timidates them and this is why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction. It is the responsibility of free men to trust and celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears. And by destruction I mean precisely the abdication by Americans of any effort really to be free. The Negro can precipitate this abdication because white Americans have never, in all their long history, been able to look on him as a man like themselves.

He [the Negro] is the key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his and the Negro recognizes this, in a negative way. Hence the question: do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?

Baldwin knew that a democratic awakening in America will necessarily involve a truer, deeper coalition between the black and white progressive communities. Although the participation of
whites in the civil rights movement is often mythologized to be wider and stronger than it was, the fact is that key liberal white groups, such as the mainline prophetic churches and the progressive Jewish community, threw their support behind the movement. Also, the most valuable legislation of Johnson's Great Society program—the Voting Rights Act—would not have passed if Johnson had not been able to count on the coalition of northern white liberals and American blacks.

One of Baldwin's great contributions to American democracy was his determination to delve into the ways in which black thought and culture (especially black music) might instruct and inspire an America caught in a web of self-deception and self-celebration. Black people have wrestled for over three centuries with the harsh dissonance of what America says and thinks about itself versus how it behaves. He believed that by tapping into these black resources, we might be able to create a healthy democratic community and society. In Many Thousands Gone, he wrote:

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, 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... The story of the Negro is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty.
Just so, how many white Americans have been drawn into concern for black issues and opened their eyes about racism out of a connection made through respect for and enjoyment of the spirituals, the blues, and jazz, America's most original and grandest art forms? This is a major democratic effect of the great legacy of Mahalia Jackson, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, and Sarah Vaughan.

Baldwin contends that the crisis of the moral decay of the American empire is best met by turning to the democratic determination of black people—looking at America's democratic limits through the lens of race in order to renew and relive deep democratic energies. His point was to highlight their self-confidence, self-trust, tolerance toward others, openness to foreign cultures, willingness to find their own particular voices, and perseverance with grace and dignity in the face of adversity, as well as their solidarity with the downtrodden. The prophetic and poetic voices of hip-hop, like Chuck D or KRS-One, have built on this tradition, speaking more powerfully than any politicians or preachers of our day have been able or willing to do about the hypocrisies of both blacks and whites in American culture.

The murders of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin were devastating to Baldwin. Vietnam was another wound; the U.S.-supported fascist coup in Chile another bruise; the invisibility of Palestinian suffering in U.S. foreign policy another scar. Even democratic intellectuals can bear only so much. The time was so out of joint—cursed with spite—that he began to wonder whether it could ever be set right. Yet he labored on—comforted more and more by the blues and jazz he cherished and the family he cared so much for. He had
made a free artist of himself, had dug as deep as the soul could go, and was as sincere as the Holy Ghost. Yet, he wondered, does America have what it takes to conquer racism and dismantle empire? If so, when will it muster the vision and courage to do so? If not, what are we to do? At his funeral in New York City in 1987, Baldwin himself was heard singing Thomas Dorsey’s classic—and Martin Luther King’s favorite—song: “Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn....”

This book is, in part, an extension of the Emersonian tradition in our time. Its vision and analysis is enriched by the powerful Emersonian voices of the past. But there is another stream in the deep democratic tradition from which it also draws, and even more deeply. While the Emersonian tradition emphasizes the vital role of a citizen’s individual commitment to democracy and highlights the vast potentials of American democracy, even while nailing its failures to the wall, the special focus of this other tradition is the excoriating critique of America’s imperialist and racist impediments to democratic individuality, community, and society. It explicitly makes race and empire the two major limits of the American democratic experiment.

This stream begins in the works of Herman Melville, unappreciated in their time, and still less appreciated than they should be, as damning commentaries on the evils of empire. While the Emersonian is preoccupied with redeeming the soul of America—through its swings from its low to its high moments—the Melvillean tradition seriously questions whether America has a soul, has lost its soul, or ever really had a soul. It begins where Baldwin’s disenchantment ends and may leave us with at least one foot (if not both
feet) in despair. This stream includes the indispensable Robert Penn Warren, the tragically poetic Eugene O’Neill, the indomitable genius of blues and jazz artists, and the profound fiery witness of Toni Morrison.

Melville’s corpus—from *Typee* (1846) to *Billy Budd* (1891)—is an unprecedented and unmatched meditation on the imperialist and racist impediments to democracy in American life. Robert Penn Warren follows Melville’s lead and lays bare the depths of white supremacy and imperial realities in the making of America. Such Warren classics as *Brother to Dragons* (1953, 1979)—both versions are a scathing critique of Thomas Jefferson’s pervasive racism and one-eyed rationalism and *Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé* (1983; his poem about “the bloody history of the conquest of the West... One of the most murderous stories we can think of”) are often overlooked and ignored in American letters. Eugene O’Neill’s obsession with the nihilism of American imperial and racist rule runs from his first play, *Thirst* (1913), in which he played a mulatto sailor, to his greatest play, *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), which indict American civilization and the human condition.

Melville is the deep-sea diver of the American democratic tradition; indeed in *Pierre* (1852), he quips:

Deep, Deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where the endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair and the blackness of the shaft.
Melville's terrifying descent into the unfathomable depths is a plunge not only into existential nothingness but also into the heart of American darkness.

Melville expressed a radical suspicion of the capacity of the American empire to cast aside its childish innocence and confront its nihilistic violence. He grappled with the hard mystery of America's imperial impulse to dominate and conquer others and exposed the martial ideas and monarchical principles hiding behind peaceful language and benign democratic rhetoric. For Melville, beneath the smooth surfaces of American democracy festered the ravages of Amerindian genocide and the damages of African slavery. The self-remaking American individualist—the American gentleman—was also a slaveholder and an Indian annihilator. Again from Pierre:

Pierre's grandfather [was] an American gentleman . . .; during a fire in the old manorial mansion, with one dash of his foot, he had smitten down an oaken door, to admit the buckets of his negro slaves; . . . in a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the revolutionary war, he had annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads. And all this was done by the mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman in the world . . . the gentlest husband, and the gentlest father; the kindest of masters to his slaves; . . . a sweet-hearted, charitable Christian.
Melville’s Ahab in *Moby-Dick* (1851) is a nihilist obsessed with power and might, hell-bent on conquering the axis of evil in his Manichaean (us versus them, good versus evil) vision. Ahab’s blind will to conquer the white whale torpedoes his precious ship and crew. His own destruction results from an emptiness and loneliness driven by the dogmatism and nihilism that are metaphorical of an imperial America unable to confront painful truths about itself. As a captain of industry on a floating factory of multiracial workers producing whale oil, Ahab is obsessed with subduing an elusive white whale that simultaneously sustains and maims him. His last words—reminiscent of those of Shakespeare’s King Lear and his namesake in 1 Kings 22 in the Old Testament—are: “Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief.”

Yet Melville’s despair about America—or life itself—is not absolute in *Moby-Dick*. His American poetic epic—more than a novel yet not a classical epic poem—begins with the famous line “Call me Ishmael,” harkening to the biblical Ishmael, the son of a slave mother. Ishmael is the slim beacon of hope, the only one who survives the journey. And he survives in a coffin-raft given to him by his only friend, Queequeg, a man of color—in stark contrast to the white-dominated ship—whose near death prompted the building of the coffin. Ishmael’s survival at the end of the book is therefore due to Queequeg’s agency. The carving on the lid of the coffin symbolizes “a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth.” Even as *Moby-Dick* is an indictment of American imperialism, it is also a call for multiracial solidarity.
In fact, Ishmael's journey begins with an encounter with the black underside of America, and his engagement with the vision of America's dark side will push him from innocence to maturity. He begins his story in a state of despair; a despair he longs to overcome by getting "to sea as soon as I can." Waiting for the ship to embark, he goes from inn to inn searching for a place to stay in New Bedford. In searching for the cheapest inn, he finds himself in the black section of town—among those caught in the hellish death grip of imperial and racist America. Melville writes:

It seemed the great Black parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, wretched entertainment at the sign of "The Trap!"

This black inferno in which the struggle with nihilism is surmounted will mirror his subsequent journey in which the imperial Ahab's wrestling with nihilism leads to devastation. Ellison's invisible man one hundred years later repeats this scene with the preacher speaking on "the blackness of blackness"—another initiation into imperial America through the lens of race. Both Ishmael and the invisible man are exemplary seekers of democratic individuality, community, and society through the black brook of fire in America.
For Melville, this black inferno was not only the vantage point of viewing the American democratic experiment but also the litmus test for assessing the deep democratic tradition in America. The enslavement of Africans and Manifest Destiny over Amerindians proved the noble lie of American democracy. And he felt this on the most intimate of levels. His father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, was the chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts who handed down the most famous test of the Fugitive Slave Law. Shaw ordered the black ex-slave Thomas Sims back to his southern owner. Later, in another infamous case, Shaw decreed that the fugitive ex-slave Anthony Burns return to his owner. Melville’s abolitionist sentiments cut against the grain of many in his personal family and national community, but he expressed them nonetheless. Today his loving yet harsh indictment of America rings louder and truer than ever. And he has always resonated with the most acute truth tellers of America. The commitment to self-worth and individual potential of the Emersonian combines with the commitment to deep-searching truth telling of the Melvillean in the most American of art forms, the blues and jazz.

Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington and Ma Rainey, John Coltrane and Sarah Vaughan—all foundational figures of the blues and jazz heritage—created and enacted a profound democratic paideia—a cultivation of critical citizenry—in the midst of the darkness of America. If the blues is the struggle against pain for transcendence, then, as Duke Ellington proclaimed, “jazz is freedom.” Like Emerson, these great blues and jazz musicians are eloquent connoisseurs of individuality in their improvisational arts and experimental lives. Unlike Emerson, they sit on the edge
of America's abyss—in the invisible chocolate infernos of the American paradise. Like Melville, they engage in deep-sea diving beneath the apparent American sunshine. Unlike Melville, they emerge with a strong blood-soaked hope and a seductive tear stained smile. They are the consummate American practitioners of the tragicomic.

This world—historical black confrontation with the absurd in America and the absurd as America—with the frightening American threat to black sanity and dignity in slavery, Jim Crow, and discrimination—produced a distinctive deepening of the democratic tradition in America. This deepening is not simply a matter of the expansion of rights and liberties for all Americans as seen in the social movements led by Frederick Douglass, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ella Baker. It also has to do with the very meaning of democracy in America—the recasting of the contours of democratic vision and the re-creating of the contents of democratic modes of existence. The blues and jazz made it possible to engage race in America on personal and intimate terms—with democratic results. The great white literary bluesman Tennessee Williams prophetically entitled his first collection of plays American Blues. The rich blues and jazz heritage was eventually embraced by white citizens and was especially appealing to the antiestablishment youth behind the infectious pulses of rock. This heritage was the first major cultural point of contact between whites and blacks, and we've seen this dynamic again in the embrace of rhythm and blues and hip-hop by white citizens.

As infectious and embracing as the blues is, we should never forget that the blues was born out of the crucible of slavery and its
vicious legacy, that it expresses the determination of a people to assert their human value. The blues professes to the deep psychic and material pains inflicted on black people within the sphere of a mythological American land of opportunity. The central role of the human voice in this heritage reflects the commitment to the value of the individual and of speaking up about ugly truths; it asserts the necessity of robust dialogue—of people needing to listen up—in the face of entrenched dogma. The patient resilience expressed in the blues flows from the sustained resistance to ugly forms of racist domination, and from the forging of inextinguishable hope in the contexts of American social death and soul murder. The blues produced a mature spiritual and communal strength. The stress the blues placed on dialogue, resistance, and hope is the very lifeblood for a vital democratic citizenry.

The most sophisticated exploration of this black enactment of dialogue, resistance, and hope is found in the magisterial corpus of Toni Morrison. The blues and jazz heritage speaks most profoundly and profusely in her literary works. She is the towering democratic artist and intellectual of our time. Morrison’s texts embody and enact forms of deep democratic energies unparalleled in America’s long struggle with the dark side of its democracy.

She highlights the strong will and potential promise of democratic individuals. Ordinary people taking back their power sit at the center of her artistic vision. Regarding one of her masterpieces, *Beloved* (1987), she states:

> The slaveholders have won if this experience is beyond my imagination and my powers. It’s like humor:
you have to take the authority back; you realign where the power is. So I wanted to take the power. They were very inventive and imaginative with cruelty, so I have to take it back—in a way that I can tell it.

This profoundly democratic action, of taking back power over one’s life—enacted both by Morrison as artist and her characters in her art—is indebted to Emersonian nonconformity and resistance to prevailing authority. But like Melville, Morrison is also keenly alert to the formidable impediments to democratic individuality and community. One of her most vivid characters, Sethe in Beloved, explains why she killed her daughter, named Beloved, when a fugitive-slave hunter came to take them all back to their southern slave owners. Sethe says:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, footless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school
fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a
gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts,
soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter
out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaugh-
terhouse yard, but not her daughter.

And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her
daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the
paper. No. Oh no.

Morrison's exploration of the heart of American darkness is
most essentially a search for the possibility of democratic commu-
nity—a vision of everyday people renouncing narrow self-interest
and creating a web of caring under harsh American circumstances.
Morrison notes:

Those people could not live without value. They had
prices, but no value in the white world, so they made
their own, and they decided what was valuable. It was
usually eleemosynary [charitable], usually something
they were doing for somebody else. Nobody in the
novel, no adult black person, survives by self-regard,
narcissism, selfishness. They took the sense of com-
munity for granted. It never occurred to them they
could live outside of it.

Morrison's debt to Melville is quite conscious and deliberate. He
was the first American literary artist to explore whiteness as an ide-
ology and its traumatic effects on blacks and whites. As she writes
in her pioneering literary critical text Playing in the Dark (1992):
And if the white whale is the ideology of race, what Ahab has lost to it is personal dismemberment and family and society and his own place as a human in the world. The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis.

In Morrison's vision, it is fear and insecurity that drive the dogmatisms and nihilisms of imperial elites like Ahab, and love and hope that bind democratic communities in response to the offenses of imperial power and might. Melville's artistic integrity and democratic courage left him "very alone, very desperate and very doomed" in mid-nineteenth-century America. As Morrison comments about Melville's effort:

To question the very notion of white progress, the very idea of racial superiority, of whiteness as privileged place in the evolutionary ladder of humankind, and to meditate on the fraudulent, self-destroying philosophy of that superiority, to "pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges," to drag the "judge himself to the bar"—that was dangerous, solitary, radical work. Especially then. Especially now.

But rather than encouraging either revenge or despair, Morrison, like Baldwin, puts forth a vision of black democratic identity rooted in a love that embraces all—a love and trust that
holds together a democratic community and society. When asked what is her favorite metaphor for her work, she replied:

Love. We have to embrace ourselves. . . . James Baldwin once said, "You’ve already been bought and paid for. Your ancestors already gave it up for you. You don’t have to do that anymore. Now you can love yourself." . . .

That’s why we’re here. We have to do something nurturing that we respect, before we go. We must. It is more interesting, more complicated, more intellectually demanding and more morally demanding to love somebody. To take care of somebody. . . .

What is interesting to me is that under the circumstances in which the people in my books live there is this press toward love.

Morrison’s powerful portraits of community—also enhanced by her Catholicism—speak to the need for citizens in a democracy to be socially engaged, to involve ourselves with one another’s lives. Her message of democratic love resists the narrow arrogance and self-interest of the nihilism taking hold of our society. The most free and democratic character in Morrison’s eight powerful novels—Pilate in Song of Solomon (1978)—says on her deathbed, "I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would have loved ’em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more." In a commentary on Pilate, Morrison clearly displays her Baldwinian ethic of love and her democratic faith:
That’s a totally generous free woman. She’s fearless. She’s not afraid of anything. She has very few material things. She has a little self-supporting skill that she performs. She doesn’t run anybody’s life. She’s available for almost infinite love. If you need her—she’ll deliver. And she has complete clarity about who she is.

For Morrison, this belief in the capacity of everyday people to forge personal dignity and in the power of democratic community to resist the abuse of elite power is the core of America’s deep democratic tradition. Like Baldwin, she sees this belief most readily manifest in the black musical tradition. The dangerous freedom embedded in the performance of musical artists is a form of taking back one’s powers in the face of one’s apparent powerlessness. Morrison notes:

My notion of love . . . is very closely related to blues. There’s always somebody leaving somebody, and there’s never any vengeance, any bitterness. . . . It’s quite contrary to the overwhelming notion of love that’s the business of the majority culture.

She is our premier literary musician, and her texts are communal experiences in which the audience participates in and with her performance.

Morrison’s aim is to spark in the reader a desire to explore the rich human depths of a dehumanized people, to revel in the forms
of linguistic delicacies alongside their social miseries, and to be unsettled by the hypocrisy of an American chamber of horrors as the empire trumpets liberty and opportunity for all. That is why she places so much stress on the cadences of the human voice in her works. As in the blues, this emphasis asserts the dignity and individuality of her characters; it allows us to see inside them and demands that we listen to them. To hear the nuances of voice is to gain some access to the humanity of individuals. To listen closely to the tones of voice is to be open to the interiority of persons. Her democratic mission is to heal—yet to shatter moral numbness and awaken sleepwalking hurts. As she writes: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.” As Ellison wrote, the purpose is to “keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness” in order to be able to transcend that pain. She enacts on the page what black blues singers perform on the stage—with similar strategies of repetitive refrains, rhythmic language, syncopated sounds, and dark laughter. She writes about her intent:

My efforts to make aural literature—A-U-R-A-L—work because I do hear it . . . it has to sound and if it doesn’t sound right . . .

So I do a lot of revision when I write in order to clean away the parts of the book that can only work as print. It has to have certain kinds of fundamental characteristics (one of) which is the participation of the other, that is, the audience, the reader, and that you can do with a spoken story.
Morrison’s subtle grounding in black musical forms poses a serious challenge to her readers. Her books require readers to take part in them. Even a critic as sophisticated and astute as Harold Bloom—usually supremely confident in his literary critiques—openly pondered: “I do not believe that Morrison writes fiction of a kind I am not yet competent to read and judge...”

Morrison’s books can also be almost too painful to bear. She transfigures the blues cry in the dark depths with "circles and circles of sorrow." But, as with blues artists, she tells us: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." And despite their difficulty, her books have become bestsellers, read avidly by blacks, whites, and others, which is a great testament to the democratic potential residing within the American public.

Morrison’s fundamental democratic insight is that there can be democratic dialogue only when one is open to the humanity of individuals and to the interiority of their personalities. Like the blues, Morrison assumes the full-fledged humanity of black people—a revolutionary gesture in a racist civilization—and thereby dethrones the superior status of whites. This assumption liberates both blacks and whites and enables them to embark on a candid, though painful, engagement with life and death, joy and sorrow, resistance and domination, hope and despair in the American empire. Like her beloved Faulkner, Morrison takes us into the underworld and underground of the American Disney World to lay bare the lives of those ambushed by disillusionment and hampered by disappointment.

Morrison is a democratic subversive because she shuns all
forms of authority that suppress the flowering of unique individuality. She heralds all kinds of free self-creations that take seriously quests for wisdom and justice. Her insistence on the need to appreciate the plights and values of all people is a vital guide as we attempt to instill democracy in the Middle East, a region riven by issues of offended identity.

Our democracy is certainly in horrible disrepair, and the disengagement of so many, along with the flight into superficial forms of entertainment and life satisfaction, is understandable. But the deep love of and commitment to democracy expressed by these great artists and the long tradition of scrutinizing the ravages of our imperialism are strong.

The anger and disillusionment that so many Americans have felt toward the Bush administration, especially in regard to the dishonest manipulation in launching the Iraq war, is not a narrowly partisan affair. It is not a matter of the typical polarization of party politics. The passion evoked by the administration comes out of deep commitment to democratic ideals. If the administration had not been betraying those ideals, it would not have had to lie to the public in order to generate support for the war. The impassioned critique on the part of so many Americans of the current American militarism is a testament to just how alive and intense the public commitment to democracy is.

Though the saturation of American market-driven culture around the world has obscured the deep democratic strain in American life, it is in fact in America where democratic intellectuals have had the deepest tradition and greatest impact. The most