

INTRODUCTION

Brothers or Fools

Justin A. Joyce The New School

Abstract

Justin A. Joyce introduces the eighth volume of *James Baldwin Review* with a discussion of the US Supreme Court, the misdirected uproar over Critical Race Theory, a survey of canonical dystopian novels, and the symbolism of masking during COVID-19.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Critical Race Theory, voting rights, masking, COVID-19, US Supreme Court

Perhaps it is history's fault. I *suppose* it must be history which always arranges to bill a civilization at the very instant it is least prepared to pay.
James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon"¹

So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories.

Albert Camus, *The Plague*²

Writing the introductory editorial for *James Baldwin Review* involves, as I see it, trying to gauge how and why James Baldwin's life, works, and legacies are particularly relevant in any given year. The twelve months that have passed since I last wrote in these pages have borne witness to many battles: medical, legal, political, and symbolic. Beyond these figurative hostilities there has begun, of course, a literal war. In February of 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine began and rages still. I'm not embarrassed to admit that I've little to say here about the Russian atrocities occurring as I type; what's happening in Ukraine is clearly an indefensible land and power grab. War crimes have been committed with reckless abandon, and if the United States is hesitant to cooperate with the International Criminal Court in prosecuting them for fear our own politicians and commanders will be indicted for their past crimes too, perhaps it is high time for the West to rethink the ways we wage our own wars. I'm a literary critic by training, though, not a military strategist. Putin must be stopped; he must be removed from power. How this will be accomplished without provoking an all-out nuclear conflict wasn't taught in any of the Shakespeare surveys I attended. I can only hope that the clear and present danger that autocrats, despots, and demagogues like Putin represent will continue to inspire the rest of the world to band together and establish a renewed commitment to democracy, sovereignty, peaceful resolution, and humanitarian aid as we work to rebuild Ukraine.

There are other battles being fought, less murderous and less bloody but nonetheless momentous, that also commanded our attention while volume 8 of *James Baldwin Review* was assembled. I'll touch on two of these in the pages to follow: the conservative majority holding sway over the US Supreme Court, and the battles launched against the public school curriculum via the ridiculous feint of worries over Critical Race Theory. Beginning with the Court, we set our scene in a workplace in Washington, DC, and focus on one of the dominant symbols of our battle with COVID-19: face masks.

Of *course* Justice Neil Gorsuch wasn't wearing a mask. At an indoor gathering in January of 2022 with eight of his coworkers, two-thirds of whom are over sixty years old, in defiance of the local ordinance requiring masks indoors *and* the rules of his specific workplace that everyone else in attendance wear approved n95 respirators, during the peak of a surge in cases of the Omicron variant, Gorsuch decided such rules didn't apply to him. That one of his coworkers, Justice Sotomayor, whose seat is *right next to his*, is a diabetic at especially high risk didn't

matter; neither did the “request” from a higher-ranking colleague that they all mask up. Nope. Rules and workplace norms, not to mention reciprocal respect for the health of others, mattered less to Gorsuch than demonstrating his defiantly Americanist “individualism.” That streak of rebellious “liberty” that may doom us all was clearly more important to this man on this day.

Insubordinate disregard for the public health rules of the last two years certainly hasn’t been limited to this Justice alone. Indeed, much of the history of the two years the world has been battling COVID has been marked by the blatant, righteously indignant refusal by so many to follow the guidance and the science, much less the rules of public health. The blockade of semi-trucks that ensnared several Canadian cities for weeks in January and February of 2022—the preposterously named “freedom convoy”—along with the copycat occupations in several European cities and the few farcical laps around the DC beltway in March are prime examples of misguided “protests” against measures meant to keep us all safe. Blatant disdain for protocols extends beyond these shores, of course: readers would do well to recall the shenanigans of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Downing Street “partygate” scandals of this year. Rebellious noncompliance has marked air travel too. As Olga Khan reported for *The Atlantic*, the Federal Aviation Administration marked 2021 as the worst year on record for passenger behavior in the United States.³ Over 70 percent of these recorded incidents involved refusal to wear a mask.⁴

At the time of this writing, on April 22, 2022, in the United States alone 991,169 people have died of COVID-19. Surely by the time this volume is released in the autumn of 2022 we will have surpassed a million deaths. A million deaths seems momentous: the kind of statistic alarming enough to induce a change in attitude. I doubt, though, that 8,831 more graves and many more widows, widowers, and orphans will make a dent in our collective indifference. The glaring truth lurking in such statistics, most especially in the preventable among those deaths, is that the United States’ appallingly high per capita death toll from this virus is as simple as it is stubborn: when *public* health is treated as a matter of *private* choice, people die. They die from choosing reckless exposure, from choosing not to be vaccinated, choosing to expose others, opting for sheer denial, and from choosing to refuse to do something as simple as don a mask.

I would not be misunderstood here. I don’t particularly *like* wearing a mask either. I’d rather see full faces, interact with and take cues from expressions beyond those conveyed by eyes, brows, and foreheads. Anyone who has figured out how to smile with their eyebrows or a wink without appearing like a flirt is far better at this whole mask game than I am, that’s for sure. I too would prefer not to have to remember my mask when I leave the house—to say nothing of navigating the shifting guidance about which types of masks are best, or which fits my face. As a parent of elementary school children, I realize mask wearing presents barriers to children’s educational and social development; I’m not here to debate masks in schools. I’m interested, instead, in the choices of grown-ass adults who chafe at something as simple as covering one’s nose and mouth.

I understand as well that mask wearing alone would not have fully stopped the spread of this once-in-a-millennium pandemic. I will not be drawn, either, into a “debate” about whether or not masks actually “work.” There is no debate. Masks help stop the spread of airborne viruses. Are they 100 percent effective? No. Are they as impactful as vaccination? No. Does their efficacy depend on proper fit and widespread use? Surely. But anyone who wishes to poke and prod those variables, à la the “just asking questions” of Tucker Carlson and his ilk of charlatans, is engaged in bad-faith misdirection.

This misdirection has caused masks to become more than a tool to fight infection during the COVID pandemic. They have morphed to become richly symbolic as well. Choosing whether or not to wear a mask has come to represent a host of political commitments that have far outstripped this medical device’s protective capacities. Remembering how and why that has come to be will be vital for us to move forward.

Contra the folly of my brothers and sisters on the right side of the aisle—those would-be demagogues with no relevant scientific or medical training who have endlessly questioned and denounced the experts on these matters in an attempt to score soundbites—I’m not that kind of doctor. I earned my doctoral degree, instead, in literature—in the history of words and narratives, the study of signs, symbols, and metaphors—and it’s within this lane that I’ll steer ahead.

Books, then, shall be my guideposts. And we’ll turn to Albert Camus’s 1947 novel, *The Plague*, for guidance in the matter of masking. In Camus’s accounting of a small Algerian town ravaged by bubonic plague, there are many parallels to our contemporary anxieties and interpersonal maladies. People resist the lockdowns, rebel against authorities, and chafe against public health orders. In the latter portion of the novel—once the disease has become endemic enough despite inoculations that the only course is to wait it out and quarantine the dying—the vacationer Tarrou and the journalist Rambert are visiting a quarantine hospital. Tarrou gives Rambert a mask made of “cotton-wool enclosed in muslin” and tells him to wear it: “The journalist asked if it was really any use. Tarrou said no, but it inspired confidence in others.”⁵ Rambert promptly puts on the mask. Though the scene is brief and very little is made in *The Plague* of masks during a public health emergency, it’s significant that Rambert doesn’t question the effect of donning a mask. There is no rule or mask mandate in place in this setting. Rambert doesn’t need one to follow Tarrou’s advice.

Rambert is, for most of the novel, a potent symbol of rebelliousness against health orders, for he yearns to leave the quarantined town to rejoin his new wife who was sealed outside the gates when the lockdown orders were given. Rambert concocts several schemes in his attempts to escape, risking bringing the infection with him beyond the town’s walls. He does so while earning some measure of sympathy as well, for his selfishness is motivated, after all, by love and longing for his beloved. But when he abandons his attempts to escape and joins with Tarrou and Dr. Rieux—the novel’s narrator and a fictional parallel to Dr. Anthony Fauci—to help care for the sick and dying in the town, his mindset changes. Working

together, working to aid others, and working, finally, for an aim beyond his own private desires, Rambert readily dons the mask. He's told explicitly that it won't help against the disease that ails this town, but he puts it on anyway.

Inspiring confidence in others that there is a way forward, that we together shall prevail was enough reason for Rambert to wear a mask. In the past two years, though, battling a virus that works differently than plague, against which masks *do* make a difference, after more than seventy years of textile advances that have made modern masks so much more effective than cotton and muslin, and in full view of mandates, rules, and laws that require mask wearing, this simple act has been too much to ask for too many.

It evidently wasn't enough for Trump's first US Supreme Court pick in 2017, Justice Neil Gorsuch. That this January 2022 scene of workplace insubordination was a public declaration that health mandates need not apply made Gorsuch's particular refusal richly symbolic. Clearly that must have been the point of this defiant gesture. The US Supreme Court issued rulings that day that discontinued the enforcement of vaccine mandates issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the combined cases of *NFIB v. OSHA* and *Ohio et. al v. OSHA* (2022). Twisting not just logic, precedent, and legal language, but also the core purpose for which OSHA was set up, the majority opinion in the case found that OSHA's vaccinate or test order need not be enforced because the particular hazard—COVID-19—was not strictly limited to the workplace. In the majority's view, in other words, because COVID-19 existed *outside* of work settings, OSHA lacked the authority to enforce safety protocols dealing with COVID-19 *inside* workplaces.

OSHA has previously enacted rules in workplaces to mitigate the risks from other hazards that also exist outside work, such as fire, faulty electrical wiring, inadequate emergency exits, excessive noise, and unsafe drinking water. How COVID differed from other such hazards, the Court failed to explain. As Justices Kagan, Sotomayor, and Breyer put it in their dissent, "Acting outside of its competence and without legal basis, the court displaces the judgments of the Government officials given the responsibility to respond to workplace health emergencies."⁶ Adhering to scientific evidence, upholding a public health order enacted to ensure workplace safety and enable economic recovery, much less protecting the health of others, was less important for Gorsuch and the Court majority than scoring points with a rabid conservative base.

It is a sad irony that Gorsuch's refusal to wear a mask on the day the verdict was announced garnered far more media attention than the ramifications of the ruling itself. For the Court has more than just symbolic political power; it also crucially wields the deciding vote in the maintenance of the rule of law in the US and the balance of powers upon which the US democratic experiment is based. The conservative judicial appointments that now comprise the majority of the Court chafe at the idea of being seen as "partisan hacks," yet their rulings in a series of cases on high-stakes issues betray their investments nearly as clearly as Gorsuch's maskless rebellion.⁷ Voting rights, climate change, gun rights, abortion rights, affirmative

action, and religious exemptions from civil law are all issues the predominantly Republican-appointed Court appears poised to decide in favor of the culturally conservative values of the GOP base, despite the changing demographics and values of the US population and often in direct contradiction to decades of settled court precedent.

In the putative home of democracy, the Court's recent moves regarding voting rights in the United States is usefully illustrative. No longer working to have the best, or even the most popular, ideas and policies, the Republican party is committed instead to suppressing and diluting votes. The logic is as cynical as it is sinister: If only your side votes, clearly you will win, right? Make no mistake, denying and diluting the right to vote is precisely what's at stake in the ruses of "election integrity" bills stampeding through state legislatures, resistance to voting rights bills in the US House and Senate, and the recent decision of the US Supreme Court.

The Brennan Center for Justice provides stark figures on these suppression efforts: "As of January 14 [2022], legislators in at least 27 states have introduced, pre-filed, or carried over 250 bills with restrictive provisions."⁸ As Stacey Abrams told *The Guardian* back in March of 2021 regarding efforts in states like Georgia: "What is so notable about this moment, and so disconcerting, is that they are not hiding. There is no attempt to pretend that the intention is not to restrict votes."⁹ Georgia's assaults on the polls in 2021, predictably, were followed closely by similar efforts from Arizona and Texas; in 2022, Virginia is leading the charge to restrict, suppress, purge, or dilute votes with thirty-four pre-filed or introduced bills, twenty-one of which "seek to repeal provisions of current state law that ensure voter access to mail voting," evidently in response to the uptick in mail voting during the 2020 presidential election.¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, the laws passed and bills under consideration are designed to disenfranchise minority voters, voters whose record turnout in the 2020 election—and whose increasing demographic weight in this country—represent a palpable threat to Republican politicians. These efforts have disingenuously passed under the banner of "election security," and been bolstered by specious claims of election fraud; fraud, it is important to note, which has yet to be demonstrated or even discovered, despite a treasure trove of right and center right money being spent to find it.

Though the perpetually aggrieved former president and his Congressional and media sycophants continue to push what many term "the Big Lie" about his drumming in the last presidential election, there is, sadly, not much new here. The ruse of "election integrity" has been utilized to craft discriminatory laws and carve out legislative districts for nearly sixty years now, as Carol Anderson has detailed in her recent book, *One Person, No Vote*. In fact, many of these strategies came into their current form immediately following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). With literacy tests, registration limitations, poll taxes, and other blatant methods to deny minority votes now outlawed after the VRA, the strategies shifted to more subtle means such as redistricting, voter roll purges, and voter ID laws. The strategies shifted, but the goal has always remained the same: to ensure

that the franchise extends only so far—or, put more plainly, to limit the number of minority votes.

That the VRA has been eviscerated by the Supreme Court in two recent cases ensures that these tactics can continue. In the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, the Court abandoned the preclearance requirement of section 5 of the VRA, which required states and jurisdictions with a history of brazen suppression efforts to have their new voting laws cleared by the Justice Department. The majority opinion in *Shelby County* incongruously reasoned that because it had been working so well, preclearance was no longer needed. A logic, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg noted, tantamount to “throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm.”¹¹ Unsurprisingly, many recent suppression efforts not only come from the very jurisdictions that had previously needed preclearance, but began being drafted just days after the *Shelby County* ruling cleared the way.

In July of 2021, the Court, now fully armed with a conservative majority thanks in no small part to the machinations of the obstructionist senator from Kentucky, could freely misrepresent history and legal precedent to achieve a ruling that would appease the conservatives who appointed them. In *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, the Court continued to gut the VRA, tortuously misreading the “totality of the circumstances” language in section 2 of the VRA in order to uphold a recent Arizona law clearly designed to dilute the voting power of minority populations. The ruling of the majority flatly ignores the history of voter suppression in the US, and the gutting of the preclearance section of the VRA in *Shelby County*, despite the fact that such historical considerations are at the heart of the “totality of circumstances” language of section 2 as it was revised in 1982 and renewed in 2006. Perhaps most galling, the *Brnovich* ruling invokes fraud, several times, even after conceding it has not been an issue, going so far as to suggest that Arizona need not wait for fraud to protect against it. The Court apparently preferring, instead, that voters be disenfranchised before allowing them to challenge flatly discriminatory provisions.

Justice Elena Kagan’s scathing dissent in *Brnovich* notes that the VRA is no ordinary statute. It represents, instead, the “best” of America in its marriage between democracy and racial equality. Kagan rightly notes the VRA also represents the “worst” of America, simply because it “was—and remains—so necessary.”¹² As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg noted in her blistering dissent to *Shelby County*, “Attempts to cope with this vile infection resemble battling the Hydra. Whenever one form of voting discrimination was identified and prohibited, others sprang up in its place.”¹³

There are many accounts of the Hydra, the mythological monster the legendary Greek hero Heracles slew as one of his twelve labors. The versions are united, though, in some core components: the Hydra is a monster with poisonous blood and many heads, one of which is immortal. The other heads, when severed, grow back twofold; cut one off, and two more take its place. Heracles triumphs over this beast with a cunning strategy. Once severed, the immortal head is buried deeply

and covered with an immense rock; the other heads are cauterized before they can grow back doubly strong.

Ginsburg's analogy between voter suppression and the Hydra is an especially useful one, for it allows us to reckon with voter suppression not as a historical problem we can safely relegate to the dustbin of yesteryear, but instead as an active, recurring threat to democracy. James Baldwin was part of the voter registration drives organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the South during the early 1960s, worked to help garner support for the Voting Rights Act, stood with Jim Forman in Selma, and literally faced down the notorious Alabama Sheriff Jim Clark in 1963. Nearly sixty years later, the monsters threatening democracy have clearly grown back. Backed now by the Supreme Court's evisceration of the Voting Rights Act, the efforts to suppress votes are more than doubly strong.

As the dissenting opinion in the vaccine mandate case with which we began notes, the Court is comprised of lifetime appointees: "Members are elected by, and accountable to, no one."¹⁴ This lack of accountability isn't simply hyperbole by the dissenters here. As Gorsuch's mask stunt demonstrates, the Justices on the Supreme Court needn't follow the health orders of the town in which they work; as Clarence Thomas has amply demonstrated in the past few months by voting on cases about the release of documents that implicated his wife's involvement in the January 6 coup attempt and by sitting in cases in which she had an apparent monetary and legal interest, the Justices need not bother to recuse themselves from cases in which they clearly have a conflict of interest. Outside mythology, unaccountable lifetime appointments are as close as one can expect to get to being an immortal monstrosity.

The dissent, isolation, and bellicose mood of our increasingly polarized nation, however, is unprepared to fight such monstrosities. Speaking to an audience of educators in his 1963 "A Talk to Teachers," Baldwin warned about the perils of such complacency: "It's inconceivable that a sovereign people should continue, as we do so abjectly, to say 'I can't do anything about it. It's the government.' The government is the creation of the people. It is responsible to the people. And the people are responsible for it."¹⁵ We cannot accept a Court accountable to no one. And we must be equally cunning in our battle against rulings produced to appease this country's conservative political whims. Whether we choose to focus on the outrageously partisan interpretations of legal technicalities that hold sway among the objectively conservative Justices, the Court's appallingly coy "shadow docket," its inexcusable continuance of clearly unconstitutional and legally unenforceable abortion bans in several states, or its apparent willingness to further expand gun rights despite this country having more mass shootings than days in the year for the last three years, it is evident that it will take the might, fortitude, and ingenuity of a mythological hero to slay such a beast.¹⁶ While such might is mustered, I hazard we could begin by seeing which of the current Justices might best join Samuel Chase in the records of impeached Justices. What can, and has been, done can be done again. We need not sit idly by.

As the Supreme Court has been allowed to run amok, we have also been embroiled in a renewal of the “culture wars,” with the GOP whipping up unfounded fury over their own intentional misidentification of Critical Race Theory, or CRT. This frenzy’s origin can be traced to a purposeful misreading of Critical Race Theory given a sympathetic hearing by Tucker Carlson and then parroted by Donald Trump. The loose definitions and illogic that followed has warped Critical Race Theory to mean nearly *any* examination of race. Republican politicians and their accomplices in the right-wing and center-right-wing media are obsessed with it. Last fall—not coincidentally in the run-up to the November elections—Fox News mentioned Critical Race Theory nearly two thousand times, ludicrously misrepresenting the scholarship so it *sounds* scary.

This strain of legal scholarship has been purposefully misconstrued to stoke this fear, and an example of the rhetorical chicanery at work is illustrative. *Washington Post* columnist Marc Thiessen declared in November of 2021, just after Glenn Youngkin won the election as Governor of Virginia, that Democrats had been lying about Critical Race Theory.¹⁷ It was pointed out numerous times before Thiessen’s November editorial that schools are not teaching Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is not the stuff of elementary or even secondary schools, but rather of graduate and professional schools. Lessons in intersectional analyses or the systemic racial biases of the American property, legal, and tax systems may well be on offer at top law schools, but they aren’t being intermixed with spelling at your local kindergarten. They never have been. And despite the cries of the conspiratorial, no one is trying to make it so. This point bears repeating: Critical Race Theory is not being taught in K-12 schools, and no one is trying to make that happen.

The Democratic “echo chamber,” Thiessen writes, has been lying when it suggests that schools aren’t, per se, teaching Critical Race Theory. Not letting facts stand in the way, he backs his specious claim by citing a number of seemingly damning instructions in Critical Race Theory given to Virginia educators. With startlingly revealing speed, Thiessen jumps from teachers to students. What’s slickly glossed over here is the profound difference between what’s being taught to teachers and what these teachers instruct their pupils.

Lest we too quickly doubt this leap, Thiessen seeks to demonstrate causal, indeed curricular, links between informing a curriculum and instructing students. Karl Marx—ever reliable boogeyman for the right—is used by Thiessen to suggest that educators with a passing familiarity with Marx must, naturally, be indoctrinating their pupils against capitalism. For Thiessen, Critical Race Theory’s guilt extends by association, a leftist McCarthyism, no pun intended. Tying his “Gotcha!” piece to the gubernatorial election in Virginia, Thiessen ends with a sardonic apology: “Sorry, parents know that critical race theory is a real problem—and if Democrats continue telling parents their concerns are imaginary, they will continue to pay a price at the polls.”

Well. Thiessen’s casualness with causality is designed not to set straight any facts in this matter, but to enrage and instill fear. His quibbles are merely more parry

and thrust of outrage and blame above the rubble of our educational system. The moral implications of such rhetorical games, though, are too high for such hijinks. This has all been but a ruse, a distraction from the heart of the matter. Those on the left should not apologize for pointing this out. We need not dance with Nero while Rome burns, and we should not accept Thiessen's *mauvaise foi* apology.

Predictably, Thiessen pays lip service to the conceit of "colorblindness." "Colorblindness," though, has never been an aspirational end-goal of equity to be achieved. Colorblindness is, instead, a weapon for the economically flush and politically enfranchised to deny their responsibility for the privileges our country affords them and the injustices that continue to plague our nation. The savagery beneath Thiessen's semantic gymnastics reveals an unwelcome sense of being responsible for the history that preceded you (and the present you benefit from). This presumed guilt, though, is but another canard to mobilize a shrinking base against the demographic changes in this nation's increasingly diverse population. This guilt may seem to serve the GOP at the polls, but as Audre Lorde warned in a 1981 address to the National Women's Studies Association, "Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures."¹⁸ Or as James Baldwin wrote:

Guilt is a luxury we can no longer afford. I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it too for the very same reason.¹⁹

Schools in this country are in dire straits. Parents are scared and enraged, teachers underresourced and overwhelmed, school boards ill-equipped for this outcry, students intellectually and often physically undernourished. Schools are in trouble, but it has nothing to do with Critical Race Theory. In the same "Talk to Teachers" referenced earlier, Baldwin's analysis of the consequences of such misinformation are, sadly, still all too relevant:

What's upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity. If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody's history, you must lie about it all. If you have to lie about my real role here, if you have to pretend that I hoed all that cotton just because I loved you, then you have done something to yourself. You are mad.²⁰

Critical Race Theory as a specter haunting schools and infecting our curriculum is a lie. It is a deliberate ruse meant to distract from the funding and access issues that are at the heart of our failing school system. The strategy here is as deliberate as it is diabolical: stymie support for public schools and push, instead, a for-profit private charter school system in their place.

Fear, and the misunderstanding fueling it, is precisely the point of the right and center right's weaponizing of school board politics. For Glenn Youngkin's campaign, ads featuring a white mom literally wringing her hands over Toni Morrison's *Beloved* helped win the gubernatorial race.²¹ So too have the book bans that followed in the wake of Youngkin's successful campaign, which sought prohibitions and to wage a campaign of misdirection while funneling public school funds into private charter school coffers. Just last week in Florida, to cite one ludicrously revealing example of the blatant political campaigning that is occurring under the guise of banning Critical Race Theory, Governor Ron DeSantis was all too proud to announce that Florida public schools rejected nearly half of the math textbooks submitted for adoption. According to the Florida Department of Education, at least 21 percent of the submitted math textbooks were rejected because they supposedly contained "prohibited topics or unsolicited strategies, including CRT."²² It is unclear how $2 + 2 =$ intersectional legal analyses. But it is very clear these misinterpretations of Critical Race Theory are a campaign stunt aiming, above all, to make you fearful enough to vote Republican, just in case the votes for the other side aren't sufficiently suppressed with the imprimatur of the highest court in the land.

Responsibility, for Baldwin, meant reckoning with a history of America, as he put it to those educators in 1963, "longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it." We have a responsibility to tell the truths of history, surely, because we are *all* responsible for the education of future generations. But the sad result of this misguided fury is that our children will continue to suffer from inadequate schooling. With our attention diverted by this subterfuge, more cuts to budgets and programs will likely go unnoticed as school board meetings go off the rails. The struggles of America's schools—laid bare by pandemic disruptions—will not be addressed because fears have been manipulated to prevent you from banding together to seek greater access, greater equity, and most of all, better schooling.

To look truthfully at history—the messy, scary, and hurtful parts as much as the triumphant mythologies—and work with that knowledge to create the world anew is the only possibility for reconciliation and social justice. The fear stoked over CRT is decidedly misplaced. There is no reason to panic over Critical Race Theory, and school reading assignments and teacher education shouldn't be a reason to vote Republican. Instead, be terrified of reaping what's being sown here: a future in which this nation's children, now adults themselves, are as fearful, as easily manipulated by Trumped-up grievance, as woefully ill-prepared for the social challenges of tomorrow, as many American adults seem to be today.

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James Baldwin Review's eighth volume opens with a "Feature Essay" by Ed Pavlić, "Nonviolence, Black Power, and 'the Citizens of Pompeii': James Baldwin's 1968." This essay delves into James Baldwin's work and experience in that pivotal year.

Based in California then, Baldwin was often in transit to New York and London, working in complex high-profile and underground ways. Pavlić provides here a fuller account of how Baldwin developed and deployed his gifts with generosity and intergenerational virtuosity during one of the most explosive years of the twentieth century. We continue with a comparison of work from the early and late stages of Baldwin's career. Our second critical essay proceeds with an analysis of a relatively early work in Baldwin's corpus, "A Kind of Joy': Laughing and Grinning through 'Sonny's Blues,'" by James Nikopoulos. This article examines that story's narrator's focus on facial expressions to argue that the relationship between smiles, laughter, and a *kind* of joy resembles the relationship Baldwin describes between the blues and the world. Özge Özbek Akıman's essay, "'Forging a New Language': A New Spatiotemporal Logic in James Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*," focuses on one of the last pieces Baldwin published, reading *Evidence* as key to Baldwin's substantial attempts at "forging a new language."

While Nikopolous and Akıman are paired here as comparative looks at different parts of Baldwin's career, Joseph Weiss juxtaposes Baldwin with another writer. "Tortuous Time: Undoing the Past in Jean Améry and James Baldwin" compares the works of James Baldwin and Jean Améry, a survivor of the Jewish Holocaust. Weiss attempts to unpack the ethical and political implications of their shared conception of the temporality of trauma to suggest, for both thinkers, the necessity of a new, revolutionary humanism. Using political and critical theory, Monika Gehlawat's "Baldwin and the Role of the Citizen Artist" identifies in Baldwin a model for citizenship unique to the Black artist who assumed the dual responsibilities of art practice and political activism, paying particular attention to the tension between living a public, political life and the need for privacy to create art. Rounding out the critical essays, and gesturing toward the reader's role in Baldwin's oeuvre, our next essay is the Graduate Student Essay Award-winning contribution from Beth Tillman, "Reaching toward the Reader: James Baldwin's Voice in 'Notes of a Native Son.'" This article is a close rhetorical analysis of Baldwin's voice, whereby Tillman argues that Baldwin provides the reader with a transformative, intimate experience by rendering his own emotion and evolution accessible through his use of diction, repetition, alliteration, and punctuation.

This year's "Dispatches" section is an especially robust mix of survey, review, and memoir, featuring four pieces that explore Baldwin through music, dramatic performance, and a virtual symposium held last year. "'This Music Begins on the Auction Block': Learning in the Twenty-First Century from James Baldwin on Music," by Josh Friedberg, provides a thematic survey of Baldwin's writing on music and its implications for the twenty-first century. In "Making Experiences Our Own: A Review of *The Amen Corner*, 2021," Ijeoma Njaka reviews the 2021 production of James Baldwin's play *The Amen Corner*, as directed by Whitney White at Washington, DC's Shakespeare Theatre Company. Herb Boyd reviews the James Arthur Baldwin symposium at Virginia State University held in November of 2021 in "Baldwin Boxed in at Virginia State Symposium: A Review." The final dispatch is a mixture of memoir, reflection, and scholarship by Michael A. L.

Broyles, who details how, during a time of suffering, James Baldwin and singer Celia Cruz helped him understand his tense relationship with his toxic paternal grandparents and reclaim his stifled Mexican heritage in “Celia, James, and Me.”

In keeping with the aim of a comparative volume, our bibliographic essay this year looks to European translations of Baldwin’s canon. “The Evidence of Things Translated: Circulating Baldwin in Contemporary Europe,” by Remo Verdickt, provides a preliminary overview of how and to what extent Baldwin’s works have been made available via translation to new audiences across Europe. As Verdickt himself points out, however, this is but a start at assessing the full impact of Baldwin worldwide: “A truly global study of Baldwin’s circulation-through-translation might paint a very different, and certainly larger, picture. That will, however, have to be a collective undertaking—for which this foray can count as an invitation.” Indeed, though this collective undertaking has been limited by relative inaccessibility for those that do not read in English or European languages, the impact of Baldwin across the globe is like a mighty wave that has yet to crest. As but one example, in the last year *James Baldwin Review*’s open access website has had readers from over 115 countries, a 30 percent increase from the previous year. As we continue to bring together a mixture of scholarship, reviews, and reflections—from a variety of voices—it is our humble aim to continue to grow our readership and expand the legacy and impact of our eponymous author’s moving works and searing insights.

The 2022 volume of *James Baldwin Review* culminates with an interview; ending, in a way, where we began, in 1968, with a vital archival find introduced and discussed by Ed Pavlić, “They Came to See if I’m for Real: James Baldwin Interviewed by Hakim Jamal for *LA Free Press* (1968).” Upon returning to the United States to work on his screenplay about Malcolm X, Baldwin was interviewed for the *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1968. Pavlić provides a contextual and historical introduction to that interview, which offers a rare glimpse of Baldwin’s style of engagement—despite their often merciless castigation of him—with a new generation of radical Black activists. This valuable interview is reproduced here with permission from the *Free Press*.

The cover art for this year’s volume—the center panel of a much larger quilt entitled *Red, White, and Baldwin* (2015)—is also of unique value, coming to us from Kenya Baleech Alkebu, currently incarcerated in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary. This prison, nicknamed “Angola” after the plantation that formerly occupied the land, is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Within the walls, gates, and 18,000 sprawling acres of this working prison farm, Kenya has been imprisoned for over forty-two years. Along with Maureen Kelleher, an artist, activist, *JBR* contributor, and death row private investigator, Kenya is the founder of an artistic collective, the Social Justice Collaboration Quilts Project. This unique project was conceived as a collaboration between a free person and an incarcerated person to highlight and bring attention to Angola’s prison hospice program and has since grown to include more lifers in Angola, as well as American political prisoners in federal facilities and a death row inmate

in Tennessee. The quilting collaborative encompasses several incarcerated individuals working together with those outside prisons to “collaborate, communicate, support, and encourage creativity.” In addition to the quilt adorning our cover, several other quilts from the project are on exhibition at the Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.²³ Kenya’s color choices in this quilt are meant to represent the “witness or witnesses to diversity in crisis.” The inspiration for the quilt, as he explains in his own words, was Baldwin’s outspoken defense of essential humanity:

Well, the way I see it, James Baldwin is a champion of free speech. And his international prominence muffled the drumbeat of those who thought ex-slaves inferior, giving me, a neo-slave, reason and cause to live out loud, to come out from the shadows. It’s an honor to celebrate the legacy of James Baldwin.²⁴

In celebration of the Quilts Project’s artistic spirit, honed and perfected in spite of appalling deprivations in a prison named for a plantation in the ostensible “land of the free,” *James Baldwin Review* is honored, indeed, to feature Kenya Baleech Alkebu’s quilt *Red, White, and Baldwin* as our cover art.

As we recall the past year, the mounting COVID death toll, turmoil over masks, and the conservative sway over the Supreme Court, we should remember, too, that there have been other moments of national reckoning, other moments when a choice of how we should live or die together was brought suddenly into focus. From these moments, and those whose lives and works shaped these eras and our inheritance, we can glean much good counsel.

In his last Sunday sermon, delivered in Washington, DC, four days before he was assassinated in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. implored the gathered parishioners to keep in mind our interconnection, as he put it, our “inescapable network of mutuality.” King warned of the stakes of forgetting our common bond:

We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.²⁵

At a benefit dinner in California that same year, just nineteen days before King was shot, James Baldwin spoke to introduce the Reverend King. Baldwin, as usual, didn’t mince words and his judicious comparison between the weight of domestic and international conflicts bears heavily on the demands of our time:

It’s only now that people are beginning to suspect that something terrifying has happened and with our consent. Because we do know that we can’t fight a civil war, which is what this ferment is about—because I am your brother, I was born here, my father’s blood is in this soil and nothing will drive me from this country, it also belongs to me.

We cannot fight a civil war and global war, too, at the same time, and especially if both are predicated on the same principle. And I'm not now accusing American people of being wicked, I'm accusing us of having allowed ourselves to be brainwashed.²⁶

In the twelve months since I last wrote in these pages, an alarming number of nonfiction books have been released that deal quite earnestly with the question of whether or not the United States is running headlong into another civil war. I've purchased four of them, but they sit in mint condition amid the ever-mounting pile of "to read" books that clutter the homes and offices of those of us who read for a living. In truth, though, they sit there staring at me because I've yet to be able to muster the courage to crack their spines.

My hesitancy to read these diagnoses of mortality for this nation stems from an unwillingness to pursue the finer points of what are already the obvious roots of our discontent. Beyond a failing public education system or a failed private health-care system; in addition to growing economic disparity and above the ravages of systemic racism, misogyny, and homophobia; further than the fear-mongering demagogues and the enabling algorithmic echo chambers that haunt our media spaces and promulgate not much more than the polarization by which they profit; past the influence of a narcissistic demagogue with a Houdini-like ability to escape any legal consequences for his numerous evident crimes and the cowardly minions bent to his bidding—in spirit if not in word; and yonder the stalemates of a deadlocked Congress which has entirely abdicated its responsibilities and duties of office to compromise and govern on our behalf—we see the obvious ailment in the American democratic experiment is that we are no longer working together for anything.

Thinking through the comorbidities that ail our politics has, of late, seemed a tautological exercise. Perhaps, as Toni Morrison memorably put it, it may be time to "dream a little before [we] think."²⁷ To fiction, then, I turned instead, to dreams of a sort. Nightmares in this case, for instead of delving into the nonfiction diagnoses of America's demise, I dove into some of the canonical dystopian novels of the twentieth century. Dystopian novels, you see, tell us of the grim possibilities within our present moment. They work best when pressure is applied to certain tendencies or technologies so that this one thing explodes into a force that wholly manifests a world different than our own. Yet these tales resonate simply because in these dystopias we recognize our own worlds too. As Neil Gaiman explains,

What speculative fiction is really good at is not the future but the present—taking an aspect of it that troubles or is dangerous, and extending and extrapolating that aspect into something that allows people of that time to see what they are doing from a different angle and from a different place. It's cautionary.²⁸

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) both caution against the sway of autocrats and the deadening homogeneity of entirely routinized lives. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) provide stark warnings about what shall be

wrought if we continue to allow women's reproductive rights to be sacrificed on the altars of religious zealots. Of course, George Orwell's *1984* (1949) is uniquely relevant to our times; it takes little acumen to discern the connections to our time of constant surveillance, a bombastic blowhard of a leader, the Ministry of Truth's ready use of "memory holes" into which inconvenient facts can be conveniently discarded, and a willingness to bend history and truth in the manufactured language of double-speak. It's no accident that the use of "Orwellian" as an adjective has risen sharply since Trump's ascent in politics, and continues apace with the blatant falsities of "alternative facts" and "big lies." Much is to be learned from these dystopias. Each was written at a unique time, warning of the logical extension of certain social and political predicaments in each author's own lifetime and imagination. That the parallels with our own moments are so apparent means the lessons have clearly not yet sunk in.

The novel that struck me most in this reading assignment, though, was Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1951). It is striking because it contains, to my mind, something of a solution, a glimpse of the way forward. The novel is rightly remembered for its inversion of the figure of the fireman. In this nuclear dystopia, the firemen don't fight fires to save buildings and people. They deliberately set fires to destroy books, along with the buildings these dangerous books are in and the people who might happen to be there with them.

What's remarkable about the novel, though, is that the firemen are a complement to the censorious escapism of the larger culture. In other words, they are simply helping along a culture already wholly dedicated to escapist entertainment and the flattening, thinning, and eventual elimination of complex thought. That's what makes the books dangerous in the first place, for books generate thoughts and ideas, introduce and record complexities and conflicts. As the fire station chief, Beatty, remarks, "a book is a loaded gun in the house next door."²⁹

More remarkable still, the setting of *Fahrenheit 451* is not, like in Orwell or Huxley or Atwood, an autocratic, authoritarian regime. Instead, this censorious culture is organic, a creation of the people who first stopped reading for pursuit of other, simpler pleasures, and then followed this to its natural conclusion. As Beatty explains, "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick."³⁰ The firemen, then, are a supplement, an aid to the larger, organic goal of rooting out complexity and troubling thought.

The culture at large has embraced the soothing homogeneity of spectacles, sensations, and soothingly pallid entertainments. This embrace is represented most prominently in the figure of Montag's wife, Mildred, in her fatuous escape from everything through her full-walled TV parlor, constant droning in-ear radio, and sleeping pill overdoses. As the rebellious Faber explains:

The whole culture's shot through. The skeleton needs melting and reshaping. Good God, it isn't as simple as just picking up a book you laid down half a century ago. Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its

own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then at which buildings are set off and crowds gather for the pretty blaze, but it's a small sideshow indeed, and hardly necessary to keep things in line.³¹

It's worth remembering that the novel is not simply a forewarning of the flattening of thought due to mass culture, it is also an ode to the act of remembering, the importance of learning from history. As the men Montag joins at the end—the hobos consisting of exiled professors from elite universities—remind us, memory and the preservation of histories are the vital building blocks of civilizations: “We’re going to meet a lot of lonely people in the next week and the next month and the next year. And when they ask us what we’re doing, you can say, We’re remembering. That’s where we’ll win out in the long run.”³²

As we march ahead through 2022 and beyond, I implore you to be about the task of remembering. As our epigraph from Camus’s *Plague* reminds us, “knowledge and memories” may be all that we can hope to gain from the past two years. COVID-19 has forever changed our lives; there will be no going back to “normal.” Though the world seems desperately to want it to be so—and far too many are acting as if it already were—remember that the pandemic isn’t yet over. Indeed, as I write there is yet another subvariant of concern in the US, many American cities are reinstating the mask orders they have only recently lifted, and Shanghai is having to publicly admit that it is struggling to feed millions of people locked down in adherence to China’s draconian “Zero COVID” policies.

As the virus’s waves crest and crash, the cycles will level out and we will establish new routines as we learn to live with an endemic threat. Writing in 1961 about the recalcitrance of the South regarding integration, Baldwin warned, “It is not an easy thing to be forced to re-examine a way of life and to speculate, in a personal way, on the general injustice.”³³ Neither will establishing a new post-COVID way of life, or dealing with the injustices that are far too general today be easy. But as we strive for both, we will be well armed by remembering from whence we’ve come. Remember not just those who perished due to COVID, but the reckless imprudence that caused so many infections that could have been prevented. Remember the leaders, politicians, jurists, and charlatans that enabled such folly. Remember the choice to live together as brothers must be made anew each day, lest we perish as fools. Finally, as you establish your “new normal,” please remember the mask.

Grosse Pointe Park, MI, April 25, 2022

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” in *Going to Meet the Man* (1965) (New York, Vintage, 1995), p. 175.
- 2 Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1948) (New York, Vintage, 1991), p. 291.

- 3 Olga Khazan, “Why People Are Acting So Weird,” *The Atlantic*, March 30, 2022, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2022/03/antisocial-behavior-crime-violence-increase-pandemic/627076/ (accessed April 15, 2022).
- 4 Marnie Hunter, “FAA Numbers Confirm It—2021 Was Terrible for Bad Behavior in the Skies,” *CNN Travel*, January 13, 2022, www.cnn.com/travel/article/unruly-airline-passengers-faa-2021/index.html (accessed April 19, 2022).
- 5 Camus, *The Plague*, pp. 207–8.
- 6 *NFIB v. OSHA*, 595 US ___(2022), Dissent, p. 2. The full opinion, along with Gorsuch’s concurrence and the dissenting opinion, can be found here: www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/21a244_hgci.pdf (accessed April 19, 2022).
- 7 Chandelis Duster, “Justice Amy Coney Barrett Says Supreme Court is ‘not a bunch of partisan hacks,’” *CNN Politics*, September 13, 2021, www.cnn.com/2021/09/13/politics/amy-coney-barrett-supreme-court-not-partisan/index.html (accessed April 11, 2022). Trump’s final appointment to the Court, whose chief qualification appeared to be her religious zealotry and willingness to end abortion access, Amy Coney Barrett attempted to defend the court against claims of partisanship in a speech in September of 2021 just after the court voted to uphold an obviously unconstitutional Texas abortion ban.
- 8 “Voting Laws Roundup: February 2022,” Brennan Center for Justice, www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2022 (accessed April 17, 2022).
- 9 Qtd. in Sam Levine, “Threats to US Voting Rights Have Grown—What’s Different about this Moment?,” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2021, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/25/us-voting-rights-threats-voter-suppression-republicans-stacey-abrams (accessed April 21, 2022).
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 US ___(2013), Dissent, p. 33, www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-96_6k47.pdf (accessed April 22, 2022).
- 12 *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, 594 US ___(2021), Dissent, p. 1, www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/19-1257_g204.pdf (accessed April 22, 2022).
- 13 *Shelby County v. Holder*, Dissent, p. 2.
- 14 *NFIB v. OSHA*, Dissent, p. 13.
- 15 James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers” (1963), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2021), p. 336.
- 16 Statistics available on the Gun Violence Archive website, www.gunviolencearchive.org (accessed April 16, 2022).
- 17 Marc A. Thiessen, “Democrats Are Lying about Critical Race Theory,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/09/democrats-are-lying-about-critical-race-theory/ (accessed April 22, 2022).
- 18 Qtd. in Deva Woodly, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 75.
- 19 James Baldwin, “Words of a Native Son” (1964), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 713.
- 20 Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” p. 334.
- 21 Though the advert is no longer readily available on Youngkin’s campaign feed via YouTube, you can view it here in an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*: www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/02/reading-beloved-high-school-glenn-youngkin-virginia-election/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

- 22 Florida Department of Education, “Florida Rejects Publishers’ Attempts to Indoctrinate Students,” April 15, 2022, www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/florida-rejects-publishers-attempts-to-indoctrinate-students.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3VmsKzNvJawEfuD5t5k315p0An9SLOs7TcBggkokQ9P8Iw31Ka1IPnl6CI (accessed April 22, 2022).
- 23 The quilts were also on exhibition earlier in 2022 at the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Museum on Rutgers University campus. At the time of this writing a virtual version of the exhibition is still available at the Zimmerli website: <https://zimmerli.rutgers.edu/art/exhibition/stitching-time-social-justice-collaboration-quilts-project> (accessed April 6, 2022).
- 24 An audio recording and transcript of Kenya Baleech Alkebu briefly discussing this artwork is available as part of the Zimmerli exhibition: <https://zimmerli.rutgers.edu/stitching-time/quilts/red-white-baldwin> (accessed April 6, 2022).
- 25 Transcription courtesy of Ed Pavlić, from a recording available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLsXZXJAURk&t=11s (accessed June 13, 2022).
- 26 James Baldwin, introducing Martin Luther King Jr., “Martin Luther King Speaks! ‘We come not to beg but to demand,’” March 16, 1968, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xU71kk27nQU (accessed June 1, 2022).
- 27 Toni Morrison, “Sarah Lawrence Commencement Address” (1988), in *The Source of Self Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York, Knopf, 2019), p. 73.
- 28 Neil Gaiman, “Introduction,” in Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1951) (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. xii.
- 29 Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, p. 56.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 33 James Baldwin, “A Fly in Buttermilk” (1961), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 195.

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- . “Words of a Native Son” (1964), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 707–13.
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Contributor’s Biography

Justin A. Joyce is one of the founding editors of *James Baldwin Review*, the journal’s current managing editor, and Research Director in the Office of the President at The New School. His first monograph was *Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Gun Violence in Westerns and The Law* (Manchester University Press, 2018). With Dwight A. McBride, he is the editor of *A Melvin Dixon Critical Reader* (2006) and he also edited Vincent Woodard’s Lambda Literary Award-winning book *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism in U.S. Slave Narratives* (NYU Press, 2014) and Lindon Barrett’s *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (University of Illinois Press, 2014). Joyce’s writings on Baldwin have appeared in *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (2009), and *James Baldwin in Context* (2019). Along with Dwight A. McBride and Claire Potter, Joyce is the co-editor of a special issue of *Public Seminar* (April 2022) entitled “Teaching While Black.”