

# Chapter 6

## “You’re the Nigger, Baby, It Isn’t Me”

Robert Jensen

*The Willed Ignorance and Wishful Innocence of  
White America*

Two of the defining features of white America are its embrace of not knowing and the insistence on not being accountable. The essence of white pathology is contained in that willed ignorance and wishful innocence. By avoiding knowledge of what was done, and what is still being done, we can maintain our illusions about our own righteousness. And then we can sleep through the night, though fitfully. We can lie down and rest, comfortably but with a nagging feeling that something is wrong.

In this chapter, explore our white-supremacist system, and the white privilege that is the result of that system, by examining how white America constructs heroes, black and white. Such an examination, if honest, will lead to the only place that honesty in a white-supremacist system can lead white people—to an unsettling sense of ourselves, to an uncomfortable look in the mirror. Borrowing from James Baldwin, this is what we must see in that mirror: We white people are the nigger.

### BLACK HEROES

In a class on democracy and mass media that I taught for several years, I assigned readings by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin.<sup>[1]</sup> I asked the students to take note of what they knew about those three people before they did the reading. How do the men live in their imagination, in the public imagination? The answers, from overwhelmingly white classes in the early 2000s, were consistent: MLK was a great leader who, inspired by his Christian faith, used non-violence to advance the cause of civil rights; Malcolm X was a dangerous radical who advocated violence against white people, whom he hated; and James Baldwin—never heard of him.

After the students read the essays and speeches, I asked them to discuss how their understanding of the three writers had changed. Again, the answers were consistent year after year: They had no idea that King had advanced such a radical critique, not only of white supremacy but of the U.S. war machine and the materialism in capitalism<sup>[2]</sup>; and they had not been aware of the sophistication of Malcolm X’s critique and the depth of his humanity.<sup>[3]</sup>

Those reactions were predictable. Ever since white America allowed King to serve as the iconic figure for the “polite” civil-rights movement, white America has frozen him at an early point in his life, cast as the purveyor of the all-American dream. If black America demands a hero, white America will let them have King but an ideologically muted version. In the eyes of white America, Malcolm X—who once

said, “I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare”<sup>[4]</sup> —plays the counter-iconic role, the dangerous black man. Neither caricature captures the man or the movement he led, of course, and one goal of the assignment was to spur students to ponder why white America needs the caricatures. Is the construction of the King and Malcolm X legends simply more evidence of the enduring white-supremacist reality in the United States?

About Baldwin, the students asked a simple question after reading: Why have I not read this man’s work before? Typically, the only students who knew of Baldwin had encountered him in a black literature class, and the others were amazed that such a powerful writer was largely forgotten today. After screening *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*,<sup>[5]</sup> a documentary about Baldwin that captures his energy and spirit, the students were even more stunned that Baldwin could be forgotten.

This lack of exposure to Baldwin can’t be dismissed as merely generational. Baldwin died of cancer in 1987, when those students were babies, but MLK and Malcolm X died two decades before Baldwin, albeit by assassination in more dramatic and memorable form. The question remains: Why has white America (and much of non-white America, as well) pushed out of public view one of its most prophetic voices of the last half of the twentieth century?

I have no pithy theory about why Baldwin disappeared from the canon, why white America ignores him. It may simply be that in a culture that loves self-aggrandizing history and prefers glib experts, Baldwin was a formidable intellectual who refused to whitewash the past. He was relentless in his demand that white America abandon its willed ignorance and wishful innocence about that history:

This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.<sup>[6]</sup>

## WHITE HEROES?

One of the reasons for my evangelical fervor about Baldwin’s writings is that there is no other writer about race who sparks the range of intellectual and emotional responses in me. When I read Baldwin I learn and I feel, together. That capacity—to not simply intellectualize away a problem, nor to turn complex social problems into purely personal emotion—is crucial for white people who want to understand our own incoherence. For me, Baldwin’s work has been a path down that frightening road.

I return to Baldwin and that path every few years or so. Like all great writers, Baldwin should not just be read, but re-read. After my most recent time spent with Baldwin to prepare this chapter, which included watching lots of video interviews, I realized that in recent years I have grown complacent, even a bit lazy in moral terms. For whatever reason, I had come to feel safe in the world, too self-satisfied; I was turning into the smug white person that it is so easy to be in this world.

In short: I realized I was losing the capacity for self-hatred. Baldwin helped me get that back, by reminding me that I am *the* nigger.

I am not a nigger, but *the* nigger. The difference in the article—*the* instead of *a*—is important. Here is Baldwin on the subject, taken from a 1964 public television documentary on racism in “liberal” San Francisco, in which he was featured:

Well I know this, and anyone who has ever tried to live knows this. What you say about somebody else, anybody else, reveals you. What I think of you as being is dictated by my own necessities, my own psychology, my own fears and desires. I'm not describing you when I talk about you, I'm describing me. Now here in this country we've got something called a nigger. It doesn't, in such terms, I beg you to remark, exist in any other country in the world. We have invented the nigger. I didn't invent him. White people invented him. I've always known—I had to know by the time I was 17 years old—that what you were describing was not me, and what you were afraid of was not me. It had to be something else. You had invented it so it had to be something you were afraid of, and you invested me with it. Now, if that's so, no matter what you've done to me, I can say to you this, and I mean it: I know you can't do any more and I've got nothing to lose. And I know and have always known—and really always, that is part of the agony—I've always known that I'm not a nigger. But if I am not the nigger, and if it's true that your invention reveals you, then who is the nigger? I am not the victim here. I know one thing from another. I know I was born, I'm going to suffer, and I'm going to die. The only way you get through life is to know the worst things about it. I know that a person is more important than anything else, anything else. I learned this because I've had to learn it. But you still think, I gather, that the nigger is necessary. Well, he's unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you. I'm going to give you your problem back. You're the nigger, baby, it isn't me.

[7]

I am the nigger.

Let me be clear: I am not using this term in the way it is thrown around in pop culture today. I am not a nigger/nigga, in the sense that white people use the term to try to create the illusion of being hip, being part of their imagined version of black culture. I am not weighing in on the discussion within the black community about the pros and cons of using the term. I am not claiming to be a nigger to shock or offend.

I'm using the term as white people commonly use it, to express that ugly mix of fear and contempt. I recognize for all the changes in the culture since Baldwin used it in 1964, the term retains its power. Following Baldwin, I want to use it not as a weapon against others but as a tool for self-examination. I want to point the word inward rather than outward. To be a nigger is to be degraded, deficient, diseased, maybe even essentially deranged. In the racial game, we white people truly are the niggers.

I am the nigger, and so is every white person in the United States. Baldwin is

right—white people are, as a class, less than fully human. We have created a world in which violence and coercion are routinely used to advance the narrow self-interest of the few at the expense of the many. That is inhuman. I am not a nigger, but as a white person I am *the* nigger. As long as the United States remains a white-supremacist society (more on that below), we can't escape this.

If the white projection of that status onto blacks was really about white fears of being those things, then I am those things. How could I not hate myself if I am a degraded person, not quite fully a person? If I am white in a white-supremacist society, and I want to claim any humanity, I have no choice but to hate the fact that we white people created the nigger, which means hating white people, which means hating myself.

There is a way out of this trap: Rather than pretend not to hate, we can acknowledge the hate so that it is possible not just to transcend it personally but to eliminate the need for it. I have to learn a loving self-hatred that can lead us out of this desperate place. If I am going to be honest, I can't evade the category; I have to help eliminate the category. We white people are the nigger until we get rid of the category we created. As long as the white-supremacist system continues, whether or not any white people ever aims the racial slur at a black person, then the idea of the nigger exists. And as long as that idea exists, any white person who wants to claim to be fully human has to accept that we are the nigger.

## NOT ALL WHITE PEOPLE ARE ALIKE

The first reaction I typically get from white people to such a statement is: "That isn't fair. You are assuming all white people are alike. We aren't all bad."

Let's pause for a moment on that kind of comment: White people don't like being lumped together, treated as if their race defines them, being held responsible for the actions of their racial cohort. White people want to be viewed as unique individuals, not as less-than by virtue of their color. That doesn't feel good. So let's sit with that feeling for a moment. Before we talk about the varieties of white people, let's spend just a minute or two or three trying to understand the experience of being reduced to a category, the experience that white America has imposed on others for a century or two or three.

Of course not all white people are the same, on the issue of race or anything else. To assert that white Americans are "the nigger" is not to pretend there is a single white experience or political position. This isn't about describing the characteristics of individual white people; it's about asking white people collectively to be responsible. To say all white people are responsible is not to suggest all white people are the same on anything, including our opinions about race. It's not to pretend we all have the same political or economic power or all are equally responsible for the racialized inequality in the United States. All I am saying is no white person gets to opt out.

From that recognition of a collective identity and responsibility, it is important to

think about the different ideological shades of white people. Just as with any ideology, there are many ways to organize the understandings white people have of whiteness. I'll divide that spectrum into reactionary, conservative, liberal, and radical white people.

Reactionary white people have never stopped believing in their inherent place on top of a racial hierarchy. They are proudly white supremacist; they still believe that black people—and usually also indigenous people, Latinos, and various other non-white groups—are biologically inferior. In recent decades this overt white supremacy has been pushed to the margins, but the racist backlash to the election of Barack Obama demonstrates how quickly that open expression of white supremacy can find its way back into the mainstream.

Conservative white people, who decry the ignorant bigotry of reactionaries, have abandoned genetic claims about racial inferiority and instead ponder how the pathologies of black and brown cultures might have developed. These conservatives—call them the “soft” white supremacists—are careful about how they speak in public, recognizing that in a multicultural society it is a more effective self-promotion strategy to prop up the mythology of white America (the hardest-working chosen people in the world) rather than attack non-white America.

Liberal white people, who are quick to scold reactionaries and the conservatives, are more likely to ask how white America can “help” non-white people than ask how white America can transform itself. Rather than challenge the fundamental structures of the nation-state and economy to eliminate racialized disparities, liberals look for ways to smooth off the rough edges. Tepid affirmative action programs are a big hit with liberals.

And then there are radical white people (the category in which I put myself), who are bold enough to critique it all. We are the ones with the courage to tell the truth. We don't hesitate to describe the contemporary United States as a white-supremacist society. We are the heroes. And we are so humble that we deny our own heroism.

## THE PROBLEM WITH WHITE HEROES

That last paragraph was meant to poke at white radicals. It was meant to poke at myself. It was meant to say: Don't forget, you are not the hero. You are the nigger.

Back to heroes: In general, I am skeptical of them. I think having heroes is almost always a bad idea because people are people, which means people are flawed, which means heroes are flawed, which means heroes betray us because we set them up to betray us. Why not just forgo heroes and avoid the whole messy business? Though everyone recognizes that no hero can withstand scrutiny—in other words, we all know that every hero is a person—we keep creating heroes, which means we eventually have to tear them down or lie about them, neither of which are attractive options.

Specifically, it's a very bad idea for white people to look for black heroes. When we hold onto black heroes, we focus on the admirable qualities of black individuals

rather than the collective responsibility of white society.

The only thing worse than white people celebrating black heroes is white people creating white heroes. So, first, we need to kill all the white heroes.

For radicals, it's easy to reject the white heroes put forward by the dominant culture, such as the "founding fathers." Whatever their political achievements, they were also moral monsters. They were rich guys with slaves.

Is it unfair to judge people of another era by the standards of our time, to impose our moral judgments on people from centuries past? Perhaps it would be, but to recognize that someone like Thomas Jefferson—who not only owned slaves but wrote a famous racist tract (*Notes on the State of Virginia*<sup>[8]</sup>) and raped at least one of those slaves (Sally Hemings)—was a moral monster does not require us to transport our values back in time. We can evaluate him on the standards of the best of the white community of his own time. Among them was Thomas Paine, another founding father, but one rarely discussed today, perhaps because he wasn't wealthy, had radical politics, and critiqued organized religion. Paine, a major figure in the establishment of the United States who is best known for his 1776 pamphlet "Common Sense," was a vocal opponent of slavery; the first article he published in colonial America was an anti-slavery essay,<sup>[9]</sup> and a few weeks later an anti-slavery society was formed in Philadelphia with Paine as a founding member. Certainly Jefferson was familiar with Paine and the arguments against slavery. Certainly Jefferson was aware of the existence of the idea that all humans had an equal claim to liberty and the argument that Africans should be considered human in these matters. Jefferson lacked either the intellectual capacity or moral clarity, or both, to do the right thing. Not exactly the stuff of heroism.

Conquering heroes—the heroes who populate the history books of the United States—are not really heroes at all, unless we abandon basic moral principles, of their time and ours. But just as dangerous as treating conquerors as heroes are the stories of people with privilege who reject the system that produces the privilege—the resistance hero. The man who allies himself with feminists. The white person who takes up the anti-white supremacy cause. The American who fights for the revolution abroad. These people are cast as a kind of anti-hero, but anti-hero is just a variation on hero, and I still contend: Heroes are dangerous, no matter what category.

## WHAT'S A WELL-MEANING WHITE PERSON TO DO?

If white people want to contribute to radical political movements, we should speak out against white supremacy. We have to do more than denounce the reactionaries, critique the conservatives, and challenge the liberals. We have to name white supremacy as the problem and offer a compelling analysis of that system.

First, the irony: Compelling critiques of white supremacy have been made, of course, by non-white people for centuries. When white people make the same critique, we are often taken more seriously precisely because we are white and presumed to speak more authoritatively. Black people who critique white supremacy

are often labeled as angry or whiny, while white people who make the same critique are brave. We're not only presumed to be "objective" and therefore intellectually superior, but because we are arguing against a system that benefits us, we are morally superior.

Second, the double bind: When people suggest that it is heroic to speak about white supremacy and to contribute to organizing efforts to challenge the system, most white radicals point out that we should not be lauded simply for doing the right thing. And in rejecting heroic status, by offering humility in response to the praise, we add to our anti-heroic heroism.

We white people need to tell our stories, especially to other white people. How do we do that without casting ourselves as heroes? Is there a way to tell the story of white privilege without writing ourselves into that story as the hero, as the white person who "gets it?" The more we white radicals emphasize that white people will never get it in the same way as non-white people, the more we make the point that we really do get it. The more we deny heroic status, the more we can't help but imply we really are heroes.

Here's an example: I was recently at a "courageous conversations" discussion at a local church, one of about forty people, men and women, a variety of racial/ethnic identities. Three black women presented information about health disparities. About fifteen minutes into the presentation, at a point when it wasn't appropriate to interrupt with questions, a white man did just that, saying he was concerned that "we all will leave here feeling good about ourselves" but with no clear action plan. One of the black women answered politely and returned to her presentation.

I muttered to myself that the white guy should shut up and listen before he diagnoses the problem with a session that was providing valuable information, most of it new to me. But the presenters got things back on track, and I kept that thought to myself.

About five minutes later, another white man raised his hand and, making no connection to the material that the speaker was discussing, expressed his desire to talk about actions. "We know the statistics," he said. "We need to do something." Again, one of the women presenting tried to acknowledge his concern and return to the subject, but this guy ignored her and repeated his call to action.

At that point, I spoke up, saying, "I think your interrupting the speaker is disrespectful, and I would like to hear the rest of the presentation." My point was clear: You are exerting your privilege to define the purpose of the event, overriding a black woman who is in authority at that moment. Such behavior was at odds with his stated desire to contribute to an anti-racist project.

The white man got angry, kept talking, and finally blurted out, "Well, I don't like you either," though I had not attacked him personally and didn't know him. Apparently satisfied, he shut up and the program resumed.

I believe it was appropriate for me, as a white person, to challenge another white person who was unaware of how domineering his behavior was, especially in the context of the racial and gender dynamics. It seemed unfair to leave it to the

presenter to sanction him, which would have left her open to accusations of not being willing to listen to feedback. I think I did the right thing. As we mingled after the event, several people thanked me.

But even if I did the right thing, I didn't feel good about it. By intervening, I was casting myself in the role of hero. I got to be the self-reflective white guy, compared with the clueless white guy. I got to be the white guy who "got it."

## DRIVING WHILE WHITE

Here's one more example: Most discussions of "driving while black/brown" focus on the experiences of non-white people facing the threat of discriminatory treatment from law enforcement officers. But focusing on the flip side, how most white people don't worry about being stopped by police, helps us understand what it means to have privilege in a white-supremacist society. I often use a personal experience to explain that:

Late one summer night I was heading home after a long day at work. I was wearing an old t-shirt and shorts, driving a decaying 1970s-era Volkswagen Beetle, looking pretty raggedy. At an intersection I went through a yellow light (OK, maybe it had turned red) and saw the flashing lights in my rearview mirror. I pulled off the busy street onto a deserted side street and waited for the police officer. I was hot, sweaty, and tired, and I was in a bad mood. I complied with the instructions of the cop but with attitude.

When I opened the glove box to get my registration and insurance card, a small folding knife that I keep for emergencies popped out. The officer, who was white, asked me politely, "Do you mind if I hold that knife while we talk?" I gave it to him, and he ran my plates, wrote me a ticket, and returned the knife. I drove home.

When telling that story in an audience with non-white people, I routinely ask: What might have happened to me if I were black or brown? Most of the people laugh, recognizing that the officer would have been more likely to have treated the knife as a threat. One young black man asked: "Do you mean what would have happened after I'm on the ground with a gun to my head?" He wasn't suggesting that every police officer, white or not, is going to harass every non-white citizen in every traffic stop, but simply was recognizing the patterns in the targeting of black and brown people and the disproportionate use of force against non-white people.<sup>[10]</sup>

In telling that story, in acknowledging my privilege, I can't help but cast myself as the hero. I'm the kind of enlightened white person who can reflect on privilege in a white-supremacist society and see the truth.

Well, I can see most of the truth. During one talk when I told that story, I saw a middle-aged black man in the back of the room shaking his head, as if he disapproved of my account. That made me nervous, and I kept my eye on him through the discussion. Finally I asked him if he would like to comment, and he said that I didn't recognize all the ways my privilege had influenced my actions that night. "You pulled off onto a side street," he said. "I would never do that."

His challenge increased my nervousness. I explained that I had been pulled over on a main city street with a lot of traffic, and that I didn't want to block a lane so had turned off. "I understand why you did it," he said. "I'm telling you I wouldn't have." He said he would have stayed on the busy street, in view of as many people as possible.

I finally saw his point. My privilege dictated my choices long before the knife jumped out of the glove box. I could pull onto the deserted street because I didn't have to think about the potential consequences of being out of view, because I couldn't imagine a cop harassing or hurting me. I fumbled a bit more, trying to sound smart, and then realized there was nothing I could do but recognize that his analysis was correct. In telling a story designed to demonstrate that I'm one of the white people who gets it, all I did was make clear that I didn't get it all the way. Everyone ended up laughing, both at me and with me.

I still use that anecdote in lectures, updated to include that man's analysis. The story is designed in part to remind us white people that we aren't the experts with the definitive account and that it's important to listen. But in offering that story, of the heroic white person who is so humble that he doesn't mind using a story about his own shortcoming to illustrate the political point, I am simply reinforcing my own anti-hero heroic status.

And now, in writing down this account of the false heroism of white people, I am doing the same thing. By recognizing how there are times I don't get it, I am demonstrating how I really do get it. There's no way for me to speak without casting myself as the heroic anti-hero. The only way to avoid this trap is to not speak, but to not tell the story of white privilege is to abandon our responsibility to use white privilege to undermine it. To not speak because I feel immobilized by this trap would be cowardly.

But even making that point is problematic, since it highlights the struggle for me, a white guy. See how difficult this is for me? See how heroic I am to keep going, even when it's so difficult? Thinking about this too much can drive a person just a bit crazy.

## THE RIGHT KIND OF CRAZY

This may sound like the self-indulgence of a white male professor (three identity categories especially prone to self-indulgence). Even if it is self-indulgent, I don't think I'm idiosyncratic. A question for the white people reading this: How many of you secretly write a story in your head in which you are a heroic anti-hero? How many of you have ever felt a sense of being special because a non-white person described you as "the white person who gets it?" How many of you feel a little creepy about this?

Most of the white people I know in political organizing are aware of this trap. We know that our value as public speakers and writers is rooted in this irony that being white gives our critique of white supremacy greater weight. As a middle-aged white man with a tenured academic position, my status not only gives me credibility but also a platform from which to speak and job protection if I choose to speak critically.

Since I have that position, I think my job is to be as radical as possible, to be the craziest person in the room, in a political sense. Much of the allegedly progressive work around race today has been reduced to watered-down diversity talk and celebrations of multiculturalism. There's nothing wrong with diversity and multiculturalism, unless those frameworks eclipse the much-needed critiques of white supremacy, as they routinely do. We need to keep the focus on the political, social, and economic effects of the enduring racism that is woven into the fabric of the United States. People with privilege can provide a service by pushing at the edges, working to create more space for non-white people to speak as bluntly as they want.

The best way I've found to do this is to identify the United States as a white-supremacist society. Even at a time when we have a black president, it's crucial to understand that we are still a white-supremacist society. The racial justice movements forced civil rights legislation and created a more civilized culture on many fronts, but we are still a white-supremacist society. In as many places and as many ways as I can, I repeat: The United States is a white-supremacist society. To most white people that sounds crazy.

In the United States today, everyone except an overt racist acknowledges our white-supremacist past and condemns the inherent injustice of that system, though often qualifying their positions with a demand that we see those historical crimes "in context." That leads to routine denial of the extent of the genocidal campaigns against indigenous people, the degree to which economic development was the product of African slave labor, the depth of the exploitation of Asian workers, and the brutal consequences of the U.S. aggression that took over Mexican territory.

But even with that hedging, white supremacy is widely understood to be a moral evil. That's why in the dominant culture, the term "white supremacist" is applied only to those overt racists, such as members of neo-Nazi groups or the Klan, and is not used to describe U.S. society. The United States was once a white-supremacist society, but how could that term be accurate today? We can answer the question by assessing the ideological and material realities—the way people think and the way people live.

First, the ideological: Studies consistently show that white-supremacist attitudes endure, even in people who are not overtly racist. Equivalent resumes sent to employers produce higher callback rates for a job interview when the applicant has a white-sounding name than a black-sounding name.<sup>[11]</sup> White people watching a video of a neighborhood evaluate the quality of the place as lower if there are non-white people walking the streets compared with white people in the frame.<sup>[12]</sup> Whatever the stated beliefs of white America, racist attitudes are deeply woven into the fabric of the culture. That's how we think, feel, and react.

Second, the material: There is a racialized gap on measures of wealth and well-being in the United States. On average, white people are doing better than non-white people, and the gap between white and black America is particularly pronounced. Even more dramatic is the fact that on some of those measures the gap between white and black has grown in the decades since the legislative achievements of the

civil-rights movement, while on other measures the pace of the march to equality is so slow that it will be decades or centuries before we reach parity.<sup>[13]</sup>

The United States is the most affluent society in history. It is also a nation with a “can-do” spirit that believes that anything we want to achieve can be achieved. If the wealthiest nation in history claims to be committed to the end of racial injustice but remains white supremacist, both in ideological and material terms, what is the appropriate term to describe the racial system of the contemporary United States?

Only a crazy person would suggest that the United States in the twenty-first century is a white-supremacist society? That’s the job of white people committed to a radical analysis: To be crazy, the right way.

## GROWING UP

White people are the nigger until the category disappears. That means that self-respecting white people should focus not simply on helping non-white people deal with the worst of white racism (whether that help comes individually or through government) but on radically transforming society to eliminate white-supremacist ideas and conditions. If we white people don’t want to be the nigger, that’s the only way out.

I believe that transformation cannot happen unless we actively link the struggle against white supremacy to the struggles against patriarchy and capitalism as well.<sup>[14]</sup> A radical approach to race requires an equally radical approach to gender and class. We must recognize that whatever short-term material benefits we accrue in these systems, they lock us into what are essentially death cults: White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism are systems based on the naturalness and inevitability of hierarchy, of domination and subordination. To accept that is to surrender our humanity and join those death cults. The most important thinking in the movements for racial, gender, and economic justice has always pointed not to reform of systems but to the end of the systems.

Baldwin retained that radical spirit throughout his life. A year before his death he spoke at the National Press Club and gave several sharply worded answers to questions that amounted essentially to, “why don’t black people get over it?” Just as he did in those powerful essays in the early 1960s, he threw the question right back to the mainly white audience and asked them why the white community won’t be responsible for itself:

White people don’t know who they are or where they come from, and that’s why you think I’m a problem. But I am not the problem, your history is. And as long as you pretend you don’t know your history you are going to be the prisoner of it. And there’s no question of your liberating me because you can’t liberate yourselves. We’re in this together. And finally, when white people—quote unquote white people—talk about progress in relationship to black people all they are saying and all they can possibly mean by the word progress is how quickly and

how thoroughly I become white. I don't want to become white. I want to grow up. And so should you.<sup>[15]</sup>

That plea for us all to “grow up” struck me. That's exactly what I want to do, to grow up and out of my own compulsion to play the hero, to grow into a recognition that I must face the way in which I am the nigger.

I am in my mid-fifties, closer to the end of my life than the beginning. I've accepted that the fallen world into which I was born will fall further before redemption is likely. I have found ways to stay part of social justice movements even though I see little possibility of much progressive change in my remaining years. I am happy to keep working, even with no likelihood of progress in my lifetime and no guarantee of success in the longer term.

In taking the long view, I am rooting myself in religious traditions. By that I don't mean a particular set of supernatural claims, but rather an approach to the tragic nature of human existence, to the profound failures of the modern human. Earlier I used the term “prophetic” to describe Baldwin, who was—both during his life and after his death—often called a prophet. Baldwin seemed to prefer the term “witness.” When asked in an interview what he believed he was witnessing, Baldwin said:

Witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see. . . . In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is.<sup>[16]</sup>

Baldwin, who was raised in a strict Christian home,<sup>[17]</sup> uses these terms ecumenically, recognizing the power of the narrative from which the terms come without needing to embrace all the claims of the tradition. For me, that is part of why his writing and speaking have such power. He could invoke God without imposing a sectarian notion of God:

To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others. Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.<sup>[18]</sup>

I don't like heroes, and I don't call Baldwin a hero. But I pay attention to those who have had the courage to bear witness. The goal is not to glorify the witness but to strive to live up to the challenge. The goal is to grow up, to be responsible adults. That requires a commitment to knowing, refusing to be willfully ignorant. And it means renouncing the wishful innocence that has been the hallmark of white America's

mythology. It is our task to know and to name, honestly. We are not an innocent people. As Baldwin emphasizes, to claim innocence is morally unacceptable:

[A]nd this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember, *most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.<sup>[19]</sup>

## THE END OF HATE

I believe that white people are afraid to face the truth because they are afraid that the truth can only lead to self-loathing, to hating ourselves and other white people. That is precisely what happens, but there is a path out. Baldwin, speaking about a conversation with a friend who had accused him of hating white people because they were white, explains it:

[T]he moment she said it I realized it was true. It was as though I was looking at some pit at my feet, and the moment I realized it was true, if you see what I mean, it ceased to be true. Once I realized, and could accept in myself, in fact, it was true I hated white people, then I didn't hate them anymore.<sup>[20]</sup>

We transcend hate not by pretending to love but by acknowledging the reasons we hate. For white people, that starts not by looking at people of color to try to understand them, but by looking at ourselves and trying to fathom how we got to this place. As Baldwin said, "The only way you get through life is to know the worst things about it."

For people with unearned privilege in an unjust system, this is the worst, to look in the mirror honestly, both to acknowledge the damage we have done to others and to see what we have done to ourselves.

## NOTES

1. The assigned readings were: Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," pp. 289–302; and "A Time to Break Silence," pp. 231–44; Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, George Breitman, ed. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1965), Chapter 3, "The Ballot or the Bullet," pp. 23–44; and Chapter 5,

“Letters from Abroad,” pp. 58–63; and James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), “Color,” pp. 673–77, and “The White Man’s Guilt,” pp. 722–27.

2. See Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000).
3. See Marable Manning, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011).
4. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, George Breitman, ed. (New York: Grove, 1965), Chapter 3, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” p. 26.
5. Karen Thorsen, dir., *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1990).
6. James Baldwin, “White Man’s Guilt,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), pp. 410–11. Originally published in *Ebony*, August 1965.
7. James Baldwin, quoted in “Take this Hammer,” produced by KQED-TV for National Educational Television, 1964. Online at 41:15, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187041>. Also online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0L5fciA6AU>.
8. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html>.
9. <http://www.thomaspaine.org/Archives/afri.html>.
10. For information on how this plays out in New York City, see Center for Constitutional Rights, “Racial Disparity in NYPD Stops-and-Frisks,” <http://ccrjustice.org/stopandfrisk>.
11. Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination,” *American Economic Review*, 94:4 (2004): 991–1013; Devah Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
12. Maria Krysan, Reynolds Farley, and Mick P. Couper, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Racial Beliefs and Residential Segregation,” *Du Bois Review*, 5:1 (2008): 5–26.
13. I summarize this data in my book *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2005), pp. 4–6. See also United for a Fair Economy, “State of the Dream 2012: The Emerging Majority,” [http://faireconomy.org/sites/default/files/State\\_of\\_the\\_Dream\\_2012.pdf](http://faireconomy.org/sites/default/files/State_of_the_Dream_2012.pdf).
14. See Robert Jensen, “Beyond Race, Gender, and Class: Reclaiming the Radical Roots of Social Justice Movements,” *Global Dialogue*, 12:2 (Summer/Autumn 2010), <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=487>.
15. James Baldwin, speaking at National Press Club, December 10, 1986. Online at 40:03, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYka\\_Tq\\_mTI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYka_Tq_mTI&feature=related).
16. Julius Lester, “James Baldwin—Reflections of a Maverick,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1984. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-reflections.html>
17. For an account, see his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Dell, 1985/1953), which is typically described as semi-autobiographical.
18. James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected*

*Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), p. 234.

19. James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), p. 292. This essay was originally published in *The Progressive* magazine in 1962 and was subsequently published along with another essay ("Down at the Cross—Letter from a Region of My Mind," first published in *The New Yorker*) in book form as *The Fire Next Time* in 1963 by Dial Press.

20. "Race, Hate, Sex, and Color: A Conversation with James Baldwin and Colin MacInnes, James Mossman/1965," in Fred L. Stanley and Louis H. Pratt, eds., *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p. 46–47.