finds it in the works of Mark Twain, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and Thomas Pynchon as well as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson, and Leroy Carr.

There are a number of white lovers of the blues who have a tragi-comic sensibility, but for too many in white America the blues remains a kind of exotic source of amusement, a kind of primitivistic occasion for entertainment only. The blues is not simply a music to titillate; it is a hard-fought way of life, and as such it should unsettle and unnerve whites about the legacy of white supremacy. The blues is relevant today because when we look down through the corridors of time, the black American interpretation of tragi-comic hope in the face of dehumanizing hate and oppression will be seen as the only kind of hope that has any kind of maturity in a world of overwhelming barbarity and bestiality. That barbarity is found not just in the form of terrorism but in the form of the emptiness of our lives—in terms of the wasted human potential that we see around the world. In this sense, the blues is a great democratic contribution of black people to world history.

The ugly terrorist attacks on innocent civilians on 9/11 plunged the whole country into the blues. Never before have Americans of all classes, colors, regions, religions, genders, and sexual orientations felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. Yet to have been designated and treated as a nigger in America for over 350 years has been to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. The high point of the black response to American terrorism (or niggerization) is found in the compassionate and courageous voice of Emmett Till's mother, who stepped up to the lectern at Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago in
1955 at the funeral of her fourteen-year-old son, after his murder by American terrorists, and said: "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life." And that is precisely what Mamie Till Mobley did until her death in 2003. Her commitment to justice had nothing to do with naïveté. When Mississippi officials tried to keep any images of Emmett's brutalized body out of the press—his head had swollen to five times its normal size—Mamie Till Mobley held an open-casket service for all the world to see. That is the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.

Much of the future of democracy in America and the world hangs on grasping and preserving the rich democratic tradition that produced the Douglasses, Kings, Coltranes, and Mobleys in the face of terrorist attacks and cowardly assaults. Since 9/11 we have experienced the niggerization of America, and as we struggle against the imperialistic arrogance of the us-versus-them, revenge-driven policies of the Bush administration, we as a blues nation must learn from a blues people how to keep alive our deep democratic energies in dark times rather than resort to the tempting and easier response of militarism and authoritarianism.

No democracy can flourish against the corruptions of plutocratic, imperial forces—or withstand the temptations of militarism in the face of terrorist hate—without a citizenry girded by these three moral pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. The hawks and proselytizers of the Bush administration have professed themselves to be the guardians of American democracy, but there is a deep democratic tradition in this country that speaks powerfully against their nihilistic, antidemo-
cratic abuse of power and that can fortify genuine democrats today in the fight against imperialism. That democratic fervor is found in the beacon calls for imaginative self-creation in Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the dark warnings of imminent self-destruction in Herman Melville, in the impassioned odes to democratic possibility in Walt Whitman. It is found most urgently and poignantly in the prophetic and powerful voices of the long black freedom struggle—from the democratic eloquence of Frederick Douglass to the soaring civic sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., in the wrenching artistic honesty of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and in the expressive force and improvisatory genius of the blues/jazz tradition, all forged in the night side of America and defying the demeaning strictures of white supremacy. The greatest intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual resources in America that may renew the soul and preserve the future of American democracy reside in this multiracial, rich democratic heritage.

Let us not be deceived: the great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy. This is as much or more a colossal fight over visions and ideas as a catastrophic struggle over profits and missiles. Globalization is inescapable—the question is whether it will be a democratic globalization or a U.S.-led corporate globalization (with thin democratic rhetoric). This is why what we think, how we care, and the way we fight mean so much now in democracy matters. We live in a propitious yet perilous moment in which it has become fashionable to celebrate the benefits of imperial rule and acceptable to condone the decline of democratic governance. The pervasive climate of opinion and the prevailing culture of consumption
make it difficult for us to even imagine the revival of the deep democratizing energies of our past and conceive of making real progress in the fight against imperialism.

But we must remember that the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens' desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites. This desire is predicated on an awakening among the populace from the seductive lies and comforting illusions that sedate them and a moral channeling of new political energy that constitutes a formidable threat to the status quo. This is what happened in the 1860s, 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s in American history. Just as it looked as if we were about to lose the American democratic experiment—in the face of civil war, imperial greed, economic depression, and racial upheaval—in each of these periods a democratic awakening and activistic energy emerged to keep our democratic project afloat. We must work and hope for such an awakening once again.