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James Baldwin and the *Unhistoric* Life of Race

In James Baldwin's eyes, the United States cannot end racial inequality while its white citizens are "trapped in history."¹ The phrase "trapped in history" occurs in two distinguished essays, "Stranger in the Village" (1953) and "My Dungeon Shook" (1962). Whites are ensnared in the fantasy of whiteness and have created a segregated world that allows them to treat blacks as both inferior and completely separate from them. Through the lens of white supremacy whites evade black humanity; they see only "the Negro they wished to see" ("A Fly in the Buttermilk": 169). In "Dungeon," "Stranger," and other essays, Baldwin emphasizes that in addition to dehumanizing blacks, whites debase themselves in making their racist fantasies manifest ("Dungeon": 336). Baldwin, however, does not see this as an inevitable practice, and he insists that if whites recognize and "understand it," they can be released from the trap of history (336). In reconsidering Baldwin as a spokesperson and champion of racial progress during the 1960s civil rights era, it is important to focus on the concept of being trapped in history, which for Baldwin is not just about transforming laws and statutes but making manifest a "change of heart" for whites ("The Fire Next Time": 370). Being historically "trapped"

is the locus for what prevents the social transformation necessary to create just and equal social relations and citizenship in the United States.

What is interesting about Baldwin's notion of the historical trap is the relationship between changing laws of white society and changing hearts or moral consciousness. On the one hand, Baldwin insists on downplaying the immediate significance of legal cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and on the other, Baldwin sees segregation laws that the *Brown* ruling overturns as strictures that keep whites trapped. In Baldwin's analysis of racist social ills and his thoughts about how to eradicate them, he disavows and affirms the efficacy of the law. This essay evaluates Baldwin as a civil rights actor by examining his diagnosis and prescriptions of social change that involve civil rights law and necessary changes in whites' moral consciousness, as well as the postsegregation vision that Baldwin suggests can occur once whites move beyond being "trapped in history." To this point, whites escaping or being released from the trap of history, in the legal and moral sense, is the end of whiteness. The question is, what does Baldwin's concept of an eradicated historical trap for whites do to the black collective racial politics created to combat it?

So much of Baldwin's insight into the racial conflict during the civil rights era is at the same time a provocative focus on future social and political possibilities. For instance, Baldwin recognizes and lauds the work of organizations such as the NAACP, yet these worthy efforts to transform racist laws, in Baldwin's view, have done little to effect the pressing immediate concern: whites' "evasion of the Negro's humanity" ("Nobody Knows My Name": 192). Baldwin returns to this evasion repeatedly ("Dungeon": 335), describing whites as thinking of blacks as "not really men but cattle" ("Stranger in the Village": 85). Thus, in a progressive future of racial equality, Baldwin perceives whites as seeing the opposite: recognizing blacks as human as well as discontinuing dehumanizing social practices. According to Baldwin, these transformations are not accomplished easily; they are traumatic and terrifying precisely because they involve "risking oneself" ("Fire": 370). Baldwin's call for whites to embrace a transformative sense of self-risk and dispense with social attachments and delusions that dehumanize whites and people of color "involves such an overhauling of all that gave us our identity" ("The Dangerous Road before Martin Luther King": 262). When Baldwin imagines this self-risk, he is thinking of its locus in the historical transformation of individual and collective identity—a historical activity to escape the trap of history. Lauren Berlant describes this

as a “*historical* present that suggests a shift in historic proportions that pervasively affect the continuity of everyday life” (Berlant 2008: 4–5).

If legal and moral dehumanization by whites brings everyday continuity, figured in Baldwin’s white racial trap, a “shift in historic proportions” brings whites recognition of black humanity as well as a progressive discontinuity. Within the 1960s, Baldwin’s essays produce a post-trap/postsegregation future beyond the politics of racial collectivity established by Jim Crow social conflict. I identify this new mode available in Baldwin’s essays as the unhistoric life of race. Baldwin’s account of black legal challenges and the necessity of changing whites’ thinking about blacks forecasts the undoing of organizing politically around race. Hence, I submit that Baldwin discloses the unhistoric life of race in his discussions of the dehumanization–humanization opposition that defines the parameters of being trapped by and escaping racist historical consciousness. Baldwin’s deployment of the trap of history, then, is his way of dealing with whites’ debasing of others as well as his recognition of the humanizing perceptions that could result from being released from the racist trap. When Baldwin writes that whites can be released from the trap of history, he reveals the unhistoric life of race. But what does the marking of white supremacy’s demise have to do with black antiracist politics? If black intellectuals and artists cannot see beyond raced-based politics or see when race becomes much less relevant to pressing political conflicts, are they also “trapped in history”?

J. Hillis Miller (2001: 79–80) depicts the unhistorical life as social phenomena that cannot actually be objectively managed, recorded, and analyzed historically.² The unhistoric life that I read in Baldwin’s seminal essays is closer to Nietzsche’s idea of the unhistorical dimension of history. In Baldwin’s version, the end of racist dehumanization not only manifests the end of whites’ ahistorical thinking about blacks but both groups’ access to a “new current of life,” to “evolving culture,” where whites no longer cling “relentlessly to the past”; the past really dies (Nietzsche 2010: 67, 61). What I read in Baldwin’s use of the dehumanization–humanization axis has less to do with whether racial phenomena can be recorded or with a postsegregation moment in which all memory of racial difference fails, but rather when it no longer makes sense for whites and blacks to construct their political goals in racialized grand narratives of progress.

Baldwin critics have always been interested in the multifaceted aspects of Baldwin’s views on the pathways to full humanity and social equality but have not attended to how the problem of dehumanization

imbues Baldwin's use of the concept "trapped in history." About Baldwin's deployment of history during "the hothouse of the civil rights era," David Blight (2011: 208–9) writes that Baldwin urged whites especially to embrace history's stories and face its terrors. Probing metaphysical aspects, Walter Muyumba asserts that in the context of the civil rights era, Baldwin claims, that "without acknowledging Negro humanity, white Americans can never realize their own human conditions" (Muyumba 2009: 122). Marlon Ross (1999: 33) argues that the sexual narrative in *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is in fact a racial one, because in Baldwin's view, sexual crisis and racial crisis rely on the same moral evasion of truth.³ Whether emphasizing the dangers of mind and spirit, historical consciousness, or the inextricability of discourses of race and gender, what these critics and others have in common is that they uncover hidden workings of racialized social identity but overlook what Rolland Murray (2007: 39) calls the "potential undoing" of race in Baldwin.⁴ There is no doubt, as critics point out, that Baldwin's work is driven by an antiracist critique, but, in my view, that critique contains a humanizing–dehumanizing opposition that captures the undoing force of race to which Murray calls our attention. The racial undoing I discern in Baldwin's essays is not just about abandoning white supremacy, but it also implies that blacks must challenge, give up, or let go of aspects of black culture that politically minded activists find significant for collective racial progress.

I pursue the unhistoric life of race by looking at Baldwin's assessment of Henry James's characters in the 1960s (published in the 1980s) through which Baldwin examines how individuals use others as receptacles or things for passion, grief, or retaining innocence, all of which manifest feelings of historical confinement. After looking at Baldwin's use of James, I take a closer look at how Baldwin's notion of whites' "guarding and keeping" emerges in the context of whites' celebration over the *Brown v. Board* decision. What is more, in essays such as "The Uses of the Blues," Baldwin shows how black music sheds light on how blacks resist the punishing forces of white supremacy. However, equally significant, if one follows Baldwin's arguments about being trapped in history, is that blacks may also have to give up or change their relationship to their own political instruments. I conclude by establishing how Baldwin's depiction of black music in the civil rights era offers a glimpse of new self-relations, which do not offer new forms of black politics, but instead trouble all notions of politics rooted in racial collectivity.

Rediscovering Jimmy

On more than one occasion, Baldwin captures a version of the insolubility of 1960s race problems that occur solely through changes in the segregation laws without wider changes in whites' beliefs and attitudes. Interestingly enough, Baldwin consistently expresses his admiration for Henry James as a writer to understand precisely the choices he believed whites faced in the civil rights era. Lynn Orilla Scott (2009) examines Baldwin's challenges to whites during civil rights protests, and I would like to add to her work by demonstrating how Baldwin drew on James as a way of understanding the historic and psychic crisis of consciousness and the self-risk necessary for traversing the traps of racist history. James was very important for the style of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which critics have discussed (see Leeming 1986 and Newman 1974). James's fictional situations, as Kenneth Warren and Sara Blair render them, also have varying connections to the racialized political unconscious of the United States (see Porter 1989: 125–26; Warren 1993; and Blair 1996). One cannot be certain that Baldwin specifically was interested in the US social conflict over race revealed by Warren and Blair. Baldwin does however find the idea of self as journey that he read in James's fiction as crucially relevant for racialized social conflict in the United States.

James, more specifically, also helps Baldwin reflect on how characters use others to avoid the terrors of risking their own selves. Baldwin finds the moral difficulties faced by Lambert Strether (*The Ambassadors* [1903]) and Hyacinth Robinson (*Princess Casamassima* [1886]) to be related to the problem of race in America in the 1960s (see Leeming 1986: 48). This is not only James's work but what is shared by Baldwin the individual and James's fictional characters. The American traveling to Europe as a trope is the situation that forced Baldwin to think, recalibrate, and eventually see the "ordinary as something they [the characters] can no longer presume" (Berlant 2008: 5). Baldwin expresses this directly: in Paris, he states, "I got over something" (Leeming 1986: 53). This feeling of getting over is the occasion and activity that shapes Baldwin's conversations about social inequality in the 1960s, recognizing the other as a real person, a kind of racial undoing that changes one's relationship to racial difference, which anticipates the unhistoric life of race.

Through James's characters, Baldwin contemplates racial politics, but one does not need to focus on racial identity alone to bring out what Baldwin sees in James. The crucial question about James's characters is

whether they are willing to pay “the price of the ticket” (“Introduction,” *Price*, xiv). Someone willing to pay the price is willing to face terrifying challenges that can unravel his or her ideal self; for whites, believing in being white and strictures of white supremacy support it. The fallout of not paying the price is “a certain inability to perceive the reality of others” (Baldwin quoted in Leeming 1986: 49). For whites, they cannot see the reality of blacks. Baldwin equates not seeing someone as a “real person” with being a “receptacle” for another’s troubles or anguish. If one avoids the troubles and anguish crucial to one’s self journey, then one is not paying the price of the ticket, which for Baldwin is ultimately the path to freedom and a fulfilled life. Whites, as Baldwin depicts them, use blacks and American Indians as receptacles and do not see them as real people, instead using them as things to avoid paying. But just because whites use blacks as things, does it mean this is how they see them?

In “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin (1985: 85) recalls that whites first saw blacks as people to be purchased as commodities; this vision is the imagined origin of black dehumanization. Furthermore, Baldwin insists that whites think that blacks do not really exist and that they deny that the “Nigger” or “Indian” is “their kinsman—blood of their blood, created by them” (85). This denial is another failure to recognize and treat blacks and Native Americans as fully human. To this, Baldwin writes, “our dehumanization of the Negro, then, is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: our loss of identity is the price we pay for the annulment of his” (“Many Thousands Gone”: 67). The ultimate effect, then, is manifold dehumanization; whites’ debasing of blacks debases whites. Baldwin uses James’s characterization to conceive of the dynamics of whites’ dehumanization of blacks and themselves, where the existential “self as journey” and racial conflict are mutually informing.

In Baldwin’s economy, making a real person unreal or devoid of personhood is perfectly achievable. Baldwin thinks the destabilizing power of the thing is always suppressed, avoided, or used against the person-thing. If Americans keep their “nigger,” then, according to Baldwin, they will be bound by a failure to live and see the truth about themselves and the world. To escape this historical dynamic, whites must “understand it,” face their terrors, the anguish of truth, and fantasies that allow them to sustain the racist regime that denies blacks civil rights.

What does one need to know to get out of the trap of history, to see and know another person as a “real person,” as fully human? In France, Baldwin said he was able to “leave behind the paranoia and rage” (quoted in Leeming

1986: 53), which allowed him to face America from a different position. This position actually made the leaving behind possible (Leeming 1986: 54). Leaving behind is not necessarily forgetting but is changing one's relationship to the object of experience. As a "stranger" in Leukerbad, Switzerland, Baldwin admitted that getting over seems not to be getting over at all, and that he could not get over the resemblance of the name *neger* because it sounded too much like *nigger* ("Stranger": 81). *Nigger*, for him, is personal and familial degradation expressed in the phrase, "Your mother was a nigger" (81). Here, he invokes the notion of being "trapped by history," and Paris offered him something that happens enough in Leukerbad. "Silence in Paris" forced him to "listen to what he had been avoiding" (Leeming 1986: 55). This is how Baldwin takes Jimmy out of *nigger*: "Not Jimmy the black boy but Jimmy." This is liberating for Baldwin because it allows him to see and to touch the reality of others (54). Baldwin also imagines this loss and gain in collective transformation that can be articulated in distinct individual terms, where he sheds "paranoia and rage," accepting *nigger* only to conquer it. When Baldwin went to Paris, he wrote: "I realized I was American when I came to France" (48–49). The price of this realization was an intensity of alienation, terror, and outsidersness, a rattling of his interior that yielded a new self-relation where he shed *nigger* and gained Jimmy.

Baldwin still is somewhat elusive here. At the center of Baldwin's reflections on James and the 1960s, whites debase themselves in their failure to recognize blacks' humanity and personhood. But what is positively asserted is the opposite: it takes a full notion of a human to be dehumanized and degraded, but the initial negation is one that cannot be proven or completed, because recognizing the human already initially occurred in the need, opportunity, and ability to rob someone of his humanity. If James's characters dehumanize others because they avoid life, avoid the reality and equality of others, how was the human receptacle's life established as something to avoid, something threatening to his thinking about or acting in reality? Again, dehumanization in Baldwin operates in tandem with humanization, and the contradiction they both construct is not static but dynamic, because in recognizing it, one sees the necessity of both but the falsity of one. Baldwin was called "nigger," but he was never less than human. Still, Baldwin needs to be the "nigger" to get over the [oppressive force of the word] *nigger* and get to Jimmy, even though he was Jimmy, however unrealized, all along. Without seeing a contradiction, exhibited here as Jimmy and *nigger*, the inferior inhumanity is revealed as a true moment of departure and never discovered as false. Reading the *nigger*/Jimmy opposition further unveils

how white subjects need to dehumanize blacks as receptacles because of their humanity and not in spite of it. What I am trying to expose here is that Baldwin goes to James because James's characters are confronted by the problem of using people outside of any explicit racial rationale, and what I get from Baldwin's reading of that is an existential assertion that people have various reasons for needing others as human receptacles, because they are human and can be used as such. This existential claim casts light on how contingent and specific Baldwin thinks of US racial dynamics in the 1960s, and yet he still contemplates other ways subjects trapped themselves in illusions of social identity for normative coherency. In the "Stranger" essay, he concurs with James Joyce. He writes, "Joyce is right about history being a nightmare . . . but it may be the nightmare from which no one can awaken" ("Stranger," 81). I take this to mean history resurfaces unannounced with different traps for different social attachments that are difficult for people to leave behind.

The end of the specific racial problematic, then, does not end the history or politics of social identity. Glancing at *Giovanni's Room* makes this idea even more apparent. *Giovanni's Room* manifests social and historical transformation in terms of gender and sexuality.⁵ David, the protagonist, avoids the very type of psychic challenges that Baldwin demands subjects must face. David runs from the "guilt of terror" of homosexuality and the suicide of Giovanni, his lover, for which he feels responsible (Baldwin 1956: 152). David turns his fiancée, Hella, into a receptacle for his anguish, thus turning Hella into a thing, dehumanizing her. Even though one cannot deny that gender politics defines *Giovanni's Room*, it is a mistake to believe that it operates outside of or in opposition to the existential frustrations that Baldwin sees as central to his notion of experience. Baldwin reiterates a profound claim that conjoins race, gender, and combinations of both: one is always trapped by some histories; social interaction produces them, and a subject must face them. About Baldwin, Charles Newman writes, "[The] form changes and the substance remains" (Newman 1974: 62–63). However, I am using *Giovanni's Room* to claim the opposite. The substance changes but the form does not. *Giovanni's Room* gives another historical angle that does not confront the race problem specifically (as US white male normativity), but rather shows that the trap of history is not singular but always available in multiple layers of social history, which may or may not overlap at different times throughout one's life. Baldwin does not create a fantasy of transcendence; instead, I read in his work a multidimensionality of how one experiences history. In changing one aspect of it, for

example, about race, other urgent political realities come into focus in an era after racial politics.

In the hotbed of civil rights strife, Baldwin thought about the terrifying promise of change. The unhistoric life of race is that activity that encourages new relations and contemplates a shift in history from racialized social conflict to social conflict and pursuits of equality that bring other necessities into focus. Thus, one can escape the trappings of racialized social conflict, but at the same time, Baldwin would also insist that avoiding people's humanity cannot be just about avoiding race. There are many things in one's overall experience that groups and individuals find, for one reason or another, to avoid or adjust their worldview as an escape from a reality that confronts them. Baldwin's trap itself relays the unhistoric life of race, when race, as a collective political focus on groups' racial dynamics, becomes no longer salient or no longer captures the major obstructions to social progress and political equality. This means that Baldwin's racial thinking on civil rights is not always trying to reproduce itself, imagining not only the promise but also the necessity that a racial collectivity must be let go by whites. Crucial to this concept is legal segregation and other sanctioned practices that reinforce white supremacy. In the last section, I examine the implication this has for black counterracist political strategies.

Undoing Law and Racial Undoing

Baldwin closes "A Fly in the Buttermilk" with the following: "Segregation has worked brilliantly" (169). The law permitted whites "with scarcely any pangs of conscience, whatever, to create, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see" (169). Segregation's end made whites confront the hard task of "reexamin[ing] a way of life" (169). As Baldwin says throughout his writing, whites seeing the "Negro they wished to see" evacuates black humanity, and only whites' reexamination of themselves can restore it. As Baldwin articulates it here, segregation laws allow whites to trap themselves in a racist fantasy, and the postsegregation moment makes way for the hard thing that can vanquish the delusion. Additionally, when it comes to ending segregation, Baldwin heralds the NAACP for being the "only organization which has struggled, with admirable single-mindedness and skill, to raise him to the level of a citizen" ("Faulkner and Desegregation": 148). Baldwin also criticizes William Faulkner's middle-of-the-road support of desegregation (148). Baldwin's rebuke of Faulkner and validation of the NAACP's efforts substantiates how important changing the segregation laws was.

Yet, assessing what the changing racist law actually changed about whites' treatment of blacks eight years later, Baldwin also calls the overturning of school segregation laws after *Brown v. Board* meaningless. There are contextual reasons for Baldwin's frustrations after *Brown*, but my point here is to bring out that Baldwin's thinking about law and its dehumanizing effects are multifaceted. Baldwin would agree with Ian Haney Lopez (2006: 79) that laws construct races and enforce, directly and indirectly, racialized social hierarchy, but equally important for Baldwin is how imagining both the force of law and its meaninglessness discloses racial undoing that releases whites from being "trapped in history" after the end of legalized racial inequality.⁶ Additionally, Baldwin suggests that the postsegregation moment, visualized within his reflections during civil rights protest, pressures racial collectivity in ways that neither black nor white factions are ready to embrace.

Contemplating racial difference and US social structures, Baldwin claims, "At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself" ("Stranger": 88). If segregation law is changed, then one does not immediately solve the problem that Baldwin fixates on—whites' normative fantasy of an "absolute sacrosanct way of life" (88) that does not treat blacks as real or equal human beings. Despite his immediate focus, Baldwin takes a long historical view:

And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans, lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession—either to come to terms with this necessity, or to find a way around it, or (most usually) to find a way of doing both things at once. The resulting spectacle, at once foolish and dreadful, led someone to make the quite accurate observation that "Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men." (88)

The strictures of white supremacy allow whites to come to terms with or "find a way around" coming to terms with "accepting the black man as one of themselves" (88). The social apparatus of law, the denial of full citizenship, and official and governmental dehumanization all reflect a primordial violation, which Baldwin thinks began when whites first saw blacks not as brothers in the human family, but as commodities and instruments of use (85). This long historical view makes the idea of transforming racial equality, rooted in changing institutional structures such as the law, clearly deeper in scope than the law's reach.

When Baldwin highlights an anonymous person's observation that "the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men," he points out racialized objects of the mind that cannot be defined and controlled (88); the "Negro-in-America" in the white's mind is unruly and irrational. This means that, according to Baldwin, blacks' identities are never stable, which forces whites to erect new and better fictions and social structures alike to keep the Negro cogent and intact: blacks must always be a type of inferior receptacle. Whites also remain trapped in history, or as Caryl Phillips calls it, have "willful myopia" (Phillips 2011: 242). But the question is, does race fully explain this myopic relation to one's immediate social reality? Baldwin repeatedly emphasizes that whites have to give up normative conventions of whiteness, yet he also points to aspects of the historical trap that may not be ever fully treatable and will always resurface. This persistence of the psychic and spiritual problem that underscores white supremacy comes out in Baldwin's critique of white liberals who continue to celebrate racial progress after the *Brown* decision.

Baldwin, acknowledging a slight sense of guilt, felt it necessary to proclaim the *Brown* decision "meaningless" ("Fire": 371). The context for this phrasing is white liberals' celebration of the decision itself as if it equaled instant transformation or a sudden full recognition that blacks were "blood of their blood" (Leeming 1986: 50). When Baldwin writes about the *Brown* decision's meaninglessness in terms of progress, he addresses this more directly. Despite the violence and racial strife that continued around the *Brown* decision, Baldwin finds whites overly congratulatory of the court victory. He uses this challenge of white self-congratulation to ask what "progress" meant as whites heralded the victory. He writes:

For a hard example, white Americans congratulate themselves on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the schools; they suppose, in spite of the mountain of evidence that has since accumulated to the contrary, that this was proof of change of heart or, as they like to say, progress. Perhaps. It all depends on how one reads the word "progress." . . . The word "independence" in Africa and the word "integration" here are almost equally meaningless; that is, Europe has not yet left Africa, and black men here are not yet free. ("Fire": 370–71)

Baldwin is quick to point to the gap between the ruling class and reality. How accurate Baldwin is about the immediate impact of the decision is not as important as being aware of the contradiction he produces when he calls the integration decision "meaningless," because black men are "not yet

free.” Instead of a court decision without meaning, Baldwin actually reaffirms *Brown* as a proxy through which to understand the gap between law and social behavior, theory and practice, and to reiterate the most important point: what is necessary to achieve the goals of the law. Baldwin uses the *Brown* decision as his device to insist that without a meaningful “change of heart,” whites cannot break the cycle of dehumanization in the United States. It is not a shock that Baldwin puts social transformation in affective terms and that he believes change can be filled with terror and trauma.

Baldwin thinks the real problem that underlies whiteness and the reasons whites do not see a problem with their congratulatory fervor over the *Brown* decision is actually not about being white at all; it is an existential problem about self-relation, selfishness, and ideology: “Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are really guarding is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One cannot give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself then one is simply incapable of giving” (370). Baldwin posits a problem that no political reality can resolve. Giving up the desire to be superior is embedded in the challenge Baldwin sees embedded in white supremacy. What makes one think that if white people give up whiteness and white superiority that the entire problem of group and individual power will go with it? Baldwin strongly suggests that the “idea of being superior” (“Fire”: 370) and holding on to it will resurface because people have a fundamental problem with guarding and keeping, giving and making sacrifices.

The consequences of what Baldwin wants psychologically and politically means that whites must face what they do not wish to know about themselves; risking one’s self, then, is key to escaping the trap of history. What occurs in Baldwin’s assertion is not only about the problem of whites clinging to normative conventions, but also that if the immediate racial problem is solved, the giving problem still recurs under different guises. Thus, the racial trap of history points to the escape hatch that actually leads to other traps of history—history’s many-headed hydra that Baldwin identifies (especially in *Giovanni’s Room*). But my claim here is that Baldwin’s immediate focus is not eradicating all historical confinement and limitations but explicitly removing the racial one. The unhistoric life of race occurs in the admission of the racial trap’s end and the articulation of simultaneous, yet different, subsequent traps that come into focus without race. Subsequent traps demonstrate the end of the racial trap and usher in the unhistoric life of race, where collective racial politics is no longer coherent and viable.

Still, addressing the racial trap of history and the unhistoric life of race is incomplete because, as I have depicted it, it assumes that whites have all the stakes and power to act. One of the few times Baldwin mentions the black experience of being trapped in history is in regard to his own rage and paranoia in “Stranger” and elsewhere in “The Price of the Ticket,” where he refers to blacks believing in shallow aspects of the American dream, which does not include black equality. Baldwin mostly focuses on white racism toward blacks that produces, as Colin Dayan (2011: 39–69) and Nancy Bentley (2005: 465) show, the psychic effects of Jim Crow laws. Baldwin also sees the effects of the law as reflective of the “incalculable costs” to whites that rob them of their own humanity (“Faulkner”: 148). But what Dayan and Bentley overlook is that segregation laws also generate—symbolically and politically—black antiracist political organizing. Thomas Holt claims that challenges to the “very humanity of blacks” on a daily basis actually “enabled a fractious black community . . . to unite in protest” (Holt 2010: 296). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legalized inhumane degradation, and even if the law marks blacks as “stigmatic bodies,” as Bentley (2005: 465) claims, one also needs to recognize fully how segregation laws help galvanize black organizations (like the NAACP and others) to counter white supremacy to achieve social equality. Writing about civil rights protest in the early sixties, Stephen Tuck makes it plain: “As diehard segregationists weakened, black activists gained strength” (Tuck 2011: 287).

If blacks created so many weapons for advancement as Tuck and Holt indicate, many of which have been successful, why wouldn’t blacks want to celebrate these successes, see their power in various modes of black art and performance, as well as use these successes to sustain political interests? Adolph L. Reed (2000: 14–15) discusses black public intellectuals’ and artists’ ideal recollections of the success of black communities under Jim Crow. In a different vein, Houston A. Baker (2008: 71–98) criticizes black intellectuals for their failure to live up to the great racial activism that defined the civil rights era. Reed and Baker, in different ways, suggest the importance of answering what are black intellectuals’ and artists’ investments in what they view as past political successes of the civil rights era or the fortunes lost in the horrors of racial segregation. This is far too large for this essay to answer, but Baldwin’s thinking about civil rights conflict covers not only whites’ affective and ideological attachments but also blacks’ stake in a politics defined by racial identity. I am not trying to draw equivalence between white supremacy and black resistance during the civil rights era, but I am asserting that in this opposition, both groups have social and psychic attachments that sustain their view of political achievements, their sense of equality in

humanity, and the viability of racially progressive individuals and institutions. If black political thinkers and organizers see no end to the necessity of organizing along racially oriented identity politics, are they also vulnerable to Baldwin's critique of being "trapped in history"?

The unhistorical life of race becomes available in Baldwin's essays as we see that both racial groups must participate in the violence of racial undoing as it relates to politics. Giving up black institutions that were molded out of civil rights-era racial antagonism is also about giving up viable realities—social attachments that black institution builders have found effective in facing and surviving white supremacy. In his mediations on black culture amid the dehumanizing forces of white supremacy in the 1960s, Baldwin shows that black people's efforts to reclaim their humanity also have a stake in the trap of history. Whether Baldwin sees a future either as a multiracial democracy with coexisting or competing identities, or as a postracial one where there are no races, the unhistoric life of race that I read in his essays reflects a viewpoint that politics outgrows the necessity of racial collectivity, where the demand of escaping other traps of history comes to the forefront of social conflict.

Blues No More

While I have shown what getting over the historical trap is for whites and for Baldwin individually, how does escaping the historical confinement of race relate to black collective racial identity? In terms of racial politics, how do we, as does Joseph Brown SJ (1995: 53–74), read Baldwin's prose as a call to conversion? One way of approaching an answer to this question lies in Baldwin's essay on black music, "Uses of the Blues." Baldwin shows how blacks survive and even flourish through their everyday desire to be, in W. E. B. Du Bois's words, full-fledged American citizens and "ordinary human beings" (Du Bois 1926: 993). Black music does not transform lynch laws, the auction block, racial massacres, or legalized segregation, but, according to Baldwin, it presents audiences with possible, yet unforeseen new self-relations. As far as Baldwin is concerned, these possible renewed or redeemed selves are social and spiritual, relatable to the political needs of the black community. Scholars and politicians before and after Baldwin use black music and other art forms, high and low, when thinking about black strategies for racial uplift or how scholars themselves view black political projects for social equality. In kind, Baldwin articulates black music's transformative forces. That is, psychologically and experientially, black music has something to teach audiences.

What “blues songs” share with slave songs, Baldwin explains, is slaves’ discovery of “something genuinely terrible”; paradoxically, this horror reveals a “certain kind of hope” (Baldwin 2010: 65). Out of the blues, Baldwin insists, comes the central fact of life—death. In facing death, one can actually feel the experiential power of “joy” (65): “If you can live with the reality of death, you can live” (64). Baldwin’s existentialist voice is overt. It is clear that while black oppression has much evidence for death, the picture of “people,” “life,” and “America” is broader than black experience. Baldwin broadens his insight from racial music to what he reads in blues performance; he shifts from the racial to the humanistic: “People who in some sense know who they are can’t change the world always, but they can do something to make it a little more, to make life a little more human. Human in terms of joy, freedom which is always private, respect for one another, even in such things as manners. . . . Now the only way to change all this is to begin to ask ourselves difficult questions” (66). His use of “joy” and “freedom” establishes what Baldwin sees in the blues; if a subject faces the reality one seeks to avoid, the avoidance that enslaves one to avoidance, one can find freedom and joy. Baldwin calls these the moments that “make life a little more human.” The avoidance of death or whatever crippling problem one wants to run away from, however, is also equally human. But the human—less than human distinction that Baldwin implies works as a rhetorical device, calling for a new self-relation that opposes and vanquishes the less human part of the dialectic he constructs. The axis of more human to less human creates the illusion of movement (spatially, temporally, and spiritually) from one pole to the other.

The crucial point here is that the more human—less human opposition can be resolved only by realizing it first as an opposition to overcome and to act on; in vanquishing it, one has not become more human but can relate to oneself differently. One actually rediscovers one’s humanity that cannot be taken away. Baldwin depicts blues music not as a millennial event but as a daily way to “create ourselves into human beings” (60); however, I read this as creating something new after something old has been transcended.

This individual account of being overhauled in black music has immediate implications for racial conflict during the civil rights era. If Baldwin is right, then—if “we had a better working relationship with ourselves” (66)—America’s racial challenges would be over because the death of white identity, which whites avoid like real death, would actually end. Whites could have their humanity back from their own self-debasement, and blacks would no longer be victims of dehumanization at the hands of white supremacy. But two other things emerge. Baldwin does not promise the end of

all subjects' avoidance of death or other objects; instead, he sees the end of racial hierarchy. Thus, here, too, Baldwin discloses the unhistoric life of race by seeing its end and recognizing the persistence of other traps and avoidances.

Near the end of "Uses of the Blues," Baldwin suggests that escaping from the trap of history means "asking some difficult questions" (66). Since Baldwin does not overtly challenge black collective political interests and the traps are universal, the question becomes, what difficult questions do blacks have to ask in terms of racial identity? The answer is in the blues. If whites give up whiteness, they will still be white, but their relation to whiteness, in conjunction with the end of racist laws and institutional practices of Jim Crow, changes. Must blacks then give up the blues as a mode of seeing social and political struggle against white supremacy and Jim Crow? Will the blues be no more?

Baldwin says, "it is rare indeed that people give"; they guard and keep ("Fire": 370). If we take Baldwin's argument about giving up seriously, then he was attached to *nigger* as a way of perceiving his own contest with American white supremacy, and getting to Jimmy meant changing his connection with *nigger*. Getting over the paranoia and rage that defined *nigger* may have given him his own permission to write *Giovanni's Room* instead of another novel driven by black experience. In Nietzsche's thinking about the unhistoric life, one has to be "just as able to remember at the right time" as well as "to forget at the right time" (Nietzsche 2010: 63). The right time is an abstraction that is individualistic and, for Baldwin, certainly unexpected, especially because when it comes to abandoning political positions, willingly or unwillingly, corresponding social and psychological attachments are challenging to break from and some will always survive under different guises.

Kenneth Warren says what is hard for people to swallow in George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) is that "in a world where what matters is merely skin color, . . . the scramble for preferment and advantage continues unabated—that even when race no longer matters, all sorts of inequalities can still count in American social life" (Warren 2011: 42). Warren highlights what Baldwin also suggests: a world without race does not stop people from acquiring and preserving other inequalities. Warren's point is social, but it leaves a strong ontological imprint. Baldwin argues that when individual and collective powers are at stake, people guard and keep whatever ideologies reinforce their authority and way of life, while still seeking to acquire the means to use other people. The unhistoric life of race is based

on Baldwin's idea that people will always seek to use others as objects and that guarding and keeping will continue. I mark the origins of the *unhistoric* life of race in Baldwin here, where one racial abuse and use will end, but other nonracial traps of history will then come into focus. Traps of history are existential in this way.

While Baldwin's critics continue to examine his emphasis on confronting racialized social hierarchy, Baldwin's demands to confront racism were not rooted in the necessity of creative new ways for renewing black politics. In fact, escaping the trap that legalized white supremacy created requires being willing to let go of both what appears to be using people as objects and cherished avenues of resisting objectification. Baldwin indicates both. When using black music and vernacular culture as an example, culture itself would not disappear or be vanquished, but the conflation between black aesthetics and black politics inevitably will be. For Baldwin, it fits under "a manner" of seeing ("Uses": 66).

Just after Baldwin encourages "the people" to ask difficult questions, he ends the "Blues" essay with a quote from Henry James: "Sorrow wears and uses us but we wear and use it too, and it is blind. Where we, after a manner, see" (66). Baldwin then refers to a Bessie Smith song where Smith talks to the blues as she is participating in its reality, both performing within and outside of it. Baldwin emphasizes that we can, like Bessie, "after a manner" see. The "manner" is a threshold and a break, which indicates obscurity and a new self or group relation at the same time. The blues is crucial because of the way Baldwin grasps both its racial and existential significance to getting over things, not once and for all, but to begin again. This vanquishing is not eliminating history but readying a new self and group relations that may or may not be difficult or traumatic. What Baldwin offers through Bessie is "our" racial blues—a new manner of seeing that brings with it redoubling "difficult questions" that interrogate why the blues needs to be kept and guarded as "ours." One may argue that the material conditions currently do not, or will never, justify the *unhistoric* life of race as I depict it. But Baldwin's point is that the trap of history is just that: a trap that prevents seeing its end. Baldwin's essays ask us to brave escaping or being released in new political histories (and traps) far beyond our comfort zones, levels of trust, and firmly held beliefs about racial difference and the seemingly never-ending need for collective racial politics. This is the undoing power of Baldwin's work and the activity of the *unhistoric* life of race that I read in his essays.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all essays cited are from Baldwin 1985.
- 2 Miller's (2001) discussion of "unhistorical acts" in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) influences my thinking here.
- 3 Sharon Holland (2000: 117–18) also discusses the troubled relations between blackness and queerness in *Giovanni's Room*.
- 4 Dwight A. McBride expresses this powerfully when he encourages new Baldwin studies to study "Baldwin's vision of and for humanity in all its complexity" (McBride 1999: 2).
- 5 When it comes to *Giovanni's Room*, some scholars claim that it is a novel about whiteness because the characters are white and American. This is true, but I am not persuaded that racial difference plays an equally significant role alongside gender, sexuality, and challenges to heterosexual normativity.
- 6 The idea that racialized inequality persists even in seemingly neutral laws is a real concern. I want to reiterate that my claim is not that racial difference or social problems defined by race will cease to exist but rather that an overlooked dimension in Baldwin's essays is how the essays reveal the necessity of black collective politics becoming antiquated and ineffective.
- 7 For more on racial and cultural possession through the language of "ours," see Michaels 1995.

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