

JAMES BALDWIN

The Cross of
Redemption

UNCOLLECTED WRITINGS

Edited and with an Introduction by

RANDALL KENAN



PANTHEON BOOKS · NEW YORK

PS
3552
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C76
2010

The Estate of James Baldwin would like to extend appreciation to Erroll McDonald, Randall Kenan, Lily Evans, Eileen Ahearn, Douglas Field, Rene Boatman, and Quentin Miller for bringing this collection to fruition.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Baldwin, James, 1924-1987.

The cross of redemption : uncollected writings / James Baldwin ; edited and with an introduction by Randall Kenan.
p. cm.

A collection of essays, speeches, letters, reviews, etc.
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-307-37882-8

I. Kenan, Randall. II. Title.

PS3552.A45C76 2010

818'.54—dc22

2009050897

www.pantheonbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

2 4 6 1 1 9 7 5 3

very least, releases him from the Society's presumption as to why he is there. I do not pretend, in any way whatever, to be able to assess the price the person who is the Prisoner pays: but I know that prisons do not rehabilitate, because it is not their purpose and it is not in their power. One is not rehabilitated by learning to cooperate with the structure designed to debase the person into the Prisoner. Nor do men repent in "penitentiaries": the word itself reveals the mercilessly self-righteous Puritan delusion. Repentance is a private matter, and no more than forgiveness can it be coerced. Society, responsive to the will and the needs of the State, slams the door on the Prisoner with the vindictive vehemence of the blow meant to shatter a mirror.

I visited Death Row prisoners not long ago, and so I am compelled to point out that the Prisoner is likely, on the whole, to be inescapably visible: Death Row, like the ghetto, is dark with dark faces. The incarceration of the Prisoner reveals nothing about the Prisoner, but reveals volumes concerning those who hold the keys. And finally, then, since I am an American discussing American Prisoners, we are also discussing one more aspect of the compulsive American dream of genocide.

On different levels, the Artist and the Prisoner must fight very hard against debasement and isolation. It is the responsibility of the Artist perpetually to question the zealous State and the narcoticized Society. Or—bearing in mind that, for the most part, it is the poor and the helpless who are incarcerated while the able and affluent fly away—it may be time to suggest that if the State depended less heavily on criminals, the Society would be burdened with fewer prisoners.

Then we, as society with a small *s*, might be enabled to reassume our real responsibilities for each other and for all our children and tear down those incarcerations which we have built for others and in which we strangle, daily, on our own vomit.

(1983)

On Being White . . . and Other Lies

THE CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP in the white community is remarkable—and terrifying—because there is, in fact, no white community.

This may seem an enormous statement—and it is. I'm willing to be challenged. I'm also willing to attempt to spell it out.

My frame of reference is, of course, America, or that portion of the North American continent that calls itself America. And this means I am speaking, essentially, of the European vision of the world—or more precisely, perhaps, the European vision of the universe. It is a vision as remarkable for what it pretends to include as for what it remorselessly diminishes, demolishes, or leaves totally out of account.

There is, for example—at least, in principle—an Irish community: here, there, anywhere; or, more precisely, Belfast, Dublin, and Boston. There is a German community: both sides of Berlin, Bavaria, and Yorkville. There is an Italian community: Rome, Naples, the Bank of the Holy Ghost, and Mulberry Street. And there is a Jewish community, stretching from Jerusalem to California to New York. There are English communities. There are French communities. There are Swiss consortiums. There are Poles: in Warsaw (where they would like us to be friends) and in Chicago (where because they are white we are enemies). There are, for that matter,

Indian restaurants, and Turkish baths. There is the underworld—the poor (to say nothing of those who intend to become rich) are always with us—but this does not describe a community. It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become “white.” No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.

It is probable that it is the Jewish community—or, more accurately perhaps, its remnants—that in America has paid the highest and most extraordinary price for becoming white. For the Jews came here from countries where they were not white, and they came here, in part, *because* they were not white; and incontestably—in the eyes of the black American (and not only in those eyes)—American Jews have opted to become white; and this is how they operate. It was ironical to hear, for example, former Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin declare some time ago that “the Jewish people bow only to God” while knowing that the state of Israel is sustained by a blank check from Washington. Without further pursuing the implication of this mutual act of faith, one is nevertheless aware that the Jewish translation into a white American can sustain the state of Israel in a way that the black presence here can scarcely hope—at least not yet—to halt the slaughter in South Africa.

And there is a reason for that.

America became white—the people who, as they claim, “settled” the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle—or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie. White men—from Norway, for example, where they were “Norwegians”—became white by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping black women.

This moral erosion has made it quite impossible for those who think of themselves as white in this country to have any moral authority at all privately or publicly. The multitudinous bulk of them sit, stunned, before their TV sets, swallowing garbage that they know to be garbage, and—in a profound and unconscious effort to justify this torpor that disguises a profound and bitter panic—pay a vast amount of attention to athletics, even though they know that the football player (the Son of the Republic, *their* son!) is merely another aspect of the moneymaking scheme. They are either relieved or embittered by the presence of the black boy on the team.

I do not know if they remember how long and hard they fought to keep him off it. I know that they do not dare have any notion of the price black people (mothers and fathers) paid and pay. They do not want to know the meaning, or face the shame, of what they compelled—out of what they took as the necessity of being white—Joe Louis or Jackie Robinson or Cassius Clay (aka Muhammad Ali) to pay. I know that they themselves would not have liked to pay it.

There has never been a labor movement in this country, the proof being the absence of a black presence in the so-called father-to-son unions. There are, perhaps, some niggers in the window; but blacks have no power in labor unions.

Just so does the white community, as a means of keeping itself white, elect, as they imagine, their political (!) representatives. No nation in the world, including England, is represented by so stunning a pantheon of the relentlessly mediocre. I will not name names—I will leave that to you.

But this cowardice, this 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. 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 population, cheerful natives, and cheap labor. Because they think they are white, they believe, as even no child believes, in the dream of safety. Because they think they are white, however vociferous they may be and however multitudinous, they are as speechless as Lot's wife—looking backward, changed into a pillar of salt.

However—! White being, absolutely, a moral choice (for there *are* no white people), the crisis of leadership for those of us whose identity has been forged, or branded, as black is nothing new. We—who were not black

before we got here, either, who were defined as black by the slave trade—have paid for the crisis of leadership in the white community for a very long time and have resoundingly, even when we face the worst about ourselves, survived and triumphed over it. If we had not survived, and triumphed, there would not be a black American alive.

And the fact that we are still here—even in suffering, darkness, danger, endlessly defined by those who do not dare define, or even confront, themselves—is the key to the crisis in white leadership. The past informs us of various kinds of people—criminals, adventurers, and saints, to say nothing, of course, of Popes—but it is the black condition, and only that, which informs us concerning white people. 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.

(1984)

Blacks and Jews

In 1983 Baldwin was appointed Five College Professor in the W. E. B. DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In that position he would teach and lecture at all the schools in the Amherst area—Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the UMass Amherst. A number of African-American writers were teaching at Amherst at the time, including John Edgar Wideman (*Homewood Trilogy*), Julius Lester (*Black Folktales*)—incidentally, a black man who converted to Judaism—and Michael Thelwell (*The Harder They Come*), who also had been active with SNCC during the 1960s and was one of the founders of the Afro-American Studies program at that school.

Baldwin spoke on the campus of UMass Amherst on February 28, 1984, an election year: former Vice President Walter Mondale was running for the Democratic presidential nomination, as was political activist the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who had founded PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) in the 1970s and the National Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s. In January of that year, he had used the term