
Article

This is Us: Imagination, identity, and American racial hierarchy

Gauri Wagle

University of London, Egham TW20 0EX, UK.

gauri.wagle@rhul.ac.uk

Abstract This article shows that William E. Connolly's work holds resources for projects of racial justice but must be revised to fully meet the challenge of racial inequality. There are two interrelated problems in Connolly's theory: first, the drive to destabilize identity, for which he argues, rejects the need for collective identity, which is necessary in democratic politics. Furthermore, because domination renders identity unstable, the call to destabilize identity places too great a burden on already marginalized groups. The problem of destabilizing identity is underwritten by a second problem: the white working class and its grievances occupy too important a position in Connolly's analysis. This article uses insights provided by James Baldwin to amend Connolly's contributions. The article argues that there is a need to destabilize the 'we' of American politics that allows white, male identity to occupy the 'heart' of liberal democracy. Baldwin's insights help solve the problem of the 'black hole' at the center of liberal democracy which, Connolly argues, sustains fundamentalism and racial injustice. This article's contribution is to amend Connolly's work to meet the challenge of racial injustice, offer a novel reading of the place of political imagination in Baldwin's work, and show how political imagination adds depth to conversations about democracy, racial justice, and pluralism.

Contemporary Political Theory (2023) **22**, 483–505. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00620-w>; advance online publication 13 February 2023

Keywords: race; pluralism; imagination; identity; James Baldwin; William E. Connolly

American democracy is in need of major overhaul. Across political science, the 2016 election of Donald Trump brought scholars to reckon with the 'dying' of American democracy and the rising tide of nativism and prejudice (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Problems of exclusion, xenophobia, and racial injustice persist. As scholars and activists alike have argued, the 'we' of American democracy has excluded people of color, women, LGBTQ+ groups, immigrants, and other minorities in favor of asserting a white, male 'we,' exemplified by President Trump's campaign for presidency, ongoing police brutality, and problems in access



to healthcare. Exclusion in the US manifests in institutions and policies as well as outcomes varying from maternal mortality to wealth. The ‘we’ of American community is exclusive and its effects color the ways that members access resources. The result is inequality and injustice that prevents Americans from equal access to resources, life outcomes, and public goods.

Democratic identity has been complicit in injustice and domination, as the exclusive ‘we’ of American democracy makes clear. As scholars like W.E.B Du Bois, James Baldwin, Joel Olson, and others have argued, the identity of domination must be shorn from democracy. What resources do we have for changing American identity and building and maintaining democratic community when the identity of domination is shorn from democratic identity? William E. Connolly’s work is prominent in democratic theory – Joshua Foa Dienstag has gone so far as to say, ‘William Connolly is the most influential political theorist writing in English today’ (Dienstag, 2009) – and can help address the issues of identity in American democracy. Connolly has written an oeuvre committed to theorizing the problems, tensions, and resources of contemporary American democracy, including the ways that identity is constituted by and depends on difference. For these reasons, this article will turn to Connolly’s writing as an important resource.

Even as Connolly is an important interlocutor in the study of democratic identity, his work does not go far enough to address the challenge of racial domination that plagues contemporary American politics. Connolly’s theory has two interrelated problems; first, the drive to destabilize identity misses the importance of a collective identity in democracy and places an undue burden on vulnerable groups. Because domination renders identity unstable, the call to destabilize identity places too great a burden on already marginalized groups. The problem of destabilizing identity is underwritten by a second problem: the white working class occupies too important a position in Connolly’s analysis. I draw from Baldwin’s work to show how Connolly’s work must be amended to better address the challenge of racial domination.

Baldwin, like Connolly, is invested in the American democratic project and explores the importance of American identity. Unlike Connolly, Baldwin emphasizes the importance of challenging ‘whiteness’ as the assumed universal identity, rather than already unstable and dominated identities, such as those inhabited by women of color. Baldwin’s writings can help us see how identity needs to be amended in ways that expand democracy for all without placing an undue burden on already marginalized groups.

Through a reading of Baldwin, I advance an argument about the possibilities of an imagined community that is united by aspiration. My argument helps solve the problem of the ‘black hole’ (Connolly, 1999, p. 86) at the center of liberal democracy that Connolly argues harbors fundamentalism and violence. I read Baldwin to show that there is a shared identity – but one that is not tied to race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, and other forms of homogeneity, but rather, to a



commitment to a shared future and the struggles and aspirations that such a future requires. Baldwin helps show that the ‘we’ of democracy may be unstable and dynamic but persists nonetheless. Political imagination is a fundamental resource to sustain a democratic community and can even help address the challenge of racial injustice. Imagination mediates between meeting the need for a shared ‘we’ for democracy and destabilizing the existing ‘we’ of American democracy that depends on domination. Members of democracies must be able to imagine a ‘we’ to which they belong – a collective people that participates, authorizes, and governs. Imagination can help democratic citizens embrace plurality, affirm contingency, and destabilize the dominant identity in ways that abolish racial injustice specifically and support a sense of democratic community.

Identity and Race in the US

Baldwin and Connolly are both invested in the project of theorizing injustice in the US and improving American democracy. Both scholars consider the role of American identity, its vulnerabilities and exclusions, in search of ways to rectify the injustices of their time. Both scholars come to conclusions about the importance of internal speculation, intersubjective relations, and embracing difference. Connolly is an important authority on identity and contemporary American politics, as Dienstag notes above. Putting Connolly’s work in conversation with Baldwin’s helps build a theory of how to rectify contemporary American democracy so it can meet the challenge of racial injustice. While Baldwin is widely celebrated as a scholar of race in America, his work contains ‘multitudes’ (McBride, 1999, p. 2). Taking Baldwin as authoritative not only about race relations, but also about democracy, identity, and imagination, is to do justice to the multiplicity of his work. I place Baldwin and Connolly in conversation in this article to evaluate how racial domination is ensconced in American identity and the resources available to rectify this injustice. In this section, I argue that Connolly offers important resources to theorize contemporary democracy that can deepen how we understand the relationship between whiteness and its Other. Even as Connolly is important to help theorize American identity, the solutions he offers to amend American identity do not fully meet the challenges posed by racial injustice.

Baldwin characterizes the relationship between whites and people of color as

The idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization ... and are therefore civilization’s guardians and defenders. Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men...the white man’s motive was the protection of his identity (Baldwin, 1985, p. 99).



In this passage, Baldwin indicates that the status of whiteness is itself insecure and tied to the captivity or domination of the person of color. Throughout his work, Baldwin characterizes the relationship between races as one that constitutes whiteness; whiteness depends on the domination of people of color. White identity is congealed through domination of its other, or, as Baldwin writes in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, ‘the righteous must be able to locate the damned’ (Baldwin, 1974, p. 192). Recent scholarship has concurred with Baldwin, showing how whiteness depends upon the right to exclude (Harris, 1993). As historian David Roediger notes, Irish whiteness was recognized and established when the Irish learned to dominate and exclude black laborers from their jobs. These efforts were critical to ‘construct an image of the Black population as “other”... had particular attractions for Irish-American immigrant workers, even as the “whiteness” of these very workers was under dispute’ (Roediger, 1991, p 14). The Irish transformed from nonwhite to white and complicit in the domination of blacks through involvement in political parties, labor organizations, anti-Negro riots, and the circulation of media. Consequently, the Irish gained privileges associated with whiteness: ‘they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected...and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire’ (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 3). With the right to exclude come certain privileges – the wages of whiteness – that include material benefits like employment and education as well as social and political standing. In the example of the Irish transformation, as in Baldwin’s writing, whiteness depends on the domination of black folks.

Connolly’s work helps theorize how identity can harbor domination. In Connolly’s theory, identity ‘requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 64). In other words, by ascertaining difference, identity secures itself. The trouble is that identity is vulnerable and unstable, given to macro forces like globalization and economic shocks. This vulnerability can fuel resentment and vilification of the Other. I might identify as a hard-working family man, for example, but trade deals signed by the government, decisions made by firms, and the actions of my managers might threaten that identity. I might come to resent unemployment and low wages and even blame others for my suffering or my threatened identity. Connolly calls this *resentment*. Resentment can fuel ‘the devaluation of the other’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 44), ‘national chauvinism’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 24), and can seek ‘targets of vilification’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 25) as methods to maintain the security of identity.

As it relates specifically to the issues of racial inequality in the US, Connolly’s theory of identity helps us understand how white identity is congealed and what this means for state-sanctioned violence and widespread resistance to progressive policies like affirmative action. He calls these tendencies to violence



‘fundamentalism’ which is ‘a political formula of self-aggrandizement through the translation of stresses and disturbances in your doctrine or identity into resources for its stabilization and aggrandizement’ (Connolly, 1995, p. 106). Fundamentalism seeks to turn sources of instability into sources of reassurance and security. For example, a source of vulnerability like threatened employment could be redeployed to reify white supremacy through anti-immigrant rhetoric or xenophobic policies. Fundamentalism in America, Connolly shows, involves the state in policies that institutionalize vilification and vengeance. Connolly argues that ‘the state increasingly sustains collective identity through theatrical displays of punishment and revenge against those elements that threaten to signify its inefficacy’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 206) exemplified by the War on Terror or policies that detain immigrants. Support for racist or xenophobic policies or resistance to policies that mitigate racial injustice can be characterized as a symptom and product of ‘generalized resentment’ (Connolly, 2002, p. 22).

There is a ‘black hole’ (Connolly, 1999, p. 82) at the center of liberal democracies, including the US, that sustains fundamentalism. Connolly claims that liberalism is ‘divided against itself’ (1999, p. 82) because of the tension between its emphasis on the individual and the need for a shared ‘we.’ What Connolly means by the ‘black hole’ is that if we are all different, there may not be anything we have in common that sustains an ‘us’ – the center of liberal democracy is empty.¹ Connolly notes that ‘Its [the nation’s] promise as future unity is thus defined less by positive exemplification than by marking a set of constituencies who deviate from it in need of assimilation, correction, punishment, or elimination’ (1999, p. 85). For example, flag burners expose the ‘black hole’ that lies at the center of American democracy: ‘to burn it is to uncover for a moment the emptiness at the center of the nation; to punish burners is to allow a set of angry, white, Christian, male patriots the right to *occupy* that vacant center and to *embody* in their being its otherwise uncertain directives’ (Connolly, 1999, p. 86). Fundamentalism is a product of the tension within liberal democracy. In the face of diversity and difference, fundamentalism seeks to identify and secure the true identity of the community – to occupy the vacant center – through exclusion, violence, and domination.

Connolly helps us see how contemporary identity within liberal democracy generates problems of fundamentalism, violence, and domination. First, identity itself can harbor domination because it is inherently unstable and vulnerable and seeks to secure itself through identification of an Other. Second, liberal democracy leaves democratic identity open to claims from various groups – including violent fundamentalists. Together, these factors act as sources of individual, collective, and state-sanctioned violence and discrimination.



The Challenge of Racial Inequality

Connolly offers a constellation of solutions to the problems of democracy's inegalitarianism and injustices throughout his oeuvre including: pluralism (1995, 2005), techniques of the self (2002), agonistic respect (2017a, 2002, 1999), the cultivation of an ethos of presumptive generosity (2008, 2013), outreach to the white working class (2017b, 2013, 2008, 1995), mobilizing a counterconstituency (2013), and institutional reform. While his work is important to help us understand how American identity relies on domination and to identify potential solutions, there are two interrelated problems in Connolly's theory: first, that the drive to destabilize identity for which he argues rejects the need for collective identity which is necessary in democratic politics. Furthermore, because domination renders identity unstable, the call to destabilize identity places too great a burden on already marginalized groups. The problem of destabilizing identity is underwritten by a second problem: that the white working class and its grievances occupy too important a position in Connolly's analysis. Focusing on the white working class means that Connolly fails to challenge white privilege and abolish racial domination.

To address the problems of fundamentalism and violence, Connolly argues that identity must be rendered unstable through work on the self and community-oriented activities. This might look like 'laugh[ing] together, on principle' or genealogy that questions 'intrinsic identity and otherness' (Connolly, 2002, p. 120, 182). Irony must accompany self-discovery, where irony is 'crafted from insight into how forgetting, denial, self-conceit, and erasure enter into the very relation between the discoverer and that which he discovers' (Connolly, 2002, p. 37). As we discover aspects of our identities, in other words, these discoveries are accompanied by an acknowledgment of the depth, erasure, or forgetting that make them possible. The goal is that we all work to acknowledge the vulnerability and instability of our identities.

Connolly's theory does not do justice to the ways that identity has long been unstable for many people because of domination and, thus, does not justly distribute the burden of transformation. For Connolly, destabilizing identity can help destabilize existing hierarchies and relieve the need for a secure identity that fuels fundamentalism and violence. He argues that the need for fixed or stable identity can promote violence against marginalized groups, casting them as Others and punishing them as an effect of resentment. Even as these insights can help us better understand democratic identity, nuance is necessary. The vulnerability of identity that Connolly seeks to affirm and pursue as a normative goal is not new to dominated groups. As Frantz Fanon notes, 'From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were



abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own' (Fanon, 1952, p. 90). The lack of metaphysical absolutes and ontological certainty are necessary conditions of marginalization and domination. Indeed, as Baldwin writes, racial domination creates conditions for black folks such that 'the missing identity aches' (1985, p. 12). In other words, for marginalized groups, a symptom of domination is that identities are often unstable, curtailed in public, suppressed, and threatened.

Domination makes necessary alternative forms of political expression that affirm and adapt to vulnerability. Vulnerable groups may affirm their identity in certain circumstances, even as they curtail it in public – for example, in immigrant associations, informal gatherings, church parties, and so on (Wagle, 2022). As Connolly himself notes, 'the bond that ties you to your prior identifications. That bond of identification is ethically important too' (1995, p. xviii). Not only is that bond important, but its importance varies based on subject position, marginality, and vulnerability. Group identifications are often one of the few safe havens of political expression and freedom for marginalized groups. Instead of insisting that *all* must embrace contingency and affirm pluralism, we might be better served by attending to the ways that dominant identities can be abolished.

As it stands, Connolly's theory asks already marginalized people to partake in action that furthers domination by ignoring the ways that identity is already unstable. Rather than asking marginalized peoples to further destabilize their already vulnerable identities, Connolly's theory must be amended to specify *which* identity ought to be destabilized. Not all must partake. Focusing efforts on destabilizing the dominant identity, rather than identity in general, better distributes the burdens of pluralizing identity and refrains from asking those, for whom domination has already foreclosed stable identity, to sacrifice more for the polity. Often, the burden of democratic change falls on already vulnerable groups – to sacrifice more for the polity and dedicate valuable time and resources to try to secure a position for themselves and improve democracy overall. For example, blacks participate more than whites in democratic activities like volunteerism, political organization participation, listening to the news or reading about public affairs, and attendance at community events, when controlled for socioeconomic status (Olsen 1970). Political action like this can be costly: it can require slices of income to support minority-owned businesses, it can require time and emotional stamina to keep up with the news, and it can mean hours spent waiting in line to vote despite voter suppression efforts. Participation can mean threats of violence that follow public protest or action and the risk of personal and familial safety by simply crossing the street for any of these activities. Similarly, feminists have noted that the efforts of women of color often go unnoticed. Even though the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, for example, depended on the labors of black women, 'the door remained closed to too many African American women' (Jones, 2020, p. 14). In these examples, we see that marginalized groups, already in a vulnerable



position, sacrifice more for a polity that often overlooks their struggles. As we build theories to repair broken democracies, we must attend to the distribution of the burden of transformation. The political work of transformation must be distributed with an attention to existing forms of marginalization and vulnerability. As Juliet Hooker writes, we must recognize ‘that responsibility for racial justice does not lie primarily with those who have already suffered the lion’s share of the losses inflicted by racism’ (Hooker, 2016, p. 465). A theory that seeks to rectify injustice cannot further burden already marginalized peoples.

The problem of burdening already vulnerable populations is doubled because of the way that Connolly focuses on the so-called white working class. Connolly calls for policies that ‘programmatically and symbolically’ address the alienation of the white, male worker (1995, p. 113). These policies address ‘the contemporary subject position of the white male worker’ such that it no longer ‘foster[s] a culture of social revenge and hypermasculinity’ (Connolly, 1995, p. 113). From as early as 1991, the theme of outreach to white workers emerges as integral to Connolly’s solutions. In *Identity/Difference*, Connolly writes

white working-class males...are subjected to a variety of disciplines and burdens that limit their prospects for life, but liberal programs devised since the 1960s tend to treat them as responsible for their own achievements and failures. And they are then told by liberals that many women and minorities suffer injustice if they do not rise to or above working-class levels of attainment...By implying that professional and corporate males have earned their position while asserting that women and minorities are victimized by discrimination, liberals imply that only one group *deserves* to be stuck in the crummy jobs available to it: white working-class males (1991 [2002], p. 78).

The white working class makes for ‘happy hunting grounds for the purveyors of aspirational fascism,’ (Connolly, 2019, p. 51) and as such must be ‘programmatically and symbolically’ addressed (Connolly, 1995, p. 113). Connolly argues that neglect of this group has fueled resentment that takes the form of xenophobia, racism, and toxic masculinity. He recommends that as a solution to tendencies of fascism, racism, and xenophobia, we must ‘draw a larger section of white working- and middle-class males into a pluralist, pluralizing, equalizing, and eco-economizing culture of democracy’ (Connolly, 2017b, p. 71). However, Connolly’s proposed outreach for the white working class is empirically problematic and sustains racial cleavages, fails to challenge white supremacy by appeasing white expectations, and furthers the burden placed on already vulnerable groups.

During Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2016, the former secretary of state described Trump supporters in two groups: first, ‘a basket of deplorables’ who are ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it,’ and second, as ‘people who feel that government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to



their lives and their futures' (Chozick, 2016). Connolly's work suggests that racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic trends might be mitigated by addressing the feeling that 'government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures' (Chozick, 2016). The equation of the two groups in Connolly's account is problematic. As Clinton notes, the groups might be empirically distinct: those that feel the government or the economy has let them down might not be the same as those that support racism and xenophobia. The idea that a disenfranchised 'white working class' elected a populist, racist, and sexist president is a political fiction. Empirically, the white working class is categorized as white, without college education, and without a salaried job. However, supporters of Trump's nativism, racism, and xenophobia tended to have higher incomes than the median of their state, and much higher incomes than the median in states with a large nonwhite population (Silver, 2016). In fact, if class is about income, voters who made less than \$50,000 tended to favor Clinton or Sanders, while the median income of Trump supporters was \$72,000 (Silver, 2016). Lower classes, then, tend to favor Democratic candidates, when they vote at all. More often than not, those in the lowest class do *not* vote – only 28% of those who make under \$30,000 voted in the 2016 election (Doherty *et al*, 2018).

By slicing the working class into racialized categories, policies that target the white working class obscure the ways that inequality and economic hardship in the US affect *all* members of the working class. Take for example, this passage:

white workers and the lower middle class in deindustrialized zones are told that only by returning to the old days of fossil fuel extraction, steel and automobile production, and white triumphalism can they hope to regain the levels of entitlement acquired precariously in the 1950s and 1960s. Trump's focus on coal workers here is revealing, since they are icons of the old white working class. This combination pulls some to embrace climate denialism and to support an authoritarian leader; it encourages others (particularly in white upper middle and donor classes) to tolerate and fund such expressions of public belief to fend off challenges from the left (Connolly, 2019, p. 52).

In this passage, Connolly's interest is to explain the linkages between climate denial and support for fascism in American politics. But we know that whites are not the only coal workers – blacks made up a significant part of labor in coal mines (Lewis, 1987). Missing here is the picture of how race cleaves apart the working class. Historically, too, race serves as 'the medium in which class relations are experienced,' fragmenting the working class along racial lines (Hall *et al*, 1978, p. 386). As in Du Bois's (1935) account in *Black Reconstruction*, the working class is divided in ways that serve to keep in place the power of capital and prevent major overhaul of economic inequality.



Outreach to the white working class sustains a cross-class, race-based coalition that affirms and appeases white privilege at the expense of minorities, under the guise of economic grievance. Whiteness and its privileges remain unchallenged and can obscure the important projects of redressing inequality for *all* those in the working class. Connolly's attention to the *white* working class appeases white expectations at the expense of mitigating economic inequality for all. As Olson writes

Connolly rejects a direct approach to confronting whiteness. He argues that the issues addressed by welfare liberals in the post-civil rights era – women's rights, racism, ecology, discrimination—ignore the hardships faced by the white working class, pushing it into the open arms of the right ... 'Inclusive' or class-based programs, however, downplay whites' historical privileges. In so doing, they appease white expectations rather than challenge them (2004, p. 85).

Outreach to the white working class fails to confront whiteness. These policies do not abolish the kinds of privileges and standing called for by many disenfranchised white workers. Combined with the need to destabilize all identity, Connolly's proposed solutions place too great of a burden on racially marginalized groups while offering policies and programs for support to whites.

Together, the recommendations to destabilize identity and programmatic outreach to the white working class place an unjust burden on marginalized groups without acknowledging their efforts or their sacrifices. Connolly's normative recommendations do not consider how identity has long been unstable for many people because of domination and how whiteness must be directly addressed. More specificity is necessary to address the uneven burdens of transformation and existing injustice.

Destabilizing *White* Identity

One way to amend Connolly's theory is to take Baldwin's lead: to focus specifically on destabilizing or abolishing *white* identity. Unlike Connolly, Baldwin speaks of white identity, rather than identity writ large. Following Baldwin helps distinguish between already marginalized identities and those that are laden with power. Abolishing white identity, or the identity of domination, does not call for policies that keep in place expectations of white privilege, but rather, seeks to abolish white privilege. As noted above, there are similarities in the ways that Baldwin and Connolly characterize the relationship between whiteness and its Other. For Baldwin, problems of racial injustice stem from the preservation of whiteness and the demands of white identity that involve domination over the Other – the need for the righteous to locate the damned (Baldwin, 1974, p. 192).



Baldwin's solution offers the specificity lacking in Connolly's – Baldwin calls for the abolition of the 'righteous' identity – whiteness. Baldwin writes:

White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this...the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed (Baldwin, 1985, p. 345).

The passage resonates with Connolly's claims that identity itself must be destabilized, its vulnerabilities affirmed, and its security treated with irony. But Baldwin specifically means *white* identity – which draws its assurance and its security from an unjust racial order. Baldwin's emphasis on whiteness helps distinguish how the identity of domination must be destabilized and abolished, as opposed to identity writ large. Baldwin's focus on white identity can guide our understanding of how to amend Connolly's theory if it is to contend with racial injustice.

As Wendy Brown notes, there is a 'detente between universal and particular within liberalism' (1993, p. 393) that can help us think through Connolly's theory of identity and Baldwin's amendment. What she means by this 'detente' is that there are two competing strands in a liberal democracy: the abstract character of political membership and liberal individualism. Even as a democratic community must have some shared 'we,' liberalism emphasizes the sanctity, creativity, and inalienability of the individual and individual rights. In various theories of liberalism, the many 'I's are made one through unity, through tolerance, or through the state (Brown, 1993, p. 392). As Brown shows, universality is often achieved by turning away from differences between 'I's in order to achieve and presuppose the commonality of the 'we.' In the US, for example, party membership unites a disparate set of individuals as one by association with Republican or Democrat. Important differences – such as one's views on sustainable agriculture or support of Israel's actions in the Middle East – are obscured by the simple red-blue divide. When I identify as a Democrat, I turn away from considerations of Zionism or regulation of subsidies in order to unify with others who share my priorities about government spending and women's rights, for example.

Brown's point is consistent with Connolly's characterization of the 'black hole' (Connolly, 1999, p. 82) of liberal democracy. The distinction Brown makes between the 'I' and the 'we' can help us think through Connolly's account of identity. For Connolly, to destabilize the 'we' is to also to destabilize the 'I' through practices of agonism, irony, laughter, and so on. Instead of seeking to destabilize the sanctity of the 'I,' perhaps we may instead destabilize presupposed "collective particulars" (Brown, 1993, p. 392) – the asserted 'we' of contemporary America. Brown notes that identity politics – or claims of injury made by 'homosexuals,' 'single women,' and 'people of color' – 'require a standard internal to existing society against which to pitch their claims' (Brown, 1993, p. 395). In



other words, Brown argues that even projects that seek to claim rights for excluded groups are ‘premised on the fiction of an inclusive/universal community, a protest that reinstalls the humanist ideal – and a specific white, middle-class, masculinist expression of this ideal – insofar as it premises itself on exclusion from it’ (Brown, 1993, p. 398). The white, male ‘we’ is pervasive: even movements to claim rights reify the normalcy and supremacy of the white, male identity. Brown’s attention to the tension between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ shows there are possibilities to destabilize the ‘we’ that insists on white, male identity as the norm, without the need to destabilize every kind of identity. This attention in Brown’s account helps strengthen Baldwin’s claims: to resolve existing injustices – like exclusions that prevent access to rights and resources – will demand a challenge to the *assumed* universal – the presumed white, masculine ‘we.’ It will require that we pluralize images of who ‘we’ are.

Brown’s terms help distill a point in Baldwin’s writings: ‘before we can do very much in the way of clear thinking or clear doing as relates to the minorities in this country, we must first crack the American image and find out and deal with what it hides’ (Baldwin, 1985 p. 239). Baldwin shows that the ‘national self-image’ is ‘outrageous,’ untrue, exclusive, and should serve as the first object of projects to destabilize identity and promote justice (1985, p. 238). The place of ‘the Negro tells us where the bottom is’ and in doing so, it stabilizes identity and prevents the need to confront what ‘screaming people in the South...are afraid of’ (Baldwin, 1985, p. 240). Assumptions, myths, and the mechanisms of sustaining domination like sociological reports and intersubjective assertions about miscegenation are about an ‘insecurity’ (Baldwin, 1985, p. 240) in the dominant identity. Baldwin’s description of the relationship between whites and nonwhites resonates with Connolly’s theory of identity/difference, but Baldwin helps show that the white, male identity must be the object of destabilization.

Abolishing the white, male identity that has come to occupy the heart of liberal democracy leaves open the possibility for historically marginalized groups to maintain their bonds of community and expression. This strategy does not require that marginalized groups evacuate their identities. Marginalized groups are often, as Brown notes, ‘attached’ to their wounded identities (1993). For her, the trouble with this is that ‘politicized identity is also potentially reiterative of regulatory, disciplinary society in its configuration of a disciplinary subject. It is both produced by and potentially accelerates the production of...disciplinary society...’ (Brown, 1993, p. 398). This is a problem for Brown because these politicized identities respond to and in effect affirm the assumed universal. However, as we know, from accounts like Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) and Kevin Quashie’s (2012), associations and communities formed by marginalized people are not only ‘interest [converted] into normativized social identity manageable by regulatory regimes’ (Butler, 1993, p. 393). In other words, identities expressed in these communities are not only responses to domination – they also ‘exceed the frame,’ as Hartman tells us (2019,



p. 50). These communities affirm other aspects of identity like dignity, togetherness, and solidarity. The loss of the assumed universal – the white, male identity – does not need to threaten the kinds of togetherness found among these communities, even as it will liberate them. Marginalized groups are not burdened with the same work of destabilizing an identity that is already threatened or vulnerable to violence, aggression, or curtailment. Instead, the work of destabilization specifically targets an asserted norm: the white, male ‘we.’

Democratic repair requires pluralizing identity, as Connolly describes. However, Baldwin helps us amend Connolly’s theory: justice and democracy will be furthered if we destabilize white identity, rather than appeasing white expectations of privilege. This amendment can better distribute the burden of transformation such that those for whom identity has long been unstable are not asked to sacrifice their attachments. Moreover, the amendment can help challenge whiteness directly, rather than keeping white privilege in place. Taking Baldwin’s insistence to challenge the ‘we’ of American democracy – that asserts itself as white and male – helps challenge racial injustice.

The ‘We’ of Democracy

The problem of the black hole of liberal democracy persists and, as Connolly notes, can invite fundamentalism and violence. Even if we successfully abolish whiteness as an identity that requires the domination of others, the problem of ‘emptiness at the center of the nation’ can still allow groups to ‘*occupy* that vacant center’ (Connolly, 1999, p. 86). In other words, even if we abolish white supremacy’s claim to the ‘heart’ of American liberal democracy, there still remains a ‘black hole’ that can entertain exclusionary and unjust identity claims. For Connolly, this is part of democratic politics and can be countered by the energies of an active, participatory, and plural agonistic democracy. While Connolly’s emphasis on plurality and agonism is useful, a reading of Baldwin offers a way to sustain a ‘we’ of democracy that still embraces plurality even as it asserts a democratic community.

Connolly’s agonism involves transforming an ‘antagonism in which each aims initially at conquest or conversion of the other’ into an ‘agonism in which each treats the other as crucial to itself in the strife and interdependence of identity/difference’ (2002, pp. 178–179). Connolly writes

Agonal democracy enables (but does not require) anyone to come to terms with the strife and interdependence of identity/difference ... When democratic politics is robust, when it operates to disturb the naturalization of settled conventions, when it exposes settled identities to some of the contestable contingencies that constitute them, then one is in a more



favorable position to reconsider some of the demands built into those conventions and identities (2002, p. 192).

Agonism emerges as the means and the mode of engagement that can struggle against the closures, normalizations, or attempted conquests of identity. Agonal democracy is plural, multifaceted, respectful, introspective, and characterized by a 'militant' activism (2017b). Agonism is useful to changing contemporary American democracy and abolishing white supremacy because it can 'disturb the naturalization of settled conventions' (Connolly, 2002, p. 192) such as veneration of the Founding Fathers in the US. In this case, challenges to the conventional 'outsized authority of the Founders in our jurisprudence and our politics' (Frank, 2014, p. 1) might also involve challenges regarding the role of the enslaved and Indigenous peoples in consolidating American unity. This kind of agonistic challenge can enable a retelling of stories as it pursues genealogies that question 'intrinsic' identities and norms – an important step on the path to justice (Connolly, 2002, p. 182). Activism and genealogy can lead to challenges to existing institutions as well. Challenging the Founders' authority might bring with it a drive to revise undemocratic aspects of the Constitution such as the Senate or Electoral College. Transforming these institutions might bring expanded democratic representation in ways that return political voice to communities in nonwhite, urban areas that are disenfranchised by these institutions.

However, the problem of Connolly's theory is that he argues that, 'You do not need a wide universal "we" (a nation, a community ...) to foster democratic governance of a population' (Connolly, 1995, p. xx). But as other scholars note, democracy requires an imagined people to authorize laws, drive participation, and build solidarity. Danielle Allen writes, 'democratic citizens cannot take shape until "the people" is imaginable' (Allen, 2004, p. 69). As Allen notes, a democracy is an 'invisible whole' that requires 'imaginative labor' to come into being (Allen, 2004, p. 17). It is only with the image of this community that 'citizens can explain their role in democracy' (Allen, 2004, p. 17). Members of democracies must be able to imagine a 'we' to which they belong – a collective people that participates, authorizes, and governs. The 'we' is an important part of maintaining democratic community, but it does not need to be a singular or homogenous 'we.' Imagination can refashion the 'we' of political community so that it depends not on homogeneity, but on shared struggles, aspirations, and futures. Imagination sustains 'numerous possibilities of intersection and collaboration' that are at the heart of Connolly's theory (Connolly, 1995, p. xx). Imagination can help address the issue of the black hole of liberal democracy in a way that keeps with Connolly's commitment to plurality.

As I read Baldwin, the democratic community is united by a shared investment in the polity and a commitment to struggle for a shared future. Take, for example, the way Baldwin refers to a dynamic, unstable 'we' in the essay 'Many Thousands



Gone' (1985). In this essay, 'we' refers in one instance to white Americans; in another, 'we' refers to the mostly nonwhite residents of Harlem. The 'we' is unstable and changing in ways that rhetorically challenge the coherence of whiteness. As Lawrie Balfour notes, Baldwin

deploys a rhetorical strategy that deliberately uncouples the narrator's 'we' from any stable point of reference. By dividing 'the Negro' from 'Americans', the essay accepts the color line as fundamental to American society. But throughout the piece, Baldwin slips back and forth across the line—now aligning himself with African Americans, now looking at them from a distance, now obscuring the difference (1998, p. 353).

This rhetorical strategy is evident in the movement from: 'It is only in his music...that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find *ourselves* until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence,' to: '*Our* dehumanization of the Negro is indivisible from *our* dehumanization of *ourselves*: the loss of *our* own identity is the price *we* must pay for our annulment of his' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 75 emphasis added). In the first passage, Baldwin references the stories of people of color, observes the silence of oppression. But when he writes 'we find ourselves oppressed with a dangerous silence,' it is not clear to whom he refers. It is Baldwin's contention that whites and nonwhites are *both* oppressed by racial domination; as Baldwin notes, the dehumanization of whites is 'indivisible' from the oppression and domination of nonwhites. In the second passage, Baldwin aligns himself with the white 'we.' *Our* identity refers to *white* identity and the person of color is on the other side of the color line. By grouping himself with white people, Baldwin admits that 'we' – white folks – are complicit in racial domination in ways that endanger 'our' own humanity. In his invocation of the unstable and changing 'we,' Baldwin renders the identity of that 'we' unclear, unstable, and ambiguous. He moves iteratively across different perspectives, inviting the reader to imagine herself as white, liberal, black, bisexual, pregnant, and so on. The rhetorical move is simple, but it effectively recodes and regroups identity each time it is employed. The possibilities are numerous: the reader may identify in any one of these ways.

Even as Baldwin destabilizes who may belong, he affirms that there *is* some shared 'we.' Baldwin's writing raises the question, 'What might we do about our dehumanization of ourselves?' In the question and the struggle for an answer, Baldwin affirms that there exists a 'we.' Democratic community can be affirmed in ways that do not demand homogeneity. It might instead emerge in attempts to destabilize existing groupings or answer political questions. The democratic community can be an aspirational 'we' that is committed to a shared political project.



An aspirational imagined community that sits at the ‘heart’ of liberal democracy can encourage the kind of agonistic, plural, democracy that Connolly proposes. A strong sense of ‘we’ can motivate members of a polity to participate, sacrifice, protest, volunteer, listen, or mobilize. We see evidence of this in Baldwin’s own relationship to his political activism. His time in Europe left Baldwin with a strong sense of his commitment to American politics and his identity as an American. As Baldwin writes of himself, ‘I proved, to my astonishment, to be as American as any Texas G.I.’ (1985, p. 179). Unlike several other scholars of race in America, Baldwin remained committed to repairing and reforming American democracy, even as he insisted that Americans were disillusioned and democracy in the US was flawed. In a letter to his nephew, Baldwin writes,

For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here... and we can make America what America must become... we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity (Baldwin, 1993 [1963], p. 10).

Baldwin’s commitment to American identity and his investment in reforming American democracy are inseparable. In Baldwin’s writing, the person of color ‘is the key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his’ (1993 [1963], p. 94). The future of the US, the identity of the nation, and the abolition of white supremacy are entwined. Another way to understand this is that Baldwin places himself, both as an individual and as a person of color in the US, at the heart of American identity. In doing so, he effectively places the struggle for ‘unconditional freedom’ (Baldwin, 1993 [1963], p. 94) for the marginalized at the ‘vacant center’ (Connolly, 1999, p. 86) of American democracy. American identity, then, depends on the struggle for a more just future.

The Promise of Political Imagination

Baldwin’s aspirational community is brought into being through political imagination. Political imagination allows members of a democratic community to imagine each other without the need for homogeneity. From theorists like Benedict Anderson (1983), Jason Frank (2014), Linda Zerilli (2005), Danielle Allen (2004), and Gauri Wagle (2022), we know that political imagination plays a key role in sustaining the people of democracy and bringing into being a democratic community. In Baldwin’s work, imagination can help individuals in the community come to terms with democratic plurality. As in Anderson’s seminal work on imagination, Baldwin’s rhetorical strategy, examined above, invokes imagination to refer to and presuppose an imagined ‘we.’ As Anderson notes about shared sites, they raise the question, ‘Why are *we...here...together?*’ (2016 [1983]), p. 56). In



Baldwin's work, noted above, the question is 'What might we do about our dehumanization of ourselves?' As in Anderson, the question and attempt to answer affirms that there exists a 'we.'

In another instance, Baldwin invokes imagination as a means to recognize and affirm plurality. In this example, a white policeman confronts racial domination and recognizes the insecurity of white privilege. The white policeman

is exposed, as few white people are, to the anguish of the black people around him. Even if he is gifted with the merest mustard grain of imagination, something must seep in. He cannot avoid observing that some of the children, in spite of their color, remind him of children he has known and loved, perhaps even of his own children. He knows that he certainly does not want *his* children living this way. He can retreat from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature (Baldwin, 1985, p. 218).

The white policeman closes racial distance, witnesses the evidence of domination. He realizes: that could have been me or my children. At such close physical proximity – patrolling the same street on which children of color play – all that is required is the 'merest mustard grain of imagination' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 218) to see contingency and the instability of identity. Baldwin describes the white policeman's experience with an identity that is unstable, exposed, or vulnerable. The policeman imagines contingency and recognizes the arbitrariness of his identity and his circumstances. In the moment following, he is faced with the choice of reaction: he can choose to embrace this realization and affirm contingency, or he can choose to feel threatened, exposed, and endangered. The first reaction might result in actions that build solidarity like listening to the children's or families' concerns, changing policing strategy, or even contesting the dictates of his job. In Baldwin's description, the white policeman retreats from the realization that imagination brings. The effect of the retrenchment is, as Baldwin tells us, callousness and cruelty.

Imagination and the plurality of perspectives is an important theme in Baldwin's work. In his novels, such as *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as well as in the essay, 'Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,' Baldwin weaves together threads from lives lived together and apart. Various characters – children, sweethearts, drunk, stumbling men, political leaders – are brought together in some kind of unity. This, Baldwin identifies, is the writer's job; 'to unite these things, to find the terms of our connection' (1985, p. 249). An imagined connection comes about as we inquire about others. Questions such as 'Who is he and what does he mean? ... Where did they get their peculiar school of ethics? What did it mean to them?... Why were they living where they were?' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 246) can bring about unity because they invite us to imagine 'the terms of our connection.'

The 'merest mustard grain of imagination' might enable us to consider others and recognize contingency in ways that unravel white supremacy and assert a more just democratic community. In the passage describing the white policeman,



recounted above, Baldwin points to the possibilities and importance of imagination as a political faculty and resource. The policeman sees ‘the very thin contingency that sorts one child from the next’ (Caver, 2018, p. 55). We know, from Zerilli’s work, that imagination can give us the ‘ability to see from other perspectives’ (2005, p. 139). Imagination allows us to inhabit others’ perspectives – to stand in someone’s metaphorical shoes. But Baldwin takes imagination a step further: not only can the white policeman imagine himself or his children in the place of the marginalized, but the policeman also sees contingency. When we see from other perspectives, we *see* other perspectives. In line with Zerilli’s claim, imagination invites other perspectives and lets us inhabit someone else’s experiences – as when we read a fantasy novel and imagine green hills and hobbits, and see from the perspective of those hobbits. But political imagination also makes possible not only that we inhabit another identity or empathize with someone else, but also that we see the *plurality of* perspectives, persons, and possibilities.

Political imagination makes possible a democratic community that is dynamic and plural. Even as the ‘we’ of democratic community is invoked through acts like reading, patrolling, speaking with others, listening to the news, or meeting strangers, the imagined community can exceed the invocation. As Frank notes in his work on political imagination, in the American Constitution’s preamble, ‘We the people’ is invoked and brings into being a people that does not currently exist – a people is presupposed. The people brought into being may choose to retrospectively authorize and support the Constitution – but this remains one among many possibilities. As Frank writes of *Federalist 85*, ‘Publius in his last essay projects the authorizing authority of the people into an unmarked horizon of future acts, reforms, and constitutional revisions’ (Frank, 2014, p. 8). Similarly, in reading Baldwin’s works, the reader may choose to affirm the ‘we’ that Baldwin invokes – the ‘we’ that struggles against dehumanization and injustice. In a contemporary example, a Civil War museum that celebrates ‘our’ heroes – but fails to mention the political acts of slaves – invokes a ‘we.’ *We* may choose to affirm or resist the memorialization of the museum, even as it brings *us* into being. Such a ‘we’ can act to affirm or oppose the very act that brings it into being, without losing its community. The iterations that presuppose and subsequently affirm a shared ‘we’ also mean that an imagined community can change over time. The possibilities for affirming a community are multiple, even as the community endures.

For some scholars, imagination is troublesome because it is defined only as seeing from someone else’s perspective. Understood this way, imagination can cultivate empathy. Scholars like Mary Scudder criticize empathy for undermining democracy. In her own words, Scudder ties together imagination and empathy:

Empathy-as-process, which involves imagining another’s perspective, is supposed to bring about empathy-as-outcome, of which there are two types – cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy is the ‘awareness of another’s



feelings’, whereas affective empathy is ‘feeling what another feels’. Cognitive empathy allows us to understand another’s perspective or feelings, even if we do not ultimately come to share them (2016, p. 527).

The trouble with empathy, Scudder argues, is that ‘You do not have to listen to someone you already understand’ (2016, p. 545). For this reason, she argues that empathy can cause us to dismiss others or fail to listen to our peers. The conclusion Scudder draws, then, is that imagination and the empathy that follows are not the political practices we ought to cultivate – they are not enough. Scudder’s critique of empathy helps us see why political imagination, understood as the ability to see from other perspectives, is not enough.

Imagination as empathy, or as taking another’s perspective, is often understood as an experience in the other’s skin. When we think of race in America, this no longer remains metaphorical but pushes into the problematic territory of whites who adopt black bodies – examples of which range from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to as recently as Pixar’s *Soul* (2020) or *Tropic Thunder* (2008). Inhabiting someone else’s identity is not always a good thing – sometimes, it is an act of theft and domination. In these films, as in other examples of whites taking on black identity, whiteness remains unchallenged and is even affirmed as superior. In *Soul* for example, it is only after actor Tina Fey occupies the body of character Joe Gardner – a black musician and teacher – that Gardner chooses to embrace his life and ‘live every minute of it’ (2020). The white woman, in this movie, usurps and uses the black body as a vehicle for her own enjoyment and self-fulfillment (Serpell, 2021). The filmmakers have the audacity to tell us the black man is all the better for it. In short, taking another’s perspective can be literal, too. It can mean taking – without consent or care – another’s shoes, another’s body, and another’s place. For this reason, too, imagination as empathy is not enough to undo the challenges of a racial hierarchy.

By contrast, the political imagination that unites Baldwin’s American democracy does not rely on placing oneself in another’s position. As in Baldwin’s example of the policeman, understanding is not necessary. The white policeman does not understand the black children’s feelings. Rather, he imagines an array of possibilities – of different kinds of existence, access, and life outcomes. In this way, political imagination does precisely the kind of political work Scudder claims *is* necessary: ‘rejecting the presumption of fully understanding black Americans’ perspectives and emotions related to events surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin...creates space wherein white Americans can listen to and hear the concerns and demands of black Americans’ (Scudder, 2016, p. 549). Imagination does not place oneself *as* the children in Harlem or Trayvon Martin as in Scudder’s analysis. Instead, it sees the many children who could be (and are) and the many possibilities which identity might take. Imagination can cultivate listening, action, and solidarity in ways that go beyond Scudder’s critique of imagination as empathy. By recognizing plurality, political



imagination can encourage political activity that meets Scudder's concerns and cultivates intersubjective solidarity and democracy.

As I read Baldwin, imagined democratic community keeps with Connolly's resistance to metaphysical absolutes and his affirmation of plurality. Political imagination brings into being other places, recognizes other identities, and sees the plurality of perspectives. In this way, imagination can help destabilize white identity and establish a 'we' of American democratic community. Imagination can see the availability of alternatives, the fragility of the status quo, and the vulnerability of all to contingency. Moreover, an aspirational imagined community can expand other democratic possibilities. It can bring us to the conclusion that we cannot imagine what others are thinking simply by knowing their socioeconomic status or place in the political order. With this realization, we can turn to listening, collective action, or participation as ways to better understand our peers.

There is room to explore the potential of political imagination in Connolly's writing. For example, Connolly writes of the importance of visualization:

The approach supported here...You first try to *imagine* an interim future in which substantial progress has been made on both fronts within capitalism, broadly defined...You then work back from that point to specific reforms that could actualize the image. But why participate in *visualization* at all? You do so because imaging is ubiquitous and unavoidable in thought, and if negative images are not countered by positive visualizations the creative potential of thought and action is stifled (Connolly, 2008, p. 94).

What Connolly describes is the activity of imagining a future and bringing it into being. In his account, democratic citizens are tasked with imagining an interim future, participating, contesting, and reforming to consequently bring that future into being. In the spaces of imagining and working towards a future that is more just, there is room for a *we* of democratic community, although Connolly leaves this possibility unexplored.

Connolly's work is an important resource to challenge racial injustice, including destabilizing settled conventions and institutions that keep racial hierarchy in place. Baldwin's interest in an aspirational imagined community can deepen Connolly's account of democratic politics. As Baldwin describes the community, it is plural, dynamic, and united by a shared commitment to present and future struggles for freedom and justice. Baldwin's insight can help solve the 'black hole' of liberal democracy that sustains fundamentalism. Political imagination can enable reflection, listening, and self-critique in ways that can transform democracy and existing inequality. Imagining other possibilities and affirming plurality can help establish a 'we' of democratic community that is plural and dynamic. In this way, political imagination offers strategies to address the challenge of liberal democracy's 'vacant' center. Political imagination helps establish a 'we' of American democracy that can



resolve the problem of the ‘black hole’ of liberal democracy that invites fundamentalism and violence.

Conclusion

This article shows that Connolly’s work holds resources for projects of racial justice but must be revised to fully meet the challenge of racial inequality. Connolly helps elucidate how white identity secures its own certainty through domination of the Other. However, Connolly’s normative resolutions must be amended to better address issues of racial hierarchy and inequality. Pluralists must focus on destabilizing the ‘we’ of American politics that allows white, male identity to occupy the ‘heart’ of liberal democracy. Programs and policies that focus on the white working class must be abandoned in favor of policies that do not appease white privileges. An aspirational imagined community can serve as the ‘heart’ of American democracy. These amendments help Connolly’s theory meet the challenge of contemporary American racial inequality because they address the burden placed on already marginalized groups, do not appease white expectations of privilege, and help guard against fundamentalist claims to occupy the ‘black hole’ at the center of liberal democracy. Political imagination is an indispensable resource in making Connolly’s theory more sensitive to the challenge posed by racial injustice. As a reading of Baldwin shows, imagination can affirm contingency and sustain an imagined community. This article’s contribution is to amend Connolly’s work to meet the challenge of racial injustice, offer a novel reading of the place of political imagination in James Baldwin’s work, and show how political imagination adds depth to conversations about democracy, racial justice, and pluralism.

About the Author

Gauri Wagle is a political theorist at Royal Holloway, University of London. She studies race and belonging in the United States. She holds a PhD in political science from Brown University.

Note

1. This is also partly because of the way ‘the image of the nation and the idea of democracy are bound together,’ as theorized in ‘Rousseau, Kant, Tocqueville, and Mill.’ For a longer discussion, see Connolly (1999, p. 87).



References

- Allen, D. (2004) *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown V. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, B. (2016 [1983]) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Baldwin, J. (1985) *The Price of the Ticket*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Baldwin, J. (2018 [1974]) *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Baldwin, J. (1993 [1963]) *The Fire Next Time*. New York: First Vintage International.
- Balfour, L. (1998) 'A Most Disagreeable Mirror' race consciousness as double consciousness. *Political Theory* 26(3): 346–369.
- Birth of a Nation* (1915) Directed by D.W. Griffith [Film]. Epoch Producing Co.
- Brown, W. (1993) Wounded attachments. *Political Theory* 21(3): 390–410.
- Chozick, A. (2016) Hillary Clinton Calls Many Trump Backers 'Deplorables', and G.O.P. Pounces. *The New York Times*.
- Connolly, W. (2019) *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives, and Truth*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W. (2017a) *Aspirational Fascism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Connolly, W. (2017b) *Facing the Planetary*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W. (2013) *The Fragility of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W. (2008) *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W. (2005) *Pluralism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W. (2002) *Identity/Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Connolly, W. (1999) *Why I am Not a Secularist*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Connolly, W. (1995) *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dienstag, J. (2009) Connollyism, What. *Theory & Event*. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.0.0093>.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1935) *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Doherty, C., Kiley, J. and Johnson, B. (2018) An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters. *Pew Research Center*. Aug 9, 2018.
- Fanon, F. (2007 [1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Frank, J. (2014) *Publius and Political Imagination*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke J. and Roberts, B. (2013 [1978]) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, C. (1993) Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review* 106(8): 1707.
- Hartman, S. (2019) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: WW Norton and Company.
- Hooker, J. (2016) Black lives matter and the paradoxes of U.S. black politics from democratic sacrifice to democratic repair. *Political Theory* 44(4): 448–469.
- Ignatiev, N. (1995) *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, M.S. (2020) *Vanguard*. New York: Basic Books.
- Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2018) *How Democracies Die*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Lewis, R.L. (1987) *Black Coal Miners in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- McBride, D.A. (1999) *James Baldwin Now*. New York: New York University Press.
- Olsen, M.E. (1970) Social and political participation of blacks. *American Sociological Review* 35(4): 682.
- Olson, J. (2004) *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Quashie, K. (2012) *The Sovereignty of Quiet*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Roediger, D. (1991) *The Wages of Whiteness*. New York: Verso Books.
- Serpell, N. (2021) Pixar's Troubled 'Soul'. *The New Yorker*.
- Scudder, M.F. (2016) Beyond empathy: Strategies and ideals of democratic deliberation. *Polity* 48(4): 524–550.



-
- Silver, N. (2016) The Mythology of Trump's 'Working Class' Support. *FiveThirtyEight*.
Soul (2020) Directed by P. Docter, K. Powers [Film]. Disney and Pixar.
Tropic Thunder (2008) Directed by B. Stiller [Film]. DreamWorks.
Wagle, G. (2022) Counterimagination and the plurality of radical politics. *Polity* 54(2): 334–358.
Zerilli, L. (2005) *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.