ESSAY

Tortuous Time: Undoing the Past in Jean Améry and James Baldwin

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Abstract

This article compares the works of James Baldwin and Jean Améry, a survivor of the Jewish Holocaust. It attempts to unpack the ethical and political implications of their shared conception of the temporality of trauma. The experiences of the victim of anti-Semitism and the victim of anti-Black racism not only parallel one another, but their mutual incapacity to let go of the injustice of the past also generates a unique ethico-political response. The backward glance of the victim, the avowed incapacity to heal, as well as the phantasmatic desire to reverse time all guide this unique response. Instead of seeking forgiveness for the wrong done and declaring that all forms of resentment are illegitimate, Baldwin and Améry show us that channeling the revenge fantasy that so often attends the temporality of trauma is the material precondition of actually ending that trauma. This ultimately suggests that, for both thinkers, anything less than a new, revolutionary humanism equipped with an internationalist political project would betray the victims’ attempt to win back their dignity.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Jean Améry, time, trauma, anti-Semitism, racism, torture, resentment
The shrieks ought to be over; but I hear the silence of the executed.
—Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*

Jean Améry, the Austrian-Belgian survivor of Auschwitz, describes how, upon reading a report on the Nuremberg Laws in a Vienna newspaper in 1935, he almost instantaneously understood their world-historical significance. Parallelizing what Frantz Fanon once famously characterized as the inescapability of the “epidermal schema,” the color of one’s skin, from the day of this initial reading to his eventual suicide Améry insisted that considering himself a non-Jew was no longer possible. Like the six-digit number later tattooed on his forearm, he knew that he was, on the contrary, *marked* as a Jew in perpetuity. This is to say that reading these Nazi laws on “pure” citizenship and miscegenation was, for him and so many others, a sort of death sentence in advance, a premonition of what was to come, what was, in a certain sense, the inescapable consequence of such a vile form of interpellation.

Before he was ever physically assaulted by the Gestapo, the psychological ramifications of his direct torture at Fort Breendonk had already begun taking root, as it were, via the “indirect” torture of the legal decrees issued from beyond the borders of Austria. This is a process in which the victim, as Améry retells it, slowly but surely loses the capacity to trust. Améry already sensed, in other words, that he would no longer be able to expect, *ceteris paribus*, the helping hand of his brothers and sisters. And if this distance between him and his comrades was virtually unbridgeable, since the whole world had more or less sanctioned it by declaring Nazi Germany a legitimate state, then trust in the perfectibility or gradualism of Western Christendom and its Enlightenment political ideal was all but guaranteed to wane as well. In short, the “false peace” of the pre- and post-war period was false, in Améry’s account, precisely because of the fact that, to paraphrase T. W. Adorno, the conditions of barbarism had not, despite appearances, been eliminated in the least. A sense of the radical failure of all ethical and political responses to this unbearable loneliness, this “interstellar distance” between victim and non-victim, was already present in Améry’s mind and lived embodiment during this foreboding moment of 1935.

Every Black child in America experiences something similar to the shudder that no doubt reverberated within Améry as he learned about the policy of the Third Reich. Their material experience of rightlessness and the “formal” freedoms of the Reconstruction Amendments and Civil Rights Act, which are supposed to bar the possibility of such rightlessness for Black Americans, are parallel, from a phenomenological, that is, lived and embodied, perspective. This constellation of distrust, racialized legal and extra-legal interpellation, and the gathering feeling of metaphysical doom thus puts Améry into direct communication with the works and activism of James Baldwin. Indeed, the moment one begins an investigation into the ethico-political significance of Améry’s work and life, one realizes just how much Améry’s conception of the imperative to revolt against woefully irresponsible misconceptions of society and self resembles Baldwin’s own conception.
of the theoretical and practical necessity of revolt. It may take the form of a powerless gesture of hatred, of throwing, for example, a water mug or a punch at one’s persecutor, or it may take the form of an organized resistance; in every instance of revolt, however, the impulse to break with the status quo begins as a response to one unambiguous reality above all others: that one has been robbed of one’s dignity, that the State has deemed one expendable. As Améry knew his fate like some sickness latently growing within his body, so every Black man and woman “sentenced,” in Baldwin’s terms, to never leave the open air prison of Watts or Harlem is destined to believe, on some level, that the American State is itself an oppressor that will only, in due course, tighten its stranglehold. This is why seemingly well-meaning liberals of the ownership class remain incredulous before the prospect of another Holocaust, whereas many Black folks have come almost to expect such a development. Having experienced precisely that same slow latency period of an indirect torture that eats away at the trusting psyche, it is hard to imagine that any other appraisal of the situation is possible.

Beyond this provisional similarity, what sets Baldwin and Améry apart from other thinkers and will accordingly guide the present investigation is the equally remarkable similarity with which each of them conceives of the problem of time and identity as being fundamentally bound up with the ethico-political response to ongoing trauma. It is not simply the case that these thinkers, who have almost never been compared, share similar conceptions of temporality that are respectively unique among Holocaust testimony and anti-racist witness. Importantly, they also employ a conception of identity that is inextricably bound up with what I will call the backward glance of “tortuous time.” This is to say that, for both essayists, any identity truly adequate to the task of combating all forms of racism would have to embody a set of determinate features. Playing, as the reader will see, on the Latin stem *torquere*, this identity would have to start from a position that is turned around, as it were, committed to undoing or even reversing the pain and injustice of the past. Until the real institutional momentum of that pain and injustice is stopped, both authors maintain that this “contorted” perspective would, in fact, persist as a kind of moral register, as a stubborn interruption, that defies the indifference of the ruling social norms. Because of its dogged grudge, its incapacity to let go of the wrong done, insisting upon the moral superiority of a stance that keeps going back to the crime itself instead of “moving forward” will almost certainly be ridiculed as a “twisted” or “distorted” alternative. But this characterization, which amounts to refusing any form of pseudo-healing, is ultimately affirmed by both thinkers. Insofar as, for them, soberly addressing the ongoing torture of the history of imperialism and colonialism is the sole condition under which its institutional materialization might finally be overturned, such a denunciation of half measures becomes, on the contrary, a badge of dignity regained for the victim.

For both, so to speak, disturbers of the peace, then, the fact that suffering cannot be eliminated through consciousness alone eventually forces them to reject the notion that overcoming “double-consciousness” can be achieved by any means other than a radical material or institutional transformation. In this way, my
reading of Baldwin’s concept of time differs from that of Robert Z. Birdwell on the basis of a materialist commitment. Whereas, for Birdwell, the assertion is that Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) reveals, as he puts it, a “dialectical” overcoming that chooses “self-love,” my reading of the character of John Grimes as well as Baldwin’s larger theoretical position does not allow for such a personalized choice. Interpellation, as both Baldwin and Améry taught, is imposed from the outside by social agreement. Avoiding the hail of Fanon’s “Look, a Negro!” is more than a matter of individual will power. No such “kairotic”—or perfectly opportune moment—for overcoming of oppression, such finding of the “right time” to act well, is possible without an attendant institutional transformation. Instead, Baldwin points to what could be called a contradiction that remains unresolved, a “negative” dialectics that remains negative, unlike the positive fulfillment that Birdwell’s reading suggests, precisely because the institutions of racism have not yet changed. As Mikko Tuhkanen has suggested, this overriding need to address a contradiction brings Baldwin strikingly close to the ethical urgency of Malcolm X. This urgency, which Baldwin calls “time now,” upsets the secure distance of the witness who is not called to immediate action. Even though it is impossible to revolve the paradoxical or immanently contradictory character of the, so to speak, right course of action, the need to do so persists for the victims. This is why Améry himself has no patience for the cold stance of “historical objectivity,” and why, in Baldwin’s language, no one living under the duress of a racist police state can “afford the historical point of view.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that Baldwin would claim that being Black in the United States is, to use Améry’s formulation, at once “impossible and necessary.” Impossible, because the only way to fulfill the racist fantasy projection of the white imaginary is to affirm one’s self-destruction. Necessary, because every white “mask” is a hopelessly undignified adaptation to domination, or a hopelessly disavowed adjustment that effaces the degree to which Blackness is, following Fred Moten’s conception, a negative identity, a dynamic resistance to all forms of reification. The “double bind”—that necessity and impossibility—hovers over much of Baldwin’s writing and is perhaps best exemplified in *The Fire Next Time*, when Baldwin writes to his nephew that “the really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them,” his white countrymen, who have committed the virtually unforgivable crime of racism. The theory and practice that would resist the compulsion to fix human beings into a static identity is thus the same theory and practice that, mirroring Améry’s imperative against the false peace of pre- and post-war Germany, would have to renounce, as Baldwin put it, the “wretchedly middle-class” aspirations of American ideology. Baldwin and Améry’s renunciations, then, refuse reconciling oneself to that which is unworthy of your trust, refuse reconciling yourself to ruin.

While this comparison may be met with skepticism by theorists who maintain that forms of oppression are necessarily distinct and non-comparable, it should be noted that a considerable amount of theory has parted ways with this supposition. More importantly, the spirit of Baldwin’s work suggests, following Fanon, that comparing Jewish and Black experience is a worthy exercise, so long as it avoids,
for example, decontextualizing the differences between the European diaspora and African American experience, or avoids effacing the differences of dehumanization at work in the white projection of Black “criminality,” on the one hand, and the anti-Semitic projection of Jewish “acquisitiveness,” on the other. Baldwin criticizes those who reject the comparison between these two forms of racism as “outrageous.” In one of the most poignant examples of how, for Baldwin, there are clear lines of convergence between the victim of anti-Semitism and the victim of anti-Black racism, he did not hesitate to claim that, when incarcerated for crimes she did not commit, Angela Davis appeared as “alone, say, as the Jewish housewife in the boxcar headed for Dachau.” Despite the controversy this comparison incites to this day, Baldwin here could not be any closer to Améry’s perspective. “The ‘lived experience’ of the black man,” writes Améry, commenting on his encounter with the writings of Fanon, “ correspond[s] in many respects to my own formative and indelible experience as a Jewish inmate of a concentration camp.” The interiorized rancor that may have potentially been a factor in Baldwin’s own attempts at suicide was arguably grounded on a feeling of powerlessness that results when there are not, to use Améry’s language, enough “good comrades” in one’s nation to turn the tide against the perpetuation of genocide, or at least to mobilize the political support that Davis herself would go on to receive.

Acknowledging the parallels between these two forms of overwhelming isolation and the symptoms they manifest is perhaps the best means of dispelling the charge of anti-Semitism that plagued Baldwin in his lifetime and that may still trouble some readers. Baldwin’s justified anger over, for instance, Jewish landlords administering living conditions that are more squalid than the “fictional” account of Bigger Thomas’s tale, must be read, I argue, as his acknowledgment of contingent social arrangements. Although it should be obvious enough, this did not mean, for Baldwin, that “the Jew” is as such a malevolent rent collector. It simply meant that some Jews are blind to the privilege their relative whiteness affords them in economic arrangements like rent and housing. The difficulty is that, within the confines of advanced capitalism, property owners are inevitably pitted against the propertyless. Virtually every powerless subject will thus be inclined to resort to easy, biologistic, or even infantile, explanations. “Jewishness” appears, in this context, as the cause of plight. Baldwin knows that this is a fetishistic logic. He experienced it firsthand with the same acuteness that Améry did before the homogeneous “faces of stone” of both those who kept guard over the camps and those who looked on indifferently from afar: “the German.” This desperate, all-too-reductive explanation—as if there were not Germans in the resistance, as if there were not Jews in solidarity with the Black freedom movement—is what Baldwin is attempting to highlight with the exaggerated title of his famously controversial essay, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White.” Anti-whiteness and anti-Semitism are not the essentialized and inevitable perceptions of the Black population; they are, rather, symptoms of desperation, of not being able to change a condition whose forces of reproduction continue to unfold from behind the backs of both oppressor and oppressed.
Baldwin’s oeuvre might even be summed up as a kind of warning against the destruction that will inevitably unfold if this depoliticized and ultimately fetishistic perception is not addressed. To overlook the real cause is to reproduce the symptoms of the bad political situation. Anything less than reflecting and channeling into a mass movement an awareness of the dialectic between these false conditions of ongoing genocide and their true conditions of elimination would be cataclysmic. In Baldwin’s words, “what, today, seems merely humiliation and injustice for a few, can, unchecked, become Terror for the many, snuffing out white lives just as though they were Black lives.” “If the American state could not,” he continues, citing Lorraine Hansberry, “protect the lives of black citizens, then, presently, the entire State would find itself engulfed.” “Little by little and catch-as-catch-can” could, in a word, easily become the systematic extermination of an entire population, especially when the machinery of carceral warehousing, surveillance, and the militarization of the police continue to spread with a seemingly unstoppable inertia.

The works of Baldwin and Améry live on as our, so to speak, accumulated debt, because almost none of the social antagonisms that weighed on them have been lightened. If, in response to these antagonisms, the era of the Black Lives Matter struggle is an era of promise, of a chance that the tide might finally be turning, it is no less an era troubled by all the trappings of electoral politics and, worse still, troubled by the prospect of being appropriated by the society of the spectacle: the semblance of political change that leaves intact economic domination. Solidarity, then, is needed more today than ever. But, as theorists as diverse as Gilles Deleuze and Joy James have claimed, it must be a solidarity based on something more than mere representation. Against such a crude identity politics pitilessly peddled by the demagogues of moderation, the need guiding this comparative analysis is, rather, a need to reignite the very internationalism whose moral and political clarity guided virtually every word that Améry and Baldwin wrote. Nothing short of this internationalism, which not only gleans the parallels between the Jewish and African diaspora, but, beyond the scope of this essay, the parallels between the camps in El Paso, Gaza, and Xinjiang, will suffice to answer the suffering of modernity. Nothing short of it will counteract the rising ethno-nationalism that, scarcely mitigated after the recent defeat of Donald Trump, accompanies the above-mentioned machinery of domination.

In the spirit of this attempt to forge new alliances that center on the prospect of a multi-ethnic unity of labor, let us take a closer look at Améry’s and Baldwin’s conceptions of time, as their temporal commitments are crucial, in my analyses, to building this much-needed solidarity. Along the way the reader will notice a commitment, in particular, to what might be called, in keeping with the theory of the Frankfurt School, a chrono-ethical conception of redemptive history. This commitment resonates with Baldwin’s notion of the time for redemption as always already, “now.” More specifically, Walter Benjamin’s understanding of a temporality in which redemption is also always “now,” in which the chance to pull the emergency brake, to stop the catastrophe, is always present, will guide this analysis. By bringing conceptions of time and temporal ethics to bear here I aim to
demonstrate that this redemptive conception of time in which one continues to stay true to the possibility of ending the violence of history emerges not only immanently from the needs of historical development but also immanently from Baldwin and Améry’s shared attempt to undo the multifaceted history of racism in the capitalist era. In contrast to so many interpretations of Baldwin that, in my estimation, water him down into what is effectively a liberal among liberals, this critical approach seeks to reveal the degree to which both Baldwin and Améry ought to be situated squarely in the middle of the history of left-revolutionary theory and practice.31

In the wake of colonial conquest, the Middle Passage, and the founding of the international market system, the commonsensical notion of temporality against which both essayists rebel came into prominence. Although this modern conception of time has by now hardened into a seemingly incontestable feature of the dominant epistemology, it makes several assumptions that, contrary to Améry’s and Baldwin’s heterodox view, indicates a major departure from its predecessors. In the first place, this modern conception presupposes that the past remains in the past, something over and done with. As abstractions linked to and subsumed by the “equivalent form,” the contents of this conception of time are scarcely distinguishable from dead artifacts or indifferent quanta. Next, it assumes that events move unidirectionally or linearly, never turning back upon themselves, never entwined or mixed up with the past, and always, for the sake of self-preservation, forgetting the wound and trauma of what once was. This implies, finally, that social and biological reality can never speed up or quicken, slow down or come to a standstill. The world can, in brief, never be fulfilled or undone according to this model. Spurning the cyclical and messianic conceptions of time that preceded it, modern temporality thus asserts: The dead are dead. What was, was. Time does not accumulate; it is better not to get bogged down in metaphysical flights of fancy, in the absurd logic of trying to redeem or rescue the victims of history; to do so is to be impractical.

Whether it is physical or psychological, slow or instantaneous, the experience of torture cannot help but provoke incredulity concerning the alleged practicality of this standpoint. The violence through which the victim of American white supremacy has learned to be on guard, as it were, against this form of “reason” is not somehow less deleterious than the violence through which the victim of the Gestapo learned the same defensive orientation.32 In Améry’s case, this torture, which, as we have seen, ruptures the human assumption that help is coming, that someone will, in the end, mitigate the pain, generates what I have alluded to as his “warped” conception of time.33 This is, in part, Améry’s way of subverting and reclaiming the psychological attribution of the capitalist world, the so-called concentration camp syndrome, or the “abnormality” of nervousness, hostility, and, above all, the incapacity to preserve oneself in and through healing. In fact, for Améry, seamlessly reproducing oneself, like both the biological organism and the State, in and through forgiving, forgetting, and trusting anew, is more a sign of ethical failing than ethical strength.34 With good reason, it is only this “warped” or
“twisted” (*torquere*) temporality that leads to a genuine morality for Améry.\textsuperscript{35} It deserves this moniker, he insists, because its backward glance is overtly differentiated from precisely the healing, biological time-sense that, in looking forward, chalks up the atrocity of the past to a mere “operational mishap.”\textsuperscript{36} The next generation of Germans, like the racialized inheritors of the settler-colonial state, thus complains about not having directly participated in the horror itself. The petulant adolescent, “sick and tired” of hearing about it, contending that he was not there during American slavery or Auschwitz, is quick to emphasize the “economic miracle” of post-war Germany and, mirroring the “most private” desire of Baldwin’s white supremacist, is ultimately proud of his history, proud and deserving of his nation’s accomplishments.\textsuperscript{37} From Goethe to Merkel or, in the US context, from Washington to Obama, the nation-state is telling an epic tale of progress. Empire, which has never stopped beating its drum, is apparently devoid of guilt. Only the victim, so it seems, fully lives with its quantitative weight. *Vae victis*. Woe to the vanquished, says world history.\textsuperscript{38}

In both cases, then, the nationalist denial of the tortuous or entwined character of history, that is, the blood-soaked blood tie that, in truth, binds different generations and ethnicities to one another, cannot help but produce, for Améry, a festering resentment and, for Baldwin, a menacing potential for violence or outright despair. The only choice left to the despised victim of history is to begin theorizing about and practically struggling for a social structure that would finally, in a phantasmatic or, indeed, absurd manner, undo the torture of the past. This notion of undoing the past, of reversing time, preserves the antithesis to modern temporality, namely *fulfilled* time.\textsuperscript{39} For Améry and Baldwin, the present is always shot through with the now-time of redemption, with a fleeting glimpse of how the danger might be averted. Any other perspective exonerates the current persecutors who are, in truth, the haunted embodiment of their forebears. To transform the present, against the onward march of the capitalist mode of production, is to undo and fulfill the past simultaneously. In fact, it is not too extreme to say that any other perspective borders, for Améry and Baldwin, on an insult to the dignity of the dead.

Every tortured soul wishes, after all, that the torture should first and foremost simply stop. When the direct form of it, in contrast to its psychic reverberation, finally does subside, the victim, as so many survivors testify, almost always becomes wholly dedicated to the so-called new categorical imperative: never again, not for anyone else, ever, regardless of ethnicity, creed, or national identity.\textsuperscript{40} A single human tortured, let alone the entire globe engulfed in flames, would be among the worst offenses for Améry.\textsuperscript{41} Améry’s resentment is, in this manner, arguably the only desire that avoids eclipsing the utopian longing, the emancipatory hope, that was immanent to the aims of the Western philosophical tradition from the start. By the obstinate power of negation—never again, not for anyone else, ever—a world completely devoid of torture is kept open as a genuine prospect. And, resembling Fanon’s vision of the emancipatory potential of revolutionary violence, it is precisely this unyielding anger, this resentment that, channeled, sublimated, and reorganized, could give birth to a new type of human being. What’s
more, this new human would regain, as I have previously suggested, the dignity that was stolen by a racist form of interpellation. If the intensity with which the victim fixates on the harm done were strong enough, if it were collectivized and steered by a political project, a new humanism that has internationalist reach could also finally emerge. Disgusted with, to use Paul Gilroy’s terminology, all “managerial versions of anti-racism,” this new humanism would have to be wary, moreover, of all those forms in which the wage illusion appears to alleviate torture, but in fact ensnares one all the more in the zero sum game of an anarchic social structure. The previously mentioned, “wretchedly middle-class” aspirations of most Americans, Black and white, would have to be exposed, in other words, for what they are. Upward mobility for some is destitution for others. To paraphrase Baldwin, only this new, utopian, and temporally reorganized humanism, whose vanguard is the Black population of the world, knows that every concession heretofore granted to the victim by the “good will” of the heads of state, instead of being autonomously expropriated from below, has in reality been a concession “made in order to stay on top.” With a gathering wave of comrades utterly repulsed by all half-measures, all revisionism, all white moderate compromise, all adaptation to the war-mongering of a neo-fascist empire, this vanguard lays the grounds for a new world precisely because it will not let go of the past. Only when such grounds are laid will we begin to prove that we are taking seriously the eternity of suffering that the tortured continue to endure.

Baldwin gets to the heart of this redemptive logic in his famous essay, “The White Man’s Guilt.” Unlike the refrain of a collective “we” from which he frequently speaks in, for example, Notes of a Native Son (1955) and Nobody Knows My Name (1961), this text begins with a command, or better, a warning, to the white man, who stands over and against the Black man. This is to say that, contrary to the assumption that there is a “we,” a collective nation undergirding the shared experience of Black and white folk in America, Baldwin is at first compelled to maintain a strict separation. The recognition of a shared community is, of course, the linchpin for virtually all of Baldwin’s attempts to force “us” to think the social and psychological preconditions of reconciliation, but here his writing performs the material contradiction that seems impossible to overcome. He is obviously aware, in this context, of that phenomenon that Fanon called the “fact of blackness”: the inescapability of being visually marked, unlike the Jew, as the subordinate, as the enemy, or the criminal. Baldwin’s voice speaks with resounding authority, much like Améry’s, when the latter says, “Only I possessed, and still possess, the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull, and for that reason I am more entitled to judge, not only more than the culprit but also more than society—which thinks only about its continued existence.” “White man, hear me!” exclaims Baldwin.

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.
Baldwin suggests that failing to see this preservation of the past in the present, this manner in which the past is *before* us, is actually equivalent to bringing hardship upon oneself, however unwittingly, and however disproportionately white suffering stands in relationship to the suffering of racial minorities. For, as he elaborates in *Nobody Knows My Name*, one law in particular subtends this movement of history, namely that to deny the humanity of others is to deny it to yourself. Hence, it is not inaccurate to assert with Baldwin that “time passes and passes,” but, as Baldwin would write in *No Name in the Street* (1972),

> It passes backward and it passes forward and it carries you along, and no one in the whole wide world knows more about time than this: it is carrying you through an element you do not understand into an element you will not remember. Yet, something remembers—it can even be said that something avenge.

One is tempted to say that the body remembers or, more accurately, the collective unconscious remembers. The more this twisted history remains repressed, the more the guilt compounds for both the heirs of the persecutors and the heirs of the persecuted. But “the shame of destruction,” writes Améry, recalling the iron hook on which his warped body was hung, “cannot be erased” for the latter in particular. The persecuted bear the burden, so it seems, disproportionately; they are the ones who on the whole absorb the sheer quantity of this collective guilt. Améry might as well be referring to virtually every “unutterably wearied” and “unutterably ruined” working-class Black man and woman, every Bigger Thomas who, as Baldwin insists, dies without forgiveness. The resentments will not go away for the nameless masses, tortured in the silent corners of police departments, black sites, and prisons. Nor should they, until the conditions for the possibility of these dehumanizing, tortuous spaces are completely annihilated.

This incapacity to keep time or accurately “count,” which serves in Baldwin’s construction as a performatively accent to *No Name in the Street*, reminds us that the blood has already been spilled. Especially in the midst of what seems like progress—for instance, the Reconstruction Amendments, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the post-war economic boom—this accounting for what has been discounted becomes all the more pressing. Despite the white supremacist’s disavowed desire for purity, Black and white experience is mixed, fundamentally mixed, *for good*. In Baldwin’s terms—and this is the lesson from his sojourn to France—there is no escaping this American scar, this mixed up, distorted, or twisted lineage, even if it marks each subject in a singularly different way. Hence addressing the process of self-reflection, of coming to terms with the resounding echo of the colonialist era, Baldwin says of the Black man in particular that:

> In the white American he finds reflected—repeated as it were, in a higher key—his tension, his terrors, his tenderness. Dimly and for the first time, there begins to fall into perspective the nature of the roles they have played in the lives and history of each other. Now he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated
and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced.\textsuperscript{44}

Denial of this permanent entwinement, so wretchedly on display in the white moderate liberal’s consciousness and behavior, is to exact a “cosmic vengeance” upon one’s own head. “Whatever goes up must come down.”\textsuperscript{55} This is why Baldwin demands a dialogue, which he admits has not yet taken and cannot, under these restless social conditions, take place. Black folk and white folk, “subdued and subduer,” do not as yet share a language.\textsuperscript{56} Lest both sides perish, lest the fire ignite next time—and who could deny that it’s not already aflame—an attempt at “renewal,” Baldwin says, must begin.\textsuperscript{57} And it must start with white folk learning to listen, finally, to an accusation.\textsuperscript{58}

Of course, it should be noted that there’s a liberal, even obscene resonance to the word “renewal.” The radical internationalist, the humanist to come, is no doubt ill at ease with such a term, especially after so much bloodshed and so much good intention. The renewal of this dialogue, far from being an adequate response, might, so this same radical suspects, be nothing other than the false appearance of a reconciliation that, time and time again, rears its ugly head under the watchwords of “tolerance” and “diversity,” while leaving intact the same structural system of racist subjugation. From Faulkner to the Alabama clergymen, such a commonplace view continues to say, in response to the ongoing protests: “wait,” “slow down”; that is, translated into Martin Luther King Jr’s acute, sorrowful words: “Never.”\textsuperscript{59} Thus Améry’s German youth insists that he has nothing against the Jews, but this is easy enough, since all the world, including the strongest battalions in human history—those of the victor—were also opposed and remain opposed to Nazism. Thus Baldwin’s white supremacist says, “What have you got against me?” “I also want your child to have a decent education and rise as high as his capabilities will permit.”\textsuperscript{60} Yet all the world is, under protection of formal freedom, just as much opposed—nominally speaking—to the anti-Black racist as it is to the anti-Semite. Even if the neo-fascist elements in the Republican Party are presently empowered to no longer conceal their long-standing racism, this remains a minority tendency, whereas the majority endlessly virtue-signals to all the world about racial justice, while doing absolutely nothing to reverse, for example, the housing policy, wealth disparity, and police funding through which the racist social structure is actually reproduced.

A different accent is needed.\textsuperscript{61} I am referring to the fact that, for Baldwin, fomenting, for instance, a renter’s strike, in the face of omnipresent redlining, is necessary. Or, similarly, expressing sympathy for Malcolm X’s frustration over the reformist or pacifist character of the March on Washington, perhaps blocking roads, shutting down airports, or at least considering a praxis more militant than that of redistribution, is also necessary.\textsuperscript{62} In the end, despite a justified ambivalence before the racist tenor of so many of the labor unions, supporting the socialist cause, marching under its banner, may even be required, Baldwin subtly hints. In order to finally resist those liberal institutions that remain as complicit in the racist
history of the State today as they were at the foundational moment, a decisive rejection of current property relations is needed.\textsuperscript{63}

In this sense, to have a truly transformative dialogue means that “we” would actually confront the material forces, that is, the biological and social time-sense of modern capitalism, through which the racist nation-state continues to preserve itself. We would, that is to say, rescue this nation, call it by its proper name, in order to thereby destroy it.\textsuperscript{64} To have this dialogue, then, to find a language of solidarity, which not incidentally avoids being duped by the class interests of the Black middle class—in Baldwin’s view, as quoted in Raoul Peck’s film \textit{I Am Not Your Negro}, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Democratic Party—is to begin struggling against the institutions of accumulation that systematically preclude an acknowledgment of just how much white security is bought at the cost of a generalized Black disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{65} Even though the white working class suffers appallingly, the disproportionate suffering of the Black working class might as well mark them—in terms of unemployment, exclusion from public housing, welfare benefits, as well as the spatialized surveillance of the “occupied ghetto”—with \textit{Judensterne}.\textsuperscript{66} Class antagonism in the US context is perpetuated via the ideological threat of being proletarianized, that is, deemed a racialized pariah of the neer-do-well faction of the workforce.\textsuperscript{67} Parallelizing Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer’s thesis on how the wretched conditions of the prison are the socially necessary bottom from which the poverty of the outside world is distinguished as a lesser—albeit rat-infested—evil, white consciousness swallows whole the stone offered up in compensation for its empty stomach.\textsuperscript{68} To reiterate Baldwin’s response to the inhumanity of William F. Buckley’s threadbare apologetics, the white stratum of the working class accepts the apparent grace of its relative misery on the basis of one, tacit contractual guarantee: “At least they are not Black.”

What can be concluded from all this? We must, in the first place, recall Améry’s citation of Magnus Enzensberger, who provocatively said that, whether one likes it or not, Auschwitz is Germany’s past, present, and future.\textsuperscript{69} With Baldwin’s comparably tortuous conception of time in view, one is but a short step away from adding that chattel slavery is likewise America’s past, present, and future. Most importantly, in both cases, demanding, à la Nietzsche, that the slave morality of resentment be assuaged is no longer adequate. Nor is a fatalism, a mythical acquiescence, before the apparent inevitability of the nation-state adequate. The lesson is, rather, to avoid being blackmailed by the master morality, which has never tired of assailing the weak, that is, the losers of history, with sermons against the supposed illegitimacy of their rage. Today this apologia or \textit{raison d’état} offers up the substitute gratification of hiring a diverse and inclusive ensemble of politicians and business leaders who change absolutely nothing other than the surface appearance of domination.

An unresolved resentment inexorably results from shopworn personalizations of this kind. “Absurdly,” Améry writes, this resentment “demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone.” “Resentment blocks,” he
continues, “the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future. I know that the
time-sense of the person trapped in resentment is twisted around, dis-ordered, if
you wish, for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullifi-
cation of what happened.” As Günther Anders once similarly expressed it while
contemplating the potential for nuclear holocaust, the “widening of our moral
fantasy” has to be the first principle today, especially if the offerings of the techno-
crats, who are by no means qualified to resolve the deepening antagonism, are ever
to lose their veneer of legitimacy.

As Baldwin observes, white people refuse, on the one hand, to believe in death
and are not, on the other, willing to confront the degree to which their identity is,
as yet, constitutively bound to the maintenance of the private property system.

In spite of this reified stubbornness, “death,” which is to say, radical transforma-
tion, outside of the identitarian and proprietary impulse, is precisely what is
needed. This is what Baldwin suggests when he goes to great lengths in attempting
to uncover the truth-content of the suicide drive, instead of simply spurning it as
“unnatural” or, in lockstep with the ruling norms, disparaging it as a mere sickness
that the pragmatic spirit healthily overcomes. Given his own struggle with sui-
cide, does not the ethico-political imperative become a rather stark expression?
Does it not, in other words, demand something rather uncompromising, namely
that the conditions of torture must be undone, or else one can only expect ruin;
that the real enemy must be determinately identified and systematically blocked
from acts of inhumanity, or else the “danger” that the bad conscience of white
America projects onto anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements is all but guaran-
teed to explode onto the political scene?

When the real possibility of social transformation is channeled into another
round of “moderate” compromises, despair supplants the possibility of fulfilled
time. Even after enduring torture, Améry claimed that the initial repudiation of
Germany by the international community gave him the impression that justice
was really possible, that a new European identity was emerging. It was only when
the false peace returned, that is, the denial of the real institutions under which
torture could be eliminated, that his despair engulfed him. This is another way of
saying that the idea of fulfilled time cannot be sold so cheaply, that is, on the vic-
tor’s terms, without dire consequences. The field on which this reversal of time
takes place, the “unnatural” terrain on which the “genuine demand for revenge”
occurs, is that of the historico-political realm of praxis, not the realm of mere
psychology.

This is what Améry means when, paralleling Baldwin once more, he elaborates
on the absurd desire to do the impossible, to turn time back. Améry, more spe-
cifically, goes so far as to insist that the failed German revolution is precisely what
must now succeed. The missed chance, the aborted attempt, wherein the Social
Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Germany were subdued by both
the forces of reaction and liberalism, Hitler and Hindenburg, wherein that small
number of “good comrades” and underground resistance did not, moreover, have
the numbers to tip the scale, will no longer constitute how history has unfolded. Catastrophe will not be the organizing principle of history any longer. Chattel slavery will not have the last word. The Northern army that stood guard against Southern regression during Reconstruction will not be withdrawn in order to beat back the railroad uprising and resolve the presidential dispute of 1877. Having thus won the victory of labor against capital—the same one that comprised the international revolution on which the German revolution was based—slavery will not, accordingly, give way to Jim Crow and the convict leasing system, which will not, in their turn, give way to the next divide and conquer tactic, namely the Southern strategy and the hyper-incarceration that came with the unspeakable war on drugs. None of it will, in sum, have happened, since, to state it again, the missed chances will no longer be missed. The moral future, for which we continue to fight, resolves the past by, paradoxically speaking, undoing it.

Let there be no confusion: this is not a call to obliterate memory, to flee the multi-generational trauma that undoubtedly constitutes experience. It is rather a call to truly consider the conditions for the possibility of ending a quite legitimate resentment that quite legitimately continues to fester and compound. To return to the shared history of white and Black folk, one recalls Baldwin’s famous discovery that came to him in the Swiss village. “The world,” he says, “is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” After all the violence, after so much toil inflicted and endured together, to be an American—or, for that matter, to be a European—is to be in a milieu whose transnational violence has breached the insulated borders of the past. There’s no escaping this. To be German or American is to be caught, then, in a milieu that perpetuates catastrophe. In a similar sense to Angela Davis’s claim that a politics disconnected from the utopian vision of prison abolition defeats itself before it has begun, we must therefore insist: there should be no America. There should be no Germany—full stop.

Can anyone, following this logic, doubt what occurs when SS Sergeant Wajs, Améry’s torturer, stands before the firing squad, or Baldwin’s terrified rookie cop and Southern sheriff are forced to do the same? They themselves desire, Améry maintains, to turn back history. They want to reverse, if only for a brief moment, what they have done to others. They are, in this respect, once more restored to a common footing with Améry, to their humanity, for now they are, against the “anti-man” they have become, finally “nail[ed] to the[ir] deed.” In other words, if the persecutor—including the Eichmann-esque bureaucrat famously derided by Arendt—were finally pinned to what he did, if the concept were adequately related to its object, if the accusation were listened to and a corresponding resistance emerged that was finally equal to the magnitude of a fear that, in disavowal, drives the spell of history forward, then time would already be fulfilled, history would, as Améry declares, already be moral. The remorseless pride of national identity would die, because continuing it would finally be acknowledged as affirming one’s complicity in genocide. An overwhelming shame would immobilize the can-do pragmatism of the state’s reproductive amnesia. “Then history,” writes Baldwin, expressing this same phantasmatic prospect of undoing the past, “becomes a
garment we can wear, and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.\textsuperscript{85}

The pragmatism of the biological and white-supremacist time-sense is not, viewed in this light, as pragmatic as it claims to be.\textsuperscript{86} Means and ends have, in reality, lost each other if self-preservation destroys the very self it sought to maintain. The incapacity to experience is another name for this phenomenon of means without end.\textsuperscript{87} A similar logic is at play when self-reflection forgets that identity was only ever a promise, a not-yet that, as Baldwin repeatedly maintains, will have to be won in an incomprehensibly difficult struggle. Staying true to this deferred realization, Améry stubbornly clings to his righteous indignation, not least when he, with an almost Socratic melancholy, senses that soon he and all the other survivors will die, that the cause is a lost cause and will surely be denounced by the inheritors of security as the “half-brained chatter” of a grumbler.\textsuperscript{88} For without this indignation, he says, the power to reverse an order of time, which to this day reproduces the abstract State at the expense of each of its members, would be forfeited. The quantitative pressure would not recoil into the qualitatively new. In Améry’s emphatic words,

I hope that my resentment, which is my personal protest against the anti-moral natural process of healing that time brings about, and by which I make the genuinely humane and absurd demand that time be turned back—will also perform a historical function. Were it to fulfill the task that I set it, it could historically represent, as a stage of the world’s moral dynamics of progress, the German revolution that did not take place. This demand is no less absurd and no less moral than the individual demand that irreversible processes be reversible. In order to clarify and simplify what I mean, I need only return to the conviction already expressed that the unresolved conflict between victims and slaughterers must be externalized and actualized, if both the overpowered and those who overpowered them are to succeed in mastering the past, a past that, despite its extreme oppositeness, they still have \textit{in common}.\textsuperscript{89}

Hence, the “settlement in the field of historical practice,” the fulfillment of the missed chance of history, does to time what was always promised by time.\textsuperscript{90} Instead of, as in bourgeois society, the past dominating the present, the present finally dominates the past. In even more blunt terms, the present, which is to say, the standpoint of redemption, of now-time, annihilates, in messianic violence, the possibility of racist “progress” continuing in ever-new forms.\textsuperscript{91} The cleansing rites that Fanon famously gave voice to in \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (1961) are synonymous with the “seething, purifying thirst for revenge” entailed in Améry’s externalization.\textsuperscript{92} Without such an outlet, debilitating fear is doubtless the only thing that can result. With such an outlet, a new identity might be born. From the spirit of violence, the victims regain their dignity. By finally resisting the adversary, by finally meeting the inertia of domination with an equal force, self-respect returns. The torturer does not, however, become the tortured in this aporetic vision of fulfilled time. Far from it. When genuine resentment becomes actual, that is, institutionally supported and organized, instead of being forced to turn back upon
itself in masochistic powerlessness, it inevitably produces a consciousness that, opposing the state of biological nature, finds any perpetuation of torture to be utterly intolerable. This, then, is the internationalist basis, the new categorical imperative. True sovereignty ends the false sovereignty through which the immoral arc of history unfolds. To be equal to the infinite suffering of the Middle Passage and Auschwitz is thus to gather a material force that is capable, at last, of calling a halt to the homogeneous, empty time of colonial and neocolonial capitalism. Until that day should arise, Baldwin and Améry’s grudge will, in the name of positive justice, continue to disturb the “negative peace.”

Notes

3 This claim about the similarity between Black and Jewish interpellation does not, of course, collapse the two non-identical experiences. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, Grove Press, 1967), p. 115, is no doubt right to note that the “whiteness” of the Jew provides a different type of “mask.” He or she can, as Fanon says, go “unnoticed.”
10 For a look at how, despite his embeddedness in a Jewish intellectual milieu, Baldwin’s own claim about the similarities between Black and Jewish experience generated a considerable degree of disagreement and even hostility, see Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 20.
18 Ibid., pp. 745–6.
20 Fanon, _Black Skin, White Masks_, p. 157.
24 Jean Améry, “Resentments” (1966), in _At the Mind’s Limits_, p. 80.
28 Gilles Deleuze, _Difference and Repetition_ (1968), trans. Paul Patton (New York, Continuum, 1997); Joy James, “Radicalizing Feminism,” in Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (eds.), _The Black Feminist Reader_ (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2000), p. 253. It is not for nothing that James, who is inspired by the Combahee River Collective, is more interested in forming alliances with white allies who are committed to anti-corporate activism than she is in forming alliances with “ludic” Black feminists, that is, feminists who remain liberal or continue to adapt to capitalist domination, instead of resisting it.
29 Even if, on my reading, Baldwin is an internationalist, there are some grounds for believing that he did not always live up to his own ideals, particularly in relationship to the Congress of Black Writers and Artists. For an examination of what was arguably Baldwin’s misconception of the differences between American freedom and African unfreedom, see, for example, Richard Iton, _In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Right Era_ (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 50–2.
30 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (1940), in _Selected Writings_, ed. Michael W. Jennings, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003). For a historiography that, although not citing either Baldwin or Améry, describes the modern conception of time as itself an expression of the financialization of the transatlantic slave trade, see Ian Baucom, _Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History_ (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005). Baucom’s Benjaminian emphasis is especially important in this context given that he begins to show how thinkers such as Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott, and Édouard Glissant are also part of this radical Left history.
31 For an example of Baldwin’s disdain for the “cowardly obtuseness” of liberalism, see Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” p. 320.
32 As Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” p. 20, says, haggling over the number of victims is already an expression of the prevailing barbarism.


34 Améry, “Resentments,” p. 68.

35 Ibid., p. 81.

36 Ibid., p. 67.


38 Améry, “Resentments,” p. 65.


40 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 365.


42 For a consideration of the humanism at work in Améry’s and Fanon’s work, see Paul Gilroy, “Theory, Torture, and the Prospect of Humanism,” Theory, Culture & Society, 27 (2010), 22.


44 James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, in Morrison (ed.), Collected Essays.

45 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, pp. 109–40.

46 Améry, “Resentments,” p. 70.


48 Baldwin, Nobody Knows, p. 179.

49 Baldwin, No Name, p. 365 (my emphasis).


52 Améry, “Torture,” p. 27, parallels Baldwin’s lament over our lack of conscience when he says that these same police station tortures that happen in Western democratic countries seldom cause the public to become too finicky.

53 Baldwin, No Name, pp. 353, 358.

54 Baldwin, Notes, p. 89.

55 Baldwin, Fire Next Time, p. 346.

56 Baldwin, No Name, p. 381.


62 Baldwin, No Name, p. 440.

63 Ibid., p. 461.

64 Ibid., p. 358. Baldwin expresses the antinomian character of this demand to name the proper name of the country when he says that the Black freedom struggle is forced to ask of others that they act with the same generosity, clarity, and nobility that they expect of themselves. The answer he receives is that “there are no American people yet.”

65 For a further look at how Baldwin’s class politics differentiates him from other theorists of anti-racism who fail to see the intersections between class and race, see James


69 Améry, “Resentments,” p. 78.

70 *Ibid*., p. 81.


77 Baldwin, *Notes*, p. 17.

78 Améry, “Resentments,” p. 75.


81 Baldwin, *Notes*, p. 129.


87 Baldwin, *Notes*, p. 12.


91 Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” (1921), in Jennings (ed.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 1.


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