

BEGIN AGAIN

James Baldwin's America
and Its Urgent Lessons
for Our Own

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking with Jimmy

I arrived in Heidelberg, Germany, on a hot Saturday morning the day after leaving Newark, New Jersey. This was the beginning of my stay at Heidelberg University as the 2018 recipient of the James W.C. Pennington Award. Born on the eastern shore of Maryland in 1809, Pennington escaped slavery at the age of eighteen, learned to read and write, and was the first black man to attend classes at Yale University. He went on to become a minister, and in 1849, the Heidelberg Faculty of Theology awarded him an honorary doctorate. It was the first time, I believe, that a European university bestowed such an academic honor on an African American. And here I was, a country boy from Moss Point, Mississippi, who wrote about religion and race in the United States, flying across the world to accept an honor named after Pennington at a university founded in 1386.

I met James, an American graduate student from a small town in Michigan who was studying at Heidelberg, as I checked into

my apartment, House 2, no. 64. He was charged with getting me settled on my first day at the university. The elevator wasn't working, so we walked up three flights of stairs with three weeks' worth of clothes in my suitcase. The apartment was small. I opened the door and immediately found myself in a kitchenette with the bathroom and shower right next to it. The stove had two burners. The oven was a microwave. Five steps in, I stood in my bedroom/living room/dining room. The bed doubled as a couch. Then I spotted my desk. Nothing else mattered after that.

The apartment, with its high ceilings that kept the room from closing in on you, had a dated feel, and comfort was not its primary concern. In fact, this part of the Heidelberg campus (and it is a stretch to describe it as a campus in any American sense) wasn't very appealing at all. All the buildings felt like they were constructed in the 1960s and '70s. Square monstrosities with little character. Strictly functional. James waited for me outside. We were going to buy my train pass, check out the grocery store, and travel to the *alte Stadt* (the old city).

As we entered the station, I heard screaming. People in front of us stood still and stared at some kind of commotion. I followed their eyes. Four policemen (*polizei*) were piled on a black man. One officer had his knee in the man's back; the others twisted his arms. His pants were halfway down his legs. His bare ass was exposed. The police pressed his head down into the concrete as if they were trying to leave the imprint of a leaf there.

With each attempt to cuff him, the man let out a bloodcurdling scream. All eyes were on him as the crowd stood by and watched intently, like spectators at a soccer game without any real attachment to the teams playing. I watched them as they watched the police and the black man. Their faces revealed nothing. They were inscrutable, at least to me. I had not been in Heidelberg for

two hours, and police had a black man's face pressed down on the concrete with a knee in his back. He screamed again. I didn't understand his pained words. I didn't know what he had done, if anything. I only knew the screaming was all too familiar.

James turned beet red and, for some reason, felt the need to apologize *to me*.

There is a kind of isolation being in a place where you do not know the language. Words do not interrupt your vision. Silence allows you to see differently. During my short time in Heidelberg, I took in the landscape: the wildflowers, the cobblestone roads, the old buildings bleeding into new construction. One noticed a sadness. Perhaps it was the feeling of a place that had experienced the devastation of war or the effect of having a U.S. military base shut down and the struggle of figuring out what would happen next. I saw the whiteness of the place (a smattering of color here and there; a soul food restaurant that played Al Green and served only Ethiopian food) and heard the beauty and harshness of a language I could not understand. Whatever I was experiencing, even in that initial traumatic moment, I was not in the United States, and to my mind that was a good thing. I did not have to go on television and explain what happened at the train station. I did not have to explain it to James either.

I wondered, at the time, if this was what James Baldwin initially felt when he lived abroad: an escape from the constant demand to deal with what was happening in the States and what was happening *in him* because of it. Paris became a refuge of sorts in his early days. Whatever Baldwin faced there, at least he didn't have to deal with the barrage of racist nonsense here, and in the silence that his lack of French afforded him, he could reimagine

himself. It is exhausting to find oneself, over and over again, navigating a world rife with deadly assumptions about you and those who look like you, to see and read about insult and harm, death and anguish, for no other reason than because you're black or black and poor or black and trans or . . . For me, the daily grind consumes. I cannot escape the news. I am drowning in it, and in all the nastiness of a country that seems, or feels, like it is going underwater.

Heidelberg afforded some critical distance, a brief refuge from it all. A small apartment in a place where I did not know the language offered *me* an opportunity to be still, to quiet my head, and to think about my country and the moment we currently find ourselves in.

I started this book outside of the United States. That seemed appropriate. It would give me a distinct vantage point to write about Donald Trump, race, and the current state of our politics. Plus, Baldwin insisted that it was outside of the United States that he came to understand the country more fully. My hope was to begin the writing in St. Thomas in a nice flat overlooking the Caribbean Sea, but Hurricane Maria took care of that dream. So I found myself in Europe, lecturing and teaching at a university where Hegel taught his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the nineteenth century, and thinking about James Baldwin's America and what lessons it might offer our own.

At the end of the second week in Heidelberg, I decided to catch a quick flight from Frankfurt to Nice. I wanted to see Baldwin's home in Saint Paul de Vence, or what was left of it. I knew that his sprawling ten-acre property—the place with its “welcome table” that he finally called home for seventeen years—was being

destroyed to make way for luxury apartments. I found it a fitting image for his later life and a somewhat ironic fulfillment of his own prophetic witness: capital and luxury running roughshod over everything. Even his sanctuary failed to escape.

I had never traveled within Europe before. They didn't give us papers to fill out. No one checked my passport. I simply walked off the plane that morning and into France. My taxi driver, Christophe (I imagined him as the white French counterpart of Black Christopher in Baldwin's novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*), a rather muscular white fellow who looked like he could be from South Jersey, drove toward my hotel. He seemed excited to practice his English. I mentioned the purpose of my visit: "I am going to Saint Paul de Vence to see the remains of the house of a famous African American writer." *The remains*. It was as if I were visiting a grave site.

Christophe interjected, "No. No. You should visit the place immediately." Nice would be cut off from traffic later in the day, he told me. France was preparing for a *national* dance party that evening (I found the idea of a "national dance party" odd). Plus, France's second game of the World Cup was scheduled at 4:00 P.M. He made an abrupt U-turn, and we headed toward Baldwin's home.

When we arrived in Saint Paul de Vence, Christophe walked with me down the Route de la Colle toward Baldwin's home. I saw the tips of moving cranes. We were close. Soon the beginnings of the new apartments came into view, concrete foundations with red wooden side rails for protection. Men were busily moving about. Below us was an absolutely stunning view of the countryside. I imagined Baldwin waking up, probably at midday, after a night of heavy drinking and intensive writing with coffee and cigarette in hand, stretching and looking out at the expanse. Ready himself

for another day. Sounds of an active construction site interrupted the scene, especially that damn sledgehammer. Finally we arrived at what was left of Baldwin's house. Huge cranes lumbered. Bulldozers cleared land. And a sign on the wall said it all: LE JARDIN DES ARTS: 19 APPARTEMENTS DE GRAND LUXE AVEC VUE MER PANORAMIQUE. RÉSERVEZ MAINTENANT, SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY.

From outside the fence, I saw portions of the main house still standing. Christophe said, "We should see if anyone is here. Maybe they will let us in." I thought that was rather brazen, but he walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. I must have looked unnerved. "What do we have to lose?" he asked, looking back at me with a slight smile. Two white women greeted us with decidedly British accents. They thought we were potential buyers: an African American man dressed in a blue linen shirt and cream-colored jeans with a muscular French guide. Made sense, I guess. I explained that I was working on a book with James Baldwin at its heart, and that I wanted to see the remains of his home. They seemed a bit defensive, declaring that the main portion of the home was being restored and would be a part of the new complex. The other part had been crumbling from neglect and had to be torn down. I asked if I could see the house. Nervously they agreed and walked out to the balcony, but immediately noted all of the construction work going on below. "It's too dangerous," they said. I could only view the house from there.

It looked like an excavation of an ancient ruin. The ground had been carefully cleared, and only the writing room of the historic house, once a beautiful villa with a lush garden and palm and orange trees, remained, exposed for the sun to beat down on its side. Contrasted with the new construction jutting out of the mountain, what was left of Baldwin's home looked old, scarred, and re-

signed to its fate. I imagined the owners of the new apartments, or at least some of them who cared to mention it, boasting that they lived at the home of a famous African American writer, only then to point out the panoramic view. Just above our heads, you could see the village of Saint Paul de Vence. The view was stunning. My heart broke.

The ruins were a fitting description for what Baldwin saw in the latter part of his life in the United States. He saw decay and wreckage alongside greed and selfishness. He saw, and felt deeply, the effects of America's betrayal of the black freedom struggle of the mid-twentieth century: The country had refused, once again, to turn its back on racism and to reach for its better angels, and our children were paying the cost. As I looked out onto the ruins and thought of the election of Donald Trump and the ugliness that consumed *my* country, I asked myself: *What do you do when you have lost faith in the place you call home?* That wasn't quite the right way to put it: I never really had faith in the United States in the strongest sense of the word. I hoped that one day white people here would finally leave behind the belief that they mattered more. But what do you do when this glimmer of hope fades, and you are left with the belief that white people will never change—that the country, no matter what we do, will remain basically the same?

Amid the rubble of the construction site and the signs promising luxurious living, I thought of Baldwin's witness in his later years as an answer to my questions and part of the reason why I needed to write this book. He grappled with profound disillusionment after the murder of Dr. King and yet held on to his faith in the possibility of a moment when we could all be fully ourselves, what he referred to as a New Jerusalem. I had to understand how he did that, and what resources, as he confronted his dark America, he might offer me as I confront the darkness of my own.

In the documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin's brother David powerfully recounted Jimmy's summation of his life; in that, I heard what I needed to do:

I pray I've done my work . . . when I've gone from here, and all the turmoil, through the wreckage and rubble, and through whatever, when someone finds themselves digging through the ruins . . . I pray that somewhere in that wreckage they'll find me, somewhere in that wreckage that they use something I've left behind.

I started digging, and *Begin Again* is what I found.

I must admit this is a strange book. It isn't biography, although there are moments when it feels biographical; it is not literary criticism, although I read Baldwin's nonfiction writings closely; and it is not straightforward history, even though the book, like Baldwin, is obsessed with history. Instead, *Begin Again* is some combination of all three in an effort to say something meaningful about our current times. The book moves backward and forward, vacillating between the past and present as I think *with* Baldwin about this troubled period in American history.

To be sure, the idea of America is in deep trouble. Though many will find consolation in the principles of the founders or in the resilience of the American story, the fact remains that we stand on a knife's edge. Donald Trump's presidency unleashed forces howling beneath our politics since the tumult of the 1960s. For decades, politicians stoked and exploited white resentment. Corporations consolidated their hold on government and cut American workers off at the knees. Ideas of the public good were reduced

to an unrelenting pursuit of self-interest. Communities fractured. Demographics shifted. Resentments deepened. The national fabric frayed, and we are all at one another's throats. Those restless ghosts underneath our politics now haunt openly, and a presidential election alone will not satisfy their hunger. A moral reckoning is upon us, and we have to decide, once and for all, whether or not we will truly be a multiracial democracy.

We have faced two such moments before in our history: (1) the Civil War and Reconstruction, and (2) the black freedom struggle of the mid-twentieth century. One has been described by historians as our second founding; the other as a second Reconstruction. Both grappled with the central contradiction at the heart of the Union. Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in March 1865 spoke directly to the cause of the war's carnage.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that the mighty scourge of war may speedily pass. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Almost one hundred years later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave voice to the aspirations of the second Reconstruction in his soaring "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963.

I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”

Both moments were betrayed. One was undone by the advent of Jim Crow; the other by calls for law and order and the tax revolt by the so-called silent majority. The cumulative effect of our failure, in both instances, to uproot a pernicious understanding of race weighs heavy on our current crisis. Think of it this way: We already have two strikes.

Some may want to take issue with my reduction of our current malaise to the problem of race. What we face goes much deeper, they might argue. But I would beg to differ. At the core of this ugly period in our history is the idea that who “we” are as a country is changing for the worse—that “we” are becoming unrecognizable to ourselves. The slogans “Make America Great Again” and “Keep America Great” amount to nostalgic longings for a time under siege by present events, and the cascading crises we face grow out of, in part, the desperate attempts to step back into a past that can never be retrieved. The willingness of so many of our fellows to toss aside any semblance of commitment to democracy—to embrace cruel and hateful policies—exposes the idea of America as an outright lie.

In the archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, I came across an undated handwritten note to Robert Kennedy from James Baldwin. The infamous meeting after the protests and violence in the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, between Kennedy, Baldwin, and a group of Baldwin’s colleagues that included Lorraine Hansberry and Jerome Smith had ended horribly. Kennedy left the meeting suspicious of Baldwin,

his motives, and his politics. The FBI file on Baldwin suggested as much. But on the occasion of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, on behalf of that same group, Baldwin wrote to Bobby Kennedy and expressed his sincerest condolences. He wanted Kennedy to see that the horrific murder of his brother should not be understood apart from the struggle they argued so fiercely about on May 24, 1963. "Whatever may have blocked your understanding of what we have tried to tell you of our suffering," he wrote, "is dissolved by suffering, and we beg you to allow us to share your grief. As we know that in these trying days to come, you share our struggle, for our struggle is the same." Baldwin wanted Kennedy to see what was at the root of all of our troubles: that, for the most part, human beings refused to live honestly with themselves and were all too willing to hide behind the idols of race and ready to kill in order to defend them. His insight remains relevant today because the moral reckoning we face bears the markings of the original sin of the nation.

But there is another, more specific concern that digging in the wreckage revealed. Baldwin had witnessed the promise and peril of the early days of the civil rights movement, rose to fame as a literary figure willing to risk everything on behalf of the movement, supported it financially, and even put his frail body on the line along with others in pursuit of a more just America. In an October 9, 1963, interview with Fern Marja Eckman, just two days after his participation in SNCC's Freedom Day demonstration in Selma, Alabama, Baldwin described what he saw there. He talked about the courage of everyday people as they stood in line, hungry and terrorized by Sheriff Jim Clarke and his men, to register to vote. He talked about his rage at the injustice of it all.

"The helmets were, you know, like a garden. So many colors," he recalled of the police who bullied the men and women waiting

patiently in line to register to vote. “And with their guns and their clubs and their cattle prodders.” Eckman asked him if he was afraid in the moment when the tensions rose between them and the Selma police. Baldwin said that he was furious. “The thing is you get—you’re so scared—I was scared in the morning. Before it all began. And I was scared the first time I walked around there. But, later on, I wasn’t scared at all. . . . Your fear is swallowed up by, you know . . . fury,” he told her. “What you really want to do is kill all those people.”

Baldwin saw the brutality of Jim Crow up close and witnessed its effects on those who struggled against the brutality, as well as on those who defended it. He also felt its effect on himself. He saw friends murdered in cold blood. The deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., became symbolic of a broader and more systematic betrayal by the country. In Selma, Baldwin had described Sheriff Clarke and his deputies as manifestations of broader forces. These men “were deliberately created by the American Republic,” he said. That same republic had now turned its back on everything black people and their allies fought for. Disillusionment and deep-seated pessimism set in among many of those, including Baldwin, who survived it all. Baldwin told Quincy Troupe in his last interview, in November 1987 (he died December 1, 1987):

I was right. I was right about what was happening in the country. What was about to happen to all of us really, one way or the other. And the choices people would have to make. . . . I was trying to tell the truth and it takes a long time to realize that you can’t—that there’s no point in going to the mat, so to speak, no point going to Texas

again. It's been said, and it's been said, and it's been said.
It's been heard and not heard. You are a broken motor.

One can read these words and conclude that Baldwin had given up—that the cancer which ravaged his body had metastasized and seized his spirit. But I think that's wrong. In the full view of the wreckage of the movement, Baldwin realized he could not save white Americans. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how often he prophesied doom, the country refused to change. America simply doubled down on its ugliness, in *different* ways. White Americans, he concluded, had to save themselves. This shift in the later work of Baldwin—what the writer Michael Thelwell described to me as “the shift in Baldwin’s *we*”—disturbed and unsettled those who had previously celebrated his genius. For the white liberals who embraced him, Baldwin had succumbed to pessimism and turned his back on his artistic vision. He had, in effect, given up on them and embraced the prattle of Black Power.

What many of his critics, then and today, fail to realize is that Baldwin never gave up on the possibility that *all of us* could be better. I found that insight in the rubble. Baldwin never relinquished the idea of the New or Heavenly Jerusalem found in the book of Ezekiel and the book of Revelation, where, for him, the idols of race and the shackles of obsolete categories that bound us to the ground were no more. We still needed to fight for that. But *we* would do so without the burden of having to save white people first.

In writing this book, I wanted to understand more fully how Baldwin navigated his disappointments, how he lived his refusal to chase windmills any longer, and how he maintained his faith that all of us, even those who saw themselves as white, could still

be better. I needed to understand how he harnessed his rage and lived his faith.

The problem, for me, was particularly acute, because of the country's *latest* betrayal: The promise of the election of the first black president had been met with white fear and rage and with the election of Donald Trump. The courage of young people in the Black Lives Matter movement as they protested police violence confronted the cynicism of large swaths of the nation. Dashed hopes and broken lives characterize our moment too. Ours, like the moments after the Civil War and Reconstruction and after the civil rights movement, requires a different kind of thinking, a different kind of resiliency, or else we succumb to madness or resignation. Baldwin, I believe, offers resources to respond to such dark times and to imagine an answer to the moral reckoning that confronts us all.

Although it has been many years now, I did not read James Baldwin seriously until graduate school, and even in my early days at Princeton, I was more interested in Ralph Ellison. Ellison, the author of *Invisible Man*, offered a sophisticated treatment of the race problem in the United States that left the ground fertile. His nonfiction essays brimmed with philosophical and literary rigor, and I could read them with my white classmates without having to manage their discomfort. Baldwin seemed, at least to me back then, to leave the ground scorched. He told the truth, but anger dripped from the page. When I read *The Fire Next Time*, I could not reconcile his rage with his talk of love. It was like Dr. King meets Henry James meets Malcolm X meets Freud. Baldwin was *too* personal. In contrast, Ellison remained hidden behind his elegant words and powerful insights. His mask fit perfectly. Baldwin's

essays forced you to turn inward and confront whatever pain was there, and I did not want to do that. I damn sure didn't know what to do with *my* pain philosophically. Moreover, and this mattered most, I could not read him with my white colleagues without having to manage whatever *he* made *them* feel.

So I evaded Baldwin. My classmates wrote dissertations on him, one of which eventually became an important scholarly book. I hesitated because I knew that, if I let him get inside of my head—inside of me—he would force me to look at myself honestly as the precondition for saying anything about the world. I was right. I finally found the courage to read him seriously, and in his work I found a way of thinking and a language to express what was happening inside of me and what I was seeing in my country.

My engagement with Jimmy over these many years has been, in part, an arduous journey of self-discovery. Reading and teaching his words forced me back onto myself, and I had to return to *my* wounds: to understand the overbearing and vexed presence of *my* father in my head. As a child, the man scared me to death. A stare could freeze me. A tone could bring me to tears. I had to understand, as best as I could, how my father's rage lodged itself inside of me, why I really left home (ran away, actually) at sixteen to go to college, and how I closed myself off emotionally in order to protect the vulnerable child who simply wanted to hear the words "I love you" from him. Jimmy's essays demanded a kind of honesty with yourself, without sentimentality, before you could pass judgment on the world as it is. Lies, he maintained, gave birth to more lies. He insisted that we see the connection between the disaster of our interior lives and the mess of a country that believed, for some odd reason, that if you were white you mattered more than others. What we made of ourselves in our most private moments, we made of the country. The two were inextricably re-

lated, because the country itself reflected those intimate terrors that moved us about.

In this sense, I was wrong, in those early days, to think of Baldwin as simply a personal essayist. To be sure, autobiography was a central part of his nonfiction writing. But, at its core, Baldwin set out to understand the American riddle.

*a place, at once, so free,
yet so bound,
always present, but never found*

He sought to wrap his mind around the complex bundle of evasions, denials, loves, and hatreds that made up the American project, and point a pathway forward to becoming new, different human beings.

Reading Jimmy, then, requires much more than an encounter with one's pain. It is a demanding practice: tracing his references (understanding his invocation of Henry James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Marcel Proust, the blues, etc.), feeling his language (how he sits with the King James Bible, finds resources in Shakespeare, and revels in Black English), and tracking his insights across a wide array of work. Close to seven thousand pages of work. Since that fateful day in graduate school when I finally decided to "sit with him," I have been an ardent reader of James Baldwin. What I have learned over these three decades is that Baldwin's way of translating what he saw and making it real for others still has something to say to us. His understanding of America and his particular insights about its contradictions and failures endure and offer ways of seeing the country afresh.

But we cannot grab hold of what Baldwin is saying, I believe, if we fall into the trap of reading him in a straight line. There is so

much more about him and about what he witnessed than the stale characterizations of a career in full bloom in 1963 and a writer in decline by 1972. Baldwin's work constantly folds back on itself. Earlier formulations are taken up in his later years, and the accents move because of what he has seen and experienced. Rarely does he cast aside old ideas for new ones. Instead, new experiences cast old ideas in a different light.

Reading *The Fire Next Time* alongside *No Name in the Street*, for example, reminds me of listening to John Coltrane's "Pursuance," the third part of his classic album *A Love Supreme*. Taking the same notes, rotating them, and using a different tonal framework, Coltrane frantically pursues enlightenment, and one gets the feeling as one listens that he is playing the same thing over and over again even when the solo is at its most dissonant. For me, reading Baldwin throughout his career feels like this: a manic pursuit of a radically different way of being in the world, where "niggers" and the white people who need them no longer exist.

Begin Again takes up this pursuance in our times. The book aims to think with Baldwin and to interrogate how an insidious view of race, in the form of Trumpism, continues to frustrate any effort to "achieve our country." To be clear, to think with Baldwin is not to imitate or replicate his thoughts but to grapple with the ghosts of history that shadowed his time and continue to haunt our own, to make explicit the ravages of memory as he bore witness, to sit with the traumas of betrayal then and now, and to acknowledge the overwhelming challenge of mustering the faith to continue to fight. Thus, the book moves about: gesturing to the past, abruptly turning to the present, drawing on Baldwin's biography and close readings of his essays, and ending with my thoughts about our current morass. Patience. Patience. Such a book requires a different kind of writing. Not simply straightfor-

ward political commentary or philosophical argument, but a kind of writing where my rage and vulnerability (in other words, my passions) are in full view, because the book itself is a desperate plea in the after times.

In the end, it makes sense to me that so many people today reach for Baldwin to help them understand this latest iteration of the American nightmare, but to my mind, they are only grasping a part of his gift. We cannot cordon off his rage and leave behind the later works. Jimmy saw something in those years leading up to the election of Ronald Reagan. He desperately sought to prepare us to endure what was to come if the country failed to make different choices. I guess he saw something like Donald Trump on the distant horizon, and, however bitter he seemed, he still wrote to us with love. He still played the same notes no matter how dissonant they sounded.

The American idea is indeed in trouble. It should be. We have told ourselves a story that secures our virtue and protects us from our vices. But today we confront the ugliness of who we are—our darker angels reign. That ugliness isn't just Donald Trump or murderous police officers or loud racists screaming horrible things. It is the image of children in cages with mucus-smearred shirts and soiled pants glaring back at us. Fourteen-year-old girls forced to take care of two-year-old children they do not even know. It is sleep-deprived babies in rooms where the lights never go off, crying for loved ones who risked everything to come here only because they believed the idea. It is Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his twenty-three-month-old daughter facedown, washed up on the banks of our border. Reality can be hard and heartless.

Revealing the lie at the heart of the American idea, however,

occasions an opportunity to tell a different and better story. It affords us 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. In some ways, as I scoured the rubble and ruins of his life and works, this call for a different story was the answer I found to my own shaken faith. In his last novel, *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin provided the key to surviving and mustering the strength to keep fighting amid the after times:

When the dream was slaughtered and all that love and labor seemed to have come to nothing, we scattered. . . . We knew where we had been, what we had tried to do, who had cracked, gone mad, died, or been murdered around us.

Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.

icon or the relevance of the Legacy Museum and the memorial in Montgomery for those who lived in places that memorialized the war on terror or adored oversized Confederate flags.

Jimmy was right: “We live by lies” in this country, and those lies can be seen and heard all around us. “We’re living in a region where the landscape is littered with the iconography of the Confederacy,” Bryan Stevenson said in *True Justice*. “When I look around and I see the iconography of the glory of enslavement and the era of lynching, I say we’re not in a very healthy place.” The drive along Highway 65 gave me a sense of that, and of the scale of the task before us. Progress, in this country, is always freighted with lies. “We have lived through avalanches of tokens and concessions but white power remains white,” Baldwin wrote in the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*. “And what it appears to surrender with one hand it obsessively clutches in the other.”

I arrived a bit early for my timed ticket at the Legacy Museum, so I decided to walk around Montgomery. I realized, and was a bit shocked to admit to myself, that for all those trips passing by the city on the way to and from college, I had never actually stopped to visit. I had never seen the Dexter Street Baptist Church or visited the Rosa Parks Museum. So from the museum I headed southwest along Coosa Street, winding my way past the Rosa Parks bus stop and turning down Dexter Street, which dead-ends a few blocks down at the state capitol, its white dome rising up above the low-lying surroundings. I imagined hearing George Wallace’s words “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” I read signs that described the grandeur of the five-day Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965 and how it ended in front of the steps of the capitol building with King narrating a

history that brought the movement to that moment and voicing his refusal to go back to what was:

I know there is a cry today in Alabama. We see it in numerous editorials: "When will Martin Luther King, SCLC, SNCC, and all of these civil rights agitators and all of the white clergymen and labor leaders and students and others get out of our community and let Alabama return to normalcy?" But I have a message that I would like to leave with Alabama this evening. That is exactly what we don't want, and we will not allow it to happen. For we know that it was normalcy in Marion that led to the brutal murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson. It was normalcy in Birmingham that led to the murder on Sunday morning of four beautiful, unoffending, innocent girls. It was normalcy on Highway 80 that led state troopers to use tear gas and horses and billy clubs against unarmed human beings who were simply marching for justice. . . . It is normalcy all over our country which leaves the Negro perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. . . . The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and worth of all of God's children.

As I thought about Dr. King's words and about how the cry for normalcy still rings out today, I found myself standing in front of Dexter Street Baptist Church, a quaint and unassuming red brick building with a classic steeple and a signature pair of symmetrical turned staircases leading up from the street to the church's entrance. Here a young Martin King, fresh out of seminary, stepped into history. All of those powerful and courageous black women

helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott here. It was a bit overwhelming.

Montgomery has many markers along streets and buildings, suggesting what feels like a civil rights movement trail, and as I kept coming across them, I wondered about the story they told of sacrifice and faith. I was curious as to whether other plaques and markers told of the moments of doubt, of the riots right after the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, or of Dr. King's often debilitating depression in the face of the country's recalcitrance. I suspect the story of a movement on the precipice of failure in 1968 that Baldwin and King talked about in Los Angeles—a story that takes seriously the after times—has little to no place in the narrative of civil rights tourism.

In old cities, it's not uncommon to find a lot of history packed into a small expanse of land, and Montgomery is no exception. The Dexter Street Baptist Church itself is built on the site of an old slave pen and sits just a block away from the house where Jefferson Davis lived and led the Confederacy during the Civil War. Three blocks south on Decatur, a marker calls out the former site of the house of Warren Reese, a Confederate colonel who later became the mayor of Montgomery and persuaded Davis to tour the South in 1886, a kind of post-Reconstruction victory lap. Dexter had just come into being then, and the fruits of Reese's mayorship would exist forever in ironic juxtaposition with the church. From Dexter's staircase, the platform from which King and generations of black preachers and parishioners would have emerged each day, one can see poking through the trees to the northeast a figure extending upward from a column next to the state capitol. This is the top of the Alabama Confederate Monument, an eighty-eight-foot-high monument to the soldiers of the South. Mayor Reese helped raise funds to erect it, and its corner-

stone was laid on April 29, 1886, three years after work began a block away on the brick building that now houses Dexter. For almost the entire history of the church, then, its congregants have had to confront a white supremacist memorial on the horizon.

As I walked back toward the Legacy Museum, I saw a quotation from Maya Angelou emblazoned across the side of the building: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” It gave me the sense, before I had even set foot inside, that whatever this museum aspired to do, one of its aims was to disrupt a standard narrative of the country that had become a part of the civil rights movement tourist industry of the city. This wasn’t a triumphalist story of redemption of a racist South by the moral courage of black people. Presumably, Stevenson and his curators wanted to linger on the memory and consequence of what Dr. King referred to during the Selma march as the normalcy of violence in the South. In a way, the subject of the museum—the violence of white America and its traumas—refused to be assimilated into that traditional story, where the courage of ordinary people and the redemption of America mattered more.

The museum building is only about eleven thousand square feet. When you enter the front door, after you pass through security, you walk into a dark area and are immediately introduced to the scale and violence of the slave trade and to Montgomery’s role in it. Data, maps, and video footage cover the wall. As a result, the foot traffic stops. I had to squeeze through the groups watching the videos to walk into the space that held re-creations of slave pens. The path from the initial video leads you down a narrow, dimly lit hallway. The wall is sectioned into individual pens. People

stop to look through bars that foreshadow the bars of prison cells, and to listen to holographic images that describe the horror of the slave trade and the auction block.

It becomes immediately clear that the Maya Angelou quotation had announced the museum's purpose: This is a narrative museum, and its story is one of the continuous and vicious strands of racial violence that characterize this country's history; it is what Stevenson describes as the "untold cruelty that hides in silence." Here that violence is front and center. As you move into the major part of the museum, you are introduced to a wide-ranging story that reaches from slavery to mass incarceration. The words and sounds tend to run together.

I decided to stand in the middle of the room. I wanted to see and feel what was happening on this unusually comfortable summer day in Alabama in a museum that challenged America's innocence. I saw young black students with their smartphones typing information from a table that listed the Supreme Court decisions around race. I noticed people crying as they looked at a wall full of the signage of the era of segregation. On one sign the town of Ozark, Arkansas, prided itself on not having any Negroes. I watched people watch footage of Ross Barnett, son of a Confederate soldier and the notorious governor of Mississippi from 1960 to 1964, declare his commitment to racial segregation and his pride in being a member of the white citizens' council. A young white woman pushing an elderly white woman in a wheelchair spoke loudly as they read the time line along the wall of the museum. The young woman shouted, "Brown versus Brown!" and then corrected herself. The older woman said, "I guess they had to leave and go west and north to avoid all the violence."

Two women, one black and one white, sat close to each other on a bench watching Technicolor video footage of Dr. King speak-

ing about the legacy of slavery and segregation and how it affected black people. In the video, King questioned the demand that black people should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. “It is a cruel jest,” he said, “to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.” The women watched King intensely, slightly bent forward. Both were crying. The black woman, in fact, was weeping. I thought they were together because of the intimacy of their grief. But then they got up and walked their separate ways. The white woman looked at me as she passed by and said, “This is rough.” The black woman simply walked away shaking her head.

One wall in the museum had shelves full of bottles of soil from the places where people were lynched. The bottles were large, at least a foot tall, and each one contained a unique shade of earth, running from deep browns to umbers to sandy tans. The distinctive colors and textures of the soil made each jar like a signature of land, with dark histories written into the composition. They revealed the geography of the violence. Names and counties were listed on the labels. A few just listed the county, when the person remained unknown. I stood beside a black woman as she looked at each bottle. She leaned back onto the heels of her feet to look at the bottom shelf, as if she was searching for something or someone—perhaps the soil of the place where she lived, or where someone she loved lived—on the wall.

The museum’s story isn’t necessarily a linear story, at least not in the organization of the space. One can wander about. Once you move away from the wall telling the story from slavery to mass incarceration, there is no attempt to suggest how you take in the details of the four eras of slavery, segregation, lynching, and mass incarceration that make up the museum. Sounds and sights bleed from one exhibit section into the next, and if you stand in the

center of this small museum, as I did, you can hear the voices of King and Barnett, the sounds of freedom songs and the screams of people being overrun by the police in Selma. You can hear people taking in the violence of it all with deep sighs and hushed groans. It is the cacophonous song of America.

As I stood and listened, I thought of Baldwin's view of American history. The past is not past; "history is literally *present* in all we do," he wrote in "The White Man's Guilt." People carried that history with them as they moved about the museum—as they saw the relationship between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Perhaps more to the point, I got the sense that what was happening as people confronted the violence was an attempt to give voice to the trauma at the heart of the American experience—not just an attempt to depict the scars and bruises endured by black people, but to show what that violence had done to the soul of white Americans. Confronting the trauma and giving it language offered an occasion for those in the museum to confront what our history has made of all of us, shorn of any preordained American story of a more perfect union or the burden of black suffering as the basis of white salvation. There were no happy endings here. No feel-good stories or catharsis of overcoming. Looking unflinchingly at what we've done was enough.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (often called the Lynching Memorial), the other half of EJI's Montgomery project, is a little less than a mile south of the museum. A shuttle bus ferries visitors between the two, and once my bus had pulled out, our driver began an impromptu guided tour. He showed us where ground had recently been broken for a new memorial to Rosa Parks at Court Square Plaza and pointed out an elegant fountain

on the site where a slave auction block once stood. He mentioned where the Selma to Montgomery march ended, pointed out the state capitol, and asked if we could imagine George Wallace on the steps shouting “segregation now, segregation forever,” as I had done not hours before. We all had just stepped out of a museum that eschewed the traditional focus of the civil rights story, but now it suddenly felt as though that story had snapped back into place.

When we got off the bus, though, I had a different sensory experience. We had moved from the cramped space of the museum, where words guided our eyes and thoughts, to the six-acre open space of a memorial to the lynched black body. Nestled between Caroline Street and Holcombe Street, overlooking the state capitol and just down the road from the Alabama State Board of Pardons and Paroles, was a monument to our dead and to the countrymen who killed them. I looked up a beautifully landscaped hill and saw the elegant symmetry of the memorial against a backdrop of a clear blue sky. The architects had been inspired by the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. With sculpture, art, and design, they had aimed to build a place to heal. It felt like sacred space.

As I walked into the memorial, I saw walls featuring text blocks that told the story of the violence, but no one lingered as they did in the museum. The words weren't the story here. Instead, my eyes turned to the *Nkyinkyim Installation* by Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, a haunting sculptural representation of slaves chained together in agony, defiance, and unimaginable grief. The sculpture stands on the side of the path that leads you up an ascending walkway to the monument, the physical structures that commemorate the dead. With each step you make your way up

the hill. Before you reach the memorial, you can see lined up across the lawn duplicate monuments that can be claimed by the individual counties where the lynchings occurred. It looked like a prairie full of rusted, brown coffins.

Eight hundred monuments, which look like vertical headstones made of corten steel, sit at eye level, and as I walked I could read each county and count the number of dead. Some had one or two or three people listed. Others had many more. I started taking photos of those counties that had more than ten lynchings, imagining these places as haunted by ghosts. Had anyone in any of these counties acknowledged the carnage? Had anyone atoned? I kept taking photos, but it became too much. I had to stop. I was overwhelmed with grief.

As I kept walking, the floor slanted downward, but the monuments remained level. Before long their bottoms were above my head. As I looked up at them, it was as if I were witnessing bodies swaying from poplar trees—except these were stiff. “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,” Billie Holiday sang in *Strange Fruit*. In contrast to my experience in the Legacy Museum, where the space was crowded and the experience could take on a nearly communal feel, as I moved through the memorial I wasn’t fully aware of others around me. This was a solitary experience. On the walls were descriptions of some of the reasons for the lynchings. One man was murdered for having a photo of a white woman in his hat; another had been falsely accused of peeping at a white woman through a peephole; another refused to buy seed from a white man. An entire wall, black and shimmering, which stretched the length of the side of the memorial, was also a wall of tears, with water streaming for the dead memorialized here. Underneath the water, etched into the wall, were these words: “Thousands of

African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are honored here.”

The experience was only intensified when I saw the monument of Jackson County, Mississippi, the place where I was born and raised. Eight people had been lynched there. Throughout my childhood, I never heard that such a horrendous thing had happened, never mind happened eight times, anywhere near my home. I knew none of the names. Staring at the monument, I understood a bit better my dad’s claim that he doesn’t “do white people.” Why would he? As the jars of dirt at the museum had made plain, the places we live are often, though not always, landscapes layered with the violence of generations. It is in the soil that nurtures us even when we can’t see it on the surface.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that in order for human beings to live full lives we must cultivate our ability to forget. “It is possible to live with almost no memory,” he said, “but without forgetting, it is quite impossible to live at all.” He was referring to history. But the National Memorial for Peace and Justice represents a *traumatic* history, and it isn’t easily forgotten, if at all. Our bodies carry the traumas forward. The history of racial trauma lives on and moves us about in ways we often don’t realize. It grounds our fears and, whether we know it or not, it affects our dreams. In places all over the South and the country, the legacy of this terror and trauma continues to haunt. The memorial confronts the trauma directly and offers us, in its own way, a chance to begin again. Stevenson put it this way,

I want there to be repair in this country not just for communities of color that have been victimized by bigotry and discrimination, I want it to be for all of us. I don’t think we

can get free until we are willing to tell the truth about our history. I do believe in truth and reconciliation. I just think that truth and reconciliation are sequential: That you can't have reconciliation without the truth.

Fundamentally, Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative have built a museum and memorial in the heart of the Confederacy that not only bear witness but tell a history that provides a foundation for the even harder work we still must do. Their story counters the lies on offer in the surrounding city; it both rebukes the still-standing Confederate monuments, with their explicit claims to superiority by white people, and at the same time counters the triumphalist narrative of the civil rights movement stamped into markers on every corner. Taken as a whole, the project can be seen as part of the work Baldwin called for in the after times. In its depiction of the tenacity of the lie and the brutality of its consequences, and in its unsparing look at how terror and violence have undone us all, the museum and memorial perform the work that establishes the precondition for a new way of imagining America.

Of course, there are no guarantees. Just down the road a bit, a large Confederate flag still towered over Highway 65 as I drove back to Birmingham.

I have taken the title of this book from a passage in James Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head*. In light of the collapse of the civil rights movement and the consolidation of the after times with the election of Ronald Reagan, Baldwin offered these words for those who desperately sought to imagine a way forward: "Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again." *Begin again*