

Poli & Humanities - ep 9

[00:00:00.18] TOM MERRILL: Hello, everybody. Welcome to another episode of Politics and the Humanities. I'm Tom Merrill. I'm a professor at American University, and I'm here with my colleague Sarah Marsh. Hello, Sarah.

[00:00:10.02] SARAH MARSH: Hey, everybody. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:12.63] TOM MERRILL: Our guest today is Nick Buccola, who is the author of this wonderful book *The Fire is Upon Us-- James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Debate Over Race in America*. Nick is the Elizabeth and Morris Glicksman Chair of Political Science at Linfield University. He's also the author of a book on Frederick Douglass and he's done a reader on Frederick Douglass and he's done an edited volume on Abraham Lincoln. And I think I-- did I get everything, Nick?

[00:00:41.22] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: I think so, yeah (LAUGHS).

[00:00:42.44] TOM MERRILL: Well, close enough. Nick's book has been a fantastic success, which I guess we should say. So this was Whoopi Goldberg's, one of her favorite things for 2019. Isn't that right, Nick?

[00:00:54.15] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: That is correct, yeah.

[00:00:55.98] TOM MERRILL: So poor Nick has come a long way down to have to talk to us. But, Nick, I want you to know that we actually move copies. It's a very high percentage of our listeners (LAUGHS) buy. So if you have four listeners, then, and you get three copies sold--

[00:01:12.04] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: I love it. I love it.

[00:01:12.96] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE]

[00:01:13.06] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: That's a high rate of return. I love it.

[00:01:15.51] TOM MERRILL: But so what we're going to do is we're going to hear-- we're going to have Nick talk about the Buckley-Baldwin debate, which is the centerpiece of his book. And then we've got some questions about James Baldwin, which I think is really the hero of this book. Isn't that right, Nick?

[00:01:29.31] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: That's correct. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:01:31.39] TOM MERRILL: So that's going to be the shape of our conversation. And maybe I'll just start by asking, Nick, do you want to just tell us about this famous debate that Buckley and Baldwin had? Viewers can find this or listeners can find this on YouTube, at least in a truncated version.

[00:01:46.98] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, that's right.

[00:01:47.83] TOM MERRILL: But it's-- tell us the story.

[00:01:50.67] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah, well, thanks, Tom, and thanks, Sarah. I'm really, really excited to be here with you and to have this conversation.

[00:01:56.53] So February 18, 1965, James Baldwin, who, at that time, was second only to Martin Luther King as kind of a face of the Civil Rights revolution, was invited to the Cambridge Union to debate William F. Buckley, Jr., who, at that time, was kind of one of the faces of the Conservative counterrevolution, a founding father of the American Conservative movement. And Baldwin and Buckley were there at the Cambridge Union, the world's oldest debating society, a debating society that had just marked its 150th anniversary, to debate the motion, the American dream at the expense of the American Negro. And so that is kind of where-- the hook for the book, right, it's that moment. It's these two intellectual giants squaring off on this international stage at the high tide of the Civil Rights movement.

[00:02:40.95] And the book itself, though, is a longer book. I sort of start the reader out in that space, in this packed Cambridge Union that night with all this excitement and all this energy, and then I go back in time, and the reader has to wait 250 pages before we're back in the Cambridge Union for the climactic chapters in the story. Because what I-- once I started doing the research for the book, I realized pretty quickly that, really, the heart of this story is-- are the lives that these two men led, the sort of intellectual lives, in particular, leading up to this moment. Who were they? What did they believe? Why did they believe what they believed?

[00:03:14.83] And so what I try to do in the book is kind of weave their intellectual biographies. They're born about 15 months apart from each other, so I weave their intellectual biographies against the backdrop of the rise of these two movements that each of them did so much to shape, respectively. So that's the kind of big-picture story of the book. And, yeah, so I'm excited to get into some of the details with you,

[00:03:36.88] SARAH MARSH: Nick, can I ask you how you got interested in writing a book like this? I mean, what led you to the project?

[00:03:43.95] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: You know, it's one of these things that it's so many accidents in a row. And then the first was, actually, I was hosting an event on my campus with Susan McWilliams Barndt from Pomona College. And I didn't know Sue very, very well. I know, often, in our profession, we sort of sometimes speak poorly of our major conferences, like APSA, but APSA was actually really a giving moment for me in the sense that I sort of saw Sue speak there several years ago.

[00:04:18.06] And I didn't know her, but I thought, oh, she's-- I really am interested in having her on my campus. So I invited her to campus, and she was working on Baldwin at the time. So I sort of, like a good host, did a little more reading of Baldwin. And I had read a little bit of Baldwin, but not nearly, nearly enough, and I was, of course, once I started reading him, I couldn't stop.

[00:04:37.29] And Sue kind of invited me to write an essay for a political companion to James Baldwin she was editing at the time. And that kind of got me started on sort of becoming obsessed with Baldwin. And then, soon after that, I discovered the Baldwin-Buckley debate, and I was just transfixed. I mean, this sort of moment, for all the reasons I just described, this moment of these two intellect heavyweights squaring off in this international setting, I just-- there was something about it [? that just ?] pulled me in and I couldn't get out.

[00:05:09.13] And so I started out by writing an essay about it. And then the book kind of evolved. I remember, maybe a later APSA, I was having breakfast with a colleague, Chip Turner from the University of Washington, and he-- I mentioned to him, I said, I'm thinking about a book about this. I think this could be a book. And he said, "Well, there's two new books that have come out about Malcolm X at Oxford in 1964," and so, yeah, that kind of and he encouraged me and said that it seems like there could be a Baldwin at Cambridge book.

[00:05:35.21] And so it kind of evolved from there because I really want, as I just described, I realized, once I got into the archives, the story of the debate itself and how it happened and why it happened and the energy of that night was really going to be central. But, really, this longer story was the one that really kind of unraveled as I began to do the research. And so, yeah, that's kind of the story of how it all happened.

[00:06:00.95] And, of course, as I started writing, I really started researching in a serious way in 2014, 2015, but I started writing in January 2016 and, of course, all these issues that are addressed in the book are-- they're always urgent, but the kind of sense of the relevance and urgency of this debate and this kind of story of race and the American dream, it felt, in the broader culture, like it was reaching a higher level of urgency. And so I was really fueled by the political energy around me to write the book and also trying to finish it before someone else wrote this book because I knew it was a book that had to be written.

[00:06:39.75] TOM MERRILL: Can I ask a follow-up on the personal side? So in the, I think, it's the Acknowledgments or something, you talk about your own history, your own political history, that you come from a conservative family, or something. And you were-- the detail that stuck out to me is you were an intern at the Heritage Foundation.

[00:06:57.62] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah.

[00:06:58.12] TOM MERRILL: Right? And, you tell me if this is right, but it seems to me that there's a sense of betrayal in this book when you're writing about Buckley, right, that you wanted him to be someone different than he, at least in this episode, he turned out to be. Is that a fair assessment?

[00:07:16.01] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, that is. Yeah, and I figure that, in the Acknowledgments, I would just pull the skeletons out of my closet, rather than let some journalist expose me as a former Heritage Foundation intern. But, yeah, I mean, so you my family is-- you know, they're fairly conservative, not super-duper conservative-- and, I should say, Never-Trump conservatives at this point in their lives.

[00:07:43.34] But I, yeah, so I grew up in a conservative family. Buckley was somebody kind of on my radar growing up, not in a central way. We weren't gathered around the TV watching Firing Line every week or anything, but it was on my radar, certainly as I got into my college years and was kind of like the typical college Libertarian for a while there, and as somebody who, you know, I admired, I thought was interesting, I was intrigued by. And as I sort of matured, I guess, intellectually, I began to question a lot of what I believed growing up and questioned a lot of sort of things that I had just taken to be true in terms of my political philosophy.

[00:08:24.26] And the experience at the Heritage Foundation was a really interesting one, and I think it was-- it may have sort of helped me in my intellectual and sort of growing up from conservatism, in a lot of ways. And so, to borrow a phrase from Buckley and turn it on its head, Buckley famously spoke of up from liberalism. Yeah, so I think that Buckley was somebody-- and, also, I had this kind of general narrative about Buckley in my mind that was a narrative of redemption on race, that Buckley had said some really racist things and written some racist things in the '50s and the '60s, but that he had kind of come to regret those things by the end of his life.

[00:09:05.06] And I kind of-- that was the narrative I sort of believed about Buckley, going into the research, and also Buckley as the editor of conservatism, as somebody who did have this kind of important role. And we still see headlines today about Buckley as this person who was-- one of his central contributions was to edit out people who were conspiracy theorists and so on and so forth.

[00:09:24.50] TOM MERRILL: John Birch people.

[00:09:25.52] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: The John Birch people and all that. So, I think that, yeah, looking, I want-- once I got into the-- had the sort of basic idea for the book, I really went into it wanting to see. And he gives us so much in terms of understanding how his mind is working because he writes so much publicly and he's writing so many letters that you really get a sense of-- you know, you can peek into his mind almost every day as he's shaping this history.

[00:09:48.92] And so I really-- yeah, there was a kind of sense of betrayal, I guess, on some level insofar as Buckley had this reputation as somebody who was attempting to fashion an intellectually serious and responsible conservative movement. There certainly are a lot of moments in the book when I think the research revealed him to be less intellectually serious than one might hope, and certainly less than responsible.

[00:10:16.00] TOM MERRILL: So and we should distinguish between two things, both of which I know you have opinions on, right, but one is the Buckley of the '50s and the '60s, right, which is what the book is really about, and then this later question of whether or to what extent he changes his mind. Right, and so that the contemporary defenders of Buckley who are-- you know, many of them still work at National Review, right, they take an opposite view on the latter thing than you do.

[00:10:40.92] I think it just needs to be said. I mean, Buckley, in the earlier period, he some things that, by our standards, are amazingly creepy. Right? And I'm thinking here especially of the editorial, "Why the South Must Prevail," or it may have [? been that. ?] I think that's the title. Can you talk-- I mean, just in that because I think it's important for people to remember what that position was-- can you tell us about that?

[00:11:06.61] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, so one of the things that I try to do in the book is give a really deep, slow-motion explanation of how Buckley and his circle at National Review dealt with questions of race and Civil Rights. I mean it's in the year, two years, really, that Buckley is sort of building the foundation for National Review and launching it. It's 1954, and eventually it launches in November 1955.

[00:11:34.74] And so that's happening in the wake of the Brown v. Board school desegregation decision, the sort of grassroots backlash against that decision with the rise of the White Citizens' Councils and so on, the elite backlash against the decision, the Southern Manifesto eventually in Congress. And then you also have the lynching of Emmett Till, which gets international headlines. You have the arrest of Rosa Parks, the Montgomery bus boycott, the rise of Martin Luther King, all that is happening right in these months into when Buckley is starting National Review.

[00:12:03.99] And Buckley makes very clear, from the beginning. So he was in this position as the editor, as the sole shareholder, to decide how the magazine would come down on these questions of race and Civil Rights. And he says, 10 years later, when this guy Jeffrey Hart's writing a 10-year anniversary book about National Review, he asked Buckley, what was your goal? What has been your goal on race and Civil Rights? And Buckley says, "I wanted the magazine to be extremely articulate," always important to William F. Buckley, "non-racist, but not reflexively racially egalitarian."

[00:12:37.92] And so Buckley thinks, what he thinks he's doing-- right, and this is important, understanding what people think they're doing-- he thinks he's fashioning an intellectually serious, non-racist politics on race, and it's-- but it's a very, very fine line he's trying to walk. What it ends up resulting in is they are against Brown v. Board, they're against any federal intervention to try to take down the Jim Crow regime, including Congressional action. It's not just a matter of the courts.

[00:13:06.93] They're critics of Martin Luther King at almost every turn. The one exception is they think economic boycott is a legitimate form of social protest. They're critics of the sit-in protesters, critics of the Freedom Riders, against the Civil Rights Act of '64, against the Voting Rights Act of '65.

[00:13:21.90] And Buckley himself, as you said, Tom, most infamously writes this editorial, "Why the South Must Prevail" in 1957, and that piece is written in the context of the debate of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. And it's, in particular, that piece is written to defend an unfriendly amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which essentially was a jury nullification amendment. It basically said that white juries in the South would be able to nullify the federal law at any point. And so it was a very unconservative kind of position Buckley was taking.

[00:13:59.67] But he says, in "Why the South Must Prevail," white Southerners-- it really should be called or it is essentially it should be titled "Why the White South Must Prevail"-- white Southerners, he says are entitled and, not only that, that they have a right, but they have a duty to take whatever measures they believe are necessary to maintain their civilizational supremacy, right, which I know will be important to our conversation later.

[00:14:21.54] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:14:21.63] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: So he even kind of-- he doesn't quite defend violence, extralegal violence, but he doesn't condemn it either in that piece.

[00:14:29.46] So it is, as you said, Tom, a very creepy piece that Buckley never repudiates. And this is the important thing for, just to your second point about distinguishing the later Buckley, Buckley is asked on Fresh Air with Terry Gross, everyone's favorite show, she--

[00:14:45.09] TOM MERRILL: No, no, no, we're the favorite. Oh, sorry. Terry Gross, you gotta get out of the way.

[00:14:48.98] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: She, yeah, she reads to him from-- and this is late in his life, not quite in the last couple of years, but it's late in his life-- reads to him from "Why the South Must Prevail," and he says, "Everything that you just said is correct." And, basically, he has this way of defending the view that he took, which is even creepier because he says, "Well, isn't it called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People? Isn't that implying that they were not sufficiently advanced to be on a some sort of terms of political equality?" That's Buckley's defense into the '90s, you know, into the early 2000s. So that's, I think, important for folks to keep in mind.

[00:15:26.96] We don't have to focus on the later Buckley, but that's definitely-- you know, that's a position that I don't think he ever fully repudiates.

[00:15:33.32] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. No, but he-- I mean, he says explicitly there and other places, right, that Black people in the South, but also elsewhere, are not as culturally advanced, right? And that just has to be said. Like, that's part of the Buckley trajectory, right? And so I just I don't want us to somehow miss that.

[00:15:53.72] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, and that's a really, and I should just say real quickly, is that-- and I think this is really important, too-- is that Buckley really, and I take him at his word, Buckley did not believe what he was saying and doing fit within the category of racism. So, for Buckley, it's been a really necessary ingredient in what racism is, it's rooted in animus. And it's also fixed, right, so racial hierarchy is fixed.

[00:16:20.84] And Buckley, his position, his version of white supremacy, even in that most infamous piece in "Why the South Must Prevail," is that his position is white supremacist, but it's temporary and it is rooted and it has this kind of, instead of animus, is rooted in this kind of noblesse oblige. He believes that white people as superiors, and he says this at the end of that piece. He calls on Southerners. He says, "Don't take advantage of all this power you have, white

Southerners. You have an obligation to bring African-Americans up to a level of cultural equality which then can be a basis for political rights." So it's a nuanced position, and that's important for people to understand that that's how Buckley was rationalizing it in his mind.

[00:17:00.53] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Also, there could be a lot more to be said about that. So let's talk about the actual debate itself.

[00:17:06.03] SARAH MARSH: Yes. And, Nick, can you tell us, for our listeners who haven't read the book yet, but should definitely go out and do that, what's the setup for the debate? How is this thing structured? You know, what is the situation that Baldwin and Buckley are walking into? And how does the voting work, the whole deal?

[00:17:28.68] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah. Thanks, Sarah. Well, yeah, so one of the really cool things about this book was, because it was hosted-- the debate was hosted in 1965 by undergraduates, 50 years on, as I'm doing the research, many of those undergraduates are still around. They're now in their 70s, and I was able to interview the students who planned the debate, hosted the debate.

[00:17:50.70] So that back story of how the debate even happened had not been written about, to my knowledge. Everyone knew the debate happened. The BBC recording was on YouTube, but it was sort of murky as to why-- how they ended up there that night.

[00:18:03.08] So that, without getting into those details, which we can talk about later if you want, essentially, they are invited by this guy Peter Fullerton. It sort of happens as a result of Baldwin's publicist wanting to promote his third novel. The paperback release of *Another Country* was happening in the UK in early 1965. And so they asked, they called the Cambridge Union to say, hey, will you host James Baldwin for an author event?

[00:18:28.79] And this undergraduate, Peter Fullerton, said-- you know, and I interviewed him-- says, "I was feeling very brave, and I said, 'No, we will not host James Baldwin for an author event. This is a debating society. We will host him for a debate,' but not for just an author event." So that was kind of the original-- and then it was sort of this behind-the-scenes negotiation, in many ways, between Baldwin's sort of representatives in the Cambridge Union.

[00:18:53.87] In part, Baldwin's representatives didn't want him to do this debate for a lot of reasons, especially because they knew Buckley would be involved. But so they arranged for the debate to be structured in a way-- I think this is probably, and Peter doesn't remember all the details of how this came to be-- but essentially what they did is they had this motion that Peter proposed to Baldwin and Buckley, the American dream is at the expense of the American Negro, and they ended up having essentially set pieces.

[00:19:19.38] So it's not a debate, when folks who haven't watched it yet or haven't listened to it, when they watch it, they're not going to get to see Baldwin and Buckley arguing with each other, in that form of debate. It's, rather, there's one student speaker on each side of the motion, so one on the Baldwin team, one on the Buckley team. And then Baldwin speaks. He delivers a speech of about 24 minutes. And then Buckley speaks, so he delivers a speech of about 29 minutes.

[00:19:42.68] And so the BBC recording has the entirety of Baldwin's speech. Buckley's speech is edited down a bit, but the entire audio recording is on the audio book for *The Fire is Upon Us*, and we have the full transcript in the book as well. So you get to hear all of Buckley's speech if you check out those sources then.

[00:20:00.83] TOM MERRILL: All those words, and nobody knows what they mean.

[00:20:02.84] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, right (LAUGHS). Right, so all those words, and no one's, yeah, there's a great-- it's great for vocab. For preparation, if you're doing some sort of standardized test, listen to Buckley for a little while. But, yeah, so that's how the debate was structured. And then they-- the way the students, so then-- and then one thing that's not captured by the recording, either the audio or the BBC recording, is that after Buckley sits down, there were then these really short 2-minute speeches that were given by other students, and I think it was three on each side. And I was able to interview a bunch of those students, but their speeches seemed to be kind of lost to history.

[00:20:41.42] And then the students voted, so it started at like 8:45 PM, so about 11 PM or so. The way the students voted was you would walk out one door or the other, depending on which side you were voting for. So the line for the-- spoiler alert-- the line for the Baldwin side was much longer. The final vote was 544 for Baldwin's side and 164 for Buckley's side. And so that's the kind of detail of what happened.

[00:21:09.41] SARAH MARSH: So, Nick, in the book, right, so Fullerton then announces who wins. Do the students go out, and they come back in for the announcement? Or how does-- I couldn't figure out where the students had gone and where they heard the news.

[00:21:21.63] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, so the way-- I think the way the BBC edited that was-- what must have happened is they sort of cut. They stop. Buckley gives his speech. They cut there. Those other little student speeches happened. Then the students voted, and then when they actually show Fullerton back in the President's chair and his announcing the vote, you'll notice the chamber is pretty empty. I mean, you can see Baldwin and Buckley down in the debating area and see a few other people around.

[00:21:53.99] But, yeah, I think it was sort of one of those things where, like, basically, the word just spread. Right? So in the Union itself, it's the debating chamber is just one-- it's the major part of the Union premises, but there's also a bar. So a lot of students are hanging out in the bar. There's a library upstairs. There's all these other rooms, and then there's this kind of that nice courtyard there. I don't know how, you know, it probably was pretty cold outside.

[00:22:16.04] But people just kind of find out who won through the buzz, I guess. And they probably sensed, as they're looking at the lines, kind of who was going to win. And then, of course, all the media coverage after the event, they certainly found out who won very soon after.

[00:22:34.31] TOM MERRILL: So, Nick, I think we want to ask you some questions about Baldwin, but maybe I have to frame the question in terms of the Baldwin-Buckley debate. So

Baldwin, right before the debate, has I think in that, right before the debate, has published *The Fire Next Time*. How close is that in time? It's within a year or something, isn't it?

[00:22:53.26] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, so *The Fire Next Time*, the sort of bulk of *The Fire Next Time* is this long essay, "Down at the Cross," which was originally published in *The New Yorker* magazine in November 1962. And then the book, *The Fire Next Time*, which is that long essay plus the short, famous letter to his nephew that was published originally in *The Progressive* magazine, the book itself, that little book of those two things, comes out in late January 1963.

[00:23:17.98] TOM MERRILL: So I want to frame a question, and I-- this is, I feel, a little bit unseemly doing this, framing a question that I think is implicit in Buckley's speech, that I think this is a work for him. But given every other creepy thing that he's said-- I feel a little bit uncomfortable saying this-- but it seems to me that part of his question is really, "Are you, James Baldwin, asking us to reject, A, Western civilization and, B, Christianity?"

[00:23:43.48] And so Buckley is a lifelong Catholic, right, and that the thing that-- he's got this-- Baldwin has a line about "Jesus, the sun-baked," and Buckley says "fanatic," but that's not the word that Baldwin actually uses. But, in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin is quite critical of Christianity and says, you know, St. Paul was a fanatic, and one can see the results in the concentration camps.

[00:24:11.89] Right, and so there is a feeling, I think, and especially at the end of Buckley's speech, right, when he's like, "We will defend the faith of our fathers," that he feels personally his identity has been touched, shall we say. And that seems to me to have lots of echoes with the race conversation today. So I wonder if you could talk about that, a little bit.

[00:24:35.69] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah, great question, Tom. Yeah, and this is something that-- one of the things I do in the book, although it's primarily a kind of narrative-driven kind of storytelling approach, I do kind of a deep dive into *The Fire Next Time*, mostly because it's the book that kind of casts the sort of longest shadow over the debate. It's the book that Buckley, it's unclear to me, still, whether Buckley actually read it, but he certainly read Garry Wills' review of it for *National Review*. And he seems to have gotten at least some of the big ideas, the most controversial ideas.

[00:25:11.66] And one of them, as you say, is that he reads the book as an attack on Western civilization, as an attack on Christianity. Buckley writes an editorial at one of his syndicated columns after the book comes out, and he titles it-- this is his review of Baldwin-- it's called "A Call to Lynch the White God," Buckley with his provocative titles.

[00:25:34.36] And so, yeah, Buckley says that-- there's, like, two lines that seem to rankle him more than any other, that sort of, as you point out, are kind of symbols for everything else or how he's interpreting Baldwin. One is that line about Jesus, right? Baldwin refers to Jesus as that "disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave the church his name." and then, of course, the stuff on St. Paul. And then the other line that Buckley quotes directly during the Cambridge speech is,

"The only thing that white men have that Black men should want is power," right, and that, those two things are the things that just drive Buckley up the wall.

[00:26:14.95] And so I think that part of what is going on in *The Fire Next Time*-- and this is, we could talk about this for the rest of the day, so I'll keep it relatively brief-- is that Baldwin is, he has this extraordinarily complicated, I think, relationship with faith, with religious faith, and with the West-- and I know we'll talk about that more as we-- and with the Western tradition kind of writ large. But I think one of the things you see going on, because there's language in *The Fire Next Time* that is certainly, understandably sort of takes readers aback, especially readers who identify themselves as Christian. But Baldwin is engaging in, I think, a kind of critical dialogue that was central to his life.

[00:27:04.09] Baldwin grew up in a very religious household. He was, himself, a young minister from the age of 14 to 17. He has these moments when he's never really, there's moments when he is somebody can read what he says or hear what he says and say, well, he's clearly now an atheist or a religious skeptic. But he also, you know, he always was surprising people, too. I mean soon after the debate, he's asked what he, how he identifies religiously, and he says, "I'm an unorthodox Christian." Right, I mean, he's kind of playing around there. And then he says, later on, when he's asked about his relationship with Christ, he says, "Well, I think of Christ as the most betrayed figure in all of human history."

[00:27:44.33] Right, so there's a kind of way in which Baldwin has a kind of sense of what a true Christianity is, and he sees it embodied in many of the Civil Rights activists around him who are deeply committed to their religious faith, and sees it in people like Martin Luther King as well. But, well, and so what Baldwin's really indicting, in my reading of *The Fire Next Time*, is he's indicting not Christ, not Christianity as an idea of what could be, right, as a true faith, but rather he's indicting a kind of practice. He's indicting a sort of a way that people have imagined Christianity to be, imagined their faith to be, that has led them to treat others inhumanely.

[00:28:26.63] So there's a line in and one of the sort of key transition points in *The Fire Next Time* when he's talking about God, and it's a line that definitely gets people's attention, right, when he says that basically, if God can't make us more free-- and I'll just read it directly because Baldwin will put it more beautifully than I can. He says, "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him." Right?

[00:28:59.98] TOM MERRILL: And I think this is at the end of that. There are three sections, so at end of the first section, right?

[00:29:04.01] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, exactly, exactly. And so I think Baldwin, I mean, one thing I say, I think is really important is that-- you know, Cornel West has this great sort of description of Baldwin as the Black American Socrates, right, and I think there is something about Baldwin that, if we try to sort of pin him down and say, this is what he believed about Christianity, then he's going to pivot and he's going to ask us a new question. So that's and those are kind of some relatively amorphous reflections on Baldwin and Christianity.

[00:29:35.21] I mean, one of the big points I try to make in the book is it's certainly, to me, one of the things I feel very confident saying, is that Buckley sets up a straw man of Baldwin's position, for sure, and dismisses it far too quickly. And I think even Garry Wills, who has a much more nuanced take on Baldwin, I don't really-- I think Wills somewhat surprisingly, given, I think, the depth of Wills' thinking, he kind of reads Baldwin in this way as well and has a really, I think, important critique of a position that I think Baldwin doesn't take, but I think is relevant to this overall discussion of Baldwin in the Western tradition.

[00:30:09.50] TOM MERRILL: Sure. So I have a lot to say. I mean, so one thing is that I think Buckley, I mean, it seems like he maybe put-- this will be a charitable [? reason-- ?] is that he gets scared, and he's attacking the thing that he's scared by, perhaps which is may not be the same thing as what Baldwin is. But it also seems to me that Buckley couldn't have said these things to Martin Luther King. Right, Martin Luther King is much more like, "The Declaration gave us a promissory note, and so the standard is clearly there. We're just asking America to live up to the standard." Right?

[00:30:39.45] Whereas, in *The Fire Next Time*, it's things seem like they're-- like, what's the theological foundation here is less clear. So I want to say something about *Fire Next Time* and ask you if this is a correct understanding of how the text worked, and then I want to ask-- I want to give you a quote and ask you to tell me what it means.

[00:30:57.35] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: OK.

[00:30:58.22] TOM MERRILL: But it's so that the-- and I wonder if Buckley read past the first section of this book, right, because like the first section is the most stridently anti, at least, established Christianity for a very long time, right, that Christianity has a kind of fanaticism in it and that Christians think that God is white, I think, is one of the things that's said. And, right, probably that was the case for many people, right, and that this also has to be said.

[00:31:27.29] But the structure of the essay-- and I've been reading *Notes of a Native Son* with my students, and it, and there's a similar structure with Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright and *Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas* in the sense that, first, you got the white-is-right position, and then you get inversion in this long middle section with Elijah Muhammad of *The Fire Next Time*, where everything's just been flipped. And so what was on the bottom is now in the top. Black is right. White people are devils.

[00:31:53.69] And Baldwin clearly rejects that, right, that that's-- and so the way that the essay unfolds is more complicated than just simply reading that first section all by itself. And then you get this final third section, in which whatever Baldwin's own answer to the question of, who should I be is at least, in that essay, is to be found. Does that sound like a fair description of the essay to you?

[00:32:15.02] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of those-- I mean, I think the first time I read the essay, I knew I was reading something profound, but I didn't quite understand. Like, because he's going, you know, he starts us out, right, in Harlem. He's a teenager. He's trying to give us a sense of what the world looked like through his eyes. And then

he's-- and you really feel, as a reader, like you're there with him and trying to getting a sense of what that landscape looked like in the kind of forces of domination that he's confronting. And then he will pan back to these big question, big statements about the moral history of the West and Christianity.

[00:32:53.05] And then he'll take you-- and then [? he'll go, ?] as you said, to the beginning a part 2, all the sudden, you go from Harlem in the late '30s, early '40s to the doorstep of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam in 1961. And you're like, what just happened? There's a little section break there.

[00:33:07.54] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, right.

[00:33:08.00] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: There's probably a little ad in The New Yorker separating, a little cartoon or something. And then, but then it becomes clear, right, as you just pointed out, Tom, is that he's doing this really interesting inversion thing that, I think, part of the kind of literary history of this piece helps explain a little bit of what was going on with that. But he had been thinking about the Nation of Islam while he was thinking about these broader questions, these autobiographical questions, and these questions about the moral history of the West.

[00:33:36.64] And so he came up with-- and some of the letters he wrote to his agent during this period kind of help us see this-- that he figured out that there was a way, in terms of the literary maneuvering, that he could utilize these reflections he had been having about the Nation of Islam to really help tie together what he was trying to do in these other parts of, "these other regions of his mind," to use his language. And so, I mean, that, to me, and so a part of what he's up to there, right, he knows, predominantly, he has his predominantly white audience.

[00:34:10.15] I mean, right around this time, there's this interesting passage in Time magazine. He's on the cover of Time magazine later in '63, after The Fire Next Time comes out, and the reporter says most Black folks in Harlem and Birmingham still have no idea who James Baldwin is. His audience is primarily this kind of-- he's sort of become this literary celebrity and that he's read mostly by white liberals. And that, that was-- Baldwin, he was conscious of that, and I think it sort of-- that plays out in various ways over the course of his career.

[00:34:44.68] But I think part of what he's doing there, I think, is that he's trying to use the Nation of Islam, which he knows will-- it strikes fear into the heart of his white reader and seems extraordinarily bizarre and odd in terms of its theology and its politics and so on. And he's trying to sort of do this sort of slow-motion thinking with the reader about the Nation of Islam and then revealing, in the process of a lot of these things that he's said, about certain conceptions of Christianity, certain conceptions of whiteness that he's described in the first part and then he'll come back to in the third part. He's using the Nation of Islam as a kind of vehicle to sort of say, look, you're seeing how absurd this sounds to you based on your experiences, based on everything you've ever been taught. Well, I want you to try to utilize this lens now to look back at yourself.

[00:35:37.34] And so I think it's a-- I mean, to me, that is extraordinarily powerful, and it led this text to be misread. I think a lot of people were-- some people thought, is James Baldwin too sympathetic to the Nation of Islam? Because of what he wanted to do, though, is to understand. He said, look, the Nation of Islam, as you said, Tom, I think it's clear to any careful reader, he rejects the message of Elijah Muhammad.

[00:36:01.53] TOM MERRILL: Sure. He's also gay. I'm always sort of wondering, like, how-- like, they're trying to convert him, and he's looking at all the wives and the children. And, you know, it's like how is this conversation going to go? Like, how long can he keep this up, you know?

[00:36:14.74] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. I mean, it's-- yeah, it's an extraordinary-- and he-- I mean, Baldwin, you know, in terms of his sexuality, I mean, there's some times where he's explicit. And in, of course, in Giovanni's Room, Another Country, other and some of his essays where he writes about his sexuality, or sexuality generally, and is addressing some of these things. In The Fire Next Time, I mean, that moment, right, when he-- and there's some ways in which I think there's a kind of subtext. Right, he walked into the mansion of Elijah Muhammad, and he says, you know, he felt self-conscious about the cigarettes in his pocket, right?

[00:36:47.98] And so there's something about and he says like there's all my vices, right, and the fact that he's leaving from, that he's hearing Elijah Muhammad refer to white devils throughout the evening, and then Elijah Muhammad says, hey, we'll give you a ride wherever you're going next. And, you know, and Baldwin's thinking, I'm going to hang out with some white devils in another part of town. And so, yeah, and--

[00:37:07.60] TOM MERRILL: [? End ?] the night [INAUDIBLE] house again.

[00:37:08.29] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: --that's, ultimately, the sexuality is there too, for sure.

[00:37:11.38] So, yeah, so there's a kind of way in which Baldwin does want to say, and he says this. I think, this is where the kind of misreading of Baldwin as sympathetic. I mean, he's sympathetic in a sense to the Nation of Islam insofar as he sees, especially Malcolm X and, to some extent, the Nation as a whole, he sees a kind of an articulation of Black rage and that is-- that Baldwin sees as entirely justified. Right, and this is why, when he says the Nation of Islam has all of the facts on its side-- he says things like that, and it gets him in some trouble-- he's talking about their diagnosis of a problem, of the kind of the impact that white supremacy has had on, in terms of demoralizing folks.

[00:37:54.77] And that the credit he gives to Elijah Muhammad, as he said, he's done what generations of welfare workers and so on have been unable to do. He's given a lot of people a sense of self-respect and dignity that they didn't have before. And Baldwin, but Baldwin is careful to say that that's important, and I want to acknowledge that. And that's significant, but I also want to say that the recipe, the sort of the foundation of what Elijah Muhammad has given people is a false-- that it's a false foundation, and it's going to fall apart because it's based on a lie. And so that, I think, it's a profound thing he's doing there. It's nuanced, and he's cutting in both directions, but that's central to what he's up to.

[00:38:34.97] SARAH MARSH: So, Nick, my students are reading "Letter From a Region in My Mind," my graduate students, and they've really puzzled over the part of the middle section of the essay where Baldwin says that he and Elijah Muhammad would either be strangers to one another or enemies. And this is what he's getting at, right, the stranger or the enemy. This is the sort of double lens Baldwin's trying to use to look at the Nation of Islam?

[00:39:02.96] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that's a really powerful moment. I mean, what a moment, just standing there on the stoop with Elijah and kind of feeling like-- and he has a couple of lines in there where he says, "I think to myself that maybe this is what my father and I would have been like if we were friends." You know? And he kind of feels, and he sort of feels-- he's like, I feel Elijah's pain. I can see his pain, the pain in his face.

[00:39:30.20] And so, yeah, there are these moments of really significant connection, but then, yeah, as you point out, Sarah, that moment at the end where he recognizes, maybe just because of what I take-- "Well, because of what he takes his responsibility to be and what I take to be mine, we cannot be friends and may possibly be enemies." Or strangers, yeah, we get the stranger, the idea of a stranger as well.

[00:39:52.94] Yeah, and I think that that, in that moment, especially, like you think about when Baldwin is writing that, he's in, I think, that maybe has his hope isn't at its highest point, but it's ascending. Right? There's reasons to be hopeful, and Baldwin really sees something changing before his eyes. In many ways-- I mean, we might talk about this later-- but the sort of ways in which there's been a sense of the protests this last summer, of feeling like-- you know, this feels different. It feels like something's changing in terms of the consciousness of the culture.

[00:40:27.86] Baldwin was sensing that. Right, he saw in the revolutionaries, the student revolutionaries in the South, he saw something different. And one of the reasons-- and he puts it in a global context, right. He sees that one of the reasons that he thinks this freedom movement is different is because of freedom movements happening around the world. There's a kind of way in which decolonization kind of provides Americans, you know, Black Americans with sort of a new imaginary to put it in sort of a fancy sort of academic term.

[00:41:04.10] So, yeah, so I think that's central to what-- so he senses things are changing, and then here's Elijah Muhammad, who is he thinks is right in so many ways about his diagnosis. But, as Baldwin says in the beginning of part three, the third kind of movement of the symphony that is "Letter From a Region in my Mind," he says, "I want my people to be free, but I want them to be free with dignity." Right, and he says that-- that's where he calls out the Nation directly and says that what Elijah is asking people to do is to root their sense of identity, their sense of worth, in a lie of a kind of racial supremacy. Right?

[00:41:42.38] And so Baldwin says that's always going to be a recipe for disaster, and so I cannot-- that's why I have to be fundamentally I'm a stranger-- Elijah and I are strangers to one another, and we may have to be enemies. So, yeah, I think that's part of what's going on there, and it's definitely-- yeah, there's a lot more to say about that, right? Because Malcolm is this other-- Malcolm and Baldwin is this whole-- that's a whole another kind of chapter in that story that's even more complicated.

[00:42:09.24] SARAH MARSH: Mm, OK.

[00:42:10.52] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, there's a lot here. So, Nick, maybe if I can just reflect back what I hear you're saying, hear you saying that, at least in the first two parts from *The Fire Next Time*, that what we're getting, if we were seeing this as Martians, we could put it next to great works of political theory, that it's really about self knowledge, that the Elijah Muhammad section is, in a way, it's like this is how you look to somebody from-- you, white supremacists, this is how you look to somebody from completely a different world. And you don't recognize yourself in it, but that's maybe because you're blind to yourself in certain fundamental ways. That's what that's, at least, what I hear you say.

[00:42:47.21] So I think I want to talk more about what, sort of what Baldwin's alternative is, both in the third section, but I also think that Sarah has some things that she wants to ask you about the reading the Western tradition, whatever the Western tradition is. But let me throw out a sentence from the end of *Fire Next Time* and hear what you think it means. This, and I didn't prepare you for this, so you're just, so just the--

[00:43:15.41] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: That's all right. That's all right, improvise.

[00:43:17.63] TOM MERRILL: People who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. What does that mean? How does that fit into Baldwin's thought?

[00:43:27.56] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, I mean, and this is central. This is central, right? This is part of Baldwin's idea. And another line around that, where that line is, is Baldwin talking about the need to become a kind of Blues people, right, the need for white Americans, people who imagine themselves to be white, to become Black is a phrase that Baldwin uses in the third part of *The Fire Next Time*.

[00:43:56.91] And I think part of what Baldwin is up to, there, and sort of asking us to come to terms with our suffering is, I think, something that runs through his thought from the beginning to the end. And that is that-- and it goes to this point you're making about self-knowledge-- Baldwin, he thinks that this, the central problem, the central human conundrum, is that we construct identities. We're constantly constructing and reconstructing identities for ourselves in order to feel safe, right, that we're fundamentally scared, and what we're most scared of, right, is we have this fear of death.

[00:44:33.50] Right, there's this kind of-- there are moments when I wrote in my margins for the book I have Hobbes. You know, it's one of the people that always comes to mind when I-- Baldwin describing Harlem in the early-- some of the things he says remind me of Hobbes describing the state of nature. But so Baldwin is talking about the ways in which we construct identity in order to make ourselves feel safe, and that we're-- fundamentally, this fear of death is kind of, I think, at the core of that.

[00:45:00.45] And so Baldwin, when he's talking about, he has these sort of really stinging indictments of things like white musicians, right, and sort of these comments that, sometimes, I think he's a little bit hyperbolic about how white people sing, period. And then but he really is

trying to draw this contrast, right, between this kind of, the sort of poppy music where it's, everything is good, we're all, you know, everyone, or whatever it is, birds and flowers and romance or something, and then the Blues, right, where Baldwin thinks what he sees in the Blues and what he hears in the Blues and what, I think, he's trying to capture in a literary sense as a kind of Blues writer is a sort of acceptance of life as it is, acceptance of suffering, acceptance of the reality of death, acceptance of all the ways in which we are fundamentally broken.

[00:45:58.31] And that sort of-- that quest for some identity that makes us feel safe is always going to be there, but while simultaneously sort of finding a way to, as he says earlier in the essay, to accept that and find joy and find love and find and try to fight for justice and so on, that is something Baldwin-- I mean, fundamentally for Baldwin, that is what he wants, that's what he's calling on us to do, is to come to terms with all of that, right, the sort of not just try to keep ourselves protected from the things that make us uncomfortable, but, rather, to confront them in a way that makes our suffering noble. Right? We are going to suffer one way or the other.

[00:46:42.75] And this is what he shows through so many of his characters in fiction, these characters who are suffering, but their suffering is not noble. Right, they're suffering through. They're pretending to be something they're not so that they can feel safe. But, ultimately, they don't feel safe, and their souls are being torn apart. So Baldwin says, look you're going to suffer, so why not suffer in an honest way? Why not suffer in a way that actually is more authentically human? And, in so doing, you might be able to help others survive their suffering.

[00:47:15.23] And so I think that's part of what he's up to there. I mean, there's still some lines in the last third of the essay that I still am trying to wrap my mind around, what he could have meant and how it fits with other things he's said and also accepting the fact that it might not be-- everything might not fit together perfectly. It might not-- might be asking for something from him that he's not trying to give. And so that's, those are a few thoughts about that. But I think that's a crucial thing for Baldwin, coming to terms with our histories as individuals, as collectives, has to do-- part of what he's, when he calls on us to come to terms with history, it's coming to terms with our suffering, with our trauma, and then trying to figure out how we can use that suffering and that trauma that history to build something better.

[00:48:03.43] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:48:04.30] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Great.

[00:48:04.74] SARAH MARSH: So I think the idea of a usable past is totally germane to the questions I want to ask about Baldwin and the canon. So, Tom, is it all right if I take the next? So when I was reading the book, I was struck by the way Buckley understands Baldwin's position on, let's call it, Western civilization, but like Western culture, literary texts. And Buckley says, in his view, Baldwin's advocating to jettison the entire deal.

[00:48:42.03] TOM MERRILL: Tear down the statues!

[00:48:43.86] SARAH MARSH: And so this-- right, and so we're still having the debate that at least Buckley imagines himself to be having with Baldwin. But, at the same time, at least the

way I read Baldwin, I don't know that Baldwin necessarily sees it in the way that Buckley lays it out. And so, Nick, can you first talk us through how Buckley understands Baldwin? And then I'd like to get into some passages from Baldwin about the Western tradition and get Baldwin's disposition.

[00:49:17.72] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, thank you, Sarah. Yeah, so Buckley, Buckley-- and this is to sort of just to set this up. I mean, it's important. My sort of reading of Buckley is-- this goes back, and I'm going to talk with, Zoom into the University Wisconsin tomorrow and talk about Buckley and Baldwin and their fathers. Right, so I think there's a lot of daddy issues here.

[00:49:41.90] But so, just to say briefly, I mean, Buckley, you know, he has these parents who have imposed this very strong worldview. And, essentially, I read Buckley as much of what he is doing with his life is trying to make his parents proud. Like the rest of us, right? And what he really, what he's more and more specifically, he sees his role, his vocation, as defending the worldview that his parents taught him. Right? And that worldview is, he was taught, what made their affluence possible and what made American prosperity and dominance possible.

[00:50:19.79] And so when Buckley thinks about that as a general idea, he is thinking of this thing, right, Western civilization with particular ideas within what he understands to be Western civilization as being especially important. And the details of those ideas are maybe less relevant to your question than just the general ideas, that he sees himself as a guardian of this thing that he identifies as Western civilization.

[00:50:47.13] And so, from a very early age, that's what he-- so he gives his graduation speech at Yale, right, and he says, Our obligation as elites from, leaving from this institution, is to guard Western civilization, this oasis of freedom and prosperity. Our job, yes, there are people who are going to point out all the problems with it. They're going to say that there could be this better way, but they're wrong. We have to protect the sort of known goods against those who are kind of arguing for an unknown better.

[00:51:15.27] And so that's Buckley. And so Buckley really, throughout his life, from the earliest days, he's most comfortable though not defending particular values within Western civilization, but rather serving as the kind of person who is there to take on anyone who's perceived as a threat to those values. And so that's as a debater in college, on Firing Line, in his writing. Buckley is-- that's the role he plays. So anyone he sees emerge on the scene who he perceives as a threat to that idea of Western civilization, he's ready. You know, knives are out. He's coming for them.

[00:51:49.82] And Baldwin is from a very, from very early on, when Baldwin's sort of rising on the scene, Buckley identifies him as a special threat. Right, he's an "eloquent menace," is what Buckley calls him. He's somebody who's extraordinarily-- Buckley acknowledges, Baldwin is extraordinarily gifted as a writer. And that makes him even more dangerous, right, because he's so, he is-- Buckley sees in him a kind of literary merit that Buckley sees might seduce the elites to accept him into the establishment.

[00:52:19.40] And so, yeah, I mean Buckley basically argues that-- and this goes back to some of his earliest writings on Baldwin-- he reads Baldwin as somebody who is there to with intentions no less than overthrowing Western civilization. He wants-- his rejection of Western civilization is total. His hatred of Christianity, he uses this line that's not actually captured in the BBC recording, that it is there in the audio recording where Buckley says, Baldwin is calling on us, all of you, students, to go raid the libraries around here and burn the Plato and the Aristotle and the bibles and so on and so forth.

[00:52:57.31] So, for Buckley, he sees Baldwin as really calling. You know, he says his rejection of our civilization is total. He wants to overthrow it completely and replace it. With what? Well, Buckley's not entirely sure. He has some, he'll sometimes suggest Baldwin is a Marxist, will suggest these sorts of things. But he does see Baldwin as hellbent on overthrowing everything, the faith of our fathers, as you referred to earlier. So that's kind of his general position, and then we can, yeah, we can work out the specifics.

[00:53:31.05] SARAH MARSH: And so, so for Buckley at Cambridge, he, at the end of the speech, he says to the students, he invokes Churchill and says, "If this is, in fact, what Baldwin proposes to do, we will fight it on the beaches," and so forth, just like the Nazis. And Buckley ends-- help me, Nick, if I get this wrong. Right, he says they would do this for the sake of the Western tradition, but also for the sake of the American Negro.

[00:54:00.25] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Right.

[00:54:00.71] SARAH MARSH: Of course, I'm not getting the quote quite right, but what does Buckley mean by that?

[00:54:06.11] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, so and this is something Buckley-- this was a common Buckley technique. So throughout the Civil Rights revolution, so even when he's not writing about Baldwin, he'll often make this analogy, which is an unfortunate one in many ways, where he'll compare Civil Rights protesters in his analogy to Nazis. And he-- or so he does this a number of times with the Freedom Riders and the sit-in protesters. He completely says, well, think about when the American Nazi Party does X,Y, or Z, and we react in this way. Why are we reacting? They're disturbing the peace in one setting. These Civil Rights protesters are disturbing the peace in another.

[00:54:45.71] So this is not a one-off for Buckley to make this sort of analogy. But, yeah, part of what he's saying there, right, is that he, as you said, Sarah, he's saying, look, we he's here to overthrow Western civilization. I'm here to defend Western civilization. And I will tell you that if it comes to it, I will go beyond defending Western civilization and wearing my tuxedo in the Cambridge Union, and I will take up arms. If there's a war, I am going to fight for Western civilization.

[00:55:15.49] And there's kind of this implicit, this kind of race war that he's imagining at the end of the speech. And, again, uses that analogy, as you point out, of sort of quoting Churchill and saying, essentially, that Churchill, right, and he's saying this to the students as well. Like, Churchill was not just defending Britain. Right? He was defending certain values that later

generations of Germans would appreciate Churchill for what he did because now they, down the road, they're able to live free because Churchill defended certain values.

[00:55:50.14] And so, although their grandfathers may have been killed in the process, there's something about that in terms of looking toward the future that he thinks that people will appreciate. Right, so you know, he says that to Baldwin. He says-- I think, during the speech, right-- he says that your-- Baldwin's grandchildren will curse him if we follow his way. And so, yeah, that, that's central to what Buckley is arguing.

[00:56:15.40] And I think Garry Wills makes this argument in, I think, a more sophisticated way. And we don't have to get too far into that, but part of what Wills argues is that-- this is a kind of a slightly-- he takes it in a more, I think, a more intellectually defensible direction than Buckley. But Wills makes his point is that he reads Baldwin as rejecting Western civilization as well, and his argument is that that's a mistake because there are resources within Western civilization that are already and can continue to be useful to the struggle for liberation.

[00:56:48.38] And so I think Buckley, you know, he kind of gets-- that kind of may be what he's getting at in a clumsy way with that part of the speech. But, yeah, that's kind of how I read that.

[00:56:58.83] TOM MERRILL: Can we-- Sarah, do you want to read that passage from Baldwin and--

[00:57:02.53] SARAH MARSH: Sure, yeah, so there's a passage. I pulled a few-- well, I should say, Tom shared these with me. And I think they're the best way to get into Baldwin's disposition to the question, which is really different. I mean, I don't think Baldwin, in any sense, is advocating a race war. I mean, that's the whole reason for bringing--

[00:57:19.65] TOM MERRILL: Or a war against the camp whatever that is [INAUDIBLE].

[00:57:22.90] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, so Baldwin seems to want something different. And so I'm going to read from autobiographical notes from "Notes of a Native Son," and start on page 6 if you all are in the same edition. So Baldwin says, "I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West. When I followed the line of my past, I did not find myself in Europe, but in Africa. And this meant that, in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the Cathedral of-- oh, gosh help me with my French, Chartres.

[00:58:11.17] TOM MERRILL: Chartres.

[00:58:11.65] SARAH MARSH: Chartres?

[00:58:12.14] TOM MERRILL: Chartres.

[00:58:12.55] SARAH MARSH: Thank you.

[00:58:13.06] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: I think it's Chartres, too.

[00:58:13.57] SARAH MARSH: "And the Empire State Building, a special attitude, these were not really my creations. They did not contain my history. I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper. This was not my heritage.

[00:58:31.78] At the same time, I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use. I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have been-- I would have to appropriate these white centuries. I would have to make them mine. I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme. Otherwise, I would have no place in any scheme." So, Nick, how does that differ from Buckley's characterization of Baldwin's position?

[00:59:08.78] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, this is such a-- every time we sort of read a passage of Baldwin, you just sort of like take a moment and just savor the language and just the profundity of what he has to say. But, yeah, so I read Baldwin-- and Baldwin, I think, that passage in autobiographical notes, and I know we might look at "Stranger in the Village" if we have time as well. You know, if Baldwin is reflecting, I think, in this really nuanced way, in this, I think, a really profound way, how somebody like him, given his-- somebody from a very young age is obsessed with books, right, and obsessed with-- really obsessed with this tradition, reading everything he can and trying to think about the connection between his own experience and what he's reading.

[01:00:02.16] I think that you see him reflecting in that space with, he says, I want to come-- I would like to be able to come to terms with my own history, with the history of my family, but much of that history has been destroyed. Or I am separated from, it in this moment in a way that I-- and, certainly, when he was growing up, he was separated from the other sort of his history in a variety of ways by the school system, by what the resources available to his family, and so on.

[01:00:31.19] So what he's trying to say, there, is that he feels like this sense. There is something different, right, about his relationship to the kind of the major sort of markers of civilization. Right, it's here in that passage, right, that you just read. He's identifying, right, in so many different areas, literature, music, architecture, religion, all these different things that he, I like that phrase he uses. "I have to have a special attitude."

[01:01:03.44] Right, there's this and then in "Stranger in the Village," he says it's so powerfully. Even the illiterate white villagers, here, have a connection to these things, these sort of artifacts of high culture that they can't really understand in the same way I can. They are connected to them in a sense-- in a way that I can never be. And so I, for me, I always like to think about Baldwin in this regard as part of what he thinks is really important in terms of coming to terms with reality, as one sense of reality, is, one. I think he uses the phrase here in the last part of what you just read.

[01:01:45.26] He just says part of what it meant for him to become intellectually mature was to understand, he said, "to understand my role, which should not be confused with what others called my place. I will not accept my place, but I need to understand my role. I need to

understand why I have come to occupy the space in your imagination that I've come to occupy. What did you need that created your perception of me?"

[01:02:10.80] And so I feel like that sort of thing that Baldwin does, and this is the masterful thing that Baldwin does, where he goes from the particular to the universal, is that when he's talking about that, when he's trying to understand why is this white person that I'm confronting as a journalist, as an activist, or just in an ordinary conversation, why are they perceiving me the way they are? What do they need that makes this necessary? I think part of what he wants to do with the tradition, the West, in this universal sense, is to try to understand the kind of-- that on a broader scale, if that makes sense.

[01:02:47.70] And so I kind of, I read Baldwin-- and I get into this a little bit in the book-- when I'm doing this thing that's not entirely fair to Buckley, where I sort of take a Buckley claim, and then I evaluate it, you know, say, OK, well, let's look at what Baldwin actually said. But I think it's worth doing. And one of the things I do is I sort of try to draw attention not only to the Baldwin of the early '50s, the mid-'50s, like the passage you just read.

[01:03:12.02] But also, a little bit later, Baldwin writes this great essay in '64 called How I Learned to Stop Hating-- "Why I stopped Hating Shakespeare." which is another really powerful piece to read alongside "A Stranger in the Village" and the autobiographical notes. But, yeah, so I'll stop talking, but that-- those are a few thoughts on that.

[01:03:29.09] TOM MERRILL: Can I throw one more thing in on this from "Stranger in the Village" because it's so beautiful the way it does it? And just the arc of the book, it feels like there is kind of a story that's being told that one could almost read the book as a kind of a novel. But in "Stranger in a Village," he first says all these, as you say, markers of Western civilization say something to the white villagers, even the illiterate white villagers, that they can't say to me because they're all white. Right? That's their people.

[01:03:55.97] But then he flips, right, at the very end of the essay. And it's so beautiful, like, students miss it, but this is-- you know you're in a presence of somebody who's a very careful writer. He says, at the very end of the essay, "The cathedral chart, I have said [? says ?] something to the people of this village which it cannot say to me, but it's important to understand that this cathedral says something to me which it cannot say to them," that he brings something, I think, not by virtue of his skin color, but by virtue of the cultural construct that is his Blackness, right, that allows him to see things in these great works of the Western tradition, or whatever, that other people might miss.

[01:04:35.68] And so that there's something positive to add, right, and so it's not-- you can't-- it might be that you can't simply either affirm something or simply reject it, but that there's a phrase I think you use in your book, that critical engagement with the tradition seems to be where he ends up.

[01:04:52.00] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and he says at the end of that paragraph that you were just citing, Tom, on [? 128, ?] where he says, "But I must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope to change the

myth." And so, yeah, I mean, then this is where in the "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," I [? read the ?] two pieces that are really interesting to read. I'm giving you all these reading assignments, which Politics and the Humanities, we should give people the stuff to read, right?

[01:05:19.57] TOM MERRILL: Exactly.

[01:05:19.66] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: I mean reading "Into the Village," "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." and also, the other piece that he wrote in '64 was called "The Uses of the Blues." And I love those all together because, in part, I mean, what Baldwin says in "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare" is he sort of starts the essay by saying, at some point in my intellectual development, I viewed Shakespeare as one of the architects of my oppression. Right, like he says that I-- he was an enemy to me. I did not want to read him because I thought of him as something that I needed to reject in order to be free.

[01:05:52.31] And then he sort of, over the course of that essay, much like you're describing here, he says that, well, I realized that this can actually-- not only do I need to read this, I need to understand this, not just because I need to in order to take it apart, but because it might be useful to me. Right, I might be able to use the resources that Shakespeare is giving me.

[01:06:14.23] And so he says that, in part, he says that there's-- you know, "My quarrel with the English language just as in "Why I stopped Hating Shakespeare," has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But, now, I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault-- not be the fault-- oh, sorry. It might be the fault of the language, but it might also be my fault.

[01:06:35.23] And so he then sort of starts to think about ways in which he can read Shakespeare in a new way. Right, he can draw on his own experience to say what is Shakespeare saying. What is he drawing? What is he saying about the universal human experience that I can make my own? Right, and so he says that Shakespeare is providing me, once I understood him in this way, with one of the tools that I could use to survive, right?

[01:07:02.05] And he says, "I found in his language the authority of this language was in its candor, its irony, its density, and its [? beat. ?] This was the authority of the language which produced me, and it was also the authority of Shakespeare." And so he kind of, in that piece, then uses the blues. He says, OK, so I can read Shakespeare and I can find something that helps me make sense of the human experience and how I ought to live. And then I can also listen to Bessie Smith. And it's, of course, very different, but I can find something that's more directly related to my experience, but I can also find a different kind of message that will help me make sense of how I ought to live.

[01:07:38.32] So, I mean, that's the thing about Baldwin is, I think of him as, we do a lot of either/or in our political culture, in our culture writ large, and I think of Baldwin as often a both/and, and a both/and, not just in like hey, let's read everything, and it's all good. It's like, no, you read as much as you can. You engage not as many traditions as you can in a serious way. You engage different forms of expression. So, again, you can have that kind of critical engagement, and you might end up outright rejecting what you hear, the message that you hear,

but Baldwin is calling on all of us to sort of see and absorb as much as we can because it might be useful in terms of making sense of who we are and how we ought to live.

[01:08:25.57] SARAH MARSH: So, Nick, as somebody who's studied Baldwin's writing and is coming out for the very first time in the mid 20th century and sort of looked at what's happened to it since, do you think Baldwin is part of a tradition now? Or does he stand askance to it in some way?

[01:08:44.78] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I mean Baldwin is absolutely-- I mean, you know, and again, this is, we're going to have another, we could have a week of conversation about this, right? But I think of, I mean, I teach Baldwin now in my Intro to Political Theory class as along with Plato and Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau and all those guys.

[01:09:08.69] And it's interesting to do that, sort of to just to give that as sort of a microexample that might have broader implications. As my students engage with those texts and we're going through and reading, starting with Plato's Republic and kind of ending up with Baldwin, and then we usually read some Bell Hooks as well, I mean, it's really interesting to watch how students are once we get to that point, right. In the fall semester where we're around Thanksgiving, and we're getting to Baldwin. And they've had the experience of engaging these earlier kind of canonical texts, and they're in the-- they're now like sort of able to do the kind of, we call it ultimate questions, right, asking ultimate questions about politics.

[01:09:57.23] They're able to do that kind of thinking. They're-- I love watching them as they engage with something like "A Letter From a Region in my Mind," and now they're saying, OK, like, I can connect this back. Like Plato, yes, he was doing this in this way, and it was so different. But, like, I can connect what Baldwin is up to, here, as we talked about earlier. Like, this is somebody who's interested in these questions of self-m knowledge, who's interested in what it means to live well, who's interested in the relationship between our political lives and our moral lives. And he's doing it, like he just took me through this tour of what Harlem looked like to him as a teenager, but he's doing, like, he is doing that work that we're in, that intellectual enterprise that we've been engaged in throughout the semester together.

[01:10:42.47] So yes, absolutely, Baldwin is, in any sort of canon worth its name, Baldwin is there. And I think he's doing a kind of work that is extraordinarily valuable, just in terms of not only the content, the substance of it, but how he's doing it. Right, he's asking us to imagine the world through the eyes of folks who are often left out of the story.

[01:11:06.92] And I think that's kind of one of his central contributions is he's always trying, and he's doing this so beautifully in his fiction and his non-fiction, to get us to imagine the world through the eyes of others. And he's doing that in a way that sort of forces many readers to confront questions that they'd rather not confront. And so I think that's one of the things that's so powerful about his work.

[01:11:33.62] TOM MERRILL: Nick, I'm afraid that we're out of time. There's like 1,000 more questions that we could ask you, but that's actually a fantastic place to end. And maybe I could

just say this, that it sounds to me like if you're right, to do what Buckley wanted to do which is, let's say, keep Western civilization alive and revitalize it, one would have to do Baldwin rather than Buckley. Would that be a fair summary of your [? writing there? ?]

[01:12:01.16] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Right, right, and this is-- this, yeah, I mean-- so, yeah. I think that this is the same, right, is that Buckley, for all the rhetorical flourishes about the West and about Western civilization and about-- and, again, his self-conception as a defender of Western civilization, I mean, as somebody who spent a lot of time with these two guys, I feel very confident in saying-- and I think even Buckley's most ardent defenders would admit this-- that Baldwin engaged in a much more serious way with the Western tradition than Buckley ever did. And some of that had to do with Buckley just overcommitting himself, and he couldn't-- didn't have time to be a really deep thinker with all the other-- all the things he was up to.

[01:12:47.17] But, yeah, I mean and Baldwin was like, there was a kind of seriousness-- and this is ultimately, I should say, Baldwin's indictment of Buckley. Right, when he's asked to reflect on Buckley, the line that I think really probably stung the most was he said, "Buckley is not a serious man." Right, he's not a serious man. And that idea of being serious, being serious about the consequences of ideas, was very important to Baldwin, right?

[01:13:16.58] And so, for students, who are listening to this, and for those of us who are lucky enough to be in this vocation of teaching, right, there's something about Baldwin that's so inspiring. Right, he is somebody who communicates to us how deeply we ought to care about ideas and the ways in which ideas can change the world.

[01:13:37.61] And I don't want to just totally indict Buckley, because I think Buckley was, he did care about ideas as well, but I think if Baldwin, in a quiet moment with Buckley, I think, well, that's what he wanted to say to him is, Bill, I wish you were more serious, and I wish you would listen. And those are the two things you wanted from Buckley that Buckley was unwilling to give him. And I think those are two gifts that we can give each other, right, that kind of seriousness about intellectual life and that willingness to listen to each other.

[01:14:06.12] So, yeah, this has been so much fun. We could, I'm happy to do this again, any time. This was, I feel like we could talk all day, for sure.

[01:14:11.86] TOM MERRILL: OK, Nick, we just have to say thank you. So it's really fantastic, the work that you've done, both in the book and in sort of your public sort of representing what liberal education is supposed to be, so we want to say thank you for that. And, Whoopi Goldberg, we're coming for her that we're going to move so many copies.

[01:14:31.91] [LAUGHTER]

[01:14:33.47] So and we're just grateful for you to spend this time with us, so thank you so much. This has been a lot of fun.

[01:14:39.05] SARAH MARSH: Thanks, Nick.

[01:14:40.49] NICHOLAS BUCCOLA: Thank you, Sarah.