

# “Black People Look Up and Down, White People Look Away”: Charles Mills, James Baldwin, and White Ignorance

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**Abstract:** I examine how James Baldwin explored white ignorance—as conceived by Charles Mills—in his work. I argue that Baldwin helps us understand Mills’s account of white ignorance more deeply, showing that while only mentioned briefly by Mills, Baldwin provides fruitful insights into the phenomenon. I also consider the resources Baldwin provides to find a way out of white ignorance. My aim is to link these thinkers in ways that have been largely ignored.

**Key words:** white ignorance, Charles Mills, James Baldwin, racial epistemology

Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract* (1999) and in “White Ignorance” (2007) and “Global White Ignorance” (2015) theorized what he considered to be an under-theorized form of ignorance. He termed it “white ignorance: to refer to the pervasive ignorance of whites that is linked to white supremacy and racial domination.” For Mills, white ignorance denotes “an absence of belief, a false belief, a set of false beliefs, a pervasively deforming outlook—that [is] not contingent but causally linked to . . . whiteness.”<sup>1</sup> Since his coinage of the term, many have used it to describe the pervasive phenomenon; for at the time of this writing a ‘white ignorance’ Google search renders over 85,000 results. If the purpose of theory is to allow us to see what we could not see before so that we

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1. Mills, “Global White Ignorance,” 217.

might change things, then Mills's contribution is not merely epistemic but politically transformative. But behind every act of theorizing lies a story. In Millsian fashion, his story begins with white philosophers' neglect.

For example, Mills begins his 2007 essay<sup>2</sup> by criticizing philosophers for the scarce amount of work on racial epistemology in the field—a condition that explains the lack of attention to the white ignorance phenomenon within the literature until his writing.<sup>3</sup> As an example of white ignorance and, perhaps, an implicit reason for its under-theorization, Mills accuses academic journals and the white academy of historically engaging in white ignorance by marginalizing black voices, “epistemically ghetto[tizing]” black scholarship, and actively ignoring black intellectuals through citation practices.<sup>4</sup> While he claims that white ignorance has played a part in the under-theorizing of white ignorance itself, he, nevertheless, lists non-academic thinkers who have taken white ignorance seriously. He applauds their treatments. Mills writes, “I would suggest that “white ignorance” has, whether centrally or secondarily, been a theme of many of the classic fictional and nonfictional works of the African American experience.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to briefly explain how figures like James Weldon Johnson, James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison articulated the theme.

In this essay, I examine in more detail how James Baldwin, specifically, explored white ignorance in his work. I argue that he helps us understand Mills's account of white ignorance more deeply, showing that while only mentioned briefly by Mills, Baldwin provides fruitful insights into the phenomenon that should not be ignored. To be sure, some philosophers have addressed Baldwin's view on ignorance. Elizabeth Spelman<sup>6</sup> argues that Baldwin's account can be couched in the following claim: “W does not believe that g is true and does not want to believe that g is true.” I will claim, however, that Baldwin's account is more expansive, and I will show how Mills's view of white ignorance is distinctly Baldwinian in that it shares similar features and cognitive components. While Spelman mentions Baldwin's invitation for us to explore strategies on how to manage

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2. This essay provides a more detailed treatment of the concept than *The Racial Contract*.

3. Mills, “White Ignorance,” 17. It must be noted that conditions have improved in philosophy since the publication of Mills's essay, largely in part because of his contribution.

4. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. In fact, this essay appears in the same volume in which Mills's 2007 essay appears.

ignorance, her essay doesn't focus on these strategies, rather it highlights how whites have historically labored to maintain ignorance. I will explore how Baldwin's work provides us with such strategies. I argue that Baldwin's contribution is unique in that it not only provides a description of the phenomenon but also a prescription.

I begin in Section 1 by arguing that the epistemic asymmetry, epistemic survival, and systematic misperception features that Mills credits to individual African-American writers are all present in Baldwin's work. I do this to position him as a man of letters whose attention to white ignorance within the African-American tradition was multifaceted and exceptional. I revisit, in Section 2, crucial components of Mills's account of white ignorance (i.e., perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interests) along with the ways in which race affects them, and then turn to Baldwin's analysis of these components. In Section 3, I consider the resources Baldwin provides to find a way out of white ignorance. In the end, I argue that Baldwin has much more to contribute to the theorizing of white ignorance (as Mills conceives it) than Mills highlights. This contribution is theoretically important to understanding the concept, and normatively relevant for combatting the phenomenon. I do this with the hope of linking these thinkers in ways that have been largely ignored.

### **I. White Ignorance and the African-American Literary Tradition**

While white ignorance is the false belief or absence of belief causally linked to whiteness, this is not to imply that there also exists a thing called "black ignorance." Rather than being an ignorance born out of a lack of information about another racial group or a common, yet unfortunate existential inability to access every part of ourselves, it is whites' "privilege and subordination [that] tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation."<sup>7</sup> While whites, given their privilege, may be ignorant about themselves and their impact on others, this is not to say that other racial groups are too. Blacks, for a variety of reasons, know white people. While whiteness studies have gotten much traction in the academy in the last few decades, with white scholars at the helm, historian David Roediger—a figure Mills draws on in his 2007 essay—reminds us that African Americans have been experts in whiteness way before an academic study was born.<sup>8</sup> This expertise within African-American letters has provided important treatments of racial epistemology—while academic philosophy has lagged. Mills highlights three contributions such writers have made to racial epistemology: a) an analysis of the epistemic asymmetry that exist

7. Mills, "White Ignorance," 17.

8. Roediger, *Black on White*.

between whites and Blacks; b) the utility of this asymmetry for survival; and c) an examination of systematic white misperceptions of Blacks. Although James Baldwin is mentioned as one of four writers within Mills's brief analysis, and three of his pieces are anthologized with forty-eight other works by Black authors in Roediger's collection on Black writers and whiteness, I will show how Baldwin's work explores all three of these epistemic themes. I do this to support the claim that Baldwin's thinking on the theme was expansive and exceptional.

There exists an epistemic asymmetry between Blacks and whites. To borrow James Weldon Johnson's words, Black people "of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand themselves."<sup>9</sup> In the essay "In Search of a Majority," Baldwin makes a similar claim when he notes that "no one in the world—in the entire world—knows more—knows Americans better . . . than the American Negro."<sup>10</sup> Of course, the Americans he is referring to are white Americans. For Baldwin, it is Blacks who know them better—not only more than any other people in the world, but more than white Americans know themselves. Baldwin also helps us to see that this asymmetry is double. Blacks know whites more than they know themselves. And while Blacks know whites, whites fail to know them. For Baldwin, this is one of the reasons for the rage that many Black folks have. He writes in "The Negro at Home and Abroad" how this aspect of white ignorance is a luxury. "White men are allowed the luxury of never thinking about blacks at all, until they happen to encounter one, whereas few Black men anywhere live for very long without encountering, as an impossible obstacle forever, the idea, the presence, and the power of whites."<sup>11</sup>

But white ignorance is also global for Mills. If the modern world was created by European imperialism and colonialism and justified through slavery and exploitation, white ignorance cannot be restricted to America. This doesn't mean that white ignorance is the same across space and time. For Mills, despite its different locale, global white ignorance will share three things in common: 1) racial erasure; 2) a denial of global white supremacy; and 3) a denial of white atrocities and elimination of black achievement world-wide. Baldwin links global white ignorance and the epistemic asymmetry that exists within it in the "Abroad" essay when he explains the inquiry that happens when whites do encounter Blacks abroad.

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9. Johnson, *The Autobiography*, 15.

10. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 220.

11. *Ibid.*, 603.

The white man, in his interracial encounters, cannot fail to cause in the breast of the black a certain fury, however deeply this fury may be hidden—when, out of an innocence which can scarcely at first be believed, the white man wishes to discover the spirit, aspirations, and personal history of the black stranger before him. The black, in the face of this innocence, and observing the extent of the white man's apprehensions, cannot but feel a certain bitter superiority of his own, and a certain contempt. And he cannot but find it very nearly unforgivable that, in the mind of the white man, who has cost him so much, his own humanity should occupy so little place or such a humiliating one.<sup>12</sup>

Given that white ignorance is global, Blacks will experience it when they leave America. They will find themselves encountering the asymmetry as they engage with whites in other countries. While Blacks will know “the spirit, aspirations, and personal history” of whites with whom they interact, the same will not be reciprocated. Instead of reducing this to international incompetence, Baldwin suggests that given what whites have done and continue to do to Blacks worldwide, the fact that Blacks are unknown to whites prove that Blacks are not thought about because their humanity is not worth considering.

Baldwin's work also helps us to understand the utility of this epistemic asymmetry for many Blacks. Like other writers before and after him, Baldwin shows how the epistemic asymmetry has been used for survival. He admits, “I have spent more of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive.”<sup>13</sup> When Baldwin claims that “no one in the world—in the entire world—knows more—knows Americans better . . . than the American Negro” he admits that part of this knowing Americans better, has included such watching and outwitting. He writes: “This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you.”<sup>14</sup> The reason why Blacks know white Americans better is because they have had to watch white folks. Roediger paints a vivid picture of what such watching entailed for the enslaved on the auction block.

Consider a slave on the auction block, awaiting sale. Imagine the slave being seen, indeed examined, by the potential bidders. Imagine what she felt. Think of her trembling and crying, breaking down, even fighting back. . . . Little prepares us to see her as looking out, as studying the bidders. And yet, as recent and imaginative research has shown, slaves on the block often searched out every clue in sizing up the whites who would own them. Did that scar represent a history of violence? . . . Did those clothes mean great wealth, declining fortunes, or poor whiteness?

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12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 269.

14. *Ibid.*, 220.

What could be learned about the buyers from other slaves? What strategies of self-presentation would discourage the attention of the bidder most feared, or encourage the potential buyer judged to be the best of terrible options.<sup>15</sup>

This watching was necessary for their survival. Watching could give them clues into the character of their potential master, and thus knowledge that they would need in order to survive. Watching could perhaps help them to not be sold at all. But watching on its own was not enough for survival. This watching provided a knowledge that when used properly allowed them to outsmart the bidders. And it's this outsmarting—born out of watching—that made survival possible. For Baldwin, watching and outwitting white folks, have also helped Blacks deal with and bear them. Whites may not watch Black folks at all, but Baldwin knew that for Blacks to survive it required attention and ingenuity. For this reason, cultural critic Lauren Michelle Jackson eloquently states: "The Negro, historically, has always been in the espionage business. Subalterns survive by being watchful, warily gathering intelligence about those for whom they labor."<sup>16</sup>

Baldwin's commitment to the utility and necessity of making use of this epistemic asymmetry for survival influenced his review of the film "Lady Sings the Blues." In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin criticizes the movie for its failure to depict this asymmetry and outwitting accurately. In a scene, Billie Holiday witnesses a lynched body and grieving black faces who stared upon it. Soon Billie is back on her tour bus with her white bandmates. The Ku Klux Klan suddenly appears marching beside the bus. Although her bandmates try to hide her, Billie, who is upset about what she witnessed moments earlier, makes herself visible and curses and weeps at the Klan. Billie's tour bus is able to escape, but Baldwin describes it as "pure bullshit Hollywood-American fable, with the bad guys robed and the good guys casual."<sup>17</sup> He notes that it is not historically correct and thus not in the book in which the movie is based "for the very good reason, certainly, that black people in this country are schooled in adversity long before white people are. Blacks perceive danger far more swiftly, and, however odd this may sound, then attempt to protect their comrade from his white brothers; they know their white comrades' brothers far better than the comrade does."<sup>18</sup> To put it frankly, it is Billie (like other Blacks) who—because she knows white folks and what they are capable of—would have hid herself, managing her emotions for her own survival.

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15. *Ibid.*, 3.

16. Jackson, "Shadow and Act," 73.

17. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 562.

18. *Ibid.*

She would not have needed the foresight and intervention of her white bandmates, nor would it have existed.

Baldwin's point is this: given white ignorance and the epistemic asymmetry, it is more accurate to provide an account in which Blacks, given what they know about whites, use this knowledge to protect themselves and even their white comrades—not the other way around. Billie's knowledge of white folks would have led her to make a different decision than the movie depicted. To make the heroes her white bandmates is to downplay just how prevalent white ignorance is for white cognizers, even for those who play jazz. Recall, Black folk know whites more than they know themselves! One might disagree with Baldwin's assessment, given that we do not always act prudent based on what we know. For even Baldwin admits in *The Fire Next Time* that "people find it very difficult to act on what they know."<sup>19</sup> However, Baldwin is revealing the fact that Blacks have used what they know about whites to survive in an anti-black world. He is also pointing out just how prevalent white ignorance is and how it is also dangerous for white folks. White ignorance could cause white folks not to recognize potential dangers posed by their white fellows—even when those fellows are wearing white robes, which Baldwin believes is how the story happened.

Baldwin also offers an examination of systematic white misperceptions of Blacks. The misperceptions occur when Blacks are not seen by whites, and when whites refuse to see them. When Baldwin writes that "Black people, mainly, look down or look up . . . and white people, mainly, look away" he is referring to this non-seeing.<sup>20</sup> The title of Baldwin's second essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name*, addresses this misperception explicitly: "You don't know my name because you can't see me, these essays say."<sup>21</sup> In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin gives us some insight into this misperception. While Mills considers Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to be an epistemological novel, Baldwin is highly critical of Richard Wright's *Native Son* because of how it contributes to white misperceptions of Blacks. The problem that he finds with the novel is that it satisfies white people's images of Black people. One aspect of the misperception is that whites do not see Blacks as humans but monsters. This is the figure of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. He is without tradition; he is "the nigger."

This dehumanizing outlook also impacts how whites frame the reality Blacks face. Blacks are considered social problems rather than a human

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19. *Ibid.*, 294.

20. *Ibid.*, 304.

21. Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, 186.

problem. When Blacks are seen they are only seen as “statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence . . . somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured.”<sup>22</sup> This framing creates a “sociological and sentimental image” of Blacks.<sup>23</sup> Part of white readers’ acceptance of Wright’s *Bigger* Thomas, for Baldwin, reveals their active ignorance and satisfaction with what they (mis)perceive. He writes: “Let us refrain from inquiring at the moment whether or not he actually exists; for we [whites] believe that he exists.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, we can add to Baldwin’s claim (which is also a focus for Spelman’s analysis) that whites have destroyed many lives and “don’t know it and do not want to know it” to also include: *whites refuse to get rid of and revise the images they have of Blacks because they don’t know who Black people are and do not want to know.*<sup>25</sup> I will say more about why there is white resistance to give up these misrepresentations in the next section. Before I do, I explore the crucial components of white ignorance for both Mills and Baldwin.

## II. Baldwin, Race, and White Ignorance’s Cognitive Factors

Mills claims that there are cognitive factors that are central to “generating and sustaining white ignorance.”<sup>26</sup> He lists perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interests as examples. While these components are distinct, they are often interrelated. And they are also related to race. Baldwin was aware of this and for this reason these components feature in his work in various ways. In this section, I claim that we can look to his work for examples and an elaboration of Mills’s breakdown.

Perception has to do with “what and how we see.” Conceptions has to do with the concepts we make use of. Categories affect what we see, hence the suggestion that “the very terms we allow ourselves to use foster distortion.”<sup>27</sup> Mills considers the term “savage,” which is often used to describe Indigenous peoples and Africans, but rarely used to describe whites. When we see the “savage” we see someone who is inferior and not autonomous. This is how conception drives perception. Even when

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22. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 19.

23. *Ibid.*, 20.

24. *Ibid.*, 29.

25. *Ibid.*, 292. The earlier portion of this sentence refers to the passage in which Spelman derives her formulation.

26. Mills, “White Ignorance,” 34.

27. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, 6.



we purport to be committed to equality for every human being, the concept/precept of the savage will prevent any cognitive dissonance from occurring.

It's for this reason that Baldwin was critical of certain categories and concepts like "the nigger." Recognizing how concepts can not only distort perceptions of others but also ourselves, he challenged the pejorative label and its use.

What white people have to do, is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man, but if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it. . . . If I'm not a nigger here and you invented him, you, the white people, invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it's able to ask that question.<sup>28</sup>

Here Baldwin notes that categories like the "nigger" are inventions created by the dominant society. They serve a purpose. Instead of stating that purpose explicitly, he challenges whites to find out for themselves, with the assumption that what they'll discover will have tremendous existential and political effects. Baldwin is aware of the purpose the concept serves and it's for this reason that he rejects it. He was aware that these categories are used to mold as well as justify oppression. So, he writes that segregation has worked brilliantly to the extent that it "allowed white people, with scarcely any pangs of conscience whatever, to create, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see."<sup>29</sup> Thus, the function of these concepts and categories from Baldwin's point of view, according to David Jenkins, was "a way of grounding an 'immovable pillar,' around which white people, in their capacity as oppressors, can defend a particular 'system of reality,' of which they feel themselves in control."<sup>30</sup>

Baldwin was aware that these categories are misrepresentations and misrecognitions that operate to justify white perceptions and sustain white identity and safety. Baldwin's refusal to accept—and thus represent—the concept for white folks was meant as a way of troubling white ways of perceiving the world. It's for this reason that Baldwin writes in "A Talk to Teachers": "So where we are now is that a whole country of people believe I'm a 'nigger,' and I don't, and the battle's on! Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that you're not what you thought you were either! And this is the crisis."<sup>31</sup>

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28. Clark, James Baldwin Interview.

29. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 195.

30. Jenkins, "James Baldwin and Recognition," 90.

31. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 682.

Of course, for Baldwin, such concepts reflect more on the user than the target and are used to mask insecurity and fear. In a 1980's speech called "A World I Never Made," Baldwin notes that "the person who has defined the other, and marked him for death, has not so much defined the other as defined himself."<sup>32</sup> As much as whites may make use of these concepts for political means, they have psychological origins. In "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" Baldwin states that "the country's image of the Negro, which hasn't very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a kind of frightening accuracy the state of mind of the country."<sup>33</sup> "The key to why these assumptions are held," he says, "has something to do with some insecurity in the people who hold them."<sup>34</sup>

Memory is also important in generating white ignorance. Mills notes that there is a connection between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia. Societies that have been structured around domination will suppress an unhappy collective memory. White amnesia will work to suppress 'bad white memories' such as slavery and Jim Crow in order to support a positive narrative of whiteness, and thus a particular white identity. We can witness the interplay between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia through white washing practices and the erasure of certain historical atrocities. Mills mentions history textbooks and memorials as examples. Baldwin's work sought to address the denial and suppression of history by whites. He knew the key role it played in feeding into white identity. He was adamant that white America needed to address its lies.

The distortion of memory is what Baldwin called the 'lie of whiteness.' Eddie Glaude in *Begin Again* explains the set of practices that constitute *the lie*.<sup>35</sup> He notes how, for Baldwin, the lie is a set of lies. The first set of lies debases Black people. They are lies that are embedded via stereotypes of Blacks as lazy, dishonest, and criminal. The second set of lies has to do with American history, particularly its violent and oppressive history. According to this lie, America is good and innocent, forever committed to liberal principles in theory and practice. Its bad deeds are mistakes. Baldwin traces the lie throughout history and asks us to look back on its beginnings. It begins in slavery, and whites refusal to see Blacks as humans although they knew they could not deny that fact. He writes:

The American found himself in a very peculiar position because he knew that black people were people. Frenchmen could avoid knowing it—they

32. Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, 354.

33. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 223.

34. *Ibid.*, 220.

35. Glaude, *Begin Again*, 7.

never met a black man. Englishmen could avoid knowing it. But Americans could not avoid knowing it because, after all, here he was, and he was, no matter how it was denied, a man, just like everybody else. And the attempt to avoid this, to avoid this fact, I consider one of the keys to what we can call loosely the American psychology.<sup>36</sup>

The crime is not merely that slavery occurred, for as he notes, America is not exceptional in its inhumane practices. However, it is exceptional in its denial of history. Glaude highlights how “the lie is the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of black people and, how it deforms the soul of the country.”<sup>37</sup> Baldwin believed that if America continues to believe the myths it created about itself, it would never solve its current problems, writing: “It is important that one begin to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myth it has created about its past, which is another way of saying that it has entirely denied its past.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, there will continually be a price to pay for believing the lie.

And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white. By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a black child’s life meant nothing compared with a white child’s life. By abandoning their children to the things white men could buy. By informing their children that black women, black men, and black children had no human integrity that those who call themselves white were bound to respect. And in this debasement and definition of black people, they debased and defined themselves. And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers. Because they think they are white, they are looking for, or bombing into existence, stable populations, cheerful natives, and cheap labor.<sup>39</sup>

The function of the lie is the protection of white identity. In “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin explains the lie and its relationship to identity:

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. And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans—lynch law and law, segregation and legal

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36. Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption*, 84.

37. Glaude, *Begin Again*, 8–9.

38. Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption*, 91.

39. *Ibid.*, 166.

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 these things at once. The resulting spectacle, at once foolish and dreadful, led someone to make the quite accurate observation that “the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men.” In this long battle, a battle by no means finished, the unforeseeable effects of which will be felt by many future generations, the white man’s motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish an identity.<sup>40</sup>

For Baldwin, white amnesia and white memory work to protect and sustain white identity. The content of this identity is superiority and innocence. Thus, on one hand, whites believe they are superior and therefore do not owe respect to those who are otherwise. On the other hand, whites are innocent and therefore bear no moral responsibility for the terror and destruction that have been done in the name of whiteness. Of course, this identity is an illusion. Baldwin helps us to see how even identity itself is a cognitive force. The combination of white amnesia, white memory, and white identity generates white ignorance.

Testimonies help us remember. However, in order to maintain white ignorance, non-whites’ testimonies about white atrocities and injustices must be discredited and dismissed. Absent of testimony, white memory can be maintained, and white identity can remain intact. White ignorance is sustained through the suppression of testimony. Mills points out how Black testimonies were always under attack as a result, citing laws that made it illegal for Blacks to testify against whites in court and the disbelief of slave narratives unless a white person authenticated the claims. However, despite these efforts, Mills highlights how Black counter-testimony has always existed against white mythology. What we know about the Tulsa race riot is due to Black survivors who kept the history of the event alive despite the official Tulsa record having mysteriously vanished. Knowing how important testimony was to protecting America from its lies, Baldwin took his vocation as a witness seriously and showed us the power and necessity of testimony. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* is an example of counter-testimony and truth-telling; for Baldwin wrote the book in 1985 to give a more accurate account and analysis of the Atlanta child murders (and the city’s crisis) that he believed was lacking in the press.

Baldwin was not only a writer and artist. He described himself as a ‘witness,’ a person who testifies. Glaude summarizes the role of witness as a person who “bring[s] the suffering to the attention of those who wallow

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40. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 127.

in willful ignorance. In short, shatter the illusion of innocence at every turn and attack the shibboleths the country holds sacred."<sup>41</sup> Baldwin believed it was his task as a writer to confront society as it is, disturb the peace, even fight "an astute and agile guerilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic."<sup>42</sup> He believed the role of the artist was "to bear witness, to what life is—does—and to speak for people who cannot speak. That you are simply a conduit."<sup>43</sup>

Testifying was not merely his job as a writer, but as a lover. To testify against the first set of lies which debases Blacks, Baldwin's words push back against them, testifying to Blacks' humanity and beauty. In "Letter to My Nephew," for example, he tells his namesake: "Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear."<sup>44</sup> This was a necessary counter-testimony to and for a young child who would one day face the lie of whiteness.

Interestingly, Baldwin also helps us to see how white ignorance is not only generated by a suppression or denial of testimony, but how it (and its effects) contribute to the distortion of memory that informs the testimony. It does this through racial trauma. As Glaude points out, "Narrating trauma fragments how we remember." Pointing to Baldwin's own misremembering due to trauma he notes that Baldwin "can be forgiven for forgetting some things. He was trying to hold himself—hold us—together, after all."<sup>45</sup> But Baldwin himself highlights this connection in "Many Thousands Gone":

It is not a question of memory. Oedipus did not remember the thongs that bound his feet; nevertheless the marks they left testified to that doom toward which his feet were leading him. The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.<sup>46</sup>

Trauma can affect what we remember and thus impact the testimony we have to offer. While those who are victims of oppression can be forgiven for it, this reveals how the very thing that can counter America's

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41. Glaude, *Begin Again*, 53.

42. *Ibid.*, 6.

43. *Ibid.*, 52

44. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 293.

45. Glaude, *Begin Again*, 43–44.

46. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 22–23.

misremembering (i.e., testimony) is also vulnerable to the trauma that white ignorance engenders.

Lastly, motivational white group interests are also a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance. It encourages, for Mills, “white cognitive distortions of various kinds.” How so? If one sees Black interests as opposed to white interests, this is likely to affect white social cognition. It will lead whites to refuse to see racial discrimination when it appears or use concepts such as “post-racial” or “colorblindness” to counter reality. This is all to say that vested group interests contribute to self-deception and motivated irrationality.

Baldwin tackled vested group interests and their dangers by reminding whites that white-interests are an illusion. There is no such thing as white interests because their fates are tied in with Blacks. He writes, “Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other.” As a result, Baldwin is able to declare that “what is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. There is no way around this.” He demands in a suggestive tone that “these walls—these artificial walls—which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear, must come down.”<sup>47</sup> The walls are built by white America’s need to cling to an identity that creates a sense of self—albeit one grounded in violence and hatred—while it denies a dignified and autonomous self to others. And so later in the passage, Baldwin notes, “I think that what we really have to do is to create a country in which there are no minorities for the first time in the history of the world. The one thing that all Americans have in common is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent.”<sup>48</sup> This is not to deny difference. It is to remind Americans that they are interrelated, that their fates are tied to each other regardless of race. The lie of whiteness, however, will have Americans believe that there really is a majority and minority; whites and blacks; and a negro problem rather than an American problem.

### III. A Message to Cognizers

Mills states that his mapping of white ignorance also “render[s] epistemic criteria for minimizing it.”<sup>49</sup> And he ends “White Ignorance” by suggesting that only when we “break these rules and meta-rules can we begin the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white

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47. *Ibid.*, 221.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Mills, “White Ignorance,” 20.

darkness.”<sup>50</sup> However, I believe more can be said explicitly within the epistemic realm as well as the psychological to remedy and counter white ignorance. Baldwin can help us with this endeavor—for he not only illuminates Mills’s account of white ignorance and its cognitive components but offers multidimensional remedies. I have briefly hinted at some of them in the previous section. In this section, I will discuss in more detail the ways we can overcome white ignorance according to Baldwin.

As political theorist George Shulman puts it, the problem, for Baldwin as it is for Mills, is not an ignorance than can be “remed[ied] by knowledge, but a failure to acknowledge . . . what people do know but disavow.”<sup>51</sup> Hence, a way to overcome white ignorance involves a willingness to acknowledge, to move from innocence to acceptance. Those who fail to do so are culpable, because for Baldwin, we can overcome the refusal to see.

How might we overcome white ignorance and its crucial cognitive components? Let’s return to the lie. Baldwin had a solution to the consequences born of the lie of whiteness. For him, we must reckon with the truth. “We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it.”<sup>52</sup> Such truth telling counters myth-making and can open the way to new possibilities. Summing up Baldwin’s imperative to tell the truth Glaude writes:

Revealing the lie at the heart of the American idea, however, occasions an opportunity to tell a different and better story. It affords a chance to excavate the past and to examine the ruins to find, or at least glimpse, what made us who we are. Baldwin insisted, until he died, that we reach for a different story. We should tell the truth about ourselves, he maintained, and that would release us into a new possibility.<sup>53</sup>

Telling the truth requires an examination of the past, serious engagement, uptake to the testimonies of others, and the willingness to tell a different story.

However, given that the lie “cuts deep into the American psyche,” there is a psychological imperative too.<sup>54</sup> For Baldwin, “the American white has got to accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not. He has to give up, he has to surrender his image of himself, and apparently this is the last thing white Americans are prepared to do.”<sup>55</sup> This is part of the acknowledgement and acceptance that Shulman hints at. Also, since crucial cognitive components sustain white identity, following Baldwin’s advice we must also seek

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50. *Ibid.*, 35.

51. Shulman, “Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics,” 237.

52. Glaude, *Begin Again*, 4.

53. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

54. *Ibid.*, 9.

55. Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption*, 84.

an identity that is not contingent on whiteness. Baldwin believed that white America mistakes status for identity: “One cannot afford to lose status on this peculiar ladder, for the prevailing notion of American life seems to involve a kind of rung-by-rung ascension to some hideously desirable state. If this is one’s concept of life, obviously one cannot afford to slip back on rung. . . . In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall.”<sup>56</sup> White Americans must accept that they are not their status. That is a hard pill to swallow but one that is needed to overcome white ignorance.

But rejection is also needed. Given that concepts inform our perceptions, we must begin to answer Baldwin’s question of why we need certain concepts like the “savage” and the “nigger” in the first place. The discovery that this questioning is likely to produce will then allow us to reject those concepts so that we can move from blindness and misperceptions to seeing ourselves and co-fellows as we truly are. Such seeing will then give us the strength to begin to tear down the walls of separation, walls that we put up in order to denigrate others, disconnect from them, and deify ourselves through lies. We must force ourselves to see our political fellows as part of us, inextricably bound. This will provide us with the foundation for imagining how we might live with each other.

We can begin again. We can overcome the “pervasively deforming outlook—that [is] not contingent but causally linked to . . . whiteness,” but not just by reading books by Black authors or encountering evidence that counters white supremacist’s claims. Baldwin, a writer who was very concerned with revealing the interior life of his fictional characters, required, via his essays, that we undergo a transformation in our interior lives by doing the hard labor of acknowledgment, acceptance, and examination. This labor is not only required for us to love better but to see our world, ourselves, and each other differently. Only when we engage in this labor can we overcome white ignorance. Only after we “deal within ourselves and our own personalities, with all those vices, all those conundrums, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro race,” as Baldwin puts it, may we be able to know ourselves and then each other better.<sup>57</sup>

#### IV. Linking the Two

Philosopher John Rawls is usually mentioned with Charles Mills given Mills’s harsh and witty criticisms of Rawls’s theory of justice and his ideal-theorizing. If I have been successful here at all, I hope that Mills’s name will invoke another figure. That thinker is James Baldwin. While Mills neither

56. Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 218–19.

57. *Ibid.*, 219.



criticizes nor spends much time examining Baldwin's work on ignorance, I have shown that Baldwin helps us to understand as well as face the challenges that Mills's mapping of white ignorance presents.

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