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The Dilemma of Black Citizenship Perpetual Partiality and Patriotism

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"I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."

James Baldwin, *Notes from a Native Son*

The concepts of universal equality and suffrage have historically provided the necessary openings for those who are not rich or white or male to lay claim to the mantle of American bounty and patriotism. But all too often when black Americans and other Americans of color have been poised to make dramatic and sustainable progress, white political leaders have deployed rhetoric characterizing our protest as "un-patriotic" and "un-American;" arguing that those who critique the nation should "go back to where they came from."

These tropes of "patriotism" or "real Americans" have long been used to assert native-born white American ownership over 1) the physical territory of the United States, 2) the idea of American equality, and 3) the visual representation of who counts as an "American." Whether it be the "Redeemers" of the Reconstruction Era who needed to "save" the nation's political system from African Americans' corrupt natures; or the opponents of civil rights and Black Power who, rather than address the inequities in American society and begin to dismantle white supremacy, argued that the country needed "law and order;" or President Trump's resurrection of this bromide to tell four congresswomen of color to "go back and fix the broken and crime infested places from which they came;" the definitions of patriotism and "American" have all too often really been calls for nationalism. They have become tropes that help maintain white supremacy and exclude Americans of color from the full benefits of citizenship.

As a result, the greatest American patriots have most often been critical of America, doing all they could to prick the conscience of the country; to prod, cajole, confront, and shame both ordinary citizens and those in power into creating the “shining city on a hill” that America claimed to be. People like James Greene, Benjamin Boseman, Ella Baker, Mae Mallory, and James Baldwin were not often considered patriots. They were not widely celebrated in their lifetimes. But if we are to have a better understanding of what has made — and what might still make — America important, and if we are to redefine what love of country actually looks like, an appreciation of the historical and contemporary black freedom struggle is more necessary now than ever.

The passage, between 1865 and 1870, of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution at last allowed black Americans to be defined as “American.” And yet for the past century and a half black people have, for all practical purposes, been only partial-Americans. The activities of city, state, and federal agencies have thrown into stark relief just how partial black citizenship was — and continues to be. As historian [Eric Foner has written in *Slate magazine*](#) about black political participation during the Reconstruction Era, nearly 2,000 African American men held political office throughout the country during that time: including James Greene, a former slave who became an Alabama legislator. Foner quotes Greene as saying “When I was a slave, I didn’t know anything except to obey my master. But the tocsin of freedom sounded and I walked out like a man and shouldered my responsibilities.” People such as James Greene were patriots. African Americans performed their patriotic duty to help improve the country that professed a foundational belief in human equality by helping govern it in the best interests of all who lived there.

Despite their numbers, black politicians were often vilified and ridiculed. Foner writes that the Democratic press during Reconstruction referred to southern legislatures as “menageries” and “monkey houses.” Although the accusations were untrue, black lawmakers were monolithically portrayed as “ignorant, illiterate, propertyless, and... lack[ing] education.” In fact, after Reconstruction, Democrats in Georgia erased black lawmakers from the biographical sketches, which record service in the state legislature. Black lawmakers were partial-Americans at best, and white Americans asserted as their prerogative the capacity to erase both black Americans’ citizenship and service to the country.

Nor has the passage of decades eliminated this whitewashing. As [I have written elsewhere](#), in the mid-twentieth century black activist-intellectuals struggled against this perpetual partiality of American citizenship in New York (and beyond), pushing black New Yorkers to call systemic racial discrimination, and

the city that practiced it, what it was: Jim Crow New York. It was this perpetual partiality that compelled black activist-intellectuals to, patriotically, take the city and the nation to task for not living up to its ideals — to “criticize her perpetually,” in the words of James Baldwin. And it was this perpetual partiality that forced black activist-intellectuals to theorize northern racism in three-dimensional ways.

But, just as during Reconstruction, oppositional forces then too criticized black Americans for protesting inequality. Conservative intellectual William F. Buckley, debating James Baldwin at Cambridge University in 1965, [articulated a persistent, yet ahistorical, refrain](#) that should sound familiar today. “What should James Baldwin be doing,” Buckley asked, “other than telling us to renounce our civilization? He should be addressing his own people and urging them to take advantage of those opportunities which do exist. And urging us to make those opportunities wider.” Buckley continued: “Where Negroes are concerned, the danger, as far as I can see at this moment, is that they will seek to reach out for some sort of radical solution, on the basis of which the true problem is obscured. ...They seem to be slipping into some sort of Procrustean formulation which ends up by urging the advancement of the Negro less than the regression of white people.” The irony and condescension of his argumentation blindly assumed three things: that the systemic racial discrimination perpetuated by whites against blacks was black people’s problem to solve, that improving American society was a zero-sum game in which one group had to lose in order for another to advance, and that Buckley — as a white man — was entitled to diagnose the “true problem” black people faced in America. Buckley implied it was black Americans’ own fault they were not advancing within society at the same rate as whites. But he also suggested that black people needed to just stop complaining and appreciate everything that having-been-stolen-to-America had only partially afforded them. That black Americans ought to be, in other words, more patriotic.

But patriotism is not ritualistic. [It is not blind obedience](#) to the American flag, military institutions, or the president. Today, increasingly shrill calls for obedience as “patriotism” continue obscuring and ignoring fundamental problems facing these United States. Examples of this patriotism-as-obedience dictum abound, but one particularly biting one can be seen in the case of Colin Kaepernick, who was from 2011-2016 the quarterback of the NFL’s San Francisco 49ers. It was Kaepernick who, in 2016, made the crisis of police brutality against African American men and women part of our sporting culture by refusing to stand — and eventually taking a knee — during the national anthem. Instead of catalyzing, as he had hoped, a discussion about eradicating police brutality against black and Latino people, or about disparities within the criminal justice system, Kaepernick’s decision to kneel predictably became referendum

on [whether kneeling was unpatriotic](#), disrespectful of the flag and unsupportive of American service members. [President Trump, then still a candidate, told the country](#) (via Tweet of course) that Kaepernick should “find a country that works better than him” if systemic discrimination against people of color did not work for him. Trump’s eliding of the core issues of Kaepernick’s protest allowed many commentators — particularly, although not exclusively, conservatives — to avoid discussing police brutality against communities of color and instead question whether protestors loved the United States or deserved the rights of citizenship.

In telling Kaepernick to find another country, just as [he has done more recently](#) with congresswomen Ilhan Omar, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Ayana Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib, Donald Trump is using a well-worn historical trope to define Americans as white, patriotism as silent acceptance of the status quo, and protest as anti-American. When criticizing the congresswomen, not only is Trump relying on racist and xenophobic tropes dating at least to the First World War, he is clearly revisiting his own playbook of racist and xenophobic invective — a playbook he has been running for decades. Trump’s phrasing also reinforces an implicit association between people of color and criminality, as well as being at best partial — and certainly not “real” — Americans. Telling the four congresswomen to go back to where they came from excites Trump’s base; supporters who share his view that, when it comes to people of color, [citizenship is contingent upon their gratitude](#).

Donald Trump is no patriot. He cloaks himself in the American flag in order to stifle meaningful political discussion and legislative actions that could advance our realization of a more equitable society. But his strategy is old, not new. Kaepernick, Omar, Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, and Tlaib join the long line of real patriots, a line that includes James Baldwin and James Greene; a line composed of those who have loved their country enough to criticize it.

Actions, not objects, hold the potential for social and economic progress with regard to race, gender, sexuality, and religious openness. Be warned, it is to the detriment of our national historical memory that we continue to allow conservative political leaders and mainstream political outlets to [frame patriotism in such narrow](#), ahistorical, terms.

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