

THE FIRE NEXT TIME

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James Baldwin published *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, and in a few respects, it reads “dated,” such as using the convention of the royal “he” to mean “all people” though it really feels sometimes that Baldwin is just referring to males.

But his descriptions of racial trauma and his outline of what he feels needs to happen to heal it have not dated at all. Not at all.

The book consists of two essays. The first, and shorter, is “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.” In this letter, he counsels his nephew to hold on to two beliefs—actually, one unbelief and one grant of emancipation that circle each other like a binary star, each gravity affecting the other’s, neither gravity able to stand stable alone.

The first is the unbelief: “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don’t you ever forget it.”

The second is the emancipation granted to his nephew by holding fast to the unbelief:

I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto ... [and] you have, and many of us have, defeated this intention; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.

In the second essay, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind” (which had appeared in the November 10, 1962, issue of *The New Yorker*), Baldwin explores more deeply the physics of how the declaration of personhood by the powerless can set up

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the conditions for the emancipation of the powerful from their fever dreams and incarcerated desires, leading to a safer life for all. Here is how Baldwin closes the essay, equal parts soaring hopefulness and dire prophecy (an understandable double-offering, given Baldwin's description in the essay of his adolescent marination in the Black Christian church):

... here we are ... trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

I confess to feeling, if not mouthing, a double “Amen” at words like this, an Amen with a hallelujah in it and an Amen with “I’m boarding up the windows and getting ready for the storm.” And I also confess to having long harbored a similar prophetic hope about the United States being the only nation with the spiritual and monetary resources for bringing the kingdom of heaven upon the earth.

Of course, after this, I had to re-watch Raoul Peck’s exquisite sculpture of a documentary about Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, so that I could have Baldwin’s voice again in my ears, a voice at once arch and saddened, where he insisted that the problem of race was not about race at all but about how white people needed to examine why hating the Negro the way they did was necessary to live the lives they had chosen to live.

As much as I love Baldwin’s quest as a writer and a black man at this point in his life to describe a way out and a way forward for the nation, to me, at least, it sets such an unfair redemptive historical weight on the shoulders of “the Negro” (that term acting for Baldwin the way the land of Wakanda in *The Black Panther* acted for black audiences when the movie came out in 2018—a place of perfection that holds the power of emancipation for the world). He clearly didn’t want and didn’t expect the Negroes of his

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day to be the Virgils leading white people through the harrowing of their souls, but there is still a part of him that hopes the power and beauty, as he saw it, of his fellow Negroes would catalyze the nation's fulfillment of its core emancipatory principles and the consequent melting away of white supremacy.

However, in the United States of 2020, whatever edge that Baldwin's call for whites to shrive their souls carried has now been blunted by a ramping up of the very hatreds Baldwin tried to excavate and expose, hatreds now applied broadbrush against all those designated non-white.

This is not Baldwin's fault, of course. The fault lies in the narrowness of the program, so to speak: love white people enough to get them to 'fess up to their sins and then, so blessed, see them take up the historical project of creating, alongside their brothers and sisters, a free, egalitarian and welcoming society. I suspect that Baldwin also suspected that the program was not sufficient to the task. "People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. And this human truth has an especially grinding force here ... "

This is the program in play at the moment, of earnest discussions about white fragility and equally earnest instructions about how to be anti-racist. Yet the urgency of these examinations has tailed off over the summer and even as protests against racial injustice continue in Portland and elsewhere, people still fighting the good fight, that fight only gets airtime if there's violence attached to it and Black Lives Matter matters less to the media than the trolling of BLM by the president and his praetorians.

What is the better program, the one with longer legs and more stamina? Oh, to answer that requires more hubris and knowledge than I have, and I do not have enough time left in my life to gather what I need to begin an answer. But here is the sketchiest of sketches in response. Towards the end of his life (though, of course, he didn't know that at the time), King began to connect the dots between capitalist economics and the hatreds he fought against. He, like Baldwin, knew that the visible conflicts called "racial" were only proxies for the deeper conflicts of a system that premised its power and profits on exploiting a divided populace and disabling any alliances among the have-nots to fight the haves.

Dismantling that system is the harder program, but it's also a program that has well over a century and a half of thought and practice behind it. Do white people need to dig out

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their white supremacist roots? Absolutely. But they won't get that done by reading nonsense like *White Fragility* or worry-beading their white guilt or brassily declaring that they don't have racist bones in their bodies. It will only come when they work for a truly democratic society in solidarity with all those labeled as "non-white" and the Other who have been boxed in to the margins by fear and violence—democratic in its politics, in its economics, in its ethics, in its aesthetics. It will take lots of pitchforks as well as lot of meetings, but it can be done.

Only then will the white supremacist bones be left to bleach in the sand (along with all those other toxic skeletons that hold us up while keeping us imprisoned), and we can get to the land promised to us all in our Declaration, the preamble of the Constitution, the Civil War amendments and [add your own piece of inspiration here].

FINAL NOTE: For a great examination of democracy, read Astra Taylor's *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. And for a look at the way solidarity needs to look, feel and work, see episode 4 of *Immigration Nation* on Netflix (though you should watch the whole damn thing and let the fear and loathing and anger and cruelty that is Trumpworld along the border sift into your soul).