

Article

James Baldwin and the “Lie of Whiteness”: Toward an Ethic of Culpability, Complicity, and Confession

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to draw on James Baldwin’s depiction of white identity as the “the lie of whiteness” to tease out a nascent ethics that centers the role of genuine, honest confrontation with this so-called “lie.” In order to connect the dots between excavation of Baldwin’s lie of whiteness and the provinces of religious ethics, we will explore the role that truth-telling plays in the form of something like a religious notion of confession, limiting our engagement with confession to an honest and genuine encounter with culpability and responsibility through truth-telling. The analysis will be guided by several questions: how might a genuine reckoning with the reality and prevalence of what Baldwin intimately describes about whiteness and its connection to anti-black racism be understood morally? How might this confrontation with the truth be understood in relation to a religious concept like confession, as defined above? Finally, how might this process of confrontation further expose the machinations of Baldwin’s “lie of whiteness” and, in so doing, offer an ethical response that includes culpability and complicity? In so doing, this article seeks to begin sketching out an ethics of the role of confession in the struggle against the evils of anti-black racism, through direct engagement with Baldwin’s description of the “lie of whiteness.”



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1. Introduction

In what has come to be known as the “long, hot summer” of 1967, passions burned deeply for racial justice in the United States as urban rebellions erupted in over 150 cities in the United States (Glaude 2020, p. 86). The Black Panther Party, a newly formed organization seeking to defend black communities from the “head-knocking brutality” police departments were coming to be known for, was gaining momentum as a representation of the Black Power movement (Ibid., p. 85). This movement stood in stark contrast to the non-violent movements of Dr. Martin Luther King, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹ Black leaders who were committed to reform rather than violent confrontation were “ruthlessly condemned for standing in the way of revolution.” Eddie Glaude Jr. accurately depicts the clash between the prevailing approaches to the struggle for racial justice: “The nation had clearly refused to concede to the demands of the civil rights movement. Moreover, the refusal itself, at least from the vantage point of those disaffected with Dr. King’s philosophy of non-violence, revealed that moral appeals did little to transform the circumstances of black people’s lives, since white Americans did not seem to view the issue of race in moral terms (Ibid., p. 89).” Activist and writer (who was gaining popularity among white liberals) James Baldwin found himself squarely in the crosshairs of this clash and was counted among the reformers. Baldwin’s own views were changing around this time; in fact, one of the significant contributions of Glaude’s latest book on Baldwin offers a fresh take on the development of themes in Baldwin’s writings that resist previously held interpretations. Glaude suggests that while Baldwin was becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of genuine movement in

response to the non-violence campaigns, Baldwin also resisted “the Manichean world” the Black Power movement inhabited in the 1960s where the lines of good and evil were clearly delineated (Ibid., p. 91). At this crucial moment, Glaude extracts a particularly powerful line that James Baldwin wrote when he resigned from the editorial board of the American socialist magazine, *Liberator*, in 1967: “I would like us to do something unprecedented . . . to create ourselves without finding it necessary to create an enemy.” As Glaude goes on to argue throughout the rest of this book, although questions of “policy” or “power” were significant, Baldwin’s approach focused more on a relentless, critical depiction of “America’s race problem as, at its root, a fundamentally moral question with implications for who we take ourselves to be (Ibid., p. 90).” It came down to a question of identity for Baldwin, but not in the ways we might typically imagine; in other words, the so-called “Negro Problem” had its origins in a much deeper problem of assumptions about white identity. In Baldwin’s views and reflections on white identity a particular turn of phrase emerges, especially in his non-fiction writings and speeches, that I believe has traction with and relevance for the provinces of religious ethics. When coming to the crux of the matter about a crisis of identity, Baldwin would often refer to what he calls “the lie of whiteness.”

This article will attempt to draw on James Baldwin’s depiction of white identity—which includes its self-understanding as such, especially in relation to other identities—as the “the lie of whiteness” to tease out a nascent ethics that centers the role of genuine, honest confrontation with this so-called “lie.” In order to connect the dots between our excavation of Baldwin’s lie of whiteness and the provinces of religious ethics, we will explore the role that truth-telling plays in the form of something like a religious notion of confession. Naturally, in both theology and religious studies, confession has been traditionally understood as more than truth-telling. However, for the purposes of beginning to sketch a religious ethics in conversation with Baldwin’s reflections on whiteness and the evils of anti-black racism, we will limit our engagement with confession to a working definition that foregrounds an honest and genuine encounter with culpability and responsibility through truth-telling. The analysis will be guided by several questions: how might a genuine reckoning with the reality and prevalence of what Baldwin intimately describes about whiteness and its connection to anti-black racism be understood morally? How might this confrontation with the truth be understood in relation to a religious concept like confession, as defined above? Finally, how might this process of confrontation further expose the machinations of Baldwin’s lie of whiteness and, in so doing, offer an ethical response that includes culpability and complicity? In so doing, this article seeks to begin sketching out an ethics of the role of confession in the struggle against the evils of anti-black racism, through direct engagement with Baldwin’s description of the lie of whiteness.

Naturally, the direction of this article raises pressing questions about the intersection of anti-black racism and religion, and much has been written about this relationship (see, for instance: [Cone 1969](#); [West 1982](#); [Carter 2008](#); [Jennings 2010](#); [Blum and Harvey 2012](#)). In light of the foregoing scholarship—including the eruption of more recent scholarship that further engages the entanglements and complexities—there are many points of intersection between the scope of this essay and such issues. Discussions about a genuine confrontation with the truth and constructions of white identity highlight a further layer of scholarly conversation regarding religion and politics in the United States, with one especially pertinent thread of research that warrants at least brief comment. The emergence of what has come to be known as “Trumpism,” white evangelical support of it, and the connection to constructions of racial identity has garnered a significant amount of scholarly attention in the last few years ([Gorski 2017](#); [Nichols 2018](#); [Thomas 2019](#); [Smith 2019](#); [Bieber and Beyers 2020](#); [Holder and Josephson 2020](#); [Margolis 2020](#)). While this topic is broadly germane to the theme of this essay, it is not its main focus; in fact, a closer look reveals that it has potential to distort what I read as a central message of Baldwin’s writings.

One particular, recent event will serve as a helpful gateway into my point about why “Trumpism” is not only a poor example of Baldwin’s reflections, but can distort what I read to be at the center of Baldwin’s message. On 6 January 2021 a mob of angry,

predominantly white insurrectionists stormed the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. after being incited by then president, Donald J. Trump. Just moments before the insurgence that led to violent occupation of this government building, Trump held a rally to “protest” against the finalizing of electoral college votes that would be the concluding formality to end his presidency and confirm Joseph R. Biden as the 46th President of the United States. The rallying cry of their march en masse to the Capitol was a refusal to acknowledge the truth of the election’s outcome, fueled by Trump’s repeated falsehoods and distortions about voter fraud and a stolen election. Trump spent the weeks leading up to this incident pressuring other government officials to overturn the result of an election he clearly, and definitively, lost. During that time—as he had repeatedly during his presidency—he occasionally encouraged his supporters to commit violence; on January 6th, he did so again, and the thousands of supporters who had gathered at the rally took him literally. “You will never take back our country with weakness,” Trump shouted to those gathered at a rally hours before they burst into the Capitol. He also referred to his political opponents, i.e., those who affirmed the truth of the election results, as “bad people” and “the enemy of the people.” Trump went on to describe his followers as “warriors” and encouraged them to stop “fighting like a boxer with his hands tied behind his back.” He then added, “We’re going to have to fight much harder.” At the same rally, Trump’s ally and lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, said that Trump’s opponents should go to jail for their lack of support and added the inciteful comment, “Let’s have trial by combat.” Even Donald Trump Jr., addressing Republicans who did not support the lies, stoked the flames: “We’re coming for you, and we’re going to have a good time doing it.” As violent mobs stormed the Capitol, attacking police, smashing windows, and vandalizing offices in an attempt to prevent the certification of President-elect Biden’s victory, Trump tweeted: “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously and viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long.” The end result of fanning the flames of falsehood included four deaths, over a dozen injured law enforcement officers, and the evacuation of Vice President Mike Pence and other members of Congress.

While there are aspects of this incident that could offer potentially pertinent illustrations of the ensuing reflection on Baldwin’s lie of whiteness and its effects, I raise it here for exactly the opposite reason: to highlight the ways in which this will not be this article’s main focus. First off, this article’s argument is based on Baldwin’s depiction of the lie of whiteness, which may include its manifestation in white evangelicals and the political connection to Trumpism; however, the burden of my argument does not rest here. As mentioned above, it would indeed be interesting to connect Baldwin’s decades earlier interpretation of the role and function of whiteness, as he understood it, to more contemporary iterations in the realms of politics and religion, i.e., “Trumpism” and U.S. evangelical Christianity, respectively. But doing so would make for an entirely different approach than the one employed here. It would require further excavation of the link between U.S. evangelical Christianity and Trumpism, and how that relationship is in turn related to Baldwin’s understanding of the lie of whiteness. Again, this is certainly a viable research endeavor and one that would add a layer to this article’s intended argument, not least because of the prominence of truth/lies at the center of both; however it is ultimately beyond this essay’s scope.

Second, and more importantly, in my reading, Baldwin’s discussion of the lie of whiteness resists focusing too much on exceptional or extraordinary cases. To borrow again from Glaude’s appraisal of the recent political and religious entanglement and its connection to Baldwin, he argues that while there are (in the form of Trump), and have been in the United States’ political history, “clear racist demagogues,” where “Trump stands among them,” ultimately “such classifications are too easy.” Baldwin would thus be wary of any naïve diagnosis like this because of his allergic reaction to facile categorizations and taxonomies. Baldwin deplored melodramatic depictions “where good and evil are clearly discernible.” Rather, Baldwin’s musings about identity were steeped in a conviction that

“human beings are much more complicated” than that. Consequently, and more difficult to grasp, Glaude argues that in the spirit of Baldwin, such extraordinary examples of the problem, like Trump, “cannot be cordoned off into a corner with evil, racist demagogues.” In fact, the lie of whiteness, as Baldwin understood it and discussed it, functions best when the focus is elsewhere: “We make [the racist demagogue] wholly bad in order to protect our innocence. He is made to bear the burdens of all our sins, when he is in fact a clear reflection of who we actually are (Glaude 2020, p. 171).” Going further, Glaude argues: “To maintain this illusion [of innocence], Trump has to be seen as singular, aberrant. Otherwise he reveals something terrible about us. But not to see yourself in Trump is to continue the lie (Ibid., p. 174).” So I enlist the Capitol insurrection in January 2021 as a warning against reading Baldwin’s reflections on whiteness into an overtly explicit category or taxonomy. Baldwin is, I believe, calling for a more honest and genuine reckoning when he discusses the lie of whiteness, wherein “innocence” is not protected and moral standing is always in question. Otherwise, what ensues might easily fall into what Glaude calls “too simplistic a moral picture,” i.e., hiding “in the comfort of an easy identity politics or revel[ing] in the self-righteousness of a moralism that announces our inherent goodness and the obvious evil of our opponents (Ibid., p. 211).”

Baldwin, in my reading, was after much more than the low-hanging fruit of explicit outbursts of anti-black racism, the kind that is virtually undeniable at the time to most everyone with eyes to see—and this is what I believe give his reflections lasting pertinence. In his day, he visited and was appalled at the segregation, violence, lynchings, and discrimination in the South. But his reflections on whiteness were not confined to southern, explicit forms of white supremacy. In fact, he was just as critical of so-called “white liberals” whose racism was less “loud” and blatant, but present nevertheless: “They were simply racial philanthropists who, after a good deed, return to their suburban homes with their white picket fences or to their apartments in segregated cities with their consciences content (Ibid., p. 96).” Baldwin’s genuine concern, as I hear it coming through, is the more subtle, culturally acceptable and, in his understanding, more insidious manifestation of deep-seated cultural beliefs about identity and the ways in which that is fed by lies. In “Stranger in the Village” from his 1955 collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, he captures the crux of the matter, and it is worth quoting at length:

At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself. And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans—lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession—either to come to terms with this necessity, or to find a way around it, or (most usually) to find a way of doing both these things at once. The resulting spectacle, at once foolish and dreadful, led someone to make the quite accurate observation that “the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men.” In this long battle, a battle by no means finished, the unforeseeable effects of which will be felt by many future generations, the white man’s motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish an identity. (Baldwin 1955, pp. 176–77)

This protection of white identity is the form and function of Baldwin’s depiction of the lie of whiteness, as we will see, and it is not limited to “racist demagogues.” Thus, it is important to try to avoid, as much as possible, an easy collapse into simple dichotomies or taxonomies when engaging with his reflections. To give Baldwin an honest and fair hearing means resisting the temptation to misread his analysis of whiteness by confining it to a particular corner of a political spectrum, geography, time period, class or group of people, or worst of all, a single scapegoat figure. Whether or not we agree with his depiction of whiteness, his intended audience was much broader than that, and his analysis more far-reaching.

2. Confession, Morality, and Truth-Telling

The constructive motive of this article is to promote a genuine, honest engagement with Baldwin's depiction of the lie of whiteness and argue that a viable ethical response to Baldwin's provocation takes the form of white acknowledgement of culpability and complicity. In religious terms, I suggest that there are potentialities and resources in a specifically framed understanding of confession to accomplish that task. As I have already intimated, the kind of genuine confrontation with the truth that elicits an acknowledgement of culpability and complicity that I am after with regards to Baldwin's depiction of the lie of whiteness suggests at least a familial resemblance to confession. When brought within the ambit of religious ethics, there is some precedent regarding the relationship between morality and confession, especially in the discourses of Continental philosophy and critical theory. In fact, in the opening pages of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler begins to explore such confessional accountability "by considering how it might be possible to pose the question of moral philosophy" itself (Butler 2005, p. 3). Butler's reflections on the question of morality lead to a consideration of the role of social relations. Tracking the moral philosophies of the likes of Hegel, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Foucault, Butler begins to hone in on the "I" who must give an account of oneself in the midst of social conditions, which in turn leads to a focus on accountability. Butler writes: "In asking whether we caused such suffering, we are being asked by an established authority not only to avow a causal link between our own actions and the suffering that follows but also to take responsibility for these actions and their effects. In this context, we find ourselves in the position of having to give an account of ourselves." In other words, we are asked to give an account only when we "are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment (Ibid., p. 10)."

Butler also tracks the work of those like Foucault, who critiques the function of such systems and the constructions of selfhood and identity that they elicit, asking penetrating questions about the kind of subjectivity that emerges in light of a confessing culture? Questions like these have led to further critical reflections on the relationship between confessions and policing, with instances like the infamous case of the "Central Park Five" drawing recent scholarship in criminal law, media studies, and psychology.² Critical analyses of confession—understood as truth-telling and admission of culpability and complicity—that reveal its complicity in injustice and immorality certainly complicate this article's intention, which is to suggest a linkage between an honest, genuine acknowledgement of culpability and complicity and a religious understanding of confession. More specifically, confession has potential to exacerbate issues of white identity with regards to anti-black racism. Confession risks collapsing into "white guilt," where the focus becomes acceptance and forgiveness, rather than genuine transformation. In fact, such feelings of guilt can perpetuate a kind of hegemonic white masculinity by leading to a self-congratulatory stance for being on the "right side" of the issue. In this way, confession might further solidify what Hortense Spillers calls "hegemonic male whiteness (Spillers et al. 2007, p. 303)," that is the one who is in control, who can place themselves squarely in the right, leading to a teeming self-satisfaction and confidence in one's righteousness.³ Such complications and wrinkles are worthwhile and necessary for addressing the *pharmacological* tension of confession's morality (Derrida 1983, p. 99). Here, however, I am merely trying to invoke confession as a way to begin sketching a morality of confronting the truth, against the backdrop of Baldwin's lie of whiteness. And Butler's work is still helpful in that regard, especially because of how it foregrounds the role of accountability through address.

Butler writes: "Nietzsche understood that I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account. Only in the face of such a query or attribution from an other—'Was it you?'—do any of us start to narrate ourselves, or find that, for urgent reasons, we must become self-narrating beings. (Butler 2005, p. 11)" As we will see further below, part of the way the lie of whiteness functions is through what Baldwin suggests is a mistaken identity: a belief that one is something that they are in fact not. Confessing in this context, then, forces a reckoning with identity, through an encounter

with another, such that the goal of constructive re-narrating who we are can begin. In other words, once I have been addressed I must respond by giving an account of myself and telling a story about who I am. If the problem with the lie of whiteness (as we will see) is a lie about who I am, then confession offers an opportunity to retell that story more accurately in light of the address of the other who asks me to give an account of myself. Butler continues:

If I am held accountable through a framework of morality, that framework is first addressed to me, first starts to act upon me, through the address and query of another . . . If I give an account of myself in response to such a query, I am implicated in a relation to the other before whom and to whom I speak. Thus, I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me. (Ibid., p. 15)

I must give an account of myself—in order to be held accountable, through a framework of morality—in *response* to how that framework addresses me, which comes in the form of an address and query of another. In my reading, Butler's point (at least for our purposes) is that "the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making," rather they are always "social in character (Ibid., p. 21)." Thus, at the scene of address, which is the beginning of the ethical relation, I am forced to reckon with the truth of my relation to the other. This understanding of confession-as-giving-account provides traction to subvert the lie of whiteness because it refuses to perpetuate the falsehoods of mistaken identity. Confessing the lie of whiteness, then, would mean a direct confrontation with the truth of my identity and its relation to others.

3. On Being White . . . and Other Lies

Having set the backdrop, we will now explore Baldwin's understanding and depiction of whiteness as a lie that warrants a reckoning with the truth, which, I will argue, suggests something along the lines of confession. The goal will be to gain as much clarity as possible as we seek to identify in Baldwin's speeches and writings how he illustrates what the lie consists of, how it functions, its brief history, and its implications and effects.

Whiteness as a lie is not a novel concept. However, James Baldwin, quite fittingly, has a powerful and visceral way of portraying this dynamic, and thus I have chosen to focus on his reflections on this topic to further sketch out what this lie is and how it functions.⁴ Glaude captures one of Baldwin's clarion calls in a phrase from a speech at Howard University in the spring semester of 1963: "We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it." Baldwin was referring to the many lies that fund and perpetuate white supremacy, including white attempts at defining the "Negro" and the concomitant "Negro Problem." With the rise in violence in Birmingham, Alabama in the months before, student-led groups at Howard invited Baldwin and others to explore the role and responsibility of the black writer in the civil rights struggle. Baldwin, as always, captivated the audience, speaking about a responsibility "to excavate the real history of this country . . . to tell us what really happened to get us where we are now (Glaude 2020, p. 4)."

Baldwin's urgent call for truth still resonates, which is a testament to the prevalence and power of the lie of whiteness. Physician and sociologist Jonathan Metzl's recently published book, *Dying of Whiteness*, recounts how increasing numbers of white Americans are literally dying "because white America's investment in maintaining an imagined place atop a racial hierarchy—that is, an investment in a sense of whiteness—ironically harms the aggregate well-being of U.S. whites as a demographic group, thereby making whiteness itself a negative health indicator (Metzl 2019, p. 9)." Metzl's argument, based on his extensive sociological research, is that through a series of complex factors—including an increased sense of anxieties and uneasiness—white Americans have politically invested in, supported, and voted for politicians and policies that were detrimental to their health and well-being.⁵ In other words, Metzl's findings, through research based on interviews and

surveys with Americans around the country, indicate that white people are more inclined to align “with beliefs about a racial hierarchy that [are] overtly and implicitly aimed to keep white Americans hovering above Mexicans, welfare queens, and other nonwhite others,” even when doing so comes at the expense of their own health and social welfare (Ibid., p. 4). Metzl writes: “The stories these people told me became jumping-off points for a more sustained investigation of how particular American notions of *whiteness*—notions shaped by politics and policies as well as by institutions, history, media, economics, and personal identities—threaten white well-being (Ibid., p. 5).” Metzl’s encounter with these stories is our first window into what Baldwin means by the lie of whiteness, and Metzl’s analysis is already sketching its real-life, tangible, and material effects, up to the present day. Metzl’s study goes on to track the ways in which Americans have bought into this lie and the detrimental effects it has had. This suggests that the first thing we need to know about this lie is that it is so powerful, so persuasive, that whites are “willing to put their own lives on the line” by believing in it, as Metzl’s research demonstrates (Ibid.). In other words, the lie is so convincing that threats to one’s well-being, not to mention identifiable consequences and results, are not enough to dispel the lie. Metzl’s study repeatedly shows that whites appear to desire a maintenance of this racial hierarchy, i.e., white supremacy, even when it has direct, negative consequences for their health and well-being.

While Metzl’s analysis of the data he gathers throughout the rest of this work is insightful, there is an especially incisive remark at the end of his introduction that highlights another aspect of Baldwin’s depiction of the lie of whiteness. It is the moment when Metzl acknowledges his own white identity and how his findings relate to his social location. He admits his white privilege but does so in order to resist an implied “us versus them” that is a tried and true approach of what Baldwin was seeking to describe in the lie of whiteness: the irresistible desire to claim enlightenment, “woke-ness,” being an ally or advocate for racial justice. Metzl appears to be aware of this alluring exit strategy, so he cautiously frames his findings by pointing out this potential pitfall. There is a real temptation, he admits, to adopting an approach that “suggests *them*, conservatives, versus *us*, enlightened liberals (Ibid., pp. 10–11).” In other words, Metzl identifies how enticing it is to not only bifurcate the two sides of this issue, with one side being virtuous and the other evil, but also to swiftly place oneself in the former camp. The result of course would be conservatives, Southerners, Trump-supporters, and the majority of the voices encountered in his study, i.e., *them*, versus enlightened, educated, progressives reading this study, i.e., *us*. The matter becomes even more entrenched when we add some labels to it: *those* racists versus *us* allies. But such a division, Metzl admits, “seems to me a lost opportunity” to address a more widespread problem by implying that “Southern forms of whiteness [exist] in another ‘country,’ rather than as exaggerations of systems of privilege that surround North and South, liberal, progressive, and conservative, interviewee and interviewer both (Ibid., p. 11).”

Baldwin would agree with Metzl’s analysis here. However, I posit Baldwin would suggest it is not only a “lost opportunity,” but the very drive and purpose of his attempts to describe the phenomenon he called the lie of whiteness. And Metzl’s resistance to the lie of whiteness here is a window into the very ethic I am proposing. Part of the lie that I hope to expose, through Baldwin, is a lie of enlightenment, righteousness, virtue. It is the lie that explains away responsibility and culpability by referring to some proof or evidence of achieved moral high ground. It often comes in the form of claiming something like education: “I’ve read this book, taken these courses, seen this documentary, have this degree”; or action: “I’ve been a part of this organization, marched in that protest, donated to these causes, served on this committee”; or, worst of all, state of being: “I’ve seen my white privilege and denounced it, I *am* an ally, I support diversity, equity, and inclusion, I was once racist and now I am not.” Above all, for Baldwin the lie is evident when there is a pointing of the finger, a shifting of the blame. So long as *I*, woke white person, can identify anti-black racism and white supremacy over *there*, then all is well. I have done my good,

moral, ethical duty: “I am anti-racist extraordinaire, champion of diversity, aficionado of advocacy. Now let’s talk about those racists some more and keep the focus off me.”

Metzl puts it this way: “It’s too easy to blame the rise of white nationalism on politicians like Trump, Jeff Sessions, or Steve Bannon and far harder to address how the ideologies these politicians support benefit white populations more broadly. In this sense, the larger conversation about the effects of whiteness is the one we, white Americans, badly need to have (Ibid.).” Metzl’s invitation, directed at whites—the “we”—is one that this article seeks to accept. And it does so by striving for a more honest and genuine confrontation with the lie of whiteness via James Baldwin. Furthermore, it seeks to discover how this confrontation might result in an ethic of *immorality*, i.e., not a declaration of virtue, but an admission of guilt, confession of culpability and complicity, and acceptance of responsibility. In other words, by confronting the lie of whiteness which clutches white-knuckled to a perceived morality, righteousness, and blamelessness, the moment of confession must include acceptance of complicity and culpability.

Excavating Baldwin’s writings to begin to concretize his depiction of the lie of whiteness will be, admittedly, no easy task. Baldwin was not a philosopher, theologian, or sociologist. He was a writer and activist, and thus wrote to evoke and provoke. It will be my goal to capture, with as much precision as possible, what he meant by this phrase and how he understood its function—and I believe his nonfiction writings and speeches to be a fruitful place to start. In fact, it might be most helpful to begin to understand the lie by tracing its history. In the midst of the racial struggle for rights and full humanity happening in the mid 1960s, Baldwin suggests: “I think that it might be useful, in order to survive our present crisis, to do what any individual does, is forced to do, to survive his crisis, which is to look back on his beginnings (Baldwin 2010d, p. 98).” His wisdom then, is as practical and insightful as it is now—perhaps we must look back in order to move forward. Addressing what was often labeled “the Negro Problem” at that time, Baldwin sought to reframe the narrative by telling the truth about America’s history. While America was not alone in its involvement in and reliance upon chattel slavery, it was unique for several reasons. First, it was a nation birthed in a shroud of slavery. Second, it was a nation that was supposedly built on an ideal of freedom and liberty, whilst being steeped in slavery. Third, it was a slave-trading nation that owned slaves on its own soil. Thus, as Baldwin asserts:

The American found himself in a very peculiar position because he knew that black people were people. Frenchmen could avoid knowing it—they never met a black man. Englishmen could avoid knowing it. But Americans could not avoid knowing it because, after all, here he was, and he was, no matter how it was denied, a man, just like everybody else. And the attempt to avoid this, to avoid this fact, I consider one of the keys to what we can call loosely the American psychology.” (Baldwin 2010c, p. 84)

The “American psychology” that emerged from this “peculiar position” gives us our first peek at the lie.⁶ It is a psychology born out of contradiction, built on a myth of white superiority and the falsehood of black inhumanity, and it offers a window into the obstinate belief in the lie. This kind of pathological psychology confounded Baldwin—perhaps even more so than the history itself. “In this extraordinary endeavor to create the country called America, a great many crimes were committed,” Baldwin writes. And while the crimes themselves—conquering, capturing, enslaving, treating humans as objects and property—were horrific, Baldwin finds himself drawn to what he calls the “much more sinister matter” of what allowed such crimes to be committed and how a country emerges as a result: “I’m not talking about the crime; I’m talking about denying what one does.” Baldwin appears most interested in the lie, the myth, the denial of the reality of what America was, is, and always has been. Because it was not just the crime of slavery either: “We did several things in order to conquer the country. There existed, at the time we reached these shores, a group of people who had never heard of machines, or, as far as I know, of money—which we *had* heard about. We promptly eliminated them; we killed them (Baldwin 2010d, p. 99).” As

despicable as these crimes are, they are “universal, and as old as mankind . . . people have done that for centuries . . . People treat each other very badly and always have and very probably always will.” What Baldwin wants to unearth, however, what he feels is unique to the twisted psychology he is most interested in, is its creation of and commitment to the lie of whiteness. Because he goes on to say that “I’m willing to bet anything you like that not many American children being taught American history have any real sense of what that collision was like, or what we really did, how we really achieved the extermination of the Indians, or what that meant (Ibid., pp. 99–100).” I think Baldwin might agree that same wager broadly applies as much now as it did sixty years ago—and not just in America, but in other countries forged through colonialism.

The larger point Baldwin makes is that in order for any racial progress to occur, there must be a reckoning with the truth of history, in each context: “It is important that one begin to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myth it has created about its past, which is another way of saying that it has entirely denied its past (Ibid., p. 99).” Such a denial has tremendous repercussions, which we are still reaping today, because for Baldwin: “We have constructed a history which is a total lie, and have persuaded ourselves that it is true. I seriously doubt that anything worse can happen to any people (Baldwin 2010a, p. 109).”

The result is a lie so powerful and so convincing that whites “are not prepared to believe [Baldwin’s] version of the story, to believe that it happened.” Moreover, whites are (still) so invested in believing the lie, as Metzl’s study attests, that “they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which . . . is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.” Putting it most plainly, Baldwin maintains: “What I am trying to say is that the crime is not the most important thing here. What makes our situation serious is that we have spent so many generations pretending that it did not happen (Baldwin 2010d, p. 102).”

At this point, Baldwin is beginning to invite a confrontation with the ethics and morality of the situation. Eddie Glaude draws a contemporary connection with Baldwin’s invitation: “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 (Glaude 2020, p. xix).” Glaude goes on to suggest that an historical moment like “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 . . . Baldwin, I believe, offers resources to respond to such dark times and to imagine an answer to the moral reckoning that confronts us all (Ibid., p. xxiv).” I agree with Glaude, that James Baldwin is uniquely positioned to offer similar resources for our confrontation with the lie of whiteness and ensuing ethics of culpability and complicity. After all, Glaude acknowledges: “Jimmy’s essays demanded a kind of honesty with yourself, without sentimentality, before you could pass judgement on the world as it is. Lies, he maintained, gave birth to more lies (Ibid., p. xxv).”

Glaude begins his own engagement with Baldwin by drawing a connection between the notion of morality and truth-telling, and its potential for offering a viable way forward in the midst of continued injustice. Glaude recalls when Baldwin met Robert Kennedy shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, with Baldwin offering “his sincerest condolences.” But Baldwin also tried to impress upon Kennedy that the murder of his brother should not be understood apart from the mounting violence in Birmingham they had discussed months earlier, because the root cause of America’s troubles, for Baldwin, was that “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 (Ibid., p. xxi).” As Baldwin tried to communicate in that crucial moment in 1963, the crux of the matter was centered on a confrontation with the truth, which comes by way of revealing the lie of whiteness. And Glaude sees this as an opportunity to retell the story more accurately: “Revealing the lie at the heart of the American idea, however, occasions an opportunity to tell a different and better story. It affords a chance to excavate the past and to examine the ruins to find, or at least glimpse, what made us who we are. Baldwin insisted, until

he died, that we reach for a different story. We should tell the truth about ourselves, he maintained, and that would release us into a new possibility (Ibid., p. xxiv)."

An honest confrontation with the truth offers an opportunity for something new. Put in religious terms, there is potential for novelty in the moment of confession, to "begin again," as Glaude suggests. Such an ethic of confession would demand an excavation of the fullest extent of the lie(s), which includes the myths we hear and tell about our nations' histories. Again, in the case of the U.S., that "America is fundamentally good and innocent, its bad deeds dismissed as mistakes corrected on the way to a 'more perfect union.'" While in reality, "the genocide of native peoples, slavery, racial apartheid, Japanese internment camps, the subordination of women" and LGBTQ peoples, treatment of immigrants (from certain parts of the world), latent Islamophobia—they all "reveal that our basic creed that 'all men are created equal' was a lie," at least in practice. Glaude's point is that these are not outliers in an otherwise "grand history of the 'redeemer nation.'" They were, to use his words, "a profound revelation about who we were as a country (Ibid., p. 8)." We will return to this religious notion of revelation further below.

For Baldwin, being a writer entailed a kind of moral responsibility that is linked to telling the his/story, as the writer's task is to put "aside America's myths and legends" and force "a kind of confrontation with the society as it is, becoming a disturber of the peace in doing so." In Baldwin's own words: "It means fighting an astute and agile guerilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic (Ibid., p. 6)." I would like to frame Baldwin's approach to the moral responsibility of the writer by asking how it might apply more broadly. Most specifically, urging those who claim a desire to confront the truth of white supremacy and anti-black racism to seek to disturb the peace and unmask the underlying panic that is lurking just beneath the surface. It means stepping into the role of "witness" as Baldwin understood it, i.e., telling the story in such a way as to "make it real for those who refuse to believe that such a thing can happen/has happened/is happening here." Glaude, summarizing the role of witness, captures its mission: "Bring the suffering to the attention of those who wallow in willful ignorance. In short, shatter the illusion of innocence at every turn and attack the shibboleths the country holds sacred (Ibid., p. 53)."

The history of the lie of whiteness also entails a sense of mistaken identity. Baldwin puts it like this: "The American white has got to accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not. He has to give up, he has to surrender his image of himself, and apparently this is the last thing white Americans are prepared to do (Baldwin 2010c, p. 84)." Baldwin is referring to the implicit, yet prevalent, notion of white superiority, built on the idea that black is inferior, sub- or non-human. It is this lie that is so difficult to give up; as Metzl's study has shown, it is the last thing whites are prepared to do. There is ample psychological reason for this. If and when a (white) psychology is propped up by a notion of false superiority, funded by a lie of (black) inferiority, then what would happen to this (white) self-understanding if the lie is revealed as false? Again, Baldwin puts it perfectly: "I am not what you said I was. And if my place, as it turns out, is not my place, then you are not what you said you were, and where's your place? (Baldwin 2010e, p. 72)" That searing question, with its implication of a loss of identity, goes a long way into understanding the depth of the problem. Baldwin again turns the "Negro Problem" on its head by showing how it is truly a white problem. If whites are not superior, then what are they?

But the problem is more dire than this, because, as we have seen, Baldwin is convinced that whites always knew they were living a lie. They always knew the "Negro," shorthand for a dehumanized and objectified identity attributed to black people, did not really exist; though whites treated them as inferior and sub-human, white people could always see their humanity. There was thus always this "fatal flaw" in white identity: "They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew [the black man] wasn't—I mean *you can tell*, they knew he wasn't—anything *else* but a man." However, "the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he *was not* a man. For if he wasn't a man, then no crime had been committed." This lie is what Baldwin called "the

basis of our present trouble” in 1963. The lie is not only deep, but “extremely complex” and intricate. Baldwin gestures at the sticky nature of it: “If, on the one hand, one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the black man in captivity, and treated like an animal, and told that he was, *knew* that *he* was, a man being oppressed by other men who did not even have the courage to admit what they were doing (Baldwin 2010d, pp. 101–2).”

It is not just that one lives a lie continuously day in and day out and *knows* they are doing so; it is also knowing that the subjugated Other who props up my identity *knows* it to be a lie also. It means that I not only know the lie, and that others know it to be false, but I also know I lack the courage to admit I am lying, which offers another glimpse into this psychological pathology. This “cowardice,” Baldwin argues, this perceived “necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen.” In a passage worth quoting at length, Baldwin dives deep into the implications of this predicament of the lie of whiteness:

And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white. By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a black child’s life meant nothing compared with a white child’s life. By abandoning their children to the things white men could buy. By informing their children that black women, black men, and black children had no human integrity that those who call themselves white were bound to respect. And in this debasement and definition of black people, they debased and defined themselves. And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers. Because they think they are white, they are looking for, or bombing into existence, stable populations, cheerful natives, and cheap labor. (Baldwin 2010b, p. 166)

“Because they think they are white” captures the essence of the lie of mistaken identity I alluded to earlier. Recalling Butler’s discussion of accountability, we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and others “at the scene of address,” in relation to the other, which is the beginning of the ethical relation. Here, I am forced to reckon with the truth of my relation to the other, to whom I become intelligible. In the context of Baldwin’s reflections, whiteness then is the belief in a mistaken identity—“by deciding they were white”—that leads to inhumane treatment of others, or in most cases, complicity in its societal perpetuation. Confession, as I am trying to sketch it, would offer an opportunity to confront this decision and thought process by subverting the lie of mistaken identity through a more honest encounter with culpability and complicity, engendering an ethics of relation at the scene of address.

Baldwin’s description of the lie of whiteness as a mistaken identity defined by its false superiority is what he calls the “price of the ticket” for being, and becoming, white (Ibid., p. 164). The result, Baldwin argues, is a “moral erosion that has made it quite impossible for those who think of themselves as white . . . to have any moral authority at all—privately or publicly (Ibid., p. 165).” What it amounts to is a “debasement” of anyone who thinks of themselves as white, a moral vacuity, an identity without a moral center. By defining and debasing black people, whites defined and debased themselves: “It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves (Ibid., p. 167).”

We have already seen some of the effects of a refusal to accept the truth in Metzger’s study where a contemporary commitment to whiteness (as white superiority) results in politics and policies that negatively impact white people’s health. The irony, for Baldwin, is that in denigrating others, white people have denigrated themselves: “What I’m much more concerned about is what white Americans have done to themselves; what has been done to me is irrelevant simply because there is nothing more you can do to me. But in doing it,

you've done something to yourself. In evading my humanity, you have done something to your own humanity." By labeling an (inferior) Other through the lie of whiteness, Baldwin continues, "you have only described yourself (Baldwin 2010c, p. 84)." Thus, Baldwin understood his role as not only witnessing the trauma visited on black people, he also told the truth about the damage done to whites who explicitly and implicitly "embraced the hate and caused the terror." Drawing on Baldwin's *No Name*, Glaude recounts Baldwin's first visit to the South and his feeling "as though [he] had wandered into hell," both because of the plight of black southerners and how "the racial dynamics of the region had hollowed out white southerners." So much so that "what shook Baldwin at his core" was his "realization of the nature of the heathen" by seeing the lie of whiteness at work: "The white southerner had to lie *continuously* to himself in order to justify his world. Lie that the black people around him were inferior. Lie about what he was doing under the cover of night. Lie that he was a Christian. For Baldwin, the accumulation of lies suffocated the white southerner (Glaude 2020, pp. 48–49)." Glaude frames his entire book around this myth of whiteness: "Baldwin's understanding of the American condition cohered around a set of practices that, taken together, constitute something I will refer to throughout this book as *the lie* (Ibid., p. 7)." Glaude situates Baldwin's lie of whiteness with reference to what he refers to in his previous work as the "value gap": the idea that white lives have always mattered more than the lives of others (Glaude 2017). And these "narrative assumptions" about a mythic superiority of whiteness, Glaude argues, "support the everyday order of American life, which means we breathe them like air. We count them as truths. We absorb them into our character (Glaude 2020, p. 7)."

The next layer, or wrinkle, in the lie that whiteness presents is what I will call the "wokeness of whiteness." Baldwin regularly refers to the propensity for seamless conversion whites imagine themselves to have undergone and soon-to-follow sense of self-congratulation this supposed conversion provides. Baldwin describes this kind of self-congratulatory, and self-delusional, stance: "I mean, I walk into a room and everyone there is terribly proud of himself because I managed to get to the room. It proves to him that he is getting better. It's funny, but it's terribly sad. It's sad that one needs this kind of corroboration and it's terribly sad that one can be so self-deluded (Baldwin 2010c, p. 83)." Again, thinking of whiteness as a belief about one's intelligibility and identity, the lie of whiteness leads to a predisposition for self-congratulation: "People who have opted to be white congratulate themselves on their generous ability to return to the slave the freedom which they never had any right to endanger, much less take away. For this dubious effort . . . they congratulate themselves and expect to be congratulated (Glaude 2020, p. 195)." The kind of self-congratulation Baldwin is referring to is closely related to the scapegoating discussed above, where a group or person is identified as racist, which in turn exonerates everyone else (mostly the accuser). This is a knock-on effect of corrosively explicit and publicly sanctioned anti-black racism. When everyone sees racist actions and rhetoric on full display more frequently, then it gives an illusion of self-containment. When that is clearly racism over *there*, then it means I do not have to look more closely for it elsewhere, especially *here*. This is one of the clearest ways in which a confrontation with the truth and concomitant dismantling of the lie gains the most traction. Confession necessitates self-analysis and reflection, it is always about what is happening *here*, closest to home, with regards to me, and not what is happening over *there*.

Whiteness studies has shown that part of the problem of racial categorization is the complicity of those who benefit from it most to remain within the current framework. White privilege, a product of structural supremacy and dominance in a society or culture, is, in a sense, the inverse experience of oppression. When one group is targeted as "defective or substandard," then the rest—which is the dominant group—"is seen as the norm for humanity (Tatum 2017, pp. 104–5)." In a racist society, then, "white privilege is a concrete manifestation of how whites benefit from white supremacy (West 2006, p. 117)." As the dominant perspective, which is the norm, it is rarely identified by the one who inhabits and privileges from this position. Beverly Tatum describes the machinations of (white)

privilege: “That element of the person’s identity is so taken for granted that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture (Tatum 2017, p. 102).” If it is difficult for the dominant perspective to notice that they do indeed inhabit the dominant position, it is even more difficult to acknowledge the benefits and privileges that go along with that. In what is by now an oft-cited and well-known article, Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” gives a laundry list of societal privileges and advantages she daily experienced by being identified as white (McIntosh 1989). The entire impetus and motivation for this article, however, is in an attempt to think deeply about and reflect upon these privileges that often go unnoticed. McIntosh had to work hard to identify the ways in which society simply “worked” for her, gifting her with a host of advantages that she had not asked for and rarely noticed.

According to critical race theory and whiteness studies, there would then be little motivation for those who “have opted to be white” to work to undo and subvert white privilege and white supremacy. But lest we begin to think that it is merely a matter of being ignorant or unaware, the lie of whiteness functions more insidiously. It is not as if when whites become aware of their privilege and the machinations of white supremacy that they are keen to transform and work against it. In fact, the opposite is more often the case, as Baldwin has been pointing out. Whiteness is not just hidden and unspoken because it is the norm, but any mention of it will bring race into a situation that white people would not expect, causing them to reflect on their own racial identity, which is something whites do not do because they often do not have to (Thandeka 2000). Some recent studies and publications, like Robin DiAngelo’s popular book *White Fragility*, highlights how a culture of white supremacy functions to elicit hostile and vitriolic reactions by whites whenever race—especially their own—is brought up (DiAngelo 2018). In *White Rage*, historian Carol Anderson argues that advances in African Americans’ rights and social power has always initiated a white backlash that has fueled a deliberate and relentless rollback of any gains made. From Reconstruction to Jim Crow, from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 to the Southern Strategy of Republican appeals to racism and the War on Drugs, continuing all the way up to the present moment, Anderson argues that the expression of white rage has been as relentless as it has been brutal (Anderson 2016). In *Angry White Men*, sociologist Michael Kimmel identifies what he calls “aggrieved entitlement” among whites, which is the growing recognition that those benefits once reaped by fathers and grandfathers, and that white men believed were their due, have been snatched away from them because of transformations in the social and economic landscape (Kimmel 2013).

Our tracking of Baldwin’s depiction of the lie of whiteness has gestured towards the way in which a religious notion of confession might offer resources for continuing to sketch out the ethics of confrontation with the lie. Of course, there is perhaps no better place to look in the Christian tradition for an extended discussion of confession than Augustine’s classic text. In fact, one cannot read *Confessions* without getting a sense of the vigilance Augustine has with regards to what he describes as “sin.” Throughout this semi-autobiographical work, Augustine is at pains to hunt down the vestiges of his finitude, limits, sickness. From the infamous pear-tree incident to his youthful lust for earthly things, Augustine continually recounts these so-called sins to God and the reader. Mary-Jane Rubenstein describes one’s experience of reading such an account: “As every first-time reader of *Confessions* remarks with a degree of horror, Augustine denies innocence even to the state of infancy. From the very beginning, he describes himself as sinful: flailing his arms, weeping excessively, and demanding the attention of others. The infant Augustine is, one might say, beside himself, and it is a condition he will spend his mature years trying to escape (Rubenstein 2011, p. 112).” This kind of vigilant confrontation, bordering on neurotic obsession with culpability and complicity in immorality, is surely antithetical to what we have been tracking in the lie of whiteness; but it might be helpful for an ethics of a confrontation with the truth of one’s identity. Augustine’s relentless quest for transformation has potential to disrupt what anti-racist theologian James Perkinson calls a

white tendency toward limited liability and perfidy. The former is the immediate reaction of whites toward the charge of racism. DiAngelo points out that since one of the worst sins and evils that one can be accused of is racism, most whites—especially those sensitive to these issues—expend a tremendous amount of energy to resist such a charge and label. Thus, whites become conditioned to sniff out even the slightest hint of liability and responsibility for the current situation and deny it vehemently. This goes hand-in-glove with what Perkinson calls perfidy, a calculated duplicity of solidarity (Perkinson 2004, p. 14ff). If the belief is that being called a racist is the worst thing that a white person can experience in today's society, those who are sensitive to racial concerns will look to constantly ensure that they are seen as being on the right side of the issue. This kind of duplicity is yet another manifestation of what Baldwin describes as the lie of whiteness.

The end result is a lack of genuine vigilance in actually diagnosing and attempting to root out racist contagions by even the most vehement of objectors. In other words, Baldwin might say: beware of thou who doth protest too much. Too firm a denial of racism might be an indication of the lie of whiteness at work. Contrast this with Augustine, who begins his address to God and reader in humility and with an appeal to mercy because his soul “is in ruins” out of an acute awareness of his sinful deeds, both known and unknown. Citing the Psalms, Augustine consistently confronts his culpability and complicity: “Cleanse me from my secret faults, Lord, and spare your servant from sins to which I am tempted . . . Have I not openly accused myself of ‘my faults,’ my God . . . I do not deceive myself ‘lest my iniquity lie to itself.’ Therefore I do not contend with you like a litigant because ‘if you take note of iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?’ (Augustine of Hippo 2008, p. 6)” (1.6.6). Here Augustine is concerned about the ways in which lies and deception function to keep his immorality hidden. Unlike Augustine, who is restless until his sin is properly diagnosed and rectified, the lie of whiteness keeps whites looking for exoneration from the grand jury of society, whether or not there is genuine culpability. Whereas Augustine stares his sickness in the face, the lie of whiteness conditions a fervent pursuit of a clean bill of health at any cost, even if/when there is potential contamination by what Beverly Tatum calls the smog of racism (Tatum 2017, p. 86). Thus, in an honest attempt to come to grips with the reality of racism, we might take a cue from St. Augustine's vigilant and honest appraisal of his condition and enlist confession for a similar ethical accounting of whiteness.

4. Conclusions: The *Apokalypsis* of the Present Moment

Arguing that Baldwin's depiction of the lie of whiteness has religious ethical implications, which I have begun to sketch as an acknowledgement of culpability and responsibility in the form of something like confession, suggests that there is something revealed. In other words, Baldwin depicts the lie of whiteness with the hope that it might be exposed, that an identity that was built upon lies and falsehoods would be laid bare, so that the truth could be accepted and acknowledged. There are many religious and theological paths to be taken up here, but in closing I want to draw on the particular relevance of *apokalypsis* in relation to the constellation of the themes explored, especially in the present moment.

Apocalyptic as a religious term has come to be most associated with, and signify something like, “the end” or ends, which are arrived at through some kind of catastrophic destruction. In everyday parlance, the apocalyptic signals the end—of the world, eras, civilizations, epochs, etc. It is deployed in popular vernacular, both secular and religious, to insinuate the utter and final destruction of the world, or at least the threat of catastrophe or disaster (Murphy and Schedtler 2016, pp. 4–5). However, etymologically it has a much richer meaning, and in the context of religious studies its more nuanced definition is closer to the Greek term from which it originates, *apokalypsis*, which is more accurately rendered as “revelation” or “unveiling.”

Given its twofold connotation, some scholars of religion have begun to reengage the apocalyptic more recently, with the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, renewed protest for the value of black lives, ecological crisis, and political upheaval (Keller 2021).⁷ These reexaminations of the power of the apocalyptic led me to revisit Catherine Keller's

innovative work on this topic, especially as it relates to Baldwin's reflections. In *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, written some twenty-five years prior, Keller, in pure Keller-esque fashion, deftly frames and poses the issue of apocalyptic in such a nuanced way so as to resist any facile attempts to elude it. In the opening chapter Keller embarks on a quest to understand just what apocalyptic is or does: how it functions, in both religious terms and beyond, its habits, scripts, patterns, and desire to frame matters dichotomously in either/or fashion. Keller lands on a working definition of apocalyptic as "an interpretive framework" that is more powerful than we often give credit for. Consequently, Keller frames the objective of her analysis as an attempt to "trace the effects of the apocalypse myth (Keller 1996, p. 13)," and an astute reader will pick up on the Derridean inflection of "trace" (Derrida 1984, p. 25).

One of the reasons I invoke Keller's text is because of her discussion of how the apocalyptic functions. Getting a better understanding of how apocalyptic works—often surreptitiously and in ways we had not realized before—reveals, in true apocalyptic fashion, how what we need most is a "healing of habit" (Keller 1996, p. 11). Part of the power of the apocalyptic myth, Keller argues, is our dependence and reliance upon it, citing "the late-modern confidence in the upward March of Progress" that tells the tale of modernity (Ibid., p. 6). What is more, it is a pattern that we can find ourselves easily falling into, wherein apocalyptic thinking becomes routine as we enter its gravitational pull. It is no doubt tempting to think along the lines of good versus evil, identifying with the former and easily seeing who or what is the latter, which is one of the benchmarks of the apocalyptic's mythic function. Once the lines have been drawn, we can then identify the evil and purge it once and for all. It is all too customary to feel that the "good is getting victimized by the evil, which is diabolically overpowering" and "to expect some cataclysmic showdown" in which good must, and ultimately will, triumph (Ibid., p. 11).

When cast in the context of the evils of anti-black racism and white supremacy, the temptation of the apocalyptic becomes apparent. It is extremely enticing to divide the two sides dichotomously, declaring and denouncing the one while hoping for the ultimate triumph of the other, especially after repeated images and confirmations of anti-black racism's presence and horror—not least the graphic and disturbing eight-minute video of George Floyd's murder. It appears unequivocal who or what is evil. And when Keller talks about the danger of apocalypse, "so gruesomely literal, so massively material, that it can hardly be addressed without recourse to the phantasmagoric," it seems almost painfully clear that what we need more than anything is a violent expulsion or purging of this evil—in other words, a kind of anti-apocalyptic stance (Ibid., p. 14).

But Keller will not let us off the hook so easily—and we should be thankful, because by now we should be wary of the sigh of relief that such dichotomizing offers as the surreptitious work of the lie of whiteness. As it turns out, she argues, "anti-apocalypse" is an oxymoron, because of how it "aggressively simplifies its 'other' in order to judge and supersede it"—an apocalyptic move in and of itself. The result, or revelation, of a more thorough analysis of apocalypse, is that "such cleansing is not possible—nor is it entirely desirable (Ibid., p. 15)." One only need recall how such cleansing metaphors are invoked in genocidal histories to corroborate Keller's point as it relates to racism.

Keller's suggestion, then, is what she calls a "counter-apocalyptic" approach that offers resistance without mere opposition: "it knowingly performs an analog to that which it challenges. A 'counter-apocalypse' recognizes itself as a kind of apocalypse; but then it will try to interrupt the habit." Keller describes the revelatory process of counter-apocalypse as disclosing without foreclosing: "it would avoid the closure of the world signified by a straightforward apocalypse (Ibid., p. 19)." Its "drive for justice," especially in "the face of impossible odds and losses," resists direct opposition: "it echoes and parodies . . . in order to disarm . . . polarities (Ibid., p. 20)." The hope and goal for Keller, which I find particularly useful here, is for a situation where "we acknowledge the apocalyptic dimensions . . . in which we find ourselves entrenched without either clinging to some millennial hope of steady progress or then flipping, disappointed, back to pessimism."

Reading Keller's counter-apocalyptic approach through the lens of Baldwin's depiction of the lie of whiteness offers an opportunity to identify the ways in which it reveals itself more and more explicitly, with steadfastness and earnestness, so as to avoid facile interpretations and divisions. Doing so allows the wisdom of Keller's analysis to burst forth by asking: hasn't facile interpretations and divisions been the typical response to flare-ups of anti-black racism and white supremacy, especially in the last few decades? Writing some twenty plus years ago about a similar dynamic, Keller spots a "tendency to get active, to get enraged, and then to give up." And in a moment of true transparency—indicative of the kind of confession that I have been trying to sketch in this article—Keller admits that the following "we" includes her as well: "We see ourselves as innocent victims, and hope for ultimate vindication . . . we wish for messianic solutions and end up doing nothing, for we get locked into a particularly apocalyptic either/or logic—if we can't save the world, then to hell with it. Either salvation or damnation (Ibid., p. 14)."

By now, the resonances with the machinations of the lie of whiteness are hopefully becoming clearer. Part of the ethic that I am proffering includes a confrontation and admission of the dynamic and process Keller identifies. Whether regarding climate change, occupying Wall Street to take on the top 1%, immigration rights, #metoo, and dozens of other social movements, the trend has often been momentum spikes on social media, followed by protests and mass demonstrations, and then an inevitable fizzling out. While there are surely those who remain committed, actively fighting for issues that do not merely go away after the rest of society moves on, often the critical mass necessary to enact sustainable change loses interest. This sequence of events is evident in the responses to anti-black racism. After the murder of Trayvon Martin and the emergence of the influential Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, those not actively involved with the movement appear to fall into a similar pattern when yet another unarmed African American was shot and killed: societal outrage (again mostly on social media), media blitzes, calls for "wokeness," a walking back by public leaders and politicians, participation in demonstrations, protests, and marches, followed by a slow fizzling out. And while things *appear* to be different after the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, a closer analysis of this trend lends suspicion to the breadth, depth, and duration of these so-called changes—not least because police violence against African Americans still peppers the headlines.

Rather than merely a lens, however, I invoke Keller's counter-apocalyptic approach to help gain clarity on what an ethic of confession might look like with regards to the lie of whiteness. To put it simply, I am proposing we need some truth-telling when it comes to white responses to the problem. And part of the problem, I have been arguing, is the mistaken notion of a once-for-all conversion. The ethical resources of confession, perhaps its most potent religious power (to employ Keller's terms again), is that it is a confrontation that is not merely a rejection. We need to heal from the lie of whiteness, not just expunge and dismiss it. This might seem like a strange way to frame it—is not obliterating and expunging white supremacy precisely what we should be striving for? Like Keller, "I have been tempted toward such clarity." However, the ethic I am urging must resist such a temptation. And it is so tempting because it would make things so much easier—if we could just identify the racist contagion, root it out, destroy it, bury it, set it on fire in some kind of ritualistic pyre (or whatever other sacred imagery this sentiment invokes), then we could *move beyond it*. The target of Baldwin's reflections, however, is an *apocalypse* (unveiling) of this very temptation of getting over it, putting it behind us once-and-for-all. Like Keller, I hear him "arguing that such a cleansing is not possible—nor is it entirely desirable (Ibid., p. 15)." What we need is healing, not amputation. The former is an inside-out approach, while the latter is an outside-in. The former is slower, more difficult, but still exceedingly vigilant and acutely directed. It is not slower because we are intentionally taking a circuitous route or suggesting some dispassionate response—quite the contrary.⁸ Confronting the lie of whiteness, through something like confession, entails a vigilant confrontation with the truth, and reality, of our situation. More than anything it is a resistance to the tendency for the quick fix, the easy out, the "just tell me what I have

to do so I can move on” mentality. It is an apocalypse (revelation) of an uphill battle, a long and drawn out ordeal. It is not a final showdown between good and evil, once and for all. If I hear Baldwin correctly, it is because such boundaries are not so easily drawn, which means that there is no way of assuring that I am not complicit. There is no way of recusing myself or being fully and ultimately exonerated once and for all. All of which means, unfortunately, that this ethic offers no guarantee of morality. It is not a prescription for righteousness. It is, by definition, a resistance against any final declaration of morality.

I want to highlight one final “crease” or “fold” in the *apokalypsis* of the lie of whiteness. For Brian Blount, reading the book of Revelation—the Apocalypse of John—through the lens of African American culture, particularly black churches, allows the text to come alive as a piece of resistance literature. While unpacking and discussing the context of the “Black Church”—what he means by this context, how it has come to be, its genesis, history, and reason for being—Blount points out that the social and political situation of anti-black racism cannot be overstated. Citing Peter Paris, Blount affirms that “this oppressive circumstance . . . wasn’t merely the context out of which the Black Church arose; it was the reason for its genesis: as [Paris] puts it, ‘racism and racial self-respect have been the two warring principles that caused the emergence of the black churches (Blount 2005, p. 42).’” Blount goes on to discuss how the principle of liberation has been one of the guiding principles of the Black Church. But Blount quickly clarifies that said liberation is not merely freedom *from*, but also “the absence of any restraint which might compromise one’s responsibility to God.” Now referencing the work of Anthony Pinn, Blount argues that “it is not only the case that the Black Church has harbored a consistent emphasis on liberation; by the actions of its adherents, it has also demonstrated the firm belief that black people could participate with God in bringing that liberation about.” In other words, there is an implied ethic of agency or subjectivity in this understanding of liberation, what Pinn refers to as “responsible selves able to exercise agency in ways that transform sociopolitical structures (Ibid., p. 45).” It is not a wait-and-see what God will do theology. Tracing the links to the influential liberation theological movements, Blount points out that the understanding of the Church is very much influenced and framed in liberation theological terms: the collective of those who hear and heed God’s call (Gutiérrez 1988, p. 58ff).

The question I would like to extend from Blount’s reflections on black agency, subjectivity, and responsibility for liberation is this: how does it further expose the dynamic Baldwin was reflecting upon, where the lie of whiteness suggests an abrogation of responsibility? In other words, how might black agency shed light on, i.e., further reveal something about, the lie of white negligence? To the extent that the lie of whiteness elicits a lie and illusion about responsibility, confession confronts the reality of the situation wherein one comes to recognize a “responsible [self] able to exercise agency in ways that transform sociopolitical structures.” Put differently, perhaps the *apokalypsis* of the Black Church that Blount traces is a renewed understanding of humanity, a revelation about the nature of what it means to be a responsible human that exercises agency in ways that transform sociopolitical structures. Contrast this with the depiction of those who think of themselves as, or decide to be, white, the one who shirks responsibility, denies culpability, and angrily defends him/herself. Perhaps blackness can shatter the lie of whiteness by shedding light on what it means to be human: a moral being that takes responsibility and exercises agency to transform sociopolitical structures.

Despite the bleak picture presented by the lie of whiteness and its deep-seated roots, Baldwin offers a glimmer of realistic hope: “Now, it is entirely possible that we may all go under,” he admits. But until then, “I prefer to believe that since a society is created by men, it can be remade by men.” The hill we have to climb is high, no doubt, and only time will tell if white people have the constitution and courage to confront the lie head on. But that is the only viable way forward for Baldwin, and in 1964 he outlined what he calls “the conditions of our survival” that we might do well to heed today:

White people will have to ask themselves precisely why they found it necessary to invent the [Negro]; for the [Negro] is a white invention, and white people invented him out of terrible necessities of their own.⁹ And every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent, because those dogs and those hoses are being turned on American children, on American soil, with the tacit consent of the American Republic; those crimes are being committed in your name. (Baldwin 2010d, p. 104)

Toward the end of his life “Baldwin realized he could not save white Americans” because it appeared “America simply doubled down on its ugliness,” and thus “Americans, he concluded, had to save themselves (Glaude 2020, p. xxiii).” This article is an attempt to begin to understand such salvation. It is salvation perhaps by way of survival. It is an attempt to seek after the ethics of what Baldwin outlines, an acceptance that white people are “not innocent.” It is a confession of complicity and culpability.

Glaude closes his introduction to *Begin Again* with a quote from Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head*: “Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again (Ibid., p. xxix).” Similarly, this article has been an attempt “to begin” (sketching an ethic of honest confrontation with the lie of whiteness) again by refusing abdication, taking responsibility, telling the truth. In a moment when passing the buck, denying accountability, blaming figureheads and extremists, in a moment of divisiveness and division, Baldwin offers an ethic of courageous confrontation with the truth, a refusal to turn away from the difficult but necessary introspection that confession enlists.

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Notes

- ¹ For an excellent revision of the false dichotomy between “nonviolence” and armed self-defense in the history of civil rights activism, see: Cobb (2016).
- ² On the night of 19 April 1989, a white, female jogger was sexually assaulted in Manhattan’s Central Park. Five Black and Latino youths, who were in the park that night were gathered up, questioned, arrested, and falsely convicted after police illegally obtained video-taped coerced “confessions” from the children who were 14 and 15 years old. In 2002, after serving over twenty years in prison, the defendants were exonerated when the perpetrator came forward.
- ³ I am currently working on a project that explores the entanglement of religion, gender, and race by honing in on Spillers’ depiction of “hegemonic male whiteness.” It examines how gendered and racialized constructions feed into understandings and machinations of subjectivity and self—and, more specifically, the role religion plays in this dynamic. Ultimately, I argue that confession exemplifies the complex relationship to masculinity and white supremacy that religion has, functioning as both potential remedy and perpetual poison. As a companion piece to this article, it offers a counterpoint against seeing confession as panacea to issues of systemic racism and hegemonic male whiteness.
- ⁴ The exploration of Baldwin’s reflections here touches on (and raises) several significant themes that are apparent in African American religious history: whiteness that functions as a lie; calls for black agency that seek to tame the evil of whiteness; the juxtaposition of black spirituality and white Christian lynch mobs; black religion as a more genuine form of Christianity and thus an ethical alternative to white supremacist Christianity. Correspondingly, several significant historical figures and thinkers serve to further contextualize and offer texture to the understanding, presentation, and struggle with such themes—especially from a religious perspective—including the activism and works of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Henry McNeal Turner, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the subsequent emergence of black theology in the 20th century. It would certainly be fruitful to pursue a more diachronic approach to Baldwin’s depiction of the lie of whiteness, especially with a focus on its relation to a religious notion of confession (as is being done here), with reference to the history of black religious thought on this issue.
- ⁵ As is likely obvious by now, this article has an implicit focus on the way whiteness functions as a lie within the United States because that was Baldwin’s chief concern; however if given the space I would argue that Baldwin’s reflections on the constructions and operations of white identity operate similarly in other parts of the world. The reason for such a focus is to pare down an

- already expansive topic, while hoping that the themes and issues presented can be understood to have broader significance. For instance, Metzl's argument (and others in this article) have a parallel resonance with Reddie (2019), which analyzes the ideological (and theological) underpinnings of support for Brexit in the United Kingdom that have their roots in understandings of whiteness.
- 6 Again, while there are aspects that are unique to the American context, there are points of connection to and resonance with a dynamic that is found in contexts where the lie of whiteness still functions.
- 7 Catherine Keller is prominent here, in addition to her most recent book Keller (2021), she has some other more popular reflections on the intersection of apocalyptic and the contemporary moment. See: (Keller and Thatamanil 2020; Keller 2020).
- 8 James Cone offers a relevant critique of Reinhold Niebuhr on this point, calling out Niebuhr's too measured and "balanced" response to the injustice of anti-black racism in the first half of the 20th century, despite Niebuhr's "progressive" stance on racial injustice. See Cone (2011, p. 40ff).
- 9 I have inserted the word "Negro" here in place of one of those instances when Baldwin enlists the other, more pernicious "N" word, because I have been persuaded by the continued violence and power to harm of the latter term and label, and refuse to put it into writing. This does not mean that the arguments on the other side are not equally persuasive, i.e., that terms like these need to be repeated, in all their shock and horror, so as to never let us forget the way it is and has been used. However, I understand this as one of those instances where we must choose without a sure ethical guide. For more on this predicament, see: (Oliver 2020).

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