

FEATURE ESSAY

The Magician's Serpent: Race and the Tragedy of American Democracy

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Abstract

In this essay, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. addresses the historical and contemporary failures of American democracy. Using the metaphor of “the magician’s serpent,” Glaude brings Walt Whitman’s views on democracy into the full light of America’s failure to resolve the problem of race. Glaude places Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871) in conversation with James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* (1972) in order to construct a different sort of reading practice that can both engage with Whitman’s views on democracy and reckon with what George Hutchinson calls Whitman’s “white imperialist self and ideology” as an indication of the limits of a certain radical democratic imagining.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Walt Whitman, democracy, racism, reading, Trump

I find myself these days, more so than usual, reaching for books. Any book really. Fiction. Nonfiction. Poetry. Anything to distract from the ongoing spectacle that is this country’s politics, or anything to help me understand more fully this mess, in the Samuel Beckett sense of the word. Of course, there is the work. Teaching. Tarrying with the words and life of James Baldwin. When I am not doing that I am navigating the currents of Trumpism. Talking incessantly, and coping with, because I can’t seem to do anything else, the sourness that sits at the bottom of my stomach and that, every now and again, creeps up to the back of my throat. Bitter. Sour. With all of this, I want to hear a voice other than my own. So, I read. My spirit is all the better. My eyes not so much.

I have been reading a lot about democracy and its exemplary figures in the United States—from Ralph Waldo Emerson to James Baldwin; from Jane Addams to Lorraine Hansberry. This has been my effort to find resources within what can be called crudely the American democratic tradition to respond to the contemporary distortions of American life.¹ David Blight’s recent biography of Frederick

Douglass, for example, offers a window into the tumult of the nineteenth century through an exemplary life. The early Douglass could not have imagined the end of slavery, and yet by the time his heart quit on him, he found himself struggling against those he called “the apostles of forgetfulness.”² These were individuals—the country really—intent on scrubbing from view the ongoing consequence of slavery and its aftermath.

Attending to Douglass’s life, in all of its complexity, reveals, at least to me, the tragic character of American democracy. The reader sees clearly, as Douglass himself saw, the choice that is repeatedly made in this country, because it is repeatedly confronted, to cling to the illusion that America is, and will always be, a divinely sanctioned, white nation. That choice limits compassion and erodes the ground for genuine mutual regard. It distorts the character of those who cleave to this belief and it sets in the heart of this democratic experiment a corrosive hypocrisy that disfigures the soul of the nation. That illusion, whether consciously held or not, has destroyed and continues to destroy millions of lives. The ongoing evasions, the refusal to acknowledge the wrongs done here and abroad, the safety found in the illusion of righteousness and the sacrality of the idea of the nation itself result in a kind of mangled virtue that reaches across generations. To put the point bluntly, the country—not just the south, mind you—is haunted by the choices of its white ghosts that tragically and continuously move us about, whether we know it or not.

It is in this context that I reach for Walt Whitman’s 1871 text, *Democratic Vistas*. I want to think about his view of democracy in the full light of America’s failure to resolve the problem of race in this country. This involves placing Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* in conversation with James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* (1972). The aim here is to set the stage for my own reconstructed embrace of Whitman’s classic, an embrace colored by Baldwin’s insight.

Democratic Vistas is a searing treatment of American democratic life made up of two essays published in 1867 and 1868 in *Galaxy*, a short-run, mid-nineteenth-century monthly magazine, and a rejected essay entitled “Orbic Literature.”³ This is a book written in the shadow of the carnage of the Civil War and the unbridled greed that threatened to swallow the nation whole. Listen to Whitman:

In business (this all-devouring modern word, business), the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and moneymaking is our magician’s serpent, remaining today sole master of the field.⁴

He would go on to say:

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose *history*, I suppose remains unwritten, because that *history* has yet to be enacted.⁵

Whitman offers an unflinching criticism of the nation—of its culture, its idea of individuals, and its lack of a national literature. And in doing so, he “articulates the substance of democratic commitments in a way that would allow such commitments to be held self-consciously and self-critically.”⁶ Whitman pined for an overarching narrative that went beyond mere liberal proceduralism. Something more fundamental, that transcended or, better, *transformed* the mundane into a more “religious” quality, was needed if the nation was to be otherwise. He yearned for a kind of consensus rooted in a spiritualized democratic individuality that bound one to the other. But the country fell short. Out of the ashes of the Civil War emerged a nation bustling with the energy of commerce, “endowed with a vast and more and more appointed body,” he wrote, but “with little or no soul.”⁷ For Whitman, it was not enough that the country be held together by a new politics; instead, “original poets” were needed, persons who would mount “the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude. . .” and “give more compaction and more moral identity to these states.”⁸ Heroic in, perhaps, Thomas Carlyle’s sense of the word, these “original poets” would address the hollowness at the heart of the country.

I turn to Whitman’s apocalyptic fervor in these Trumpian times, to his condemnation of avarice, his horror over the fraying fabric of the nation, and his call for a different kind of individuality. His idea of individuality is rooted in an understanding of self-reliance that involves, at its best, an attentiveness to the quality of others’s lives in order to secure the conditions for our fellows’ flourishing as a feature of our own, and to those poets who would give us a literature that speaks to “the common people, the life-blood of democracy” and who guide us down a different path to a more excellent way of being in the world.⁹

In passages like this one, I have found, at least for a brief moment, refuge:

[A] nation like ours, in a sort of geological formation state, trying continually new experiment, choosing new delegations, is not served by the best men only but sometimes more by those that provoke it—by the combats they arouse. Thus national rage, fury, discussion, etc. better than content. Thus also the warning signals, invaluable for after times.¹⁰

The manic pursuit of money emptied out the spirit of the country and distorted what sort of people we could reasonably aspire to be, Whitman insisted. Provocative men and women would disrupt the comfort of the robber barons who benefitted from such a spiritless state and call attention to the serpent that ate up all others.

I like this image. It reminds me of that moment in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) when the priests of Pharaoh threw down their staffs which turned into serpents. Moses did the same. Only his, to the astonishment of Pharaoh, swallowed whole the others. Looking back, the special effects weren’t very good. But for a country boy from Mississippi, I was amazed by God’s power! There is something ironic, however—not just in my gullibility—in Whitman’s description of greed as the magician’s serpent. For there seems to be another lurking in the background, one that stands outsized, dark and ominous, and threatens to overwhelm everything,

despite Whitman's profound insistence on the spirit of democratic culture and the power of democratic individuality.

Whitman's views about race are pretty well known. Although there are soaring moments in his poetry that aspire for a broad, equalitarian society, his journalism and letters are filled with noxious views about black people. He didn't think much of us. In the *Brooklyn Daily Times* (1858), he wrote in support of the exclusion of black people from Oregon:

It will be a conflict between the totality of white labor, on the one side, and on the other, the interference and competition of black labor, or of bringing in colored persons on any terms . . . Who believes that white and black can ever amalgamate in America? Who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impossible seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so?¹¹

Even after the abolition of slavery and the war, Whitman expressed his opposition to allowing black men the right to vote. In 1874, just three years after the publication of *Democratic Vistas*, in "A Hint to Preachers and Authors," he wrote:

As if we had not strained the voting and digestive caliber of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and caliber (in the mass) as so many baboons.¹²

Now the point here isn't the obvious and rather banal claim that Walt Whitman was racist. That much is clearly true. All too often such a claim calls forth immediately the equally boring and strained response, mostly from those who may feel a twinge of guilt, that Whitman was, after all, "a man of his times." Well that seems to me, on its face, a clear example of stating the obvious as if it was profound. We are all persons of our times—and I can marshal a number of examples of people in Whitman's time who did not hold his views. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson was better on this subject than him.

But the point here is not Whitman's racism and the harsh judgment to banish him because of it. No fodder for the anti-politically correct brigade can be found here. Instead, I want to read Whitman's "white imperialist self and ideology" as an indication of the limits of a certain radical democratic imagining: that the failure to interrogate the looming presence of race and its effects on character, what George Hutchinson describes as "the complex, productive, and often ironic or scandalous interrelations between ostensibly separate 'racial'/cultural traditions in the United States," actually blocks the way to a more robust and equalitarian vision of American democracy itself.¹³ Whitman's choice to be a certain kind of white man haunts his radical democratic vision.

In "Erasing Race: The Lost Black Presence in Whitman's Manuscript," Ed Folsom has demonstrated, in dizzying fashion I must admit, Whitman's complex literary engagement with race and how we might read him.¹⁴ What we see is Whitman's

ongoing practice of redaction over time in his work: how race motivates him in places in his notebooks and in his poetry—think about the early versions of “Lucifer” in “The Sleepers”—and how he systematically renders that influence invisible. By the time we get to *Democratic Vistas*, race is, effectively, erased. It has been swallowed whole. Not by greed; however, instead, by his commitment to the belief that white people matter more than others.¹⁵

The irony, of course, is glaring. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman aims to show us, among other things, the relation of character and society—how each affects the other. But he fails to be the kind of person his view of democracy demands, precisely because he sees himself, until the day he takes his last breath, as a white man. That perception or, better, choice gets in the way of his embrace of democratic virtue. It limits his capacity for generosity, his sense of humility, and his idea of benevolence and mutuality. In short, it limits his view of justice.

As I reach for Whitman in these troubling times, then, I am also confronted with the demand for a different kind of reading practice. How do I draw on him as a resource? How do I possess him as my own? When, in fact, I see clearly the ways his account of the shortcomings of democracy and its remedy in *Democratic Vistas* succumbs, in his living, to the tragic reality of race in this country that suffocates democracy like an tropical python wrapped around its prey.

This reading practice—with an aim of possessing the figure as one’s own—reminds me of a startling moment in James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*. Baldwin struggles with the demand of Western history that we accept its epic stories and heroes. But this demand reflects the reality of domination, the asymmetrical relations of power that make it such that some have never had the opportunity to reject the history stuffed down their throats like Gerber baby food. Baldwin wrote:

One may see that the history, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. And whatever this history may have given to the subjugated is of absolutely no value, since they have never been free to reject it; they will never even be able to assess it until they are free to take from it what they need, and to add to history the monumental fact of their presence.¹⁶

He goes on to consider a way of using these histories, but on his own terms:

At that point, the cultural pretensions of history are revealed as nothing less than a mask for power and thus it happens that, in order to be rid of Shell, Texaco, Coca-Cola, the Sixth Fleet, and the friendly American soldier whose mission is to protect these investments, one finally throws Balzac and Shakespeare—and Faulkner and Camus—out with them. Later, of course, one may welcome them back, but on one’s own terms.¹⁷

Here Baldwin insists on confronting the serpent of greed in the full light of the serpent of race. For those black souls caught under the foot of History, a history that nearly mandates a capital “H,” we have no other choice. And that act—one of rejection and acceptance—frees us to return to the archive of the West on different terms.

History is complex. That much we know. We cannot pick and choose our history, but we can damn sure pick and choose the people and events that best represent who we take ourselves to be. And, in the end, who we take ourselves to be—our identities—is allied with a moral choice. Baldwin is right. Oftentimes, with History, we face a raw power move. As if we have to accept Confederate monuments, Winston Churchill, or Walt Whitman, because the very fact of history mandates it. Rubbish. I am reaching for the book. No one else. And if I am to establish my own relation to the history of this place, I will have to do so, if it is to be genuine, on my own terms. In fact, it is one of the ways I come to understand the very meaning of the phrase, “my own terms.”

Echoing in the background is Edward Said’s idea of contrapuntal reading. Of course, he refers to comparative reading practices that reveal the inner workings of empire, in which “the intertwined and overlapping histories” shaping Western literature (the colonial imprint) come into full view. Said insists that as readers and critics we must be able “to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its own particular agenda and pace of development.”¹⁸ He writes this as a comparativist. I embrace it as someone obsessed with the American project and its ongoing disasters. In either case, what is required is a practice that extends our reading to what was and is forcibly excluded.

This is how I read Whitman. Think about one of the motivations spurring the writing of *Democratic Vistas*. Horace Greeley, founder of the *New York Tribune*, published in its entirety on August 16, 1867, Thomas Carlyle’s *Shooting Niagara and After?* The essay was written after the passage in Britain of the Reform Act of 1867, which enfranchised urban working-class men throughout England and Wales, and reeks of Carlyle’s deep conservatism and his noxious views on race. He laments the deforming effects of universal suffrage and asserts the need for heroic figures in defense of a more noble life. “[A] life, not of ease and pleasure, but of noble and sorrowful toil; the reward of it far off,—fit only for heroes!”¹⁹

Whitman set out to defend democracy against Carlyle, even though Whitman ends up in a place, especially with his devastating criticism of the hollowness at the heart of democratic life and his call for a particular kind of poet, that sounds a lot like him. But Whitman is clear in his defense of the potential power of democratic individuality in the United States:

Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account. Much quackery teems, of course, even on democracy’s side, yet does not really affect the orbic quality of the matter. To work in, if we may so term it, and justify God, His divine aggregate,

the People—this, I say, is what democracy is for; and this is what our America means, and is doing—may I not say, has done? If not, she means nothing more, and does nothing more, than any other land . . . That is the lesson we, these days, send over to European lands by every western breeze.²⁰

The divine aggregate, the People, with no lines of demarcation is America's lesson to Europe. Moreover, political democracy as it exists here "supplies a training school for making first-class men."²¹ This is a direct rejection of Carlyle's vision, where "that of commanding and obeying, where there is nothing more, is not the basis of all human culture; ought not all to have it; and how many ever do?"²²

But if Carlyle was a partial inspiration for *Democratic Vistas* and Whitman felt compelled to respond with a robust defense of the potential of American democratic life, he felt no need to address one of the underpinnings of Carlyle's essay. "Niggers" are everywhere in the beginning of Carlyle's piece.

Servantship, like all solid contracts between men [. . .] must become a contract of permanency, not easy to dissolve, but difficult extremely—a "contract for life," if you manage it [. . .] will evidently be the best of all. And this was already the Nigger's essential position. Mischief, irregularities, injustices did probably abound between Nigger and Buckra; but the poisonous taproot of all mischief, and impossibility of fairness, humanity, or well doing in the contract, never had been there!²³

Carlyle goes on to write:

To me individually the Nigger's case was not the most pressing in the world, but among the least so! America, however, had got into Swarmery upon it (not America's blame either, but in great part ours, and that of the nonsense we sent over to them); and felt that in the Heavens or the Earth there was nothing so godlike, or incomparably pressing to be done. [. . . H]alf of million [. . .] of excellent White men, full of gifts and faculty, have torn and slashed one another into horrid death, in a temporary humour, which will leave centuries of remembrance fierce enough: and three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort) are completely "emancipated;" launched into the career of improvement,—likely to be "improved off the face of the earth in a generation or two!"²⁴

Of course, what Carlyle says here isn't shocking. We see this kind of thinking in his 1849 essay, "An Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question," and its slightly amended pamphlet version published in 1853, "An Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question." For him, slavery was a form of order and kept an otherwise lazy and feckless people working—who, for some reason, preferred to eat pumpkin rather than work.

Whitman completely evades this aspect of Carlyle's essay, as if the question of slavery and the status of black people in the United States was resolved by the Civil War and the subsequent defeat of the South. Or as if Carlyle's point did not warrant

a response, because, if Whitman's journalism is any indication, he agreed with the gist of Carlyle's general account of black people (but not his defense of slavery). In fact, the question of race, in any substantive sense, is wholly absent from Whitman's imagining of spiritual democracy and the importance of character to it, his invocation of self-reliance, and his prayer for a cultural practice and literature that reflect the uniqueness of America as such. Even in his moments of fancy, black people are absent or erased:

World including in itself the all-leveling aggregate of democracy, we show it is also including the all-varied, all permitting, all-free theorem of individuality, and erecting therefore a lofty and hitherto unoccupied framework or platform, broad enough for all, eligible to every farmer and mechanic—to the female equally with the male—a towering selfhood, not physically perfect only—not satisfied with the mere mind's and learning's, but religious, possessing the idea of the infinite.²⁵

When read against the backdrop of his journalism and letters, this absence or erasure, again, demands a different kind of reading practice. I want to track and trace what has been done with him by those poets—in Whitman's and Emerson's sense of the word—who refuse to silence race and who acknowledge, all at once, both serpents in the full glare of the light. Read towards them and back again. They confront, without flinching, the tragedy of race in this country and how it disfigures our souls and blocks the way to the ethical demand to be attentive to the quality of others' lives, that sense of responsibility to our fellows, in our effort to be more self-reliant. In doing so—that is, in reading toward and then back again—I confront the tragic choice that festers and distorts.

It is not enough to illustrate that Whitman shows up as the favorite poet of, say, Sojourner Truth or Langston Hughes or James Weldon Johnson. Much more is required. I want to see how Whitman is deployed in the very reconstruction of the idea of democracy itself; how he is, in some ways, turned on himself in a moment of reflection about character and society. It is here that I turn to a somewhat unexpected place: James Baldwin's 1972 book, *No Name in the Street*.

We do know that Baldwin read Whitman carefully. For example, during his time in Shanks Village, a writer's colony near Woodstock, New York, in July and August of 1948, he found in Whitman a resource to think about the complexities of his own identity. Like Whitman, he saw himself as expansive, containing the multitudes. David Leeming puts it best: Baldwin "preferred to think of himself as containing all roles, classes, ethnic groups, and orientations. It was necessary to accept the paradox of himself before he could be 'free.'"²⁶ The epigraph of *Giovanni's Room* comes from Whitman's section 33 of "Song of Myself." "I am the man . . . I suffered . . . I was there." And, I think, this insight can be extended across the body of Baldwin's work. Whitman shows up in *No Name in the Street*.

No Name is a dark, grieving book. It emerges after a period of silence, sickness and, of course, death. Baldwin had witnessed the deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. He writes,

Since Martin's death in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away. Perhaps even more than the death itself, the manner of his death has forced me into a judgment concerning human life and human beings which I have always been reluctant to make . . . Inconstestably, alas, most people are not, in action, worth very much; and yet, every human being is an unprecedented miracle. One tries to treat them as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they've become.²⁷

For Baldwin, the assassinations revealed the depth of the sickness that infects the American soul. And he struggles throughout the book to come to terms with the significance of that conclusion, along with its meaning for who he takes himself to be and how that, in turns, shapes his view of the country. His was no longer a prophecy of what was possible if white America failed to do what was required. Think of the ending of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), for example. Instead, it was a realization of what was, in fact, reality: the disaster of white America's ongoing failure and the inevitable judgment to come.

Like Whitman who writes in the shadows of the carnage of the Civil War, Baldwin writes *No Name* in the "after times" of the civil rights movement. He struggles to remember dates and events, priming the reader to be skeptical of his memory. "Much, much, much has been blotted out, coming back only lately in bewildering and untrustworthy flashes," he writes.²⁸ Time fractures at a dizzying pace as the possibilities of the movement give way to the backlash; as "the apostles of forgetfulness" return with a vengeance to reassert the belief that whites matter more than others in the face of demands for a more genuine democratic life. White America, tragically once again, turned its back on the vision of democracy Whitman extolled.

Baldwin looks back and laments as he tries to remember: "it was longer ago than time can reckon."²⁹ Or, in one of the darker moments in the book, he writes,

In this place, and more particularly, in this time, generations appear to flower, flourish, and wither with the speed of light. I don't think that is merely the inevitable reflection of middle age: *I suspect that there really has been some radical alteration in the structure, the nature, of time.* One may say that there are no clear images; everything seems superimposed on, and at war with something else.³⁰

With a gesture to Whitman, he cries out, "There are no clear vistas: the road that seems to pull one forward into the future is also pulling one backward into the past."³¹

In *No Name* we see this place, this country, more clearly for what it is. The carnage comes into full view as well as the evasion: that refusal to grapple with the moral

question “of what we really want out of life, for ourselves, what we think is real.”³² Almost one hundred years earlier Whitman wrote of the unwritten history of the word, democracy, because it had yet to be enacted. In *No Name*, Baldwin brazenly declares, echoing Whitman, that “there are no American people yet. . .”³³ As such, the appeals and petitions of black folk fell on barren soil, because a different way of being in the world, one not disfigured by the nastiness of white folk, had yet to be born. Whitman, in Baldwin’s hands, is transformed. He doesn’t cower in the face of the tragedy of race—seeking to obliterate its traces from the lines in the poem or the book. Baldwin, with Whitman in hand like a child’s head forced to confront what he does not want to see, faces the serpent head-on and imagines us anew.

It’s almost—at least it feels this way to me—as if Baldwin couldn’t resist a direct reference to Whitman. As he describes the three white men who looked upon him with such disdain and disgust as he stepped off the plane in Montgomery to meet Martin Luther King, Jr., Baldwin writes, “I had never in all my life seen such a concentrated, malevolent poverty of spirit.”³⁴ He then narrates the history of the moment and anticipates the revolutionaries to come and, addressing his reader, he writes, “Oh, pioneers!—I got into the car. . .”

Whitman’s “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” was written in 1865. This is his ode to those who risked everything to settle the American West.

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of
Danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and
Friendship
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with
The foremost,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there
Beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,

Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and
 The march
 Pioneers! O pioneers!³⁵

Baldwin, as we read his account of the abject failure of the country, makes us the pioneers. We, the readers, are the ones to risk everything to transform the West. Just as he shifts the white man's burden to the shoulders of black people in the epigraph to "Down at the Cross," Baldwin expresses, with this brief gesture, the hope that those who read *No Name in the Street* would become the ones to sacrifice and to exhibit the courage to step forward and build a new world.

But he understood the enormous obstacles to achieving our country. White America, in the generality, had developed, over so many generations, a number of ritual practices and a latticework of symbols to avoid confronting the consequences of their choice. From willful ignorance to feigned innocence, from viewing equality as a charitable enterprise to a callous disregard for suffering or, simply, blaming others for their circumstance in the name of self-reliance, Americans have become quite adept at avoiding the question of character when it comes to the pressing issue of race and how it impinges on the answer of who we take ourselves to be. Baldwin writes:

White America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country.³⁶

It is a refusal, really. A refusal to confront the reality of what makes this country what it is. And that refusal, along with the evasions, enable the repeated choice—repeated because it is continually confronted because black folk are still here—to believe the illusion that this is a white nation in the vein of Old Europe. It also ignites the violence that comes when that vision of the country is threatened. Democratic virtues are tossed to the wind, because, in the end, we aren't the kinds of people to cherish them. Trumpism is just its latest tragic iteration in the context of the crisis of neoliberalism.

Like Whitman, Baldwin understood that America's greatness rests with its willingness to finally embrace who and what it is. Unlike Whitman, for Baldwin, that embrace required a reckoning with the dark history of this country. It required poets, as he put it, "since they must excavate and recreate history."³⁷ Until and unless this happens, ours will be an ongoing disaster disguised as the triumph of democracy achieved. Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street*:

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life.³⁸

This is what we must do as we confront the moral callousness of Donald Trump, his lies that undermine the public trust, his stoking of fears and resentments that embolden those who find comfort in their embrace of whiteness, his policies that line the pockets of modern robber barons and tear open the fabric of the nation that connects us one to the other. We are compelled, even as we stand in the rubble of our democratic life, to endlessly condemn and attack, at the pitch of passion. As Baldwin wrote in *Just Above My Head* (1978): “Not everything is lost: responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.”³⁹

It is with this insight and instruction that I return to Whitman. I reach for him in this moment of crisis when the serpent of greed and the serpent of race threaten to swallow us whole, because he understood that we must muster the spiritual wherewithal to fight “on behalf of democracy before democracy gives way.”⁴⁰ But I reach for him on my terms and, in doing so as Baldwin shows us, he may be of some use, after all, in building a better world.

Notes

- 1 See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.
- 2 David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. 533.
- 3 Edward F. Grier, “Walt Whitman, the Galaxy, and Democratic Vistas,” *American Literature*, 23:3 (1951), pp. 332–50.
- 4 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *The Portable Whitman*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York, Penguin Books, 1945), pp. 315–84, 326.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 348
- 6 Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 8.
- 7 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 326.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 323.
- 9 Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 8; Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 388.
- 10 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 342.
- 11 Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times by Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz (New York, AMS Press, 1966). Quoted in Paul Outka, “Whitman and Race (“He’s Queer, He’s Unclear, Get Used to It”),” *Journal of American Studies*, 36:2 (2002), pp. 293–318, 295.
- 12 Outka, “Whitman and Race,” p. 296; Walt Whitman, *Prose Work, 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall, vol. 2 (New York, New York University Press, 1964).
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