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- 1 As a method, (conceptual) instrument, or form of redescription, pragmatism has been severely criticized since its inception in the late-nineteenth century. It has been attacked for supporting American imperialism (James), for being depressingly anemic and ultimately utterly ineffectual (Dewey), or for being unbearably frivolous, decadent, and cynical (Rorty). Nowadays, however, it seems that pragmatism's fate has changed decidedly. The much-debated revival or renaissance of pragmatism, for which Rorty has prepared the ground since the 1970's, has demonstrated the multilayered complexity of this way of thinking and of grasping the relation between theory and practice. In view of pragmatism's undeniable success in various fields, from literary studies to law (see Dickstein), the question inevitably arises: Why pragmatism? To put this somewhat differently, one wonders what exactly pragmatism has to offer. What is pragmatism good for? One answer is certainly that this way of thinking offers a possibility of bringing it all together, as it were: antifoundationalism, antiessentialism, nominalism, historicism, fallibilism *and* antiskepticism, meliorism, and an antitheoretical stance which at the same time ought to be seen as a resistance to the general resistance to theory. Whereas a materialist theoretician such as Fredric Jameson, for instance, has always put an emphasis on the utmost importance of the conceptual instrument of mediation, pragmatism, in its antisystematicity and governed by an anti-Hegelian gesture, seeks to make clear that one does not need any of these old-fashioned instruments in order to recognize the intimate interwovenness of pragmatic (anti-)theory and liberal pluralism.
- 2 Yet it is not only Hegelian Marxism and Marxist literary and aesthetic theory which are no longer of any use, if one follows most neopragmatists, but also poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches. Concerning the relationship between pragmatism, Marxism, and poststructuralism, Morris Dickstein underlines that "pragmatism has

come to be seen as an American alternative, an escape from the abstraction of theory [Marxism] and the abyss of nihilism [poststructuralism]" (Dickstein 16). Giles Gunn contends that "over the next decade or two pragmatism may well prove to be the most intellectually resilient American response to the quicksands and carapaces of cultural postmodernism" (Gunn 7).

- 3 Dickstein and Gunn seem to maintain that pragmatism as a theoretical practice strengthens our position in the confrontation with other theoretical approaches. Not only is pragmatism a philosophy which critiques abstractions and absolutes and which is clearly oriented toward practice and action, but it also helps and guides us in our search for method. Following Dickstein, pragmatism in its contemporary version "is less an attack on the foundations of knowledge, as it was portrayed by its early critics, than a search for method when the foundations have already crumbled" (Dickstein 16). It is crucial to see that Stanley Fish would object to this that it comes close to another version of antifoundationalist theory hope. What we finally have to understand, in other words, is that pragmatism does not offer anything to us, not even a method. Concerning his interpretation of pragmatism, his essay with the somewhat unusual title "Truth and Toilets" is surely the most valuable text. In this piece, originally the afterword to the volume edited by Dickstein, Fish makes clear that

pragmatism should itself know enough not to promise anything, or even to recommend anything. If pragmatism is true, it has nothing to say to us; no politics follows from it or is blocked by it; no morality attaches to it or is enjoined by it (Fish 295).

- 4 In Fish's account, pragmatism has no firm outline, and this vagueness or amorphousness has two advantages. First, a way of thinking so protean is a bad target for its enemies because they do not know what to hit and where to attack it. Second, because of its vagueness, pragmatism is incapable of serving as a successor theory, a new foundation, to the foundationalist theories whose shortcomings and inadequacies it has illuminated. One of the most interesting aspects of this text is that one could almost speak of a disappearance of pragmatism with regard to Fish's depiction of it: "Pragmatism may be the one theory – if it is a theory – that clears the field not only of its rivals but of itself, at least as a positive alternative" (Fish 299). Discussing essays by Richard J. Bernstein, Richard Poirier, and James T. Kloppenberg, Fish stresses that "nothing follows from pragmatism, not democracy, not a love of poetry, not a mode of doing history" (Fish 304). In view of the fact that pragmatism delivers no method, the question arises as to what it can be good for.
- 5 The answer to this question, if one follows Fish, consists of two parts. First, pragmatism teaches us that all we need can be found in the world of practices (and it thus shows us that we already have everything we need due to our embeddedness in local specific situations). Second, pragmatism teaches us that we live in a rhetorical world. As regards the first point, Fish's stripped-down version of pragmatism emphasizes the sufficiency of human practices, as well as the idea that this way of thinking, despite the fact that it delivers no method, assures us "that in ordinary circumstances there will usually be something to be done" (Fish 307). Pragmatism as an (anti-)philosophy of little steps, of small patchwork solutions, temporary stopgaps, and creative and experimental tinkering inevitably leads us back to the solidity and plasticity of the world which is shaped and constantly reshaped (or redescribed) by human beings. The way we are in this world of practice is utterly independent of the theoretical account we sometimes, in certain situations, give of those practices. Our theoretical narratives

or vocabularies will never have the desired consequences in the world of practice. In the confrontation with the solidity of this world of practice, and solidity here paradoxically means contingency, transience, and history, theory can only be considered a large blurry fantasy.

- 6 Whereas Fish would answer the aforementioned question "Why pragmatism?" by calling attention to pragmatism's disappearance as a positive alternative or method, Mark Bauerlein, in *The Pragmatic Mind*, argues that (Rortyan) pragmatism should be regarded as "a justification for making criticism into an instrument for social reform" (Bauerlein xi). Bauerlein speaks of an "appealing political impulse of the new pragmatism," and he avers that while Nietzschean, Foucauldian, and de Manian forms of antifoundationalism, antirealism, and antirepresentation-alism inevitably lead to "a nihilistic assertion of the loss of transcendence," neopragmatism "interprets antirepresentationalism as the happy fore-ground of a reconstruction of culture and criticism" (Bauerlein xv). Although Bauerlein ignores the political side of deconstruction, which has become increasingly obvious in the last two decades (think of the questions of deconstruction and ethics, deconstruction and law, and deconstruction and Marxism), his emphasis on the political impulses of neopragmatism is particularly valuable. This article wants to contribute to a discussion of those political impulses by concentrating on the question of pragmatism and race. Since the 1980's, the question of the color of pragmatism has slowly but steadily gained in importance (see, for example, Hutchinson, Lawson and Koch, and Posnock). In order to elucidate one possibility of approaching this complex question, I wish to discuss James Baldwin's essays. It is argued that his essays can be used to show the significance of a middle ground between Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism, as a political endeavor radically criticizing late capitalism, and Richard Rorty's liberal version of neopragmatism. Baldwin was of course not a pragmatist in the full sense of the word, yet there are many elements of his thought which make it seem legitimate to state that, at least to a certain degree, he is part of a genealogy of black pragmatism that reaches from W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke to West.
- 7 Concerning Baldwin's position between West and Rorty, one can formulate this as follows: Instead of a political radicalism that aims at revolutionary praxis, as developed by West in the late 1970's and 1980's, Baldwin favors a moralism that offers the individual room for creative forms of self-renewal. In the early 1970's, however, Baldwin briefly did present himself as a socialist radical. Whereas a Rortyan liberal scenario insinuates that there is no necessity to radically change the status quo and thus directs attention to the advantages of a literary or poeticized culture offering the possibility of constantly developing new forms of self-creation and new redescriptions, Baldwin urges his readers to realize that political and cultural change is unavoidable and urgently needed in order to achieve black freedom and a genuinely humane society. In other words, in Baldwin's essays, moral commitment, the notion of political change, and the idea of self-creation are combined in a way that indirectly critiques leftist radical politics, on the one hand, and nonchalant liberal gestures of self-transformation and self-renewal, on the other. Moreover, a discussion of Baldwin's essays can be useful in order to illustrate the productive tension between what might be termed the worldliness of pragmatism, on the one hand, and the creative and innovative work of the strong poet who strives to prepare the establishment of a postmetaphysical literary or poeticized culture, on the other.

1. Cornel West's Prophetic and Worldly Pragmatism

- 8 The story Cornel West tells in *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989) is one with a host of characters. It is a complicated and fragmented narrative, full of partly unexpected twists and turns. West knows how to tell a good story, and he therefore knows that the beginning of a story is of utmost importance. He does not begin with the usual suspects, that is, James, Peirce, and Dewey, but instead tries to elucidate the prehistory of American pragmatism by discussing Emerson. While he is certainly not the only one who sees Emerson as belonging to the prehistory of American pragmatism - others would, for instance, suggest that one ought to consider Whitman as the main precursor of pragmatism - his argumentation to support this idea seems particularly convincing. His genealogy of pragmatism reaches from Emerson, James, Peirce, and Dewey through Sidney Hook, C. Wright Mills, W.E.B. Du Bois, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Lionel Trilling to W.V. Quine and Richard Rorty.
- 9 West closes his book with an explication of his notion of prophetic pragmatism. Not only does he underline the renewed importance of pragmatism in the late 1980's, but he also contends that, in a time designated by many as postmodern, pragmatism might again appear attractive because of "its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse." Further, pragmatism might turn out to be capable of satisfying "a yearning for principled resistance and struggle" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 4). Throughout his text, West directs his readers' attention to the productive tension between pragmatism's insights and blindneses, its obvious strengths and its no less obvious weaknesses. Although West realizes the plurality of possible pragmatisms, he maintains that this heterogeneity must not prevent one from seeing that pragmatism always aims at expanding (creative) democracy and enriching individuality. He interprets pragmatism as a future-oriented instrumental-ism which uses thought as a weapon for more effective action and vocabularies as tools for coping with the world.
- 10 In order to fully understand the Westian notion of pragmatism as a future-oriented instrumentalism, one should keep in mind the broader context of discussion, a context which is of special interest to (New) Americanists. In the last three decades, approaches such as (New) American Studies, feminist studies, feminist legal studies, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory, to name but a few, have drawn attention to the interrelation of theory and practice, that is, they have vehemently underscored that theory ought to be seen as critical practice. To a certain degree, they argue, practice needs (provisional, tentative, and heuristic) theoretical foundations, yet at the same time theory is dependent on practice. Theorist-activists have made it sufficiently clear that political practice, that is, situatedness, contextuality, historicity, and contingency, shapes our theory. In other words, theoretical work is viewed as contributing to social change, it has consequences in the practical world, the messy world of everyday life, and political activism is seen as shaping our theories. It is important to grasp that, while a sophisticated leftist version of neopragmatism has to problematize some of these ideas, it contends that the point of theorizing is to contribute to social change, it wants theory to have consequences in history.
- 11 In his introduction to *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West stresses the Americanness of pragmatism when he writes:

I understand American pragmatism as a specific historical and cultural product of American civilization, a particular set of social practices that articulate certain American desires, values, and responses and that are elaborated in institutional apparatuses principally controlled by a significant slice of the American middle class (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 4-5).

- 12 In West's account, the American evasion of philosophy - that is, the pragmatists' radical critique and evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy - has led to a profound change in the conception of philosophy. Because of this evasion, philosophy has slowly but steadily turned into a kind of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is continually questioned and debated. What this means is that this swerve from epistemology or abstract pure philosophy in general has led not to a radical dismissal of philosophy but to its reconception as a form of cultural criticism which is politically engaged and which, at least in its Westian version, can be understood as a kind of American leftist critique. As West puts it,

[i]n this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 5).

- 13 By emphasizing the political and moral aspects of American pragmatism, West shows that he regards his genealogical account as an explicitly political endeavor. This signifies that his cultural commentary wants to explain America to itself from a decidedly leftist vantage point. His version of a worldly pragmatism is supposed to resuscitate leftist politics in the U.S. West offers an admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation of one of the major progressive traditions in the U.S., and by doing so he not only addresses the profound crisis of the 1980's American Left, but he also hopes to "inspire and instruct contemporary efforts to remake and reform American society and culture" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 7). His gesture of hope and resistance insists on the fact that pragmatism should be considered an indigenous and rich source of leftist politics in the U.S., and this leads to his suggestion that his conception of prophetic pragmatism

serves as the culmination of the American pragmatist tradition; that is, it is a perspective and project that speaks to the major impediments to a wider role of pragmatism in American thought (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 7).

- 14 This is certainly not a modest proposal, but one ought to note that pragmatist ideas were already central to *Prophesy Deliverance!*. West's preoccupation with pragmatism therefore has a longer history. While the primary concern of *Prophesy Deliverance!* was the establishment of a fruitful dialogue between black liberation theology and progressive Marxism, it was also informed by pragmatism's notions of historicism, antifoundationalism, and fallibilism. Pragmatism, as West put it, "provides an American context for Afro-American thought [...]" (West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* 21).
- 15 Following West, getting rid of all the misjudgments, myths, distortions, and stereotypes surrounding pragmatism would finally enable us to grasp that this way of thinking can be seen "as a component of a new and novel form of indigenous American oppositional thought and action [...]" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 8). It is

precisely the development of such an oppositional American cultural criticism that West sees as his task in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* and other texts.

- 16 Like Deweyan pragmatism, West's conception of prophetic pragmatism can be considered a continuation, and a creative revision, of Emerson's evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy. In a Deweyan manner, the radical historicist and fallibilist West rejects a spectator theory of knowledge, the quest for certainty, and the search for immutable foundations, and he attempts to contribute to the promotion of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy. It is important to note, however, that West's neopragmatism strives to go beyond the tradition of pragmatism, that is, it builds on the tradition which reaches from Emerson to Rorty and, at the same time, it radicalizes it. Combining insights of theorists as varied as Emerson, James, Dewey, Du Bois, Hook, Mills, Niebuhr, and Trilling, West's contention is that his prophetic pragmatism makes the "political motivation and political substance of the American evasion of philosophy explicit" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 213). Four main characteristics of West's prophetic and worldly pragmatism should be mentioned. First, it is a form of cultural and social criticism. Second, it sees itself as part of an emancipatory leftist political project and as an emancipatory social experimentalism. Third, it is religiously inspired, that is, strongly influenced by the Christian tradition and by black liberation theology. Hence, it has a mediating function between Protestant Christianity and leftist romanticism. Finally, it presents itself as a form of tragic thought. Since his early texts, West's blues sensibility has been a crucial aspect of his thinking, that is, he, firmly rooted in the tradition of black liberation theology and its understanding of suffering, pain, resistance, and struggle, emphasizes that there are always hope and the possibility of human (collective) agency in the confrontation with the tragic. As a form of "third-wave left romanticism," West's prophetic pragmatism "tempers its utopian impulse with a profound sense of the tragic character of life and history" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 228).
- 17 However, it does not succumb to this tragic character, but rather presents itself as a philosophy of struggle, a philosophy of praxis – a cultural criticism that draws its strength from an American and African American tradition of leftist resistance. As regards the notion of struggle, West points out: "Human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism, a struggle guided by a democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity, and tempered by the recognition of human finitude and frailty" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 229). As far as the utopian and revolutionary gestures underlying prophetic pragmatism are concerned, West maintains: "It calls for utopian energies and tragic actions, energies and actions that yield permanent and perennial revolutionary, rebellious, and reformist strategies that oppose the status quos of our day" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 229). West drives his point home when he concisely explicates that "the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is tragic action with revolutionary intent, usually reformist consequences, and always visionary outlook" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 229). The vehemence and intensity of West's sentences remind one of his most radical book to date, *Prophesy Deliverance!*. Although he speaks of 'reformist consequences' in the last quotation, these passages unequivocally indicate that pragmatism and liberalism do not necessarily have to go hand in hand, that they do not always have to be intimately interwoven. What we read here are not the words of a nonchalant bourgeois pragmatist who tries to rhetorically convince us that we had better refrain from wanting anything other than a late-

capitalist liberal bourgeois society. Rather, it becomes repeatedly obvious in his text that West intends to build leftist coalitions that involve various oppositional social movements ranging from racial, ethnic, religious, class, and gender to gay and lesbian movements.

- 18 In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West Americanizes leftist theory and practice; he seeks "to accent the specificity of American left possibilities" (West 2001: 358). Prophetic pragmatism, as West makes clear, considers itself the culmination of the major American progressive tradition of cultural criticism, and it is shaped by the American intellectual and political situation of the 1980s. Relating prophetic pragmatism's American roots and the question of postmodern difference, West writes:

Prophetic pragmatism arrives on the scene as a particular American intervention conscious and critical of its roots, and radically historical and political in its outlook. Furthermore, it gives prominence to the plight of those peoples who embody and enact the "postmodern" themes of degraded otherness, subjected alienness, and subaltern marginality, that is, the wretched of the earth (poor peoples of color, women, workers). (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 237)

Prophetic pragmatism, as mentioned above, wants to contribute to the resuscitation of Left politics in the U.S., and it tries to function as a means of empowering formerly marginalized voices in postmodern times. Clearly, it is strongly influenced by European traveling theories such as Marxism, structuralism, discourse analysis, and to a certain extent poststructuralism, but "it remains in the American grain" (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* 239).

2. Richard Rorty and the Idea of a Literary or Poeticized Culture

- 19 At the end of the eighteenth century, European linguistic practices changed at an enormously fast rate, and redescription became ever more radical in nature. The poet, in the broad sense of someone who wants to make it new, the maker of new words or the shaper of new and exciting languages, contributed to this acceleration of cultural change to a remarkable degree. Strong poets, in the sense of people who constantly long to redescribe many things in new ways, who use words as they have never been used before, and who desire to expand the power of the human imagination, make us realize the importance of self-creation, self-fashioning and redescription in a literary or poeticized culture. The strong poet as the creator of a new vocabulary can be P.B. Shelley elaborating on the power of the "unacknowledged legislators of the World" (*A Defence of Poetry*), or Hegel moving at the limits of syntax and letting us realize that it is perfectly legitimate to advance the argument that sublation is but a form of innovative redescription.
- 20 Redescriptions offered by strong poets such as, for instance, Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Proust, Joyce, and Adorno will provoke other people to change the way they speak, and it is this change of language that will eventually contribute to a profound cultural change. The idea of a literary or poeticized culture and the notion of the power of redescription are two provocative aspects of Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). Following Rorty, his liberal utopia would be a poeticized culture. The beginnings of this kind of culture can be detected at the end of the eighteenth century with the emergence of new vocabularies, but it has not yet been fully realized. A liberal poeticized culture in its fully realized form would be antifoundationalist, antiessentialist, nominalist, fallible, and historicist through and through. Such a poeticized culture urges us to grasp that only strong poets and Rortyan liberal ironists fully recognize the importance of

contingency and the power of radical redescription, and that we should therefore strive to imitate the strong poet's Nietzschean self-knowledge as self-creation.

- 21 The idea of a post-Philosophical culture has preoccupied Richard Rorty since his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* (1967). It was central to many of the essays collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), and it played a decisive role in the last chapter ("Philosophy Without Mirrors") of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). In its most fully developed form, the idea of a post-Philosophical culture as poeticized culture is one of the primary aspects of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In all of these texts, Rorty underscores that he has no use for a traditional understanding of philosophy. In his opinion,
[i]nteresting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 9).
- 22 He describes his own way of doing philosophy when he summarizes the new method as follows:
The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 9).
- 23 The radical antifoundationalist and anti-Platonist Rorty redescribes the notion of philosophy as a foundational discipline, and this redescription directs attention to the idea of a postmetaphysical literary culture. Rorty's antifoundationalism should be seen as an important part of the attempt to de-divinize the world. We should no longer rely on and believe in foundations, we should no longer worship anything, we should face the consequences of secularization, and we should finally realize that our self, our language, and our community are governed by contingency. Rorty's ideal liberal democracy, and culture, would no longer need any foundations,
it would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 45).
- 24 In his description of his ideal poeticized culture, most of the crucial elements of his neopragmatist thinking come together: his antifoundationalism and antiessentialism, Davidsonian and Wittgensteinian nominalism, Hegelian historicism, Darwinian naturalism, Nietzschean and Proustian perspectivism, as well as his Freudian conception of the human self (see Schulenberg, "Wanting Lovers Rather than Knowers").
- 25 In one of his latest pieces, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," Rorty states a thesis which he has been repeating since the 1970's:
It is that the intellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature (Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" 8).
- 26 According to Rorty, we live in a (not fully realized) literary culture. The transition from a philosophical to a literary culture began with Hegel. It was with Hegel that

philosophy reached its most ambitious and presumptuous form, which almost instantly turned into its dialectical opposite; that is, the Hegelian system eventually turned out to be a kind of utterly unironical, self-consuming artefact. Hegel's system was serious in its desire to depict things as they really were and it sought to fit everything into a single context. This also signifies, of course, that it pretended to represent the totality. Rorty contends:

Since Hegel's time, the intellectuals have been losing faith in philosophy. This amounts to losing faith in the idea that redemption can come in the form of true beliefs. In the literary culture that has been emerging during the last two hundred years, the question 'Is it true?' has yielded to the question 'What's new?' (Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" 9).

- 27 In today's literary culture, philosophy and religion have become marginal, they appear as only optional literary genres. A literary culture still offers the possibility of redemption, but the kind of redemption has changed. Thus Rorty points out:

As I am using the terms "literature" and "literary culture," a culture that has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy finds redemption neither in a noncognitive relation to a nonhuman person nor in a cognitive relation to propositions, but in noncognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. These artifacts provide a sense of alternative ways of being human (Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" 10).

- 28 What this also means is that the search for God was replaced by the striving for Truth, and that the latter has finally been replaced by the search for novelty and by the recognition that redemption can only be found in human creations and artifacts and not in the escape from the temporal to the eternal or transcendental.
- 29 How does Rorty define the members of a literary culture, the literary intellectuals? His understanding of the function of the literary intellectual combines a Bloomian interpretation of the autonomy of the self with Emersonian self-reliance. A literary intellectual has constant doubts about the (final) vocabulary she is currently using, she does not want to get stuck in it. She longs to become acquainted with other ways of speaking, other ways of interpreting the purpose of life. For that reason she reads as many books as possible. By becoming acquainted with so many alternative vocabularies and ways of being human, the literary intellectual enlarges her self. Because of her reading, she is introduced to a great number of alternative purposes, and ways of expressing those purposes, and she is thus given the possibility of radically questioning traditional vocabularies and explanations. To put it simply, the literary intellectual's reading leads to her self-creation, it offers her the possibility of creating an autonomous self. Rorty apparently agrees with Harold Bloom that the more books you have read, the more descriptions and redescrptions you have come across, the more human and at the same time autonomous you become. A Rortyan and Bloomian autonomous self puts a premium on the attempt to creatively expand the present limits of the human imagination, and it also seeks to demonstrate that the development from religion (God) to philosophy (Truth) to literature (novelty, imagination, redescription) is a story of increasing self-reliance.
- 30 In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty explains the relation between redescription and self-creation as follows:

We redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past, in those terms and compare the results with alternative redescrptions which use the vocabularies of alternative

figures. We ironists hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 80).

- 31 However, redescription does not only work on the personal level. Rorty has repeatedly emphasized that, instead of a set of foundations, liberal culture needs an improved self-description. He comments on the task of redescribing liberalism thus:

We need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be 'poeticized' rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be 'rationalized' or 'scientized.' That is, we need to substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace 'passion' or fantasy with 'reason' (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 53).

- 32 It is crucial to understand that, in a poeticized culture, literary criticism is the presiding intellectual discipline. Liberal ironists think of literary critics as moral advisers because the latter have read many books and are therefore acquainted with many different vocabularies. Moreover, literary critics can offer new perspectives, since they are often capable of bringing together books and authors which have hitherto been considered as incompatible. The critics' syntheses of, for instance, Nietzsche and Mill or Marx and Baudelaire or Sartre and Proust are examples of the power of creative redescrptions. Yet Rorty's contention is that the idea of ironist literary intellectuals governing a liberal poeticized culture and engaging in literary criticism in the broadest sense has to be problematized insofar as there is still a gap between those intellectuals and the public. They belong to a kind of avant-garde because they have the leisure and the money to spend most of their time reading books and redescribing persons and things. It is their job to convince the public, which consists mostly of metaphysicians, of the advantages of a nominalist and historicist literary culture. Rorty writes:

The rise of literary criticism to preeminence within the high culture of the democracies – its gradual and only semiconscious assumption of the cultural role once claimed (successively) by religion, science, and philosophy – has paralleled the rise in the proportion of ironists to metaphysicians among the intellectuals. This has widened the gap between the intellectuals and the public. For metaphysics is woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 82).

- 33 The story I have been telling so far is one of increasing self-reliance, that is, it is an Emersonian story about the strong poet's desire for self-creation in a liberal poeticized culture. However, one ought to see that this is not only a story that centers on self-reliance and self-creation but also on fear. One might even say that it begins with fear. Rorty apparently follows Bloom in arguing that poetry begins in fear. The profound fear of the poet is to wake up one day and find himself in a world he has not made, an inherited world. To put it another way, the poet fears to end his days in a world to which he has contributed nothing of distinction and which he has not creatively changed. The story of the strong poet's self-reliance begins with his "anxiety of influence," that is to say with his "horror of finding himself to be only a copy or replica" (Bloom 80). The poet fears that his most important creations do not really belong to him, but that they are the results of unconscious impressions which a stronger, more radical and impressive poet has left on his mind. Continually anxious about these impressions and their destructive effects on his work, the strong poet has to decide that he wants to get rid of them and that he does not want to be influenced by other poets. He wants to create his own impressions and leave his own mark on the

world. He desires to leave his impressions on others and to redescribe the idiosyncracies of his individual self in a way that makes it attractive to others.

- 34 The strong poet, fearing to be regarded as a mere copy or replica, eventually finds out that by describing himself in his own terms he creates himself. Confronting his own contingency, acknowledging and appropriating it, is synonymous with the creative invention of a new language or a new set of metaphors. Following Rorty, the final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy might also be interpreted as the final victory of idiosyncratic metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery. Instead of the will to truth which governed a philosophical culture, a post-Philosophical or literary culture would be dominated by the Nietzschean will to self-overcoming and self-creation.

3. James Baldwin and Pragmatism

- 35 Worldly Pragmatists and strong poets or liberal redescrivers do not need (grand) theory. Whereas West's contention is that one ought to illuminate the necessity and possibility of provisional, heuristic, tentative, and revisable theories, Rorty maintains that the idea of a nominalist and historicist literary culture allows one to realize the utmost importance of new vocabularies, new sets of metaphors, and creative and innovative redescrptions. Both versions of neopragmatism reject abstract and totalizing theories. It is interesting to see that, right at the beginning of his first volume of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin radically critiques the abstraction of theory and principles and confronts them with the priority of practice (here: "the demands of life"):

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one own's moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 9).

- 36 Abstraction can only fail since it is incapable of grasping the complexity, ambiguity, irony, and paradox of black life in the U.S. Moreover, theory ought to be understood as critique in the sense of theoretical practice. This kind of practice longs to see the consequences of theory in history. One might feel tempted to advance the argument that the quoted sentence does not imply a total rejection of theory and that Baldwin's texts rather show that, in a Jamesian and Westian manner, fallibilism, tentativeness, *and* antiskepticism come together and urge one to revise one's understanding of the task theory has to fulfill. However, at the same time, one should note that throughout his essays Baldwin puts an emphasis on precisely that which escapes the grasp of theories, abstractions, and principles: the singularity of all human experience, the particularity of pain (the horrors of black life), the power of individual resistance, the fragmentary and contingent character of human life, the possibilities of individual self-creation, human finitude (the tragedy and reality of death), and individual moral commitment in the face of uncertainty, absurdity, and paradox.
- 37 In a manner that reminds one of William James's worldly pragmatism, Baldwin calls attention to "that dense, many-sided and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 44). Undoubtedly, Baldwin often leaves his readers the impression that he is striving to penetrate through the veil of appearances, myths, misjudgments, and distorting prejudices to the really real or the Truth. In other words, the appearance-reality distinction, which Rorty has been criticizing since the 1970's and which is central to metaphysical thought, often

governs Baldwin's essays. Nonetheless, Baldwin's aforementioned description of the world we live in, the world we *make*, could also be used to characterize an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist culture that no longer needs the certainty and reliability of what is more than another human invention. Simply put, Baldwin is of course not a postmetaphysical writer, yet he often prefers making to finding or discovering. We make our world, constantly change and redescribe it in creative and innovative ways, and we also have to embrace our responsibility, as far as the question of political and moral commitment is concerned, in the confrontation with contingency and uncertainty. Following Lawrie Balfour, Baldwin's essays reorient "the focus from the level of principle to the murky region between principle and practice" (Balfour 20). Balfour expands on this point as follows:

The dual conviction that principles cannot be conceived or elaborated apart from human experiences and that those experiences repeatedly undermine the possibility that the principles will be realized lends an indispensable ambivalence to Baldwin's writing. The ferocity of his moralizing stems from an acute awareness of the distance between principles and practice, and yet his appreciation of human finitude makes him suspicious of the meanings of the principles themselves (Balfour 17).

- 38 In this 'murky region between principle and practice,' which is indeed a realm of 'ambivalence,' and the realm of writing, Baldwin manages to radically question transcendence and metaphysics without being able to leave metaphysical thinking completely behind. Baldwin, it seems, needs the tension of the in-between, the interplay of theory and practice, in order to sketch the possibility of establishing a new practice. In this new practice, as he made notoriously clear in his essays on Richard Wright, it would no longer be possible to make an abstraction of the individual black man or woman. I do not intend to discuss Baldwin's critique of Wright's naturalism in detail here, yet some aspects of this critique are important for our purposes. Insisting on the fact that "literature and sociology are not one and the same," Baldwin argues that the protest novel, far from disturbing American society, "is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 19). Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" concentrates on Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but it ends with a severe critique of Wright's *Native Son*. According to Baldwin, Wright's novel does not pay sufficient attention to the aforementioned "demands of life." It rejects life and denies the complexity and ambiguity of black existence. To put this somewhat differently, the Wrightian protest novel succumbs to the temptation of simplifying abstractions and categorizations. As Baldwin writes,

The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 23).

- 39 Abstract categorizations, if one follows Baldwin's line of argument, belong to the field of sociology and its theoretical approaches; when applied to literature they can only lead to stasis and the depiction of one-dimensional characters. In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin suggests that, in *Native Son*, a crucial dimension of black life has been completely ignored or omitted. This dimension, as he underlines, is

the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. What the novel reflects – and at no point interprets – is the isolation of the Negro within his

own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 35).

40 The climate of anarchy, fury, and violence thus created "has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of intercourse [...]" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 35-6). Bigger appears as an utterly isolated and atomized character without a past and without any kind of cultural tradition which he might use as a source of strength and resistance. Furthermore, he is depicted as a young man who has never been offered the possibility of grasping the meaning of racial solidarity and who also seems to be without any kind of future possibility (the element of utopia). Hence, Bigger appears as trapped in a static present, deprived of the possibility of change. In the context of our argumentation, one might claim that what Baldwin primarily criticizes is that Bigger is never given the possibility of creating a self. In the protest novel, in other words, blacks are represented as helpless victims of white supremacy, giving in to the enormous pressures of white society, and self-creation is a goal utterly out of reach. In confronting the complexity of contingency, the demands of life, and the potential of change, a black redescrber may develop new forms of self-creation and thereby sketch new kinds of solidarity and innovative forms of resistance which may eventually lead to future social change. This scenario, or so Baldwin seems to hold, is incompatible with the depiction of black life in Wright's *Native Son*.

41 Baldwin's understanding of self-creation is another crucial aspect when one wishes to demonstrate his significance for a genealogy of black pragmatism. In Irving Howe's opinion, Baldwin "wanted to enter the world of freedom, grace, and self-creation" (Howe 134). Robert Penn Warren, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, points out: "What Baldwin has most powerfully created is a self. That is his rare and difficult work of art" (Warren 297). A discussion of Baldwin's notion of self-creation inevitably leads to the antiessentialism of his concept of identity. Identity, as Baldwin demonstrates, is not fixed, not accomplished, not permanent, that is to say, it is to be understood as impure, transient, profoundly unstable, and plural. In Baldwin's texts there can be found many Nietzschean, Bloomian, or Rortyan gestures of self-creation, and idiosyncratic metaphors of self-creation are clearly given priority over metaphors of discovery (here: discovering the real and authentic self). As a self-reliant redescrber who desires self-creation, self-trust, and self-overcoming, Baldwin must never accept somebody else's description of himself. Longing for self-creation and self-renewal, and the creative invention of a new language, new vocabularies, or a new set of metaphors, he vehemently underscores the particularity of his independent black self and voice. He creates himself as a writer:

Well, I had said that I was going to be a writer, God, Satan, and Mississippi notwithstanding, and that color did not matter, and that I was going to be free. And, here I was, left with only myself to deal with. It was entirely up to me (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* xiii).

42 Like Rorty, Baldwin seems to hold that the U.S. is the ideal country for self-creation and self-renewal. American society is not fixed, and this fact is especially attractive to writers:

American writers do not have a fixed society to describe. The only society they know is one in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity. This is a rich confusion, indeed, and it creates for the American writer unprecedented opportunities (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* 11)

- 43 U.S. immigrants, in Baldwin's account, had "to make themselves over in the image of their new and unformed country" (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* 131). This creation of a new self, in the confrontation with a new culture, was difficult insofar as there "were no longer any universally accepted forms or standards" and "all the roads to the achievement of an identity had vanished" (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* 131). At the end of "In Search of a Majority," Baldwin argues that "[t]he one thing that all Americans have in common is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent" (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* 137). While this may sound as coming dangerously close to another version of American exceptionalism, one ought to see that Baldwin considers the possibilities of (American) self-creation as indispensable in the attempt to radically question American ideology, as well as American myths. Fighting white supremacy, black self-creation creatively redescribes American ideology. However, one might feel tempted to advance the argument that all this talk about self-creation seems too playful, frivolous, and even cynical in view of the history of blacks in the U.S. Black self-creation might be a stimulating endeavor for bookish intellectuals, but the majority of blacks have neither the time nor the money for such attempts at self-renewal and self-overcoming. Baldwin is well aware of this problem. In *No Name in the Street* he stresses that the question of black self-creation is of an almost existential nature. Following Baldwin, "to be born black in America is an immediate, a mortal challenge" (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 114). Moreover, "a people under the necessity of creating themselves must examine everything, and soak up learning the way the roots of a tree soak up water" (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 114). What this signifies is that self-creation is a means of fighting white supremacy, it is a necessary part of the black battle against discrimination and injustice. Blacks have to create themselves in order not to perish. Questioning everything, from his own identity as a black and a gay to the foundations and structures of American society, Baldwin was "free only in battle, never free to rest" (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 112).
- 44 Throughout his texts, Baldwin calls attention to the fact that, as far as self-creation is concerned, there are obvious limits for blacks. In "My Dungeon Shook," a letter to his nephew James, Baldwin explains to the teenager that white society has set limits to his ambition, that is, it will be very difficult for this young black to create himself in view of various obstacles:
- You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 7).
- 45 A visit to the ghetto of Chicago's South Side leads Baldwin to the following reflection:
- Here was the South Side – a million in captivity – stretching from this doorstep as far as the eye could see. And they didn't even read; depressed populations don't have the time or energy to spare (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 61).
- 46 What all this boils down to is that the question of self-creation in Baldwin does not necessarily have to be seen in connection with the advantages of an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist literary or poeticized culture. Rather, Baldwinian self-creation is primarily part of a political endeavor, a cultural criticism which critiques U.S. society and white supremacy and which, in a Westian manner, eventually leads to moral responsibility and commitment in the face of contingency, absurdity, and tragedy. In

his conversation with Margaret Mead, Baldwin states that he considers people "to be responsible, moral creatures who so often do not act that way. But I am not surprised when they do" (Mead 143).

47 Seeking to become "a truly moral human being," Baldwin contends that white people who rob blacks of their rights and their liberty have "no moral ground on which to stand" (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 47, 23). This last metaphor is somewhat misleading, as Baldwin in general does not favor the idea of a common ground in the form of a shared human attribute. To put it differently, he does not think that there is something like an ahistorical nature which unites us human beings, and that the existence of this ahistorical nature as our real core forces us to recognize the importance of our steadily increasing moral knowledge and thus calls attention to the fundamental nature of firm moral principles. In contrast to foundationalists and metaphysicians, Baldwin does not hold that we are morally lost without the acceptance of the idea that deep down inside us there is something which unites us as human beings, a kind of ahistorical, transcultural, and noncontingent core, and he moreover critiques the notion that we need a moral reference point and that in order to achieve moral progress we need moral principles.

48 I have already mentioned Baldwin's antiessentialism as far as the concept of identity is concerned. In Ross Posnock's discussion of Baldwin, this antiessentialism plays a crucial role. One of Posnock's primary concerns in *Color & Culture* is to illuminate the importance of pragmatism for the careers of twentieth-century black intellectuals, specifically W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. Du Bois and Locke, as Posnock submits, were profoundly influenced by William James's pragmatist pluralism, by his openness to the excluded and marginalized, and by his critique of traditional notions of identity. Regarding Locke's understanding of identity, for instance, Posnock writes: "In emphasizing the primacy of use rather than identity, Locke makes the pragmatist move that conceives identity not as antecedent essence but as an effect of action" (Posnock 11-12). Situating Baldwin within what he terms "the miscegenated lineage of pragmatist pluralism" (Posnock 223), Posnock argues that Baldwin strove to substitute a cosmopolitan nationalism for a racial essentialism. Posnock reads Baldwin as a "prophet of post-ethnicity" (Posnock 224) who demonstrated that black and white were obsolete and useless terms and who desired to contribute to the creation of a color-blind society. Baldwin's "dialectical cosmopolitanism" or "maverick cosmopolitanism" (Posnock 226, 235) was strongly opposed to ideologies of authenticity and purity and instead favored impurity, intermixture, miscegenation, creative invention, deracination, and the dispersal of identity. According to Posnock, Baldwin had to confront

the task faced by all pragmatist pluralists – turning identity from an accomplished fact that excludes and forecloses to a continuing practice of skepticism (Posnock 227).

49 Posnock is right in underlining that Baldwin often criticized America for being insufficiently motley, not plural and heterogeneous enough. America had not yet used its potential for otherness to a satisfying degree. Baldwin's self-creation wanted to draw attention to the complexity of this potential, and at the same time he intended for others to realize the possibility of creative self-renewal and self-overcoming for themselves. Baldwinian self-creation is described as follows by Posnock:

Baldwin performs an act of flagrant artifice, as he blends black and white, Europe and America, high and popular culture, into an assemblage designed to catalyze his

artistic birth. The "specialness" that emerges – the creation called James Baldwin – embodies what he calls "enormous incoherence" and Henry James calls a "hotch-potch." Which is to say he is utterly American (Posnock 237).

- 50 For our purposes, it is important to see that Baldwin's desire for political and social change became more intense and explicit in his later texts. Especially in *No Name in the Street*, this reorientation becomes obvious. Influenced by Malcolm X and later on by the Black Panthers around Huey Newton, Baldwin presents himself as a black socialist writer and partly even as a black radical and revolutionary who seeks to justify the use of arms in the fight for black freedom (cf. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 163-64). The intensity of Baldwin's proposals in the early 1970's reminds one of Cornel West in the 1980's, when he developed his own brand of democratic socialism which reactivated the heritage of American pragmatism, drew on the resources of black liberation theology, and which at the same time put a stress on the indispensability yet insufficiency of Marxism. As regards the question of socialism in the U.S., Baldwin states:

Huey believes, and I do, too, in the necessity of establishing a form of socialism in this country – what Bobby Seale would probably call a 'Yankee Doodle type' socialism. This means an indigenous socialism, formed by, and responding to, the real needs of the American people (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 150).

- 51 He justifies his decision to call for the establishment of an indigenous socialism by directing attention to a broader context:

The necessity for a form of socialism is based on the observation that the world's present economic arrangements doom most of the world to misery; that the way of life dictated by these arrangements is both sterile and immoral; and, finally, that there is no hope for peace in the world so long as these arrangements obtain (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 150).

- 52 Baldwin makes it unequivocally clear that he is not talking about liberal piecemeal reform here, but rather about radical political and social change. A real commitment to black freedom in the U.S., as he maintains, "would have the effect of re-ordering all our priorities, and altering all our commitments" (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 153). Speaking "out of the most passionate love" (Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 166) for the U.S., and never faltering in the attempt to achieve his country, Baldwin throughout his career demonstrated that his idiosyncratic self-creation and the fate of his native country were inextricably entwined.

4. Conclusion

- 53 In my discussion of James Baldwin's essays, I have focused on three aspects. First, I have analyzed his understanding of theory, abstraction, and principles. Second, I have sought to elucidate the role self-creation, morality, and the concept of identity play in his texts. Finally, the question of political and social or cultural change has been of primary concern to me. It was argued that, to a certain extent, Baldwin could be considered part of a genealogy of black pragmatism as pluralism. The combination of pragmatist ideas that is characteristic of his work allows one to situate it between Cornel West's and Richard Rorty's versions of pragmatism. It would undoubtedly be pointless to claim that Baldwin is a radically postmetaphysical author and thus an ideal member of a pragmatist literary or poeticized culture. Yet his politicized version of self-creation makes it seem legitimate to advance the idea that one can regard him as part of a left-liberal tradition of worldly pragmatism that sees the work of the strong poet or creative redescriber as contributing to political and social change.

54 If there is a characteristic that unites pragmatists as varied as James, Dewey, Rorty, and West, apart from their critique of Platonist and Kantian epistemology, it is their strong emphasis upon the democratic potential of America (see Westbrook). The significance of pragmatism cannot be adequately grasped without considering the gesture of holding on to this democratic potential. It can be said that pragmatism accentuates and strives to expand democratic possibilities in the U.S. In his latest book, *Democracy Matters*, West illustrates the importance of Baldwin's thinking in this context. Following West, Baldwin was "the most fully Emersonian of democratic intellectuals" (West, *Democracy Matters* 78) in U.S. history. Furthermore, Baldwin's "artistic eloquence, dramatic insights, and prophetic fire put him at the center of democracy matters for over thirty years" (West, *Democracy Matters* 79). It is crucial to note that West avers that in Baldwin's account it is the conception of democracy developed by blacks that is the best means of confronting the crisis of moral decay in the U.S. Baldwin offers a hitherto neglected perspective from which to analyze the current dilemma:

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 (West, *Democracy Matters* 85).

55 While Baldwin was certainly not the first writer who used the 'lens of race' in order to analyze and eventually strengthen the deep democratic tradition in the U.S., his texts are still suggestive and stimulating since they illuminate the creative and political potential of a combination of three things: pragmatism as pluralism, the notion of democracy, and the category of race. A political and worldly strong poet or creative redescrber, Baldwin was a determined fighter for black freedom and autonomy, and at the same time his version of cultural criticism might be used to help prepare the establishment of a postmetaphysical literary or poeticized culture, a kind of culture, that is, in which man finally realizes that he or she no longer needs the certainty and reliability of what is more than another human invention. Baldwin, one may insinuate, would have liked this idea of a poeticized culture.

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ABSTRACTS

This article seeks to contribute to a discussion of pragmatism's political impulses. It concentrates on the hitherto somewhat neglected question of pragmatism and race. In order to elucidate one possibility of approaching this complex question, the article discusses James Baldwin's essays. It is argued that Baldwin's essays can be used to show the significance of a middle ground between Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism and Richard Rorty's liberal version of neopragmatism. While the first part analyzes West's prophetic and worldly pragmatism, the second part seeks to illuminate Rorty's notion of a pragmatist literary or poeticized culture. The final part demonstrates that while it would be pointless to claim that Baldwin is a radically postmetaphysical author and thus an ideal member of a literary culture, his politicized version of self-creation makes it seem legitimate to advance the argument that he is part of a left-liberal tradition of worldly pragmatism that sees the work of the strong poet or creative redecriber as contributing to political and social change.

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