's methods, and although there is no evidence to suggest that Baldwin explicitly relied upon William James, the two writers nevertheless evince deep intellectual affinities.²⁴ This kinship could be attributed to the formative but under-acknowledged sway that James had over twentieth-century American intellectual culture, a position not dissimilar to the one assigned by Stanley Cavell to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom are described as “unknown to the culture whose thinking they worked to found.”²⁵ James's influence might be grasped as similarly durable but spectral, emanating through various channels of American history even as his role as a generative cultural source is repeatedly obscured. Thus, Baldwin did not need to read James to be the beneficiary of the intellectual culture that the philosopher had helped to produce. Although Baldwin's relationship to the philosophical protocols that James codified is best understood, to borrow Dewey's terms, as an “inquirer” rather than a “disciple,” situating Baldwin within a specifically Jamesian lineage brings into sharp focus how the pragmatist critique of knowledge offers him a powerful resource for thinking through how to dismantle anti-black racism and forge a new political culture.²⁶

In “Autobiographical Notes,” the introductory essay to his debut collection of nonfiction, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin furnishes an implicit appraisal of the same cast of writers that Wright had earlier heralded. He writes,

One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer [. . .] is that the Negro problem is written about so widely. The bookshelves groan under the weight of information, and everyone therefore considers himself informed. [. . .] It is not only written about so widely; it is written about so badly.²⁷

While he acknowledges that such writing might hold an ameliorative social function if the reader is shifted from “ill-will to good-will,” Baldwin's essential critique of their uniform badness is blunt and unyielding, setting a limit against which arguments for the virtues of informational aggregates inevitably shatter.²⁸ His hostility is shaped by both the thinness and homogeneity of the books that clutter his shelf—which predictably assemble under the rubrics of either “For” or “Against”—and also denotes a larger philosophical objection, one fuelled by an antipathy toward the positivist protocols enshrined within an enterprise committed to amassing data of black life. Baldwin feels stifled by this legacy, and ponders how he might conceive of a literary form that does not merely reiterate the limitations of his predecessors. Clarifying the formal character of his critique, he goes on to write, “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.”²⁹ This conflict staged

between “life,” in one corner, and “theories” and “principles” in the other, is a through-line in this early collection of essays, which repeatedly details the dissonance between lived experience and knowledge. Setting the two terms in opposition, Baldwin suggests that the drive to methodically document black life is misguided, premised upon the mistaken belief that existence might, or even should, be rendered wholly intelligible.

Baldwin amplifies this expressive line in the collection’s antepenultimate essay, “A Question of Identity,” where, momentarily setting aside any immediate considerations of race, he returns to a similar cluster of concerns, and grounds the oppositional relationship between life and theory within a specific Parisian scene. The essay ruminates upon an American student colony, lingering at a café, and grapples with the impossibility of translating their lives into a coherent sum of knowledge:

That experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair is the principal truth, perhaps, to which the colony under discussion bears witness—though the aggressively unreadable face which they, collectively, present also suggests the more disturbing possibility that experience may perfectly well be meaningless.³⁰

Baldwin’s meditation reads almost like an unconscious rehearsal of late Jamesian philosophy, which Ross Posnock characterizes as the “affirm[ation] that life (experience) defeats intelligibility (meaning).”³¹ Although the colony is unified by a shared military experience that contours their appearance and conduct, this “common denominator [. . .] does not shed on this question [of identity] as much light as one might hope,” and the only truth Baldwin allows for is their exhaustion of every attempt at verbal capture.³² He gestures toward how their existence might be altogether separate from the linguistic realm. Moreover, their abstract statuses as students, soldiers, and overseas Americans—reified in their uniforms and mannerisms—do little to satiate Baldwin’s curiosity: they each remain singular and unknowable. It is here that Baldwin marks a fragile awareness that while everyday life is saturated with figures of conspicuous meaning, these articulations obscure a darker truth, “that experience may well be meaningless.” The flicker of existential discomfort that lurks in this concluding phrase, as Baldwin’s rhetoric dilates from the student colony to a broader consideration of existence at large, suggests he has not embraced James’s serenity in view of the antagonistic relation between life and meaning. While the philosopher keenly desired to “fall back on raw un verbalized life,” Baldwin is disturbed by the prospect that no inherent meaning lies beneath experience, awaiting discovery.³³ Baldwin continues to contemplate the coordinates of identity throughout the essay, though he does so without settling on a stable answer, underlining his reluctant recognition that there is likely no meaning to uncover.

Although early in his life Baldwin perceived, with some nervousness, that existence is intrinsically illegible, he fully recognizes that the world he inhabits is plotted on a grid organized along often limiting and enervating axes such as race, gender, sex, nation, and religion, all of which operate under the cover of incontrovertible

truths. While Baldwin long acknowledged the entanglement of such social taxonomies, throughout his career he named the “fury of the color problem” as carrying a singularly decisive force: the freighted and inelastic ascription of race is responsible for situating the black subject within the “not-at-all-metaphorical teeth of the world’s determination to destroy you.”³⁴ Against the racist regimes that Baldwin encountered on both sides of the Atlantic, it has long been suggested that he sought to inscribe new understandings of black life that could contribute to an urgently needed epistemological restructuring, particularly in America. Elizabeth V. Spelman, for example, attends to Baldwin’s vague but vigorous call for the “black-led white exodus from ignorance” in order to destabilize the operations of the anti-black state; while Jack Turner suggests that Baldwin prescribes a “politics of self-understanding” as necessary for realizing a truly democratic America; and Michelle M. Wright contends that Baldwin jettisons the stultifying linearity of the “Middle Passage epistemology” by rooting understandings of race in the present moment rather than within a “history of objecthood.”³⁵ Put differently, Baldwin is repeatedly said to respond to the call later sounded by Sylvia Wynter, who recommends the creation of a “higher order of human knowledge.”³⁶

While such readings appear to place Baldwin at odds with the pragmatist devaluation of knowledge, I would nevertheless suggest that his various epistemological commitments are not incongruous with the principles earlier articulated by James. Though James’s philosophical project could be broadly construed as rescuing the particularity of experience from overarching arrangements of knowledge, he also made the important clarification that he “has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere.”³⁷ Analogizing his philosophy to a grand hotel, James admits not only the possibility, but the necessity of entering the “rooms” where settled theories of knowledge reign, though he insists that the good pragmatist does not linger, and instead always returns to the restless space of the “corridor.”³⁸

Baldwin similarly concedes that the production of new modes of knowing has an instrumental function, but his deepest impulse and greatest ambition is to recover the illegibility of pure experience that both fascinates and unnerves him. Much critical work has already gauged how Baldwin complicated and unsettled the seemingly fixed categories of identification that order modern life, and I would propose that this critique of taxonomic thinking might be grasped as integral to a larger pragmatist disposition.³⁹ By attending to the philosophical force of Baldwin’s opposition to how systems of knowledge ineluctably deform life, we might better see how he continues to challenge the commonplace ways we often think through questions of freedom and racial politics. “The time has come,” Baldwin writes, “to recognize that the framework in which we operate weighs on us too heavily to be borne and is about to kill us.”⁴⁰ When placed within a Jamesian genealogy, it becomes apparent that the unnamed framework Baldwin has in mind is epistemology itself. Writing in opposition to the positivist procedures that Wright invests with revolutionary promise, Baldwin advocates for a pragmatist aesthetics as the primary site of political change.

Baldwin's pragmatist sensibility is born partially out of his recognition that racism is, at its core, a configuration of knowledge. In "My Dungeon Shook," the famous letter to his nephew that opens *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin describes the ideological field within which black life has been precariously anchored, writing:

Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black *and for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.⁴¹

Setting aside his own earlier prescriptions for literary complexity—which will be returned to shortly—the exactness of Baldwin's prose, his capacity to "spell out precisely," is proportionate to the "brutal clarity" of the range of cultural apparatuses pressed into the single purpose of determining the "worthless" status of the black subject. Through his caustic evocation of rationalism, Baldwin implicates a lineage of Western thought that has historically defined the black subject as antithetical to humanity, and more broadly suggests how racism might be grasped as a kind of philosophy that does not merely interpret the world, but contours it. Bringing into view the discursive structures that program his dehumanization, Baldwin makes apparent that the institution of the color line is not limited to the enacted segregationist policies of Jim Crow, but is foundational to the order of knowledge that governs America. Revisiting the same conceit in the following essay, "Down at the Cross," Baldwin describes being "spat on and defined and described and limited," emphasizing the predominantly epistemological, rather than physical, constitution of his brutalization.⁴² Taken as a whole, *The Fire Next Time* establishes the conditions of Jim Crow America as entailing a brutal set of regulatory practices that foreclose any expression of black subjectivity that does not fall strictly within the purview of hegemonic sanctioning. Baldwin frets that his nephew will become trapped in a feedback loop, condemned to repeat the terms of the "white man's definitions," and the burden of his letter is to serve as a resource to cultivate basic modes of being outside the restrictive vocabularies of the state.⁴³

In addition to offering a trenchant account of the enervating meanings made available to black subjects, *The Fire Next Time* is also, to borrow Elizabeth V. Spelman's description, a "charge of criminal ignorance against white America."⁴⁴ Inveighing against the voluntary unawareness of the realities of black life, Baldwin writes, "I accuse my country and my countrymen [...] they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."⁴⁵ This amounts to the same position that Wright stakes out in his preface to *Black Metropolis*, where he describes the deliberate expulsion of black bodies from frameworks that could render them intelligible and human. Both Baldwin and Wright unveil a monstrous complicity, disclosing how ignorance is not the ghostly opposite of knowledge, but is coextensive with the presiding epistemological

regime. Putting ignorance on trial, Baldwin gestures in the direction of its erasure as a necessary procedure, insisting, "it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."⁴⁶ Despite the urgency of his prose, Baldwin, as Spelman notes, "doesn't provide much detail" on how to eliminate "destructive ignorance."⁴⁷ Although Baldwin declines to articulate a critical method for overcoming ignorance, his earlier, corrosive assessment of the books that sit on his crowded shelves makes clear that he does not subscribe to the notion that, as Wright puts it, "aid[ing] white people in knowing the facts of [. . .] Negro life" will inevitably "bring forth an organizational or ideological program" for remaking America.⁴⁸ Exuding a pragmatist orientation, Baldwin contests the Cartesian assurance that an encyclopedic repository of black life will produce the necessary rewriting of America's defining social scripts, and instead invites the razing of all inescapably restrictive epistemologies. While he writes with piercing awareness of the extant coiling of knowledge with race, violence, and power, there is an adjacent apprehension that a newly instituted structure of understanding might be equally inert and stifling. This is the position marked out in *Notes of a Native Son*, where Baldwin's critique of the protest novel is pitched pointedly at the genre's epistemological stability.

In his most famous excoriation of protest fiction, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), Baldwin resegregates the disciplinary terrain that Wright sought to unify, insisting that "literature and sociology are not one and the same," and sketches a theory of fiction responsible to the "resolutely indefinable, [and] unpredictable."⁴⁹ Rather than saturating the reader with detail, Baldwin makes a call for literary language conspicuously resistant to cognition. Baldwin charges Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright with locking black life firmly within the paradigm of dominant discourses, uncritically investing in "theories" and "principles," and thus disregarding the pulse of life that transcends and shatters all conceptual classifications. Through their relentless simplification and homogenization of black life, the works of Stowe and Wright reiterate the governing anti-black logics, and buttress the pernicious notion that "categorization alone is real and cannot be transcended."⁵⁰ Calling for an alternative to protest fiction's inadvertent collusion with the racism it had intended to examine and disrupt, Baldwin memorably writes, "[i]n overlooking, denying, [and] evading complexity [. . .] we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves."⁵¹ Issuing the imperative to produce literature that evokes the full complexity of being a human, he underwrites a set of aesthetic practices that are irreducible to any epistemological economy.

Baldwin's critique of protest fiction is unsparing, but it is beset by a fundamental problem: there is, he implies, a misalignment between the writing for which he calls and black life in America. This becomes clearer by reading *Notes of a Native Son* through the lens of *The Fire Next Time*, where Baldwin makes an impassioned plea to his nephew to "[t]ake no one's word for anything, including mine."⁵² He suggests that a subjectivity correspondent to the aesthetic practices he formulates is not

intrinsically active, but involves concerted and creative effort. Even the condemnation of Wright for uncritically recycling “the American image of the Negro” is somewhat muffled by Baldwin’s admission that this image “lives also in the Negro’s heart.”⁵³ Baldwin concedes that the deficiencies of *Native Son* mirror the entrenched fractures in America’s ideological landscape, and would later trace Wright’s political failings to his taking refuge in “safety and comfort”: Wright was not, even in quotidian life, committed to venturing beyond the security of the presiding epistemology, where he would risk encountering what he did not already know.⁵⁴ In the entangled spaces of the literary and the personal, Wright closed himself off from any disruption of his worldview, and as a consequence he reproduced the reigning social logic, trafficking in hegemonic terminologies to the point that Baldwin is left to grimly conclude that Wright’s “real impulse toward American Negroes . . . was to despise them.”⁵⁵ For all of *Notes of a Native Son*’s repetitive insistence on “complexity,” “reality,” and “experience”—terms that border on the blandly generic—Baldwin is, from the beginning, acutely attuned to how vulnerable black life is to interpellation by the governing social machinery. There is an intimation that his critique of protest fiction is stimulated less by its distortionary logics than by its disturbing accuracy: both Stowe and Wright effectively mimic the discourses of power, those same terms that Baldwin worries will ensnare his nephew. The protest novel leaves no room for any gesture that has not already been forcefully conformed to the “brutal criteria” of “categorization,” aligning closely with the central anxiety of “My Dungeon Shook,” where Baldwin makes visible the danger—the virtually genetic likelihood—of his nephew submitting to dehumanizing discourses: “[Your grandfather] was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said against him.”⁵⁶ This is the circumstance precisely notated by protest fiction, where Uncle Tom and Bigger are not marked off from their respective social environments.

In this context, Baldwin’s pledge of fealty to the “resolutely undefinable, unpredictable [. . .] [and] disquieting complexity of ourselves” is not a call for a thicker, more realistic form of aesthetic capture.⁵⁷ Instead, he is invested in an ethico-political disposition that resists and dislodges the deterministic precincts of the social order by refusing to reduce life to a set of legible coordinates. These remarks on the protest novel have implications that extend beyond the field of literature: the aesthetic for which Baldwin calls could be deployed in everyday life to release existential possibilities that are not wholly structured by the imbricated rubrics of white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. The force of this implication is demonstrated toward the close of his letter to his nephew, where Baldwin writes, “You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer.”⁵⁸ Taking the shape of both a history lesson and a tacit directive, this notice confirms that Baldwin’s hope—expressed in the same letter—that “we can make America what America must become” is primarily achieved via aesthetic energies.⁵⁹ Despite the sweep of his rhetoric, Baldwin does not hold forth on ambitions of “making” on a national scale, but suggests that the poetry he names can be

activated within the most ordinary and exploited activities made available to black life, such as the picking of cotton, the damming of rivers, and the building of railroads. Similar to how James before him had conceived of pragmatism as "fitted for the man on the street," rather than restricted to the sterile college classroom, Baldwin does not relegate poetry to the provincial realm of literary practices.⁶⁰ Eroding distinctions between art and the everyday, Baldwin holds aesthetics to be a mode of imaginative living, one that trips the knowledge circuit responsible for the organization of daily life. It is the port of access to what Alexander Weheliye calls the "lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds" that don't tangibly exist within the sphere of social conceptualization.⁶¹

While *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* strongly imply the correlation between aesthetic living and political transformation, the consolidation of the two realms is robustly elaborated in Baldwin's lecture "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity" (1962), where the problematic of the essay's title is announced to be "a kind of metaphor for the struggle, universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of the planet to get to become human beings."⁶² The endless struggle of "becoming" paints the ceaseless creativity that Baldwin identifies as central to an ethical life, and underscores his opposition to all structures of stability, fixity, and containment. Having established artists as shorthand for humanity, he goes on to contend that their function is "to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all artists are divorced from and even necessarily opposed to any system whatever."⁶³ Baldwin testifies to the imperative of living without the guiding logics that profess to give life shape and meaning, but in practice strip existence of its complexity, shelter us from reality, and occlude our access to vital human properties such as freedom, creativity, and imagination. By framing the artist as a synecdoche for humanity, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity" clarifies that Baldwin's earlier edict, in "Everybody's Protest Novel," to eschew the intellectual equipment that purports to "define and control the world" is applicable to all practices of ordinary living.⁶⁴ The rejection of the intellectual procedures that Wright recommends is not an apolitical and atrophic nightmare, where one reflexively prostrates before the predetermined meanings that saturate daily life. Instead, Baldwin's pragmatist stress on the limits of knowledge is quietly revolutionary. The practice he urges is intended to awaken his reader's dormant creative powers to push beyond the deadening "straws of our definitions" that constitute the everyday without merely instituting a new epistemological scheme.⁶⁵

Alert to the difficulty of the task he sets forth, Baldwin recognizes how definitions have infiltrated all aspects of everyday life, and he repeatedly stresses the effort needed to dredge and exile the governing "hidden phenomenon" that has become so thoroughly naturalized that it substitutes for reality itself.⁶⁶ Here, Baldwin can be said to encourage a certain form of understanding by endorsing the unblinking recognition of the artificial structures that gird quotidian existence, but he does so in order to then purge their ubiquitous presence. Having identified the need to disestablish the "hard-working ciphers" that obscure reality, Baldwin goes on

to center “our unknown selves” as the privileged site for effecting necessary and radical social change.⁶⁷

Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without then within, by the nature of our categorization. And escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as though this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality we are most endlessly betrayed. [. . .] With the same motion, at the same time, it is this toward which we endlessly struggle and from which, endlessly, we struggle to escape.⁶⁸

Rather than inducing political quietism, forfeiting the primacy of knowledge activates the imagination, creativity, and motion required for making society anew. Stridently anti-foundationalist, Baldwin advocates the abandonment of all attachments to the falsely constructed “cage of reality”: he calls for the indefinite disengagement from the putatively diverse but formally indistinct mythic, religious, and political orders that brutally abstract us from what he had earlier named “the vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.”⁶⁹ In line with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s earlier petition to “do something without knowing how or why,” Baldwin suggests that only in renouncing the structures of intelligibility can there be any hope of creating a future unfettered by ongoing injustices and inequities.⁷⁰ Declining to reproduce the rationalist logics responsible for the regulation of society and the dehumanization of the black subject, Baldwin heightens the salience of contingency: his choreography is deliberately off-center, unpredictable, and incomplete. Although the process courts intense struggle, surrenders fantasies of stability, and risks renewals of violence—as the black subject disputes the terms of categorization—Baldwin perceives “our unknown selves” as the singular available field for society’s comprehensive reconstruction. The enigmatic void he outlines is saturated with productive possibilities, and is the only zone where the “disquieting complexity” of existence can survive intact.⁷¹ We must proceed, Baldwin suggests, not from the coherent categories that produce and scar us, but from the intellectually unreachable dimensions of our being.

This freighted appeal to “our unknown selves” is not to be confused with the liberal post-racial fantasy of an “ideal theory” cleansed of identifiable pollutants such as interest, particularity, power, and history.⁷² Baldwin grants full recognition to the interminable struggle to elude the categories that shape him, and *Notes of a Native Son* as a whole is committed to sharply bringing into focus how racism doggedly trails the black subject irrespective of class or geographic designation. He implicitly returns to the impossibility of abdicating cleanly from a known to an unknown self in the prefatory remarks written for the 1984 republication of his debut collection of essays. “My inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting,” he writes, “my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance.”⁷³ Although the black subject is robbed of the agency to refuse the unsolicited bequest of race, it

might be appropriated and reimagined so the vast and illimitable birthright can be claimed. Baldwin continues, "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all."⁷⁴ This invocation of the vague and inarticulate "more" resonates with James's appreciative reference to the "tremendous *muchness*" that eludes all conceptual graphing.⁷⁵ Unlike James, however, who frames the ontological excess that he cherishes as readily available, Baldwin underscores the labor that goes into accessing the "more," and the ambition he sets for his literature is to reconcile both his calcified inheritance and his indeterminate birthright within the "same description."⁷⁶ Given that Baldwin's dialectic of the inheritance and birthright is not personal, but is installed within humanity at large, there is a suggestion that his deployment of an aesthetic procedure has utility beyond the scope of his individual life and vocation. For Baldwin, the realization of freedom demands an essentially creative disposition.

While Baldwin treats an everyday practice of imaginative living as the master trope through which society's necessary reconstruction can begin, it must be acknowledged that James had remarkably little to say about aesthetics. Evincing his signature wariness of philosophy's systemizing tendencies, James once remarked, "no good will ever come to Art as such from the analytic study of Aesthetics," and left the task of attending to the rich aesthetic implications of his philosophy to later pragmatists such as John Dewey, Richard Poirier, and Richard Shusterman.⁷⁷ Despite his demurral from inscribing an aesthetic treatise, James nevertheless establishes the conditions of possibility for Baldwin's creative project through a continued stress on the incomplete nature of the universe and its ripeness for reformation. "What really *exists*," writes James, "is not things made but things in the making," and implied in this salute to impermanence is an invitation to participate in the constant making, a process at odds with the tradition of vicious intellectualism that preaches, "what a thing really is, is told to us by its *definition*."⁷⁸ The pragmatist creed, to borrow James T. Kloppenberg's gloss, is underwritten by a commitment to "voluntarism and practical activity."⁷⁹ If the task of the pragmatist is not to suspend the world in the amber of an intellectual order, it does not naturally follow that the alternative is to be set irresponsibly adrift in the stream of experience: rather, one is to actively share in a constant process of world-building. This philosophical orientation anticipates Baldwin's later reluctance to proliferate information as well as his commitment to the political productivity of the imagination, the latter of which he insists should be unrestricted to the jurisdiction of any epistemological compass.

The severing of knowledge from desperately required national restructuring is emphatically sounded in "Faulkner and Desegregation" (1956), where Baldwin reproaches the slow pace of social reform preferred by the Southern novelist. Following the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and its edict to desegregate with "deliberate speed," Faulkner made the infamous declaration that he would ally with the American South in the event of another Civil War, "even if it meant going out into the streets and shooting Negroes."⁸⁰ Faulkner primarily phrases his reactionary rationalization for prolonging desegregation in the vocabulary of time and patience: "Go slow now.

Stop now for a time, for a moment.”⁸¹ Baldwin somewhat skews this temporal preoccupation, and frames Faulkner’s piecemeal approach as chiefly an epistemological failing:

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet it is only when man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free—he has set himself free—for higher dreams, for higher privileges.⁸²

This is perhaps Baldwin’s closest brush with utopian thinking, akin to Aimé Césaire’s haunting and enigmatic cry, “The only thing in the world worth beginning:/ The End of the world of course.”⁸³ Against a protracted project of diversification, Baldwin presses for a wide-ranging political reconstitution that encompasses nothing less than the “breakup of the world.” Consolidating an interrelated class of concerns—identity, safety, dreams, and privilege—he contends that they are reducible to a single foundation, what “one has always known,” and thereby collapses the entirety of the problem of the color line into epistemology. Knowledge, according to Baldwin, is the unsalvageable geological base of modern life’s catastrophes, incapable of redressing its own fault lines. While the initially forsaken dreams and privileges are eventually reclaimed, with renewed profundity, there is an implied interdiction against the reinstitution of knowledge even after freedom’s achievement. Baldwin’s vision of creation does not involve the production of a new set of definitions to replace the prevailing discursive system. More radically, he calls for a break from America’s most venerated intellectual habits, including its reflexive need for knowledge’s stabilizing presence, in order to imagine and ultimately inhabit a better world.

Through his provocative but ambiguous formulation of a future beyond the confines of “what one knew, or thought one knew,” Baldwin suggests there is nothing inevitable about positioning knowledge as the primary mechanism for bringing about a just and equitable society. Conversely, the emphasis on epistemology as the arena within which political change is pursued operates within the same institutional precincts that are responsible for ongoing practices of violence. To be sure, recalibrating the intellectual grids that sustain modernity—grids that have been established, as Robert Reid-Pharr notes, “in the crucibles of enslavement and colonization”—is no trivial feat, but Baldwin keeps in plain view that such rewriting engenders only short-term gains.⁸⁴ Although he struggles to imagine what it would be like to be liberated from all ineluctably enervating categories, the disposal of epistemology is nevertheless an ambiguous and abiding aim toward which he strives. In his 1960 lecture “In Search of a Majority: An Address,” Baldwin writes, “I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something which I do not understand.”⁸⁵ It is by jettisoning the usual modes of political change—which, as Wright demonstrates, tend to cluster around reconfigurations of the epistemological

landscape—that Baldwin suggests that panoramic possibilities for the future, disburdened of the menace of categorization, might finally be opened.

What Baldwin registers is the desire for a world where the everyday expressions of black life are not ensnared within a binary of being either assimilated within or excluded from the principal epistemological frameworks. In his pursuit of an alternative social order, Baldwin leans toward what Édouard Glissant names a “right to opacity,” where a total break from the knowledge economy is the only means of foreclosing the aggression that resides within an ethics based on understanding, which is ineluctably marked by processes of reduction and diminution.⁸⁶ Baldwin does not explicitly name opacity, but he similarly attempts to dislocate knowledge’s pride of place within America’s political structure. In *The Fire Next Time*, he advocates for the endless labor of pushing beyond the vitiating “details and symbols” that interpellate black subjects while remaining guarded against falling into the trap of repetition, of merely exchanging one closed system of knowledge for another, and thus being “betrayed . . . into the hands of yet another Pharaoh.”⁸⁷ The issue at hand is not specific but formal: Baldwin suggests that a degree of violence inheres within all epistemologies, a conceit that brings him into close alignment with James’s earlier suggestion that “to understand life [. . .] is to arrest its movement, cutting it up into bits as if with scissors.”⁸⁸ Resuscitating this eminently pragmatist maxim within the context of twentieth-century American race politics, Baldwin suggests that freedom can be achieved only by moving beyond the paradigm of knowledge.

In a late reflection upon his youth—the last essay he published in his lifetime, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” (1985)—Baldwin remarks upon his early awakening to the unstable and artificial classificatory system that organizes America. He effectively summarizes how he came to recognize the essentially social composition of knowledge, and its deployment as a technology of control and domination. In this final essay he articulates the individual self as the site where the revolt against the world’s epistemological arrangements originates. Constellating a set of themes to which he continually returned, Baldwin writes:

all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself.⁸⁹

This early perception of the arbitrary zoning laws that map human life does not automatically extinguish their purchase: loosening their hold takes tremendous toil, and one cannot begin in incomprehension, but must first grasp those structures that are to be disarticulated. It is, however, critical that Baldwin never relaxes into complacency, and he resists the siren call of settling into a new definition, guarding as vigorously against abstractions that might arise from the self as he does those that are scripted by the violent social order. As he remarks in an earlier essay, “the terms that you have invented, which you think describe and define you, inevitably collide with the facts of life.”⁹⁰ The ambition that Baldwin outlines is to inhabit a kind of negative space where all definitions have been evacuated. He tacitly appeals to his

reader to take a cue from his own life, and similarly expunge the meanings that forcefully operate on and through all bodies. It is, in a final measure, a lonely task, one that can only be taken up by the singular “human imagination.”⁹¹ Although Baldwin is acutely aware, as he notes in this final essay, that “we move in a vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others”—all of whom play a signal role in the self’s constitution—he also sets limits on the power they hold, and doggedly affirms the agential possibilities that exist even within an interminably hostile life world.⁹² Recuperating a species of individualism—the latter term, Amiri Baraka sneers, is “perhaps James Baldwin’s favorite word”—Baldwin insists upon the solitary self as a zone of viable resistance against the epistemologies that regulate modern existence.⁹³

Illustrating how one’s “birthright” can be accessed through the gateway of the suppressive “inheritance” without succumbing to a new genre of categorization, Baldwin, in a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, reflects upon the process of aging, and details how he came to think about race in—to borrow James’s language—“non-conceptualized terms.”⁹⁴ Following his formative church upbringing, which instilled in him a strict observance of America’s racial hierarchy, Baldwin describes the collage of shaping influences that then swarmed his life—“that whole odor of home-made gin, pigs’ feet, chitlin’, and poverty and the basement”—and marks a shift in his sense of identity: “I really began to go a little out of my mind.”⁹⁵ This series of distinctly racialized and deeply affective experiences stirs within Baldwin an awareness of unfamiliar possibilities inscribed within his identity, an awareness that does not quite rise to the level of cognition. “Obviously I wasn’t white,” he continues, “but I didn’t quite know anymore what being *black* meant. I couldn’t accept what I had been told.”⁹⁶ He does not disclose an appetite to contrive a new definition for “being *black*,” but lingers instead within the ruin of epistemology. Disrobed of his mandated discursive fabric, his skin exfoliated of fixed meaning, Baldwin cultivates a form of aesthetic living, discovering that “in order to survive . . . you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself.”⁹⁷ The seemingly unassailable categories that often demolish and stand in for reality are set aside, and resistance to the presiding regime emerges not in large-scale acts of revolution, but in quotidian practices of creativity that establish and sustain an existence capable of flourishing, on the other side of understanding.

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Notes

- 1 Richard Wright, “Introduction” to St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, Jr., *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York, Harper and Row, 1962), pp. xvii–xxxiv, xxiii. I thank Jay Garcia for bringing this text to my attention.

- 2 *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. xviii, emphasis in the original.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. xix–xx.
- 6 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 18; Wright, “Introduction,” p. xxvii.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
- 8 On pragmatism's heterogeneity, see Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (London, Routledge, 1997), p. 7: “Far from a uniform school, pragmatism has always displayed different views and interests, while regarding plurality as an advantage more than a weakness.”
- 9 Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 60.
- 10 Notable examples include James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Joshua I. Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 1997); Kennan Ferguson, *William James: Politics in the Pluriverse* (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 11 William James, “A Strong Note of Warning Regarding the Lynching Epidemic” (1903), in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 170–3, 171.
- 12 William James, “The Philippine Tangle” (1899), in Skrupskelis (ed.), *Essays*, pp. 154–8, 157.
- 13 Wright does locate value in James's first major work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which offers a theorization of the lethal psychic wounding effected by social exclusion, an insight that Wright imports to his discussion of America's racialized minorities.
- 14 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908), in *Writings 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, Library of America, 1992), pp. 625–820, 657.
- 15 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking* (1907), in Kuklick (ed.), *Writings*, pp. 479–624, 496.
- 16 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 740.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 742.
- 18 William James, “Thomas Davidson: An Individualist” (1903), in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 86–97.
- 19 William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1896), ed. Frederick Burkhardt (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 222.
- 20 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 763.
- 21 John Dewey, quoted in Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1986), p. 605.
- 22 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 34.
- 23 Wright, “Introduction,” p. xxxi.
- 24 A small but potent mass of scholarship has already established a generative dialogue between Baldwin and pragmatism, including Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University

- Press, 2000); Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *In the Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008); Walton M. Muiyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ulf Schulenberg, *Romanticism and Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the Idea of a Poeticized Culture* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Courtney Ferriter, "The Uses of Race and Religion: James Baldwin's Pragmatist Politics in *The Fire Next Time*," *James Baldwin Review*, 2 (2016), pp. 126–39.
- 25 Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 59.
- 26 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York, Macmillan, 1916), p. 394.
- 27 James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" (1952), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 5–10, 6–7.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 30 James Baldwin, "A Question of Identity" (1954), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 91.
- 31 Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers, and Artists* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 73.
- 32 Baldwin, "A Question of Identity," p. 91.
- 33 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 755.
- 34 James Baldwin, "The White Boy Looks at the Black Boy" (1961), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 269–85, 279.
- 35 Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 119–31, 123; Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 111; Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 119.
- 36 Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *boundary 2*, 12:3 (1984), pp. 19–70, 56.
- 37 James, *Pragmatism*, p. 518.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 510.
- 39 The scholarly field that has attended to Baldwin's critique of categorical thinking resists summary, but key works that address the profoundly intersectional dimension of his critique include Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1997); Marlon B. Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," in Dwight A. McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), pp. 13–55; Pekka Kilpeläinen, "James Baldwin's Gospel of Postcategorical Love: Transgressing and Transcending Boundaries," in A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas (eds.), *James Baldwin: Challenging Authors* (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2014), pp. 189–204; Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014); and Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 40 James Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity" (1962), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Vintage, 2011), pp. 50–8, 57.
- 41 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 293, emphasis in the original.

- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 301.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- 44 Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," p. 123.
- 45 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 292.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," p. 123.
- 48 Wright, "Introduction," p. xxx.
- 49 James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 11–18, 15, 13.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 52 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 293.
- 53 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 29.
- 54 James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard" (1961), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 266.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 18; Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 291.
- 57 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 13.
- 58 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 294.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), in Kuklick (ed.), *Writings*, pp. 821–978, 920.
- 61 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014), p. 2.
- 62 Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle," p. 51.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 12.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 70 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" (1841), in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, Library of America, 1983), pp. 401–14, 404.
- 71 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 13.
- 72 A thoroughgoing analysis of ideal theory's racist coordinates is found in Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 72–90.
- 73 James Baldwin, "Introduction" to *Notes of a Native Son* (1984), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 808–13, 810.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 William James, "A Suggestion About Mysticism" (1910), in Kuklick (ed.), *Writings*, pp. 1272–80, 1274, emphasis in the original.
- 76 Baldwin, "Introduction," p. 810.
- 77 William James, *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, Jr. (New York, Cosimo, 2008), pp. 86–7; John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1933) (New York, Perigee, 2005); Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993); Richard Shusterman, "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51:4 (2011), pp. 347–61.

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- 79 Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, p. 85.
- 80 William Faulkner, quoted in Phillip W. Weinstein, *Becoming Faulkner: The Art and Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 120.
- 81 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 82 James Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" (1956), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 209–14, 209.
- 83 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 22.
- 84 Robert Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique* (New York, New York University Press, 2016), p. 152.
- 85 James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority" (1960), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 215–21, 220.
- 86 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990), trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 190.
- 87 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 293, 338.
- 88 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 739.
- 89 James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 814–29, 819.
- 90 James Baldwin, "The White Problem" (1963), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, pp. 88–97, 90.
- 91 Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," p. 814.
- 92 *Ibid.*, p. 817.
- 93 Amiri Baraka, "brief reflections on two hot shots" (1963), in *Home: Social Essays* (New York, Akashic Books, 2009), pp. 137–41, 137.
- 94 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 732.
- 95 James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin" (1961), in Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 3–23, 5.
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