The Arts and Responsibilities of Political Imagination

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Western Political Science Association, 2021

Abstract: This paper shows how political imagination contributes to democratic repair and justice. In agreement with William Connolly's theory of identity and the agonism needed to destabilize it, I contend that an emphasis on pluralism is vital to democratic repair and just democratic participation. However, I show that Connolly's account of pluralism fails to confront the challenges of racial power and domination. Instead, I turn to a reading of James Baldwin to consider another way of understanding pluralism – as an imaginative force that can destabilize existing structures, abolish whiteness, and make possible democracy and justice. Attending to Baldwin's description of a pluralizing imagination, I show that political imagination is an important resource for abolition and democracy. I argue that democratic repair will require not only an individual-level cultivation of an ethos of pluralization, but also, a widespread and intersubjective rearrangement of institutions, objects, and spaces that can guide imagination and bring into being a more just and free political community.

1. Introduction

American democracy is in need of major overhaul. As studies show, democratic solidarity remains dim and efforts to curtail political participation continue. Voters prefer party ideology and policy extremism over democratic principles (Graham and Svolik 2020) and are willing to compromise on American democracy for the success of their party's candidates and their policy interests. Since the Supreme Court struck down key parts of the Voting Rights Act in 2012, states have closed 1,688 polling places, effectively suppressing black and Latinx voters.[1] Across political science, the 2016 election of Donald Trump brought scholars to reckon with the "dying" of American democracy (Ziblatt and Levitsky). Other political scientists show that the practice of democracy, not only in the US but democracy in general, is problematic. As Michael Hanchard observes, democracy as a *practice* has

[1] "Five of the six largest closers of polling places are in Texas. With 74 closures, Dallas County, which is 41 percent Latino and 22 percent African American, is the second largest closer of polling places, followed by Travis County, which is 34 percent Latino, (–67)." From "Democracy Diverted: Polling Place Closures and the Right to Vote." Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

depended upon exclusion even while the *ideal* of democracy promises equality. Along with others who have voiced anxieties about fulfilling the promise and possibilities of democracy, Hanchard notes that throughout history, "even under the most practicable conditions for the elaboration of democratic and republican ideals," there existed a "subordinated laboring majority population with limited or nonexistent political rights" bringing into question the very egalitarianism of democracy itself.[2] Even as the ideal of democracy promises equality, inclusion, and justice, the practice of democracy remains unjust and unequal. What resources do we have for repairing unjust democracies?

When barriers to democratic membership and belonging – like "same sex marriage, gays in the military, reproductive and transgender rights, voting rights for racialized and minoritized populations, and immigrant and migrant rights"[3] – fell throughout history, Hanchard tells us, it was not "due to some telos intrinsic to democratic politics; they fell more often than not, because of the challenge made by those who were excluded."[4] In other words, when democracy has expanded to become more inclusive and just, it has been because of the actions and demands of the marginalized groups, not because of some inherent, progressive, or inclusive tendency in democracy. The promise of democratic equality often depends on the activism and sacrifice of the very groups and individuals that democracy excludes. Marginalized groups like women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and racial minorities made claims to rights and belonging. These claims came partly as a result of their "proximity to democratic actors, institutions, and practices."[5] The combination of inequality and proximity to democratic ideals, "informed the pursuit and ultimately the transformation of democratic practices in Western nation-

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[2] Hanchard, Michael George. *Spectre of race: how discrimination haunts western democracy*. New Jersey : Princeton University Press, (2018). P. 98
[3] Hanchard 2018: 107
[4] Hanchard 2018: 107
[5] Hanchard 2018: 111

states and in their colonies by subjects in societies that did not want them to become citizens."[6] Proximity to democratic ideals and the experience of domination can inspire and make necessary alternative ways of imagining and radical political challenges.

The burden of transformation and democratic repair often rests on already vulnerable peoples – as Hanchard notes, these groups often lead reforms of democratic inequality. For example, Black Americans are the most likely group to say they have made efforts to educate themselves about the history of racial inequality and the most likely group to say they have made efforts to support minority-owned businesses in recent months, compared to White, Asian, and Hispanic Americans.[7] Since as early as 1966, we have data that shows that blacks tend to participate more actively than whites in activities like volunteerism, political organization participation, listening to the news or reading about public affairs, or attendance at community events, when controlled for socioeconomic status.[8] Political action like this can be costly: it can require slices of income to support minority-owned businesses, it can require time and emotional stamina to keep up with the news, it can mean hours spent waiting in line to vote despite voter suppression efforts, threats of violence that come with public protest or action, and the risk of personal and familial safety by simply crossing the street for any of these activities. Similarly, feminists have noted that women's' labor, and especially the efforts of women of

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[6] Hanchard 2018: 111

[7] Horowitz, Juliana Menasce and Kim Parker, Anna Brown, Kiana Cox. "Amid National Reckoning, Americans Divided on Whether Increased Focus on Race Will Lead to Major Policy Change." *Pew Research Center*. October 6, 2020.

[8] Olsen, Marvin E. "Social and Political Participation of Blacks." *American Sociological Review* 35, no. 4 (1970): 682-97. See also Orum, Anthony M. "A Reappraisal of the Social and Political Participation of Negroes." *American Journal of Sociology* 72 (1966): 32-46.

color, often go unnoticed.[9] Even as the passage of the Nineteenth amendment, for example, depended on the labors of black women, “the door remained closed to too many African American women.”[10] In these examples, we see that people of color – and women of color specifically – are often more likely to participate in politics and social justice movements, despite structural disadvantages like poverty, access, or recognition that might inhibit or hinder their involvement. As groups like black women overcome personal or economic struggles to vote or participate in politics, their political work is often overlooked. We must attend, then, to what it means for “women’s bodies to keep the tempo of social movements.”[11]

This means that as we build theories to repair our broken democracies, we must attend to two aspects that address the uneven burden of transformation: first, the distribution of the burden, and second, the goals of repair. First, the political work of transformation must be distributed with an attention to existing forms of marginalization and vulnerability. As Juliet Hooker writes, we must recognize “that responsibility for racial justice does not lie primarily with those who have already suffered the lion’s share of the losses inflicted by racism.”[12] Instead, the responsibility must be distributed – this means that sacrifices do not come only on the part of already vulnerable groups. Solutions that distribute the burden of political transformation are necessary. Institutional reforms – such as the enforcement of voting rights, expanded access to education and employment, or civil rights

[9] Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzalduá. *This bridge called my back writings by radical women of color*. Albany: SUNY Press (2015).
[10] Jones, Martha S. *Vanguard : How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*. New York: Basic Books (2020).
[11] Cooper, Brittney C. *Eloquent rage: a black feminist discovers her superpower*. New York, N.Y. : Picador, 2018. P. 27
[12] Hooker, Juliet. 2016. "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair". *Political Theory.* 44 (4): 448-469. P. 465.

legislation – and collective action can help better distribute the burden. Second, democratic repair cannot come without the goal of abolition. By abolition, I mean the kind of "abolition democracy" that Du Bois envisioned that goes beyond the legal end of slavery. The ambitions of abolition democracy include "physical freedom, civil rights, economic opportunity and education and the right to vote, as a matter of sheer human justice and right."[13] We cannot again rely on the political labors and sacrifices of women and people of color without recognizing their rights to and demands for freedom. They must be free and equal members in the polity for which they offer their sacrifices. In this paper, I prioritize abolition as an ideal that must accompany democratic repair so that we do not perpetuate an unequal political burden.

In this paper, I consider how political imagination contributes to the project of democratic repair and abolition. As works in contemporary political theory like Linda Zerilli's and Robin Kelley's suggest, political imagination can offer tools for emancipation and liberation. However, political imagination is complicit in sustaining domination as well. Attending to political imagination can help us change existing institutions, objects, and places in ways that undo domination. Considering political imagination's role in democracy can help us better understand domination and liberation, and guide democracy towards justice and inclusion. In short, political imagination can help realize and guide projects to abolish injustice and repair democracy.

The paper begins by considering contemporary race relations in conversation with William Connolly's theory of identity and resentment. While Connolly's account of identity and the pluralism needed to destabilize identity is vital to democratic repair and just democratic participation, I show that Connolly's account of pluralism fails to directly confront the challenges of racial power and

[13] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, P. 325

domination. Specifically, Connolly's theory fails to consider first, the ways that identity has long been unstable for many people because of domination, second, the internal variance of resentment based on subject position, and third, the ways that appeals to the white working class keep in place racial domination.

Instead, I offer a reading of James Baldwin to consider another way of understanding pluralism. Baldwin, like Connolly, emphasizes the importance of destabilizing identity, but specifically, *white* identity. I show that Baldwin's writings help us see pluralism as an imaginative force that can destabilize existing structures, abolish whiteness, and make possible democracy and justice. Using resources from Baldwin's writing, I put forth a theory of pluralizing imagination. As I demonstrate in this paper, political imagination can directly confront whiteness and its privileges, effectively challenging racial order and hierarchy. I argue that democratic repair will require not only an individual-level cultivation of an ethos of pluralization, but also, a widespread and intersubjective rearrangement of institutions, objects, and spaces.

2. Racial Injustice and the Politics of Resentment

As scholars like Joel Olson show, race functions as a form of hierarchy in which the privileges of the dominating group depend upon the subordination of the dominated group. Whiteness is an identity that allows its members to call upon an "invisible weightless knapsack of privileges."[14] This identity is made or maintained through a relation to the racial Other, exemplified by Olson and Noel Ignatiev's discussion of the Irish ascendancy to whiteness. Irish whiteness was recognized and established when the Irish learned to dominate and exclude black laborers from their jobs. As one

[14] Olson 2004: 71

inhabits these institutions, the ordering of time, space, and the reward for good behavior produces subjectivity and complaisance. Whiteness is produced and sustained not only in state policies, but also, in informal social networks and everyday acts. For example, historian Noel Ignatiev's study of ascendance of Irish immigrants to *whiteness* shows that the Irish claim to whiteness depended on everyday actions, the circulation of media, personal threats of violence, and labor alliances. The Irish transformed from nonwhite and in support of abolition white to white and complicit in the domination of Black through involvement in political parties, labor organizations, anti-Negro riots, and the circulation of media.[15] As a result, the Irish gained privileges associated with whiteness: "they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected…and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire."[16] As Ignatiev describes, whiteness was performed and gained through a network of institutions including parties and labor organizations. A dominating relation to the racial other can bring with it a "public and psychological wage"[17] including access to employment, education, restaurants, and housing loans as well social deference and status. Similarly, as we know from analyses of racial passing, even nonwhites that seek to draw from the privileges the system affords must curtail aspects of Otherness, reinforcing a white identity as superior and dominant. Passing keeps in place and conforms to existing racial order in ways that offer material rewards for its subjects including employment or social standing.

In another formulation, we might understand this as Baldwin does: "To do much is to have the power to place these people where they are, and keep them where they are. These captive men are

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[15] Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. Routledge. 1995. P. 3.
[16] Ibid
[17] Du Bois 1935: 700

the hidden price for a hidden lie: the righteous must be able to locate the damned."[18] Baldwin identifies a relationship between the righteous and the damned that is constitutive of each one's identity. As Baldwin notes, power involves placing people – discerning the righteous from the damned. In other words, white identity is congealed through a relationship to nonwhiteness. White identity – and the power and privilege that come with white identity – depends upon the subordination of the Other or the "damned." In line with William E. Connolly's account of identity, Baldwin shows that the privileges of white identity depend upon a constitutive relationship between the dominant and the subordinate. In Connolly's theory, identity "requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its [identity's] own self-certainty."[19] In other words, by ascertaining difference, identity secures itself. As Baldwin writes, "Columbus was discovered/ by what he found."[20] As in the case of the Irish relationship to black folks, Columbus's identity emerges through his identification of the Other – specifically, through his domination and subordination of the Other. Whiteness relies on a relation to the racial Other in order to maintain its status and its privileges.

Even as identity seeks to secure itself, it is vulnerable to and threatened by the overwhelming forces of globalization, capitalism, and intersubjective misunderstandings. I might identify as a hard-working family man, for example, but trade deals signed by the government, decisions made by firms, and the actions of my superiors might threaten that identity. I might come to resent unemployment and low wages and even blame others for my suffering or my threatened identity. Connolly calls this *resentment*. Resentment is a symptom of the late-modern subject who negotiates "a path through a finely grained network of institutionally imposed disciplines and requirements, or one can struggle

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[18] Baldwin, James. *If Beale Street Could Talk.* Vintage Books 2018 [1974]. P. 192
[19] Connolly 2002:64
[20] Baldwin, James. *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems.* Boston: Beacon Press 2014 [1983]. P. 32

against those disciplines by refusing to treat one's life as a project."[21] The late-modern subject in Connolly's account is disciplined into a series of sometimes conflicting requirements: employment, a driveway, a clean kitchen, a large diamond ring, two children, and so on. Discipline like this can breed resentment, Connolly tells us, because "when the self experiences itself as penetrated too densely by disciplinary powers and standards, even the benefits it receives begin to indebt it too much."[22] Another way to understand this is that the self can recognize its own vulnerability – to global forces, macroeconomics, mortality – in ways that breed resentment as the self strives to secure its identity in the face of uncertainty and vulnerability. Resentment can fuel "the devaluation of the other,"[23] "national chauvinism,"[24] and can seek "targets of vilification"[25] as methods to maintain the security of the identity.

Connolly's theory of identity helps us understand how white identity is congealed and what this means for state sanctioned violence and resistance to progressive policies like affirmative action. He calls these tendencies to violence "fundamentalism" which is "a political formula of self-aggrandizement through the translation of stresses and disturbances in your doctrine or identity into resources for its stabilization and aggrandizement."[26] Fundamentalism in America, Connolly shows, involves the state in policies that codify vilification and vengeance. Connolly argues that "the state increasingly sustains collective identity through theatrical displays of punishment and revenge against

[21] Connolly 2002:21
[22] Connolly 2002:22
[23] Connolly 2002:44
[24] Connolly 2002:24
[25] Connolly 2002:25
[26] Connolly, William E. 2004. *The ethos of pluralization*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press. P. 106

those elements that threaten to signify its inefficacy"[27] exemplified by the War on Terror [28] or policies that detain immigrants. Support for racist or xenophobic policies and resistance to policies that mitigate racial injustice can be characterized as a symptom and product of "generalized resentment."[29] Connolly explains:

> "If a man's identity revolves around menial work, freedom through voluntary sacrifice, the protection of family, and projection of a better future for his children through sacrifice, then social movements, political rhetoric, public programs, and changing job markets that jeopardize these relations between dignity, sacrifice, and freedom will be experienced as attacks on the very fundaments of his being. Thus, if school busing programs lift the educational opportunities of urban "blacks" (as African-Americans were called during this period), then they also reduce the sense of self-control over educational opportunities among "whites" (the other term in this bipolar constitution of identity through color) who cannot afford to move to the suburbs; if welfare programs appear to be extended to minorities on the grounds that they are not responsible for their dependencies, then white blue-collar workers are implicitly deprived of recognition for the jobs they have secured; if women and minorities are promised affirmative action in employment because they have been discriminated against historically while upper-class male professionals are assumed to merit the positions they hold, then white male blue-collar workers are implicitly told that they are the only ones in the country who deserve to be stuck in menial job."[30]

In other words, trends and policies that threaten the security of identity can breed resentment. For the white, male worker in this example, identity is secured through sacrifice and gendered protection and care for the family but is threatened by policies that assist historically disadvantaged groups. Progressive policies like this leave the "white male blue-collar worker" feeling that "they are the only ones…who deserve to be stuck in a menial job."[31] In this way, resentment can help explain the resistance to policies of affirmative action and support for nativist, xenophobic, or racist tropes and

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[27] Connolly 2002: 206
[28] Connolly 2004: 107, see also Anker, Elisabeth Robin. *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*. Duke University Press 2014.
[29] Connolly 2002: 22
[30] Connolly 2004: 112
[31] Connolly 2004: 112

actions among the "white working class."[32] Identities that are threatened by progressive policies resist them in ways that often perpetuate existing domination or violence to Others.

Connolly tells us that we might overcome the political dangers of resentment through an affirmation of pluralism and a rejection of metaphysical absolutes. Freedom might be pursued or achieved

> "by extending a politics of agonistic respect into new corners of life— a politics in which one of the ways of belonging together involves strife and in which one of the democratizing ingredients in strife is the cultivation of care for the ways opponents respond to mysteries of existence"[33]

For individuals in politics, this means a struggle to refuse identity as intrinsic truth and instead, acknowledging

> "a drive within themselves and their culture to naturalize the identity given to them … they also struggle to ambiguate or overcome this drive because they think it is ungrounded in any truth they can prove and because they find it ethically compelling to revise their relation to difference in the absence of such a proof"[34]

This struggle is no small feat but Connolly suggests it may be achieved by "politiciz[ing] identity and responsibility."[35] This requires transforming an "antagonism in which each aims initially at conquest or conversion of the other" into an "agonism in which each treats the other as crucial to itself in the strife and interdependence of identity/difference."[36]

Agonism emerges as the means and the mode of engagement that can struggle against the closures, normalizations, or attempted conquests of identity. This might look like "laugh[ing] together, on principle"[37] or genealogy that questions "intrinsic identity and otherness."[38] Irony must accompany

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[32] Connolly 2002: 78
[33] Connolly 2002: 33
[34] Connolly 2002: 46
[35] Connolly 2002: 118
[36] Connolly 2002: 178-179
[37] Connolly 2002: 120
[38] Connolly 2002: 182

self-discovery, where irony is “crafted from insight into how forgetting, denial, self-conceit, and erasure enter into the very relation between the discoverer and that which he discovers.”[39] As we discover aspects of our identities, in other words, these discoveries are accompanied by an acknowledgement of the depth or erasure or forgetting that make them possible. Agonism also requires an “affirmation” of plurality: “the affirmation of a Dionysian dimension enabling the self to bestow value upon the alter-identity it contests.”[40] In other words, even as we contest alternatives to ourselves, we recognize their value. Participation, contestation, “irony,”[41] “affirmation,”[42] “energies and loyalties of activists”[43] are the stuff of an agonistic democracy. An agonistic democracy is “one in which divergent orientations to the mysteries of existence find overt expression in public life. Spaces for difference to be are established through the play of political contestation.”[44] Agonal democracy depends upon contestation which, in turn, requires “participation in a public politics that periodically disturbs and denaturalizes elements governing the cultural unconscious.”[45]

Agonism affirms plurality, calls for political contestation, and disrupts existing political order. It is useful to projects of democratic transformation because it challenges and exposes settled identities and consensus such that one is in “a more favorable position to reconsider some of the demands built into those conventions and identities.”[46] Agonism can “disturb the naturalization of settled conventions”[47] such as veneration of the Founding Fathers in the US. In this case, challenges to the

[39] Connolly 2002: 37
[40] Connolly 2002: 167
[41] Connolly 2002: 120
[42] Connolly 2002: 120
[43] Connolly 2002: 215
[44] Connolly 2002: 211
[45] Connolly 2002: 211
[46] Connolly 2002: 192
[47] Connolly 2002: 192

conventional "outsize authority of the Founders in our jurisprudence and our politics" (Frank 1) might also involve challenges to the place of the enslaved and Indigenous peoples that consolidated American unity. This kind of agonistic challenge can enable a retelling of stories as it pursues genealogies that question "intrinsic" identities[48] and norms – an important step on the path to reparation.[49] Moreover, it can lead to challenges to existing institutions as well. Challenging the Founders' authority might bring with it a drive to revise undemocratic aspects of the Constitution such as the Senate or Electoral College. Transforming these institutions might bring expanded democratic representation in ways that return political voice to communities in urban areas that are disenfranchised by these institutions.

A theory of identity and its constitutive relation to difference is in line with the operation of whiteness in the US. Connolly's theory of identity argues that relations of identity/difference rely on a desire to secure identity's certainty in ways that spark resentment. Because identity is vulnerable and given to global changes, macrolevel trends, and other unpredictable forces, identity itself is always unstable. This instability might breed resentment. Resentment's political effects might include state sanctioned violence against the Other, policies that target and punish, and nationwide support for racism. Understanding racial injustice as driven by relations of identity/difference also offers solutions for abolition and freedom. Connolly offers a theory of pluralism that can help overcome or resolve some existing injustices.

3. The Problems of Pluralism

[48] Connolly 2002: 182
[49] See Christina Sharpe's work.

Connolly's theory gives us the tools to consider the importance of pluralism and its affirmation to democratic politics, but its failure to confront whiteness and its rejection of resentment as politically undesirable is problematic. First, Connolly's pluralism does not do justice to the ways that identity has long been unstable for many people because of domination. For Connolly, destabilizing identity can help to destabilize existing hierarchies – as in the case of race, xenophobia, or toxic masculinity in the US. As he notes, the need for fixed or stable identity can promote violence against marginalized groups, casting them as Others and punishing them as an effect of resentment. Even as these insights can help us better understand democracy and plurality, nuance is necessary. The vulnerability of identity that Connolly seeks to affirm and pursue as a normative goal is not new to dominated groups. As Fanon notes, "From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own."[50] The lack of metaphysical absolutes and ontological certainty are necessary conditions of marginalization and domination. Indeed, as noted by scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Michael Warner, domination makes necessary alternative and multiple forms of political expression and ontology that affirm and adapt to vulnerability. As in the case of Warner's counterpublics, vulnerable groups may affirm their identity in certain nonpublic circumstances, even as they curtail it in public. Instead of insisting that *all* must embrace contingency and affirm pluralism, we might be better served by attending to the ways that those whose identity is already vulnerable engage in politics, improve their lives and their communities, and transform or resist existing inequality.

[50] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press 2007 [1952]. P. 90.

Second, Connolly's theory rejects resentment as normatively undesirable and politically dangerous. It fails to consider that the very challenges that brought down barriers to democratic membership, as Hanchard observes, were made by marginalized peoples who may well have resented the system that oppressed them and the conditions of their subordination. Some forms of resentment may be legitimate and driven by anger against the conditions of domination. In fact, resentment can be politically productive and has often inspired challenges to existing inequality. In the passage above, for example, Connolly equates "the homophobia of many straights and the heterophobia of some gays."[51] It is difficult to agree that the two are the same – one might contend that it is quite reasonable for a dominated group – like the gays in Connolly's example – to be fearful of those that dominate them. As in this example, Connolly equates the resentment of the dominant group and the anger, fear, or resentment of the dominated group. Doing so fails to consider legitimate sources and causes of anger and resentment. With Audre Lorde, we might instead ask, "How do you use *your* rage?"[52] As Lorde notes, anger or resentment "can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives."[53] As Lorde notes, rage, anger, or resentment against the conditions of oppression can inspire and mobilize radical transformation. By insisting that resentment in *all* forms is undesirable or problematic, Connolly's theory fails to consider legitimate and productive forms of political anger and resentment.

[51] Connolly 2004: 107
[52] Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of Anger." Women's Studies Quarterly. 1981. P. 7. Emphasis original.
[53] Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of Anger." Women's Studies Quarterly. 1981. P. 8.

The consequences are twofold. First, in rejecting all forms of resentment, Connolly's theory marginalizes and threatens the very movements that seek to overhaul the system and transform injustice. The rejection of all forms of resentment creates a false center where *all* must be able to laugh, or approach with irony, their own identities. This false center carries the demand that we must reject black anger as equal to white resentment, for example, and accordingly dismiss movements that operate and mobilize each. Second, the trouble with rejecting all forms of resentment is that such a position fails to grapple with responsibility for injustice. Connolly writes, "Those who resent the world too much are eager to find others to hold responsible for their condition. They easily become punitive and exclusionary."[54] However, Connolly does not leave room for the conditions in which suffering *is* the result of domination and oppression. Should dominating groups not be held responsible for the injustices they commit? When people of color, for example, exclude whites from their parties, their gatherings, their institutions are we to consider this the same kind of exclusion as segregated neighborhoods, unequal mortgages, lack of healthcare and hospitals, or biased hiring practices? The answers to these questions require adjudicating between forms of anger or resentment that seek liberation, as Lorde notes above, and those that double down on existing domination.

Partly as a result of equating differences in rage and resentment, Connolly calls for policies that "programmatically and symbolically"[55] address the alienation of the white, male workers in addition to his normative push for an "ethos of critical responsiveness."[56] These policies mitigate "the contemporary subject position of the white male worker" such that it no longer "foster[s] a culture of

[54] Connolly 2002: xix
[55] Connolly 2004: 113
[56] Connolly 2004

social revenge and hypermasculinity."[57] Addressing and countering the "fundamentalism of the white working class"[58] emerges as the policy area in which we might undo contemporary American issues of difference and resentment. Connolly's insistence on policies that alleviate the alienation of the white working class fails to adequately distinguish between legitimate economic grievance and white expectations of privilege. As Joel Olson writes,

> "Connolly rejects a direct approach to confronting whiteness. He argues that the issues addressed by welfare liberals in the post-civil rights era - women's rights, racism, ecology, discrimination— ignore the hardships faced by the white working class, pushing it into the open arms of the right"[59]

For Connolly, the trouble is that the white working class has largely been neglected – other liberal policies have left this group with the sense that they are "the only constituency that deserves to be stuck in the crumby jobs now available to it."[60] In Connolly's oeuvre, the neglect of the so-called white working class has fueled resentment that takes the form of xenophobia, racism, and toxic masculinity. Instead, we must "draw a larger section of white working- and middle-class males into a pluralist, pluralizing, equalizing, and eco-economizing culture of democracy."[61] Unfortunately, policies that repair this neglect and appeal to white working- and middle-classes do not confront white privilege, and in fact, can appease white expectations of status, power, or standing. Olson tells us, "'Inclusive' or class-based programs, however, downplay whites' historical privileges. In so doing, they appease white expectations rather than challenge them."[62] As Olson observes, these policies fails to confront whiteness – they do not so much as reprimand let alone abolish the kinds of privileges and standing

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[57] Connolly 2004: 113
[58] Connolly 2004: 114
[59] Olson 2004: 85
[60] Connolly 2004: 129
[61] Connolly, William E. *Aspirational Fascism: the Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*. University of Minnesota Press. 2017. P. 71.
[62] Olson 2004: 86

called for by many disenfranchised white workers. During Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016, the former secretary of state described Trump supporters in two groups: first, "a basket of deplorables" who are "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic— you name it," and second, as "people who feel that government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures."[63] As Connolly's work suggests, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic trends among this group might be mitigated by addressing the feeling that "government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures."[64]

The elision of the two groups in Connolly's account is problematic. As Hillary Clinton notes, the groups might be empirically distinct: those that feel the government or the economy has let them down might not be the same as those that support racism and xenophobia. The idea that a disenfranchised "white working class" elected a populist, racist, and sexist president is a political fiction. The white working class is categorized as: white, without college education, and without a salaried job. However, supporters of Trump's nativism, racism, and xenophobia tended to have higher incomes than the median of their state, and much higher incomes than the median in states with a large nonwhite population.[65] In fact, if class is about income, voters who made less than $50,000 tended to favor Clinton or Sanders, while the median income of Trump supporters was $72,000.[66]

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[63] Chozick, Amy. "Hillary Clinton Calls Many Trump Backers 'Deplorables', and G.O.P. Pounces". *The New York Times.* September 10, 2016.
[64] Chozick 2016.
[65] Silver, Nate. "The Mythology of Trump's 'Working Class' Support." *Five Thirty Eight*. May 3, 2016. And Ogorzalek, Luisa Godinez Puig and Spencer Piston. "White Trump Viters are Richer than they Appear." *The Washington Post.* Nov 12, 2019.
[66] Silver 2016.

Lower classes, then, tend to favor Democratic candidates, when they vote at all. More often than not, those in the lowest class do *not* vote – only 28% of those who make under $30,000 voted in the 2016 election.[67]

By slicing the working class this way, the category of the "white working class" obscures the ways that inequality and economic hardship in the US affect *all* members of the working class. Historically, too, race serves as "the medium in which class relations are experienced"[68] fragmenting the working class along racial lines. As in Du Bois's account, the working class is divided in ways that serve to keep in place the power of capital and prevent major overhaul of economic inequality. The category of white working class sustains a cross-class, race-based coalition that affirms and appeases white privilege at the expense of minorities, under the guise of economic grievance. Whiteness and its privileges remain unchallenged and can obscure the important projects of redressing inequality for *all* those in the working class. Connolly's attention to the *white* working class appeases white expectations at the expense of mitigating economic inequality for all.

Pluralism and the kind of "critical responsiveness that is the indispensable lubricant of political pluralization"[69] are vital to overcoming vengeful relations of identity/difference, Connolly argues. With Connolly, we might recognize the importance of plurality and take up the challenge he offers: "We pluralists thus need to rework, *and to render ourselves available to reworkings of*, the pluralist imagination: so that it comes to terms with paradoxical relations of conflict and interdependence

[67] "An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters." *Pew Research Center*. Aug 9, 2018.
[68] Hall, Stuart A and Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. Palgrace Macmillan 2013 [1978]. P. 386.
[69] Connolly 2004: xvii

between identity and difference."[70] However, as critiques of Connolly's work show, an attention to plurality might better help resolve existing injustices if we also attend to questions of racial justice. Racial injustice is an issue of long-term divestment, domination, and discrimination. To address it will require strategies that directly confront whiteness and abolish racial privileges.

4. The "We" of Pluralism

Even as Connolly's theory of pluralism is plagued by these difficulties, pluralism holds possibilities for justice and democracy. For James Baldwin, too, problems of racial injustice stem from the preservation of whiteness and the demands of white identity that involve domination over the Other – or, as he writes in *If Beale Street Could Talk,* the need for the righteous to locate the damned. The solution, then, is the abolition of the "righteous" or the white identity – the abolition of whiteness. Baldwin writes: "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."[71] For Baldwin, like for Connolly, identity itself must be destabilized, its vulnerabilities affirmed, and its security treated with irony. Like Connolly, Baldwin's writing suggests that destabilizing, challenging, and accepting the contingency of identity is important to projects of justice and equality. But Baldwin specifically means *white* identity – which draws its assurance and its security from an unjust racial order – is what must be challenged and destabilized. Baldwin's passage above echoes Connolly's work on identity and the relation to difference that is necessary to secure identity. Baldwin's emphasis on

[70] Connolly 2004: xix
[71] Baldwin, James. "Letter from a Region in my Mind." *The New Yorker*, 1962.

whiteness as a presupposed collective “we” and the abolition of this “we” can guide our understanding of what pluralism might look like if it is to contend with racial injustice.

As Wendy Brown notes, there is a “detente between universal and particular within liberalism”[72] that can help us think through Connolly’s theory of pluralism. What she means by this “détente” is that there are two competing strands in a liberal democracy: the abstract character of political membership and liberal individualism. Even as a liberal community must have some shared “we,” liberalism emphasizes the sanctity, creativity, and inalienability of the individual and individual rights. In various theories of liberalism, the many “I”s are made one through unity, through tolerance, or through the state.[73] As Brown shows, universality is often achieved by turning away from differences between “I”s in order to achieve and presuppose the commonality of the “we.” We see one example of this in Anderson’s discussion of the newspaper which presupposes an imagined community. In Anderson’s example, differences between readers dissolve as they read the news, knowing that the newspaper is relevant to their neighbors and to strangers they have never met. The imagined community does not derive its substance from how one drinks her coffee in the morning or her opinions on a debate in the paper but by the realization that there is a shared paper that relates to “us” all.

As Brown notes, the tension between the two is integral to liberal democracies. The distinction she makes between the “I” and the “we” can help us think through Connolly’s account of identity. For Connolly, to destabilize the “we” is to also to destabilize the “I” through practices of agonism, irony, laughter, and so on. Instead of seeking to destabilize the sanctity of the “I,” perhaps we may instead

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[72] Brown, Wendy. "Wounded Attachments." *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390-410. P. 393.
[73] Brown 392

destabilize presupposed "collective particulars"[74] – the "we." Brown notes that identity politics – or claims of injury made by "homosexuals," "single women," and "people of color" – "require a standard internal to existing society against which to pitch their claims."[75] In other words, Brown argues that even projects that seek to claim rights for excluded groups are "premised on the fiction of an inclusive/universal community, a protest that reinstalls the humanist ideal-and a specific white, middle-class, masculinist expression of this ideal-insofar as it premises itself on exclusion from it."[76] In other words, even movements to claim rights can serve to reify the normalcy and supremacy of the white, male identity. But Brown's attention to the tension between the "I" and the "we" also shows there are possibilities to destabilize the "we" that insists on white, male identity as the norm, without the need to destabilize every kind of identity. Brown's account helps strengthen Baldwin's claims: to resolve existing injustices – like exclusions that prevent access to rights and resources – will demand a challenge to the *assumed universal* – the presumed white, masculine "we."

With Baldwin, we can agree that the assumed universal identity must be destabilized and challenged. In order to do so, some of Connolly's strategies – like affirming plurality – will be useful. But not *all* identities – or even all universals – must be destabilized and rejected. Certain universals – like principles of justice or freedom – can be resources for reconstructing institutions, challenging identities, and cultivating political practices that are normatively desirable. This keeps with Connolly's insight that pluralism does not require "the abandonment of all standards"[77] and can reject drives to "unitarianism" and even "fight militantly"[78] against it. Pluralists, Connolly argues, "define a set of

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[74] Brown, P. 392.
[75] Brown, P. 395.
[76] Brown, P. 398.
[77] Connolly 2005: 41
[78] Connolly 2005: 42

general virtues and limits needed to nourish a pluralist ethos within a territorial regime."[79] These general virtues and limits might include standards or principles like racial abolition, equality, and so on. Even as pluralists define "general virtues and limits," the virtues and limits are not eternal or certain. Instead, they remain open to contestation and can change with time. Using Connolly's insights, we can remedy the problems of his theory: that it rejects all forms of resentment and fails to confront whiteness. In this way, we preserve the affirmation that comes with plurality and reject existing unfreedoms. As Fanon makes the point, "We said in our introduction that man was a *yes*. We shall never stop repeating it. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a *no*. No to man's contempt. No to the indignity of man. to the exploitation of man. To the massacre of what is most human in man: freedom."[80] Standards like affirmation, love, or justice can help us reject and destabilize identities that demand violence and cultivate an ethos of pluralization.

By challenging the assumed white, male identity as the universal, this adaptation of pluralism leaves open the possibility for historically marginalized groups to maintain their bonds of community and expression. This strategy does not require that marginalized groups evacuate their identities. Marginalized groups are often, as Brown notes, "attached" to their wounded identities. For her, the trouble is that "politicized identity is also potentially reiterative of regulatory, disciplinary society in its configuration of a disciplinary subject. It is both produced by and potentially accelerates the production of…disciplinary society..."[81] This is a problem for Brown because these politicized identities respond to and in effect affirm the assumed universal. However, among dominated groups who

[79] Connolly 2005: 42
[80] From Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage.* University of Chicago Press. 2015. Original Fanon, BSWM
[81] Brown 398

convene and commune in shared spaces, the kinds of identity expressed are not only "interest [converted] into normativized social identity manageable by regulatory regimes."[82] In other words, identities expressed in such communities are not only responses to domination – they also "exceed the frame" as Hartman tells us.[83] Such imagined communities affirm other aspects of identity like dignity, togetherness, and solidarity. The loss of the assumed universal – the white, male identity – does not need to threaten the kinds of togetherness found among these communities, even as it will liberate them.

5. Baldwin, Whiteness, and the Merest Mustard Grain of Imagination

In Baldwin's writing, white identity is destabilized through invocations of imagination that directly challenge the "we" of American democracy. Take, for example, Baldwin's words in *Many Thousands Gone*. In this essay, "we" refers in one instance to white Americans, in another, "we" refers to the residents of Harlem. The "we" is unstable and changing in ways that rhetorically challenge the coherence of whiteness. As Balfour notes, Baldwin

> "deploys a rhetorical strategy that deliberately uncouples the narrator's "we" from any stable point of reference. By dividing "the Negro" from "Americans," the essay accepts the color line as fundamental to American society. But throughout the piece, Baldwin slips back and forth across the line—now aligning himself with African Americans, now looking at them from a distance, now obscuring the difference."[84]

This rhetorical strategy is evident in the movement from "It is only in his music…that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today

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[82] Brown 393
[83] Hartman, WL
[84] Balfour, Lawrie. *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*. Ed. Susan J. McWilliams. University Press of Kentucky. 2017. P. 27.

oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence”[85] to “Our dehumanization of the Negro is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we must pay for our annulment of his.”[86] In the first passage, Baldwin references the stories of people of color, observes the silence of oppression. But when he writes “we find ourselves oppressed with a dangerous silence,” it is not clear to whom he refers. It is Baldwin’s contention that whites and nonwhites are *both* oppressed by racial domination – indeed, as Baldwin notes, the oppression and domination of nonwhites is “indivisible” from the dehumanization of whites. In the second passage, Baldwin aligns himself with the white “we.” *Our* identity refers to *white* identity and the person of color is on the other side of the color line. By grouping himself with white people, Baldwin admits that “we” – white folks – are complicit in racial domination in ways that endanger “our” own humanity. In his invocation of the unstable and changing “we,” Baldwin renders white identity unclear, unstable, and ambiguous. In Baldwin’s attempts to shake the white reader’s identification, he moves iteratively across different perspectives, inviting the reader to imagine herself as white, liberal, black, bisexual, pregnant, and so on. The rhetorical move is simple, but it effectively recodes and regroups identity each time it is employed.

In parallel with Benedict Anderson’s seminal example of how reading a newspaper brings into being an imagined community, Baldwin’s rhetorical strategy invokes imagination to refer to and presuppose an imagined “we.” However, Baldwin’s project it to destabilize the imagined “we” of whiteness. As in Anderson, reading can bring into being and affirm “thousands of others of whose

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[85] Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Beacon Press 1984 [1955]. P. 24
[86] Baldwin 1984 [1955], P. 25

existence he is confident."[87] In Baldwin's example, the "thousands of others" are imagined – but their identity remains cloudy. As one reads Baldwin's work, it remains unclear who may belong to the imagined "we." Even as Baldwin destabilizes who may belong, he affirms that there *is* a "we," affirming an imagined community. As Anderson notes about shared sites, Baldwin's writing raises the question "Why are *we…here…together*?"[88] or *what might we do about our dehumanization of ourselves?* In the question and the struggle for an answer, Baldwin affirms that there exists a "*we."* Imagined community – and shared political struggle – can be affirmed in ways that do not demand a stable collective identity. It might instead emerge, as Baldwin shows, in attempts to destabilize existing groupings or answer political questions.

In another instance, Baldwin invokes imagination as key to race relations in ways that can both destabilize or affirm existing distributions of power. In this example, a white policeman confronts black domination and recognizes the insecurity of white privilege. The white policeman is

> "is exposed, as few white people are, to the anguish of the black people around him. Even if he is gifted with the merest mustard grain of imagination, something must seep in. He cannot avoid observing that some of the children, in spite of their color, remind him of children he has known and loved, perhaps even of his own children. He knows that he certainly does not want *his* children living this way. He can retreat from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature"[89]

The white policeman closes racial distance, witnesses the evidence of domination. He is faced with the realization: *that could have been me or my children*. At such close physical proximity – patrolling the same street on which children of color play – all that is required is the "merest mustard grain of imagination"[90] to see contingency and the instability of identity. Baldwin describes the white

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[87] Anderson, Benedict R. O. G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books 2016. P. 36
[88] Anderson 2006: 56
[89] Baldwin, James. "Fifth Avenue, Uptown." *Esquire*. 1960.
[90] Baldwin 1960

policeman's experience with an identity that is unstable, exposed, or vulnerable. The policeman imagines contingency and recognizes the arbitrariness of his identity and his circumstance. In the moment following, he is faced with the choice of reaction: he can choose to embrace this realization, and affirm contingency or he can choose to feel threatened, exposed, and endangered. The first reaction might result in actions that build solidarity like listening to the children's or families' concerns, changing his policing strategy, or even contesting the dictates of his job. In Baldwin's description, the white policeman retreats from the realization that imagination brings. The effect of the retrenchment is, as Baldwin tells us, callousness and cruelty.

Recognizing and affirming contingency are made possible by imagination – one that flits across identities, times, and locations to recognize the vastness of possibility. The *merest mustard grain* of imagination might enable us to embody the other and recognize contingency. In the passage describing the white policeman, Baldwin points to the possibilities and importance of imagination as a political faculty and resource. The policeman sees "the very thin contingency that sorts one child from the next."[91] For Linda Zerilli, imagination can give us the "ability to see from other perspectives."[92] Imagination allows us to inhabit others' perspectives – to stand in someone's metaphorical shoes. But Baldwin takes imagination a step further: not only can the white policeman imagine himself or his children in the place of the marginalized, the policeman also sees contingency. When we see from other perspectives, we *see* other perspectives. In line with Zerilli's claim, political imagination invites other perspectives and lets us inhabit someone else's experiences – as when we read a fantasy novel and imagine castles, rolling green hills, and hobbits, and see from the perspective of those hobbits. But

[91] Caver, Martin. "A Different Price for the Ticket: Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin on Love and Politics." *Polity* (2018). P. 55.
[92] Zerilli, Linda. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. University of Chicago Press. 2005. P. 139

political imagination also makes possible not only that we inhabit another identity or empathize with someone else, but also that we see the plurality of perspectives, persons, and possibilities.

Baldwin's invocation of imagination to destabilize existing power-laden identities deepens Connolly's account of pluralism. In Connolly's account of pluralism, contingency plays an important role because "even the thought of a possibility can shake and transform us."[93] Contingency means

> that which is changeable and particular; by contrast to the certain and constant, it means that which is uncertain and variable; by contrast to the self-subsistent and causal, it means that which is dependent and effect; by contrast to the expected and regular, it means that which is unexpected and irregular; and by contrast to the safe and reassuring, it means that which is dangerous, unruly, and obdurate in its danger."[94]

Contingency is the recognition of multiple possibilities to which one might be vulnerable. That *could have been* me. As Baldwin shows, imagination allows us to see contingency: the thin line that separates one child from the next. Responses might vary: as with the police officer in Harlem, some respond with callousness while others may empathize with the other children. Not only can imagination open the door to affirming plurality, Baldwin's work further shows that imagination can confront and challenge the security and stability of identity. Imagination can be called forth through writing, physical location, intersubjective relations, and objects. In this way, it can create a constellation of opportunities that work to destabilize the white, male "we."

Together, Baldwin and Connolly's works create an account of a contingency-oriented imagination that is capable of destabilizing existing power structures and repairing injustices. One example of an event that may invite such an imagination is showing up to a protest. As one crowds against hundreds of others in a shared project, one might imagine an array of possibilities for one's life, for one's peers, or for the future of their political world. As we know from accounts of the Civil Rights

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[93] Connolly 2002: 47
[94] Connolly 2002: 28

movement, for example, participation in such protests can alter how one imagines herself, her peers, and her political world. Participation in a movement or a community can invoke a shared project, a sense of being part of something bigger than oneself. This experience can destabilize the security of identity – it is, certainly, overwhelming to be a speck in a crowd – but it can also mobilize solidarity and political action.

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

> "Empathy-as-process, which involves imagining another's perspective, is supposed to bring about empathy-as-outcome, of which there are two types – cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy is the 'awareness of another's feelings,' whereas affective empathy is 'feeling what another feels.' Cognitive empathy allows us to understand another's perspective or feelings, even if we do not ultimately come to share them."[95]

The trouble with empathy, Scudder argues, is that "You do not have to listen to someone you already understand."[96] For this reason, she argues that empathy can cause us to dismiss others or fail to listen to our peers. The conclusion Scudder draws, then, is that imagination and the empathy that follows are not the political practices we ought to cultivate – they are not enough. Scudder's critique of empathy helps us see why political imagination, understood as the ability to see from other perspectives, is not enough.

Moreover, imagination as empathy, or as taking another's perspective, is often understood as an experience in the other's skin. When we think of race in America, this no longer remains

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[95] Scudder, Mary F. "Beyond Empathy: Strategies and Ideals of Democratic Deliberation." *Polity* Vol 48, 4 (2016): 524-550. P. 527.
[96] Scudder, Mary F. "Beyond Empathy: Strategies and Ideals of Democratic Deliberation." *Polity* Vol 48, 4 (2016): 524-550. P. 545.

metaphorical but pushes into the problematic territory of whites who adopt black bodies – examples of which range from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to as recently as Pixar's *Soul* (2020) or *Tropic Thunder* (2008). Inhabiting someone else's identity is not always a good thing – sometimes, it is an act of theft and domination. In these films, as in other examples of whites taking on black identity, whiteness remains unchallenged and is even affirmed as superior. In *Soul* for example, it is only after Tina Fey occupies the body of Joe Gardner – a black musician and teacher – that Gardner chooses embrace his life and "live every minute of it." The white woman, in this movie, usurps and uses the black body as a vehicle for her own enjoyment and self-fulfillment.[97] The filmmakers have the audacity to tell us the black man is all the better for it. In short, taking another's perspective can be literal, too. It can mean taking – without consent or care – another's shoes, another's body, another's place. For this reason, too, imagination as empathy is not enough to undo the challenges of a racial hierarchy.

However, the kind of a contingency-oriented imagination described here does not rely on placing oneself in the other's position. A contingency-oriented imagination does not fall prey to Scudder's critique. As in Baldwin's example, *understanding* is not necessary. The white policeman does not *understand* the black children's feelings. Rather, he *imagines* an array of possibilities – of different kinds of existence, or different forms of access, and different life outcomes. In fact, imagining contingency and seeing plurality do precisely the kind of political work Scudder claims *is* necessary: "rejecting the presumption of fully understanding black Americans' perspectives and emotions related to events surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin. This humility creates space wherein white Americans can listen to and hear the concerns and demands of black Americans."[98] A contingency-

[97] Serpell, Namwali. "Pixar's Troubled 'Soul.'" *The New Yorker*. January 24, 2021.
[98] Scudder, Mary F. "Beyond Empathy: Strategies and Ideals of Democratic Deliberation." *Polity* Vol 48, 4 (2016): 524-550. P. 549.

oriented imagination does not see oneself *as* Trayvon Martin as in Scudder's analysis, or the children in Harlem, as in Baldwin's. Instead, it sees the many children that could be (and are) and the many possibilities identity might take. Imagination can cultivate the kinds of listening, action, and solidarity in ways that go beyond Scudder's critique of empathy. It is not limited to *understanding* others. Rather, by recognizing plurality, this kind of political imagination can encourage political activity that meets Scudder's concerns and cultivates intersubjective solidarity or collective action.

Imagining contingency can enable reflection, listening, and self-critique in ways that can transform democracy and existing inequality. Imagining other possibilities and affirming contingency can undo the wholeness, the closures of whiteness that establish it as an identity and as *the* normal identity. In this way, a pluralizing imagination offers strategies to confront and abolish racial privilege. The precision Baldwin offers to revise our understanding of what democratic pluralism means is important – pluralism must destabilize white identity. Imagination is necessary to projects that threaten whiteness and seek to abolish white identity. Even the "merest mustard grain" of it can threaten the security of identity and its resentful or vengeful relation to its Other. Imagination can be mobilized, as Baldwin does rhetorically, or called forth through democratic politics, to address and destabilize whiteness and white identity in ways that abolish the privileges and powers of racial domination.

6. The Importance of Contingency-Oriented Imagining

Imagination, understood this way, preserves Connolly's resistance to metaphysical absolutes or the security of identity. Even as imagination can make possible taking another's place, inhabiting another's identity, or seeing from someone else's perspective, a contingency-oriented imagination

specifically recognizes and affirms plurality. It brings into being other places, recognizes other identities, and sees other perspectives. In this way, a contingency-oriented imagination does not only destabilize white identity, but the existing world itself. It sees the availability of alternatives, the fragility of the status quo, and the vulnerability of all to contingency. A contingency-oriented imagination like this affirms plurality. We imagine each other and the world as complex, multiple, and emergent. Contingency-oriented imagination can bring us to the conclusion that we cannot imagine what others are thinking simply by knowing their socioeconomic status or place in the political order. Instead, as we imagine and recognize plurality, we recognize that we cannot know other people for sure. With this realization, we can turn to listening, collective action, or participation as ways to better understand our fellows.

Contingency-oriented imagination, like other forms of imagination, is also an intersubjective activity. It is cultivated in conversation, shared location, and interaction. As in Baldwin's examples, contingency-oriented imagination can be brought forth by visiting a new neighborhood. Another way contingency-oriented imagination might be brought forth is through practices of deep listening. As Susan Bickford notes, listening in democratic politics is important because it is "It is a constitutive element in the process of figuring out, in the face of conflict, what to do… a crucial political activity that enables us to give democratic shape to our being together in the world."[99] Bickford's listening is bound to plurality and contingency, and thus can result from and enable contingency-oriented imagination. In this account, listening allows us not to inhabit other identities, but to affirm them: "We do not exactly leave ourselves behind; rather, we let others in in order to be with them-not in a way that assumes

[99] Bickford, Susan. The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship. Cornell. 1996. P. 18-19.

identity, but in a way that gives voice to difference."[100] Listening can enable imagining the plurality of possibilities – who I could have been, who you could be, what might exist – but it can also be deepened as a contingency-oriented imagination is cultivated. As we recognize contingency, we also recognize how little we know of others' lives, and this may prompt us to ask and listen in ways that resonate with Bickford's account.

Moreover, contingency-oriented imagining can help make us aware of and committed to expanded political responsibilities. As Iris Marion Young and Sharon Krause note, responsibility in political communities cannot be limited to personal accountability; it must instead be understood as intersubjective, nonsovereign, and collective. As Young writes,

> "Because we dwell on the stage of history, and not simply in our houses, we cannot avoid the imperative to have a relationship with actions and events performed by institutions of our society, often in our name, and with our passive or active support. The imperative of political responsibility consists in watching these institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure that they are not grossly harmful, and maintaining organized public spaces where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering. To the extent that we fail in this, we fail in our responsibility, even though we have committed no crime and should not be blamed."[101]

In other words, because we live in ways that are interconnected – an online shopping spree in my own home connects me to workers in Taiwan and India, buying a pint of ice cream on sale makes me complicit in policies that subsidize some farmers and disadvantage others – our responsibilities must also reflect our interconnectedness. Contingency-oriented imagination can help us see the ways that we are complicit in others' lives because it lays bare the plurality and complexity of existence. As one shows up to a protest or confronts children playing in other neighborhoods, one might become aware of how our political lives are contingent and intertwined. This sense can bring with it the expanded

[100] Ibid, 83
[101] Young, Iris Marion. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford University Press, 2011. P. 88.

responsibility called for in Young's account. This might have consequences for the rights of marginalized groups: as folks in positions of privilege recognize their responsibilities, they may participate in or support social movements that demand justice and equality.

Contingency-oriented imagination is tied to facets of democratic politics like expanded responsibility and democratic listening. As we imagine the plurality of possibilities of our own lives and others', we gain a sense of we are intertwined with people we may not understand. In this way, contingency-oriented imagination can be a tool for reforming institutions, as Young describes. It can mobilize desirable political action that reduces harm and suffering, but this is not guaranteed. Instead, we must now turn to the ways that contingency-oriented imagination can be guided by institutions, policies, and materials.

7. Cultivating Imagination, Affirming Plurality

Political imagination is an intersubjective practice. It is learned and affirmed together. One way to bring about contingency-oriented imagination is to set up an institutional framework that encourages and affirms intersubjective activities like listening, contestation, participation, and expression that bring into being and sustain an expansive and just imagined community. Institutional arrangements can have profound effects on the kinds of imagination we seek to cultivate, as Jason Frank shows in his analysis of political imagination at the time of the American founding. With Publius, Frank notes that regular interactions with institutions – like state and local governments or federal administration – can generate attachments. First, interacting with local institutions puts "terrors and constant activity before the public eye."[102] This section will focus on two key mechanisms that can

[102] Frank 59

guide imagination and make possible democratic repair and abolition: the arrangement of places and objects, and the process by which these material things are distributed, contested, and shared.

The proliferation of shared spaces and things – parks where children negotiate turns, shared textbooks in schools and libraries, and swimming pools that might cultivate new athletes – might also bring into being a more expansive "*we*" of imagined community. Take, for example, the way that Juliet Hooker speaks of the link between solidarity and physical space. As Hooker tells us, de facto segregation of neighborhoods in New Orleans meant that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, white folks felt little political obligation to the black communities that the hurricane destroyed because they did not imagine themselves in community together.[103] The desegregation of schools, neighborhoods, and monuments can help to destabilize the "we" that preserves whiteness through "locating the damned."[104] As Baldwin notes time and again, location plays an important role in maintaining the line between whiteness and Other.

The example of spaces like neighborhoods and monuments makes clear the ways that institutional support, intersubjectivity and political imagination meet in ways that recognize and affirm contingency and reject domination. First, as scholars since Baldwin have argued, destabilizing white identity and white order demands relocation of physical spaces as well. As Baldwin recounts, "I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, 'Why don't you n*ggers stay uptown where you belong?'"[105] The policeman's aggression is supported by the existence of a physical, literal space intended to confine people of color. Perhaps, quite literally, the "righteous can locate the damned" in

[103] Hooker, Juliet. *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*. 2009.
[104] Baldwin, 2018 [1974].
[105] Baldwin 1962

ways that keep in place politics of resentment and racial injustice. But if this were not the case – if we undid the institutions that keep in place segregation like housing policies, zones, and loans – the policeman would have nothing to enforce. Here, the two examples of Baldwin's policemen meet. In the first example, the policeman imagines contingency, reacts in fear and vulnerability, and then acts to reenforce cruelty and domination. But without support of segregation or an unequal criminal justice system, reactions like his would not profit from the affirmation of institutions and places. Instead, with the transformation of institutions, we can help guide reactions to and moments of political imagination to bring about abolition and expand democracy.

While there is data to show that the desegregation of neighborhoods does not necessarily improve whites' attitudes towards people of color,[106] increased access to spaces, things, and places does help redistribute key benefits like education, healthcare, and housing. This kind of access is equally important because it helps ensure that marginalized groups are included in the state's benefits. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, ensuring access can help address the issues of political burdens. Those groups that sacrifice for the polity must also be included in access to its services. In

Recent calls to diversify public spaces and monuments make clear the intersubjective aspects of rearrangement. The calls have been widespread and varied: on Twitter, in established newspapers and magazines, at city council meetings, in national campaigns, and in academia. Not all arguments to

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[106] Dixon, Jeffrey C. "The Ties That Bind and Those That Don't: Toward Reconciling Group Threat and Contact Theories of Prejudice." *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 2179-204.
See also:
Fossett Mark A, Kiecolt K Jill. The Relative Size of Minority Populations and White Racial Attitudes. *Social Science Quarterly.* 1989 v. 70 820–835.
Ha, Shang E. "The Consequences of Multiracial Contexts on Public Attitudes toward Immigration." *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2010): 29-42.

diversify public spaces, neighborhoods, or memorial sites have argued for the same desired future. For example, some writers argue that Confederate monuments must be dismantled, while others claim they must be reframed to make explicit the country's history of white supremacy. Contestation and conversation abound. With continued engagement in such conversations, there emerges a "we" – a coalition of sorts that is committed to a shared, better future. This imagined community is brought into being and affirmed through participation in in varied mediums. Through the various forms of expression and engagement, we learn that we agree that something must change and we – the "we" of this conversation, this contestation – are committed to a shared, better future together.

The arrangement of institutions, objects, and spaces can encourage an imagination of contingency and the process through which this arrangement emerges is equally important. As in the example of desegregation of neighborhoods or diversification of memorials, the conversation that surrounds institutional transformation can stimulate a contingency-oriented imagination. The conversation is constituted in different forms that cross social media, local politics, and civic engagement, and it can help with democratic listening, affirming plurality, and listening to alternative stories as a form of repair. As in Anderson's account, a conversation like this is an example of the way that the iterative movement between personal experience, intersubjective interaction, and material things can bring into being an imagined community. In this case, the community is one that is committed to a more just future.

In short, the process by which the arrangement of objects and spaces is contested and redistributed can teach and affirm the kinds of politics that are vital to democracy: collaboration, contestation, conversation. Connolly might call the process an instance of agonistic contestation and encourage participation like it. In agreement, but perhaps expanding his account, this kind of political

activity also has important consequences for how people imagine their communities and their peers. Participating in – or even observing – a conversation about memorials and objects can help make one imagine others with different viewpoints, experiences, and ideas, but with a common goal: to improve the shared polity.

In contemporary calls for redistribution and rearrangement, social media is an important mechanism for communication, expression, and contestation. However, the continued lack of regulation online can also foster white supremacy and violence, as several events of Trump's presidency made clear. Sites with "downvote" buttons are perhaps better equipped to challenge these nefarious views. Brainstorming guidelines to avoid the perpetuation of domination and violence online is necessary. In this way, social media may become one among many similar forms of participation and expression like city council meetings, campaigns, protests, art, music, and news stories. These other venues of intersubjective interaction have a longer history and more clear guidelines for conduct.

Part of what social media has helped accomplish is the proliferation of voices. Social media can make possible and encourage listening to reparative stories – truths about what the American dream costs, accounts of those who bear the burden for the bullish stock market, and memories of labor exploitation. Telling alternative stories is a form of reparation. Attention to these stories can "account for the long psychic and material reach of those passages, their acknowledged and disavowed effects, their projection onto and erasure from particular bodies, and the reformulation, reproduction, and recirculation of their intimate spaces of trauma, violence, pleasure, shame, and containment."[107] Domination has depended upon silencing those it dominates. Creating spaces for these silenced voices

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[107] Sharpe, Christina, Judith Halberstam, and Lisa Lowe. 2009. *Monstrous Intimacies Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Duke University Press. P. 4

to thrive and listening to the stories they tell can help us account for domination and reformulate its institutions.

8. Conclusion

This chapter contributes to discussions of democratic pluralism, showing that it holds resources for projects of racial justice and abolition, but must be revised to fully meet the challenge of racial injustice. As Connolly and Baldwin suggest, white identity secures its own certainty through domination of the Other. By advancing a reading of Baldwin's pluralism, I show that Connolly's ethos of cultivation is not enough – a political imagination that affirms contingency must also be guided by institutions, programs, and materials. As a turn to Baldwin's oeuvre makes clear, political imagination is an indispensable resource as we seek to abolish whiteness and the white "we." Imagination can affirm contingency, destabilize white identity, and sustain an imagined community. In order to guide imagination, we need a process that intersubjectively transforms institutional arrangements and a redistributes objects and spaces.

This chapter's contribution is to consider how political imagination adds depth to conversations about democratic repair and pluralism. It shows that political imagination can help pluralism better address the challenges of racial hierarchy and injustice. By theorizing a contingency-oriented imagination, I show what is normatively desirable about political imagination: its ability to destabilize whiteness and privilege, its affirmation of plurality, and its potential to bring into being a community that shares commitments to principles like justice or abolition.

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