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RECONSTRUCTING THE NATION: AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT AND  
AMERICA'S STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

by

ALEKSANDR ZAMALIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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by

ALEKSANDR ZAMALIN

Adviser: Professor Uday Singh Mehta

This dissertation examines how twentieth-century African American intellectuals engaged American political cultural beliefs central to American identity. A prominent argument of American political thinkers has been that the liberal-democratic ideals of freedom, equality, representative government, the rule of law, tolerance and civic obligation are what make Americans a unique people. From the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the late twentieth-century such an argument provided American politicians, social movements and intellectuals a strong justification for divergent political claims, from Cold War warriors calling for the containment of Soviet Communism, to Civil Rights activists calling for racial integration to neoconservatives calling for the dismantlement of the social welfare state. This dissertation studies how one group of African American intellectuals writing in this period, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, sought to provide counter-cultural narratives to dominant American understandings of freedom, democracy and generosity. I examine these revisions to shed light on each thinker's theoretical contributions, our understanding of the politics and art of African American intellectuals and the canon of political thought itself.

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Max Burkey was formative for the project. I am truly grateful for our enlivening conversations about writing, cultural criticism, radicalism and the meaning of intellectual commitment. Over the past five years, Jeffrey Broxmeyer's sharp-eye, endless generosity and stimulating thoughts on American culture were indispensable. Steve Pludwin's sharp wit and

uncanny ability to move seamlessly from pop culture to high theory, from the woodshop to the classroom has been inspirational.

To my good friend and colleague, Dan Skinner, I owe special thanks. It's impossible to catalogue all the things he has contributed to this project. Among those that deserve mention, Dan gave his time reading draft upon draft, helped me sharpen many of the project's central ideas, was always eager to chat about political theory and kept encouraging me to have faith in my writing and to be bold in my claims. I genuinely hope that I have at least partially repaid the great debt I owe him.

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Rosalind Petchesky has been an important mentor, colleague and friend throughout this process. Ros was so incredibly generous with her close-readings of and insightful interpretations of my work. I am grateful for the way she pushed me to identify the work's political consequences, while showing me its importance in ways I never imagined. My development as a critical scholar and more receptive, generous and complex teacher owes so much to her. I am equally grateful for her friendship. Her warmth, kindness and hospitality to my family and me cannot be quantified.

My advisor, Uday Mehta, articulated a model of scholarly engagement and pedagogy that has left a lasting imprint upon me. Uday's generous eye towards understanding a thinker's complexity and appreciating an idea's uniqueness has changed the way I study and teach texts.

His resistance to obvious interpretations as well as his championing of counterintuitive ones gave me courage to see something truly insightful in my own work. His thoughtfulness was and still is a source of inspiration.

My pursuit of an advanced degree in political science would have been impossible without my family's support. As a first generation American, I have devoted a great deal of time making sense of a past that I experienced only briefly. No one helped me more in this endeavor than my grandfather, Emil Zamalin. From him I not only learned about everyday life in the Soviet Union, but everything ranging from history to music to great literature. Much of my concern for ideas comes from his example. My grandmother, Raya Zamalin, provided unconditional care. My aunt, Marina Zamalin, provided a model by which to live life creatively. My father, Arnold Zamalin, first uprooted himself from his birthplace to give me better roots and then encouraged me to follow my passion. His kindness has provided endless nourishment over the years.

No one has been more important to this project than my partner, Alison Powell. Alison has given me love, friendship and compassion in ways I'm still trying to comprehend. Her poetry and scholarship create a bar that I endlessly aspire to reach. She has improved my ideas and given confidence to my writing. She has taught me how to become a kinder, more introspective and decent human being. She has provided endless hours of feedback, patience, dinner-conversation and laughs. She has taught me how to be a better parent and friend. Few people are so fortunate to have such a person alongside them.

My son, Sam Zamalin, has energized my sense of hope and wonder. He has exemplified the courage and resilience to tackle the unknown. He has shown me that the world is full of mystery, excitement and much needed exploration. Finally, I owe a great deal to my mother, Alla



Zamalin. She has been gone for some time now, but her memory provides me the courage to love, to be inspired, to stake my ground and to strive to do the unexpected. It is to her memory as well as to Alison and Sam that I dedicate this work.

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## **Chapter 1: Reconstructing the Nation**

This dissertation examines how twentieth-century African American intellectuals engaged American political cultural beliefs central to American identity. A prominent argument of American political thinkers has been that the liberal-democratic ideals of freedom, equality, representative government, the rule of law, tolerance and civic obligation are what make Americans a unique people. From the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the late twentieth-century such an argument provided American politicians, social movements and intellectuals a strong justification for divergent political claims, from Cold War warriors calling for the containment of Soviet Communism, to Civil Rights activists calling for racial integration to neoconservatives calling for the dismantlement of the social welfare state. This dissertation studies how one group of African American intellectuals writing in this period, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, sought to provide counter-cultural narratives to dominant American understandings of freedom, democracy and generosity. I examine these revisions to shed light on each thinker's theoretical contributions, our understanding of the politics and art of African American intellectuals and the canon of political thought itself.

The extensive body of literature studying the fiction, critical essays and speeches of Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison has overlooked this aspect of their work. One reason might have to do with scholars' concern with their aesthetics or relationship to literary traditions like romanticism, modernism or postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> After all, each thinker was an artist rather than

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of such work on Baldwin see, Therman B. O'Daniel ed., *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* (Washington, D.C., Howard University Press, 1977); Magdalena Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Nancy V. Burt and Fred L. Standley ed., *Critical Essays on James Baldwin* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988); For Ellison see, Robert G. O'Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*

statesman, a writer rather than scholar or explicit theorist of politics. Another reason might have to do with scholars' preoccupation with how they theorized American cultural identity. Indeed, as creators and theorists of American culture, each had much to say about whether it was simply white Protestant, immigrant, black or hybrid; whether its cultural values were industriousness, frugality and chastity or also saturated with a tragic-comic ethos that saw pain and suffering as constitutive even if possible to overcome.<sup>2</sup> Still another might have to do with fact that much of the study of their political thought has centered on what each said about civil rights, strategy, black politics, race or the canonical political-theoretical ideas of citizenship, the role of the state, justice, power and rights.<sup>3</sup> Yet all of these accounts overlook how each thinker engaged what Alexis De Tocqueville's classic nineteenth century text, *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), argued was the set of liberal-democratic ideals that appeared both natural and incontestable to Americans. Tocqueville understood that values like freedom, equality, representative government, the rule of law, tolerance, private property and civic obligation were central to American culture.<sup>4</sup> They not only shaped voting patterns, public opinion, political mobilization, protest or political partisanship but everything from the content of American

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 1991); for Morrison see, Valerie Smith, *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2012); Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> For this in Baldwin and Ellison see, Ross Posnock *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); For Morrison, see Marcel Pope, *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For Baldwin see, Lawrie Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); George M. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill From Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); for Ellison see, Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown V. Board of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). For Morrison, see Shulman, *American Prophecy*.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

literature, everyday communication, political judgment, self-knowledge, sense of political possibility and responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

The first core argument this dissertation makes is that what I call political “counter-cultural narratives” were central to Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work. Counter-cultural narratives provide critiques or revisions of extant beliefs and modes of being. Dominant cultural beliefs are not the *only* acceptable beliefs in a given epoch, but are seen by both ordinary citizens and elites as generally correct or uncontroversial. Such beliefs are historically contingent but often variations on larger, transhistorical ideas; specific to a nation or with international resonance; narrowly about aesthetics or also about politics; expressed through political discourse, public opinion, influential public intellectuals or art. Counter-cultural narratives are political precisely because they seek to contest these dominant beliefs. By political, I mean something that exceeds the narrow practice connected to the institutions of government, the mechanisms of political representation, voting and social movements. Politics can exist through any contestation of power, truth and meaning outside state-sanctioned discourses or the public sphere. In this sense, counter-cultural narratives are political not because they articulate a specific policy proposal or political strategy. At the same time, they are not simply political because they reflect an author's subjective decision to advance *a* truth, which itself reflects a form of power. They are political because they challenge and provide alternative understandings of prevailing political values. They are political whether or not the revision is successful at promoting political mobilization. Understanding this makes clear that fiction and creative nonfiction, rather than direct political analysis, can itself become a form of engaged political critique and value-construction.

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<sup>5</sup> Almond and Verba famously define political culture as “the specifically political orientations attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system.” Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited: An Analytic Study* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 12.

The specific counter-cultural narratives each thinker advanced are the following:

Baldwin's essays in the 1950s through the late 1960s revised the idea that freedom is a core commitment of American society, an idea affirmed by thinkers as diverse as Alexis De Tocqueville, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Luther King., Jr. Baldwin's revision of this idea took place at a moment when it was being popularized by liberal consensus historians like Daniel Boorstin and Richard Hofstadter and political scientists like Louis Hartz and was being embraced by the Civil Rights movement to call for African American desegregation, formal legal equality and political enfranchisement. Baldwin's essays instead showed that American freedom was constitutively compromised by hidden, everyday and inescapable psychological and social vulnerability. Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and his later essays revised the idea that commitment to democracy was not constitutively marked by tragic, or unintended, difficult to digest and sometimes harmful, consequences. This belief was assumed by thinkers like Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, John Dewey, Gunnar Myrdal, Robert Dahl and Sheldon Wolin.

Ellison's revision took place at a moment, from the postwar period of racial segregation to the white-ethnic and Afrocentric backlash against racial integration of the late 1970s through the 1990s, when the idea of democracy was being neglected or defined in ways that supported the racially unequal status quo. During this period, Ellison's work revised democratic commitment as that which would always unleash debilitating effects for citizens' ability to be autonomous and equal and would require burdensome vigilance and resilience from them. Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) revised the understanding of generosity as requiring a conditional adherence to normative moral standards. This belief was espoused by Puritans like John Winthrop and individualists like Benjamin Franklin and was put into practice through the various social welfare programs of early twentieth century Progressivism. *Beloved's* revision took place when libertarians like Charles

Murray, social conservatives like Thomas Sowell and public policy experts like Lawrence Mead used it to justify President Ronald Reagan's dismantling of the American social welfare state. *Beloved* instead revised the understanding of generosity as unconditional, having no expiration date and assuming recipients' agency.

The second core argument this dissertation makes is that Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison demonstrated that accepting such counter-cultural narratives would be serviceable for racial justice. Racial injustice is a distinct form of injustice predicated as much on the fact of black-white inequality in terms of wealth, job-access, housing, education and healthcare as on the various myths, perceptions, attitudes and habits engendered by racial identity. Racial myths that blacks are lazier, more criminal, more sexually devious, less responsible and less concerned with education than whites have always structured white Americans' outlook on black citizens. They have been crucially responsible for promoting in many white Americans less identification with, compassion for and willingness to act in ways to address African American socioeconomic marginalization. They have made it increasingly difficult to have more trustful interracial communication and dialogue unconstrained by white assumptions of racial superiority. They have created pain and anger in many African Americans. Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison demonstrated that accepting their narratives could help undermine these perceptions and practices because it would highlight two interrelated things. First, was the inescapability of human vulnerability, the idea that the permanence of pain, suffering, lack of control over their destiny was something that all Americans would inevitably experience at some point in their lives. It was an idea, in other words, that could help mitigate assumptions of inequality, superiority, difference and distance between citizens and compel them to see one another as similar. Second, was the view that genuine giving needed to be unconditional, based in critical



respect, compassion, solidarity and concern with others' flourishing. This was the idea that a real commitment to giving to others entailed deference to the act rather than self-interest, that it often required self-sacrifice and ongoing effort even if it was unwise or impractical. In other words, it aimed to help citizens see that ethical action towards vulnerable others in their community was defined by a lack of expiration date, would need to be ongoing and would inevitably be personally risky for those who enacted it.

### *Reconstructing the Nation and African American Thought*

Attending to this aspect of Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work challenges the prevailing argument that, with the exception of black liberals, communists and nationalists associated with the direct political struggle of the Civil Rights movement from the 1950s through the early 1970s, twentieth century African American intellectuals have largely failed to critique racial injustice.<sup>6</sup> Jerry Watts has famously claimed that the embrace of a "victim status" frame whose purpose is to secure recognition of black victimhood from whites explains this failure. For Watts, the victim-status frame endowed greater moral authority to writers like Ellison, Baldwin and Amiri Baraka but in so doing eliminated any oppositional political discourse in their work.<sup>7</sup> Yet the victim status frame cannot explain Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's counter-cultural narratives of the self, agency, community, equality, representation, individuality and ethics. Examining this, I not only show how African American intellectuals provided an oppositional discourse but how this discourse was not entirely constrained by the demand for white recognition. One of Watts' corollary arguments is that the oppressed group's need for recognition from the oppressors central to the victim-status frame forced African American intellectuals to

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<sup>6</sup> See Adolph L. Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Houston A. Baker, *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11.

speak in a language that would resonate with the dominant white culture. Not only did Baldwin's, Ellison and Morrison's culturally transgressive account of freedom as compromised, equality as shared suffering, democracy as tragic, generosity as unconditional, love as personal, direct and social rather than purely civic, action as based in vigilance, resilience and sacrifice itself subvert mainstream white cultural understandings. Each also captured how victimhood was inescapable across racial lines rather than something over which blacks held a moral and empirical monopoly. This point was captured most clearly by Morrison when she described her own work as demonstrating how “[e]ach one of us is in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it.”<sup>8</sup>

To highlight my disagreement with Watts, however, is not to argue that his interpretation is entirely wrong or devoid of analytical value. In fact, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison can be justifiably criticized for romanticizing black victimhood, implying that suffering was redemptive and casting victimhood as endowing blacks greater moral authority than their white victimizers. Yet, unlike Watts, what I show is that African American intellectual life was governed by a deep and irresolvable tension between the need to communicate the real and unequal experience of black victimization and to reformulate Americans' political understandings. On the one hand, we see the need to legitimize and illustrate to a wider white audience the political, social and cultural impact of slavery upon generations of African Americans. On the other hand, these writers attempt to revise dominant political cultural understandings that preserved distance between whites and blacks and encouraged disrespect and apathy. Whereas the former may have led these intellectuals to unwittingly re-inscribe the discourse of black victimhood, the latter actually sought to provide understandings that would eradicate the status quo of African American

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<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison and Danielle Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 40.

victimhood in the form of socioeconomic marginalization. Yet throughout this project, I also show how African American intellectuals' counter-cultural narratives were themselves victim to deeply problematic shortcomings, over-sights and simplifications. Baldwin's dramatization of vulnerability was evident in his own avoidance of and insensitivity to intersectional gendered experience; the sophistication with which he probed psychic life did not extend to an account of black women's vulnerability at the hands of black and white men. For all of Ellison's attempts to show how democratic idealism created the conditions for its own undoing, he could not see that his wish to speak about the human condition across the color line implicitly assumed the perspective of men, did not acknowledge important class differences and was suffused with an unbridled patriotic defense of America. No matter how attentive she was to the way victimhood was constitutive of ethics, love and responsibility, Morrison herself could not avoid painting a picture of black life as so painful, oppressive and constrained that hope, agency and resistance seemed unlikely, if even possible.

Beyond reframing our understanding of African American intellectual life, *Reconstructing the Nation* attempts to deepen our understanding of African American political thought. What made Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison unique as political thinkers was their refusal to narrowly examine racial justice from the perspective of what has long been a preoccupation of African American political thought: black political strategy. At the turn of the twentieth century, this debate centered on social acculturation against political agitation. Booker T. Washington argued that black strategy needed to be decidedly anti-political, focusing instead on acculturation into white society, economic gain and self-reliance.<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois famously challenged Washington's idealistic faith in uplift, disregard for the formative power of race and conviction in progress. Du Bois' primary contention was that political agitation was necessary because

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<sup>9</sup> See Booker T. Washington, *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

racism and white supremacy powerfully allocated political, social and economic resources to whites and denied them to blacks.<sup>10</sup> By the postwar period, Du Bois' argument became dominant. But the core question concerning black political agitation now centered on a debate between racial integration and black separatism. Echoing an earlier strain of Frederick Douglass' patriotic liberalism, Martin Luther King, Jr. contended that black politics required non-violent direct action centered on promoting racial integration.<sup>11</sup> Malcolm X, echoing 19th century black nationalists like David Walker, suggested that the white violence and intimidation and racial socioeconomic disparity required a form of amoral political realism best advanced through separate black social, economic and cultural institutions.<sup>12</sup> Unlike this tradition, Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work did not offer political platforms, direct political ideologies or identifiable programs of political action. Furthermore, these three writers did not advocate specific public policies, whether colorblind or race-conscious, centered on socioeconomic redistribution or equal opportunity. Yet perhaps their biggest difference came from their demonstration that justice began in pre-political settings: everything from one's self-perceptions, strategies of communication with others, individual judgment and understanding of action. This perspective differed from John Rawls' famous argument that justice should be determined through an abstract thought experiment behind a "veil of ignorance" about the kind of society they would want to inhabit if they had no knowledge of their class, racial or gendered identity.<sup>13</sup> It also differed from contemporary critical theorists' arguments that determinations about justice

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<sup>10</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Robert Terrill, *The Cambridge companion to Malcolm X* (New York: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). For a survey of Rawls' impact on political philosophy see Samuel Freeman, *Justice and the Social Contract: Essays on Rawlsian Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a sympathetic feminist critique, see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basics Books, 1991).

require sensitivity to culturally different experiences of oppression.<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison instead showed that racial justice required not recognition of individual sovereignty but a deeper awareness of one's proclivity to err, one's irreconcilable contradictions and human interdependence. Each showed that it depend upon a willingness to respond to others' suffering in ways not governed by self-interest, personal gain or through means-ends logic. Each showed that it depended upon accepting rather than jettisoning the constitutively negative outcomes of responsible action, of risking one's security for the sake of others flourishing.

In doing this each also departed from what has been a longstanding strategy of African American political thinkers concerned with fostering racial integration, reform and reconciliation: the appeal to dominant understandings of American political culture. For example, in “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852) Frederick Douglass famously argued that the transcendental, saving principles of freedom and equality found in *The Declaration of Independence* and American Revolution, though denied slaves, themselves created the moral justification for abolishing slavery.<sup>15</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois' early work, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), provided a vivid description of black conditions under Jim Crow to dramatize the emotional, physical and economic chasm created not only by the color line but also between American political cultural ideals and practice. For Du Bois, making good on these ideals required eliminating the gap created by the blinding veil of race.<sup>16</sup> In what was arguably the apogee of the historic black freedom struggle, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous “I Have a Dream” (1963) speech argued that the ideals of the *Declaration* created a “promissory note to which every

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<sup>14</sup> See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and Anne Philips, *The Politics of Presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000), 188-206.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have A Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 217-221.

American was to fall heir.”<sup>17</sup> Understanding that American political culture was compromised of the belief that all citizens were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit happiness meant that blacks could no longer be treated as second-class citizens, subject to violence, intimidation, crippling poverty and political disenfranchisement. Douglass, Du Bois and King all accepted American political culture's liberal-democratic core; each understood that engaging these beliefs was politically valuable; each understood racial justice as depending not simply on abstract arguments about fairness, reciprocity or consistency but on an engagement with beliefs that had emotional, historical and collective resonance.

Like Douglass, Du Bois and King, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison explicitly argued for or dramatized the importance of racial integration rather than separatism, reform rather than revolutionary political and economic transformation and engagement with American values. Yet unlike them, each showed that such change depended on a *radical* revision to America's liberal democratic values. I use the term radical intentionally because it connotes a “to the root” critique of extant paradigms and calls for a new, radical transformation founded on alternate principles. Radicalism seeks to upend convention, transform the meaning of common sense and remake the meaning of practicability. Radicalism's articulation of the impossible itself transforms the meaning of the possible. American radicals, including abolitionists, anarchists, communists, progressives and feminists, have always offered trenchant critiques of American capitalism, social hierarchy, forms of government and the role of the state. African American radicals did this but centered race. For them, race not only precluded radical political transformation, but a transformation in racial thinking and structures was necessary for the creation of a new political order, demonstrating that life without racialized capitalism,<sup>18</sup> sexism<sup>19</sup> and homophobia<sup>20</sup> was

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<sup>17</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Cedric Robinson has contended that thinkers like W.E.B Du Bois and Richard Wright mobilized yet complicated

possible. But others provided an entirely different vocabulary upon which national understandings of identity, community, communication, action, judgment and ethics rested. Anthony Bogues' excellent work, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, studied this mode of radicalism, examining a black heretic tradition that broke with the Western episteme to offer a constructive vision for change alongside a black redemptive tradition that identified social division, called for social healing and was prophetic.<sup>21</sup> Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work exemplified some of the historical revisionism central to the black heretic tradition along with the truth-telling of the prophetic tradition, which, as George Shulman astutely notes, has been a powerful form of claim-making in American political thought that announced truths to an audience invested in denying them.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work also revised core understandings embedded in the American episteme. By episteme, I follow Michel Foucault who defined it as the system of knowledge that itself forms the conditions of what kind of truth is intelligible, meaningful, privileged or marginalized in a given society or historical moment.<sup>23</sup> Epistemes create the conditions for what ideas are dominant in a given culture, but the ideas that constitute epistemes are much more foundational. The ideas of the American episteme each engaged were equality,

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Marxist arguments about capitalist oppression to critique colonialism and call for class-conscious anti-colonial resistance. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Roderick Ferguson has identified how thinkers like Baldwin, Wright, Morrison and Ellison exposed and challenged sociologists' of race relations' argument that black progress depended on hetero-normative, patriarchal families. See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Black heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13, 15.

<sup>22</sup> George M. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill From Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); West, *Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

individualism and the narrative genre through which to understand American life. First, each sought to reframe prevailing American understandings of equality, which have generally assumed that all individuals are equal by virtue of natural reason, freedom and moral worth. Of course, it has been hotly contested whether this conception merely guarantees all citizens' equal access to opportunities or results. Nonetheless, equality's core claim that natural superiority is dubious and that none are necessarily more deserving than others was defended in texts like the *Declaration of Independence*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments" (1848), Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* (1863) and Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" (1963). In contrast, the thinkers I study here illustrated that citizens were equal through the permanence of weakness and frailty, which compromised their potential to have unbridled freedom or have unimpeded flourishing. For Baldwin this was a historically constructed reality manifest through the experience of psychic alienation, anxiety and guilt as well as an ontological fact evident in the ever-present possibility of bodily injury, death or uncontrollable desire. Ellison showed how it was more a product of deep commitment to democratic autonomy and conscientiousness, which created counterproductive and harmful reverberations for those who exercised it. Morrison showed how the risking of oneself central to any practice of generosity always threatened to exacerbate the insecurity of those who gave. It should be noted that in demonstrating this, their work did not assert that all individuals equally experienced vulnerability. Furthermore, it did not, as slave-holding conservatives like John C. Calhoun asserted, argue that citizens were *not equal* with respect to intellectual potential or the potential to exercise their freedom.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it was a much more modest, even if no less radical, attempt

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<sup>24</sup> John C. Calhoun, *The Essential Calhoun: Selections from Writings, Speeches and Letters* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000).



at perspective-shifting: to show that one fundamental way in which citizens were equal was that no one could permanently escape weakness or lack of control over their destiny.

Second, each showed how all forms of American individualism, from its social democratic to self-interested formulations, were neither ontologically possible nor productive for human flourishing. Individualism, or the idea that the individual rather than the collective is of central moral importance, argues that all individuals could and should be self-reliant. Much like equality, the meaning of self-reliance has varied widely. For Benjamin Franklin, writing in *Poor Richard*, it meant the Protestant values of frugality, industriousness, temperance and prudence.<sup>25</sup> For Ralph Waldo Emerson, it meant resistance to social conformity, moral self-making and understanding one's responsibility to others. It is this Emersonian tradition that Jack Turner's insightful book, *Awakening to Race*, argues is a potent challenge to conservative conceptions of personal responsibility based in self-help, self-interest and personal uplift without moral concern.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, drawing from thinkers like Douglass, Baldwin and Ellison, Turner contends that this social democratic individualism is valuable for racial justice because it personalizes responsibility about acknowledging one's complicity in facilitating injustice and refusing to be complicit in it. Yet Turner's analysis overlooks how an important aspect of American political thought was not simply concerned with making individualism more moral or rejecting it in a favor of more collective concerns.<sup>27</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison believed that the sovereign, self-sufficient individual was an ontological fiction. For each, the individual was not only constitutively embedded in society but also governed by this condition. Society's

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Franklin: Autobiography, Poor Richard and Later Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> See Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

formative influence on the individual did not cause a zero-sum game in which collective goals, interests and desires made it impossible for one to unilaterally exercise their self-sovereignty. It came instead from the way the individual was inadvertently affected by his or her own social perceptions of and engagement with others. For example, if racial stereotypes made blacks victims of bodily and psychic degradation, disrespect and apathy, then these stereotypes themselves governed white behavior, making whites uncontrollably anxious, paranoid and repressive. If citizens were seriously committed to equality, freedom and generosity, then its realization threatened to upend extant social structures, privileges and identity positions that benefitted whites. At the same time, each showed that ethics itself depended upon a renunciation of individualism. Identifying with and feeling compassion for marginalized others could come from the recognition that one's own life already was or would be governed by forces over which one had little control. Furthermore, knowing that one was held hostage to, rather than sovereign over, social forces, transcendental principles and other human beings was indispensable for responsible action.

Third, each of the three writers challenged the assumption that American life is governed by the genre of romance. Romance names a narrative marked by lovers and their ultimate reconciliation, by triumphalism over impossible odds and obstacles, by optimism, heroism and redemption. This narrative cuts across ideological lines in American thought, from the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches capitalist to the Emersonian moralist, from John Rawls' self-governing moral subject to Robert Nozick's perfectly free rational actor. Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's portraits of life were much more tragic: action conceived of as totally positive itself was responsible for unintended, negative effects; not only was reconciliation impossible but the only thing permanent was a state of tension, ambiguity and contradiction; emotion dominated reason;

the liberal dream of permanent safety and security was impossible. Each also showed how life was ironic: those transcendental, utopian principles that promised happiness were the same values that required unbearable burden; ethical action required a renunciation of the logic of self-preservation and self-interest.

Finally, I want to suggest that Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work itself deepens normative thinking about how to achieve racial justice in contemporary America. Today, racial equality is far from a reality in American life. Although the post-segregation moment promised a post-racial politics that assumed the virtues of colorblindness, the triumph of legal equality and the end of hegemonic white racism, *de facto* residential segregation significantly impacts black education and labor opportunities.<sup>28</sup> “Hyper- incarceration” disproportionately disciplines and punishes black men, while regulating their access to work and citizenship.<sup>29</sup> And inequities in economic wealth, housing and education all continue to foreclose social mobility for black citizens.<sup>30</sup> Some prescriptive arguments about what practices would be most effective at redressing this condition have stressed that the historical knowledge of slavery and Jim Crow could make clear how racial inequality is a complex and accumulated network of oppression for which all Americans are collectively liable.<sup>31</sup> Others have stressed the importance that white citizens acknowledge and renounce the social, economic and political advantage white-skin offers them.<sup>32</sup> Still others argue that what is needed is a revised understanding of equality based

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Prisons of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 96-128; James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity and Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007); Linda F. Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege* (University Park:

in fairness that accounts for differences in unchosen history, identity and structural constraints that shape one's life chances, rather than calling for an identical treatment of all.<sup>33</sup> Yet the transformative power of memory, the ability to acknowledge whiteness and the willingness to embrace the abstract norm of fairness can be undercut by other beliefs. None of these things exists outside of or is unaffected by larger cultural beliefs. The success of each can greatly be shaped by other salient commitments that are much more foundational. While it is arguable whether freedom, democracy and generosity wield this kind of power on Americans' every political judgment and engagement, their centrality in American culture cannot be denied. Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's visions of how they could be revised to make citizens more attentive to their privilege, more willing to risk their own social status and support redistributive socioeconomic policies, is therefore worth attending to.

A few methodological clarifications are in order before I proceed. First, my argument does not rest on a strong claim of authorial intent. My suggestion is not that all three always *consciously* attempted to make political arguments, revise specific cultural understandings or engage in specific political or intellectual debates. Sometimes their essays made direct, premise-based arguments, yet sometimes their essays and fiction reformulated prevailing understandings through indirect narratives that deployed rich metaphors and plots; through characters' internal meditations on themselves, their commitments and action towards others. Whatever the case, the persuasiveness of my argument rests on what their work tried to say, gesture towards and dramatize, rather than what each personally believed or thought they were doing. My analysis always prioritizes the text, although I do often deepen and complicate my readings with the

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Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Amy Gutmann, "Responding to Racial Injustice," in ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 106-178.

author's personal arguments or beliefs. Second, I do not attempt to show how each thinker's counter-cultural narrative provided a unique, evidence-based reinterpretation of American political culture. I do not inquire how they participated in or directly challenged historical interpretations of American political culture as governed by a singular liberal consensus of which individualism was central,<sup>34</sup> —an individualism driven by civic republican strands that valorized public courage, sacrifice and virtue<sup>35</sup> and contained ascriptive elements of biological hierarchy.<sup>36</sup> Third, I consider each thinker's texts with an eye towards the substantive arguments they make, but also through the kinds of narratives they employ.<sup>37</sup> This allows me to attend to what is most explicit in a given text's language, while also working to uncover what lies hidden beneath its surface. Studying their narratives critically enables a move beyond discourse analysis to a more nuanced consideration of language that traces arguments and their contradictions. Fourth, while many of the texts I examine eschewed deductive political reasoning, I nonetheless try to cull political insights for what they imply or dramatize about politics. Yet unlike literary theorists who consider a text's politics in the way it conceals or constructs certain, partial ideological truths, I do this with specific attention to how their work created what Sheldon Wolin calls "political vision."<sup>38</sup> Following Wolin, I explore Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's meditation on the larger political issues of communication, recognition, judgment, action, identity, community, power, justice, resistance and politics itself. To sharpen our understanding of each thinker's political thought as well as expand the canon of political thought itself, I place them

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<sup>34</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> For the relationship between political theory and political vision see Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

into conversation with various canonical political theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, Madison, Nietzsche, Arendt, Habermas and Butler as well as contemporary debates in democratic theory, the politics of recognition, feminist theory and critical race theory. Finally, while my analysis is not driven by the concerns of intellectual history, I nevertheless attend to the various historical intellectual and political contexts in which each thinker writes.<sup>39</sup>

The outline of this dissertation is as follows. The second chapter argues that a core preoccupation of James Baldwin's essays from the early 1950s to the late 1960s was to dramatize how Americans' freedom was compromised by pervasive vulnerability. I unpack Baldwin's argument that white Americans' conception as attached to freedom blinded them from acknowledging their own complicity in racial injustice. Next, I identify how his critical revision of the American founding and American racial history through the lens of psychological and social vulnerability sought to show why American liberal ideals in American political culture would themselves not make racial progress certain. Third, I unpack his narrative of shared and inescapable suffering and attendant argument that understanding this would increase the likelihood that white Americans would approach African Americans with respect and compassion. Fourth, I argue that despite the potential for Baldwin's narratives to be used contrary to his intentions, they nonetheless deserve attention given the ongoing existence of Americans' self-conception as free and freedom-loving.

The third chapter argues that a significant contribution of Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), and essays from the 1950s through early 1990s was to show that racial justice depended on Americans' recognizing that commitment to democracy carried tragic implications. The first part discusses Ellison's demonstration of how African Americans' marginalization

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<sup>39</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

would be more likely if they failed to acknowledge that the exercise of and faith in their own autonomy could be debilitating. The second part identifies his demonstration of how white Americans' failure to recognize that democratic equality requires an acceptance of greater vulnerability could prevent them from abandoning the social benefits so central to continuing white skin-privilege. The third part identifies his demonstration of how African Americans' failure to see that democratic conscientiousness takes attention away from devising political strategy and could preclude them from creating necessary resources for confronting power. The fourth part identifies his demonstration of how both white and black Americans' failure to see that the spiritualism, sacredness and idealism of democracy makes it an ongoing, unending process could make them assume that changes to unequal socioeconomic structures could easily be achieved. The final part contends that the best way to read Ellison's problematic, unbridled valorization of American democracy is as a reflection of the circumscribed nature of American political discourse.

The fourth chapter argues that Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), shows how the practice of conditional generosity reinforces racial inequality and unconditional generosity has the potential to mitigate it. The first part identifies the novel's illumination of the problematic implications for racial justice of a model of conditional giving and listening. It shows that this model of generosity allows those who give to remain sovereign over those who receive. A conditional form of giving thus promotes a hierarchical condition, limits recipients' ability to freely construct and obtain their own account of the good and undermines their willingness to trust those who give. The second part elaborates *Beloved's* illumination of unconditional generosity for racial justice. Such a model rests on the assumption that all persons have fundamentally equal moral worth, that all persons have subject to a condition of inescapable

vulnerability; it makes those who give vulnerable to recipients and assumes that recipients are capable of moral agency. Yet, *Beloved* also shows that this model is not without risks, as its basis in care is precisely what can have a monopolizing and counterproductive effect on recipients. The final part shows how the novel's insights can be used to rethink contemporary American welfare policy.

The fifth chapter argues that the dissertation carries broader implications for future scholarship and debates in American studies and American political thought, contemporary political theory and democratic theory. In addition, I review the way this projects broadens thinking about contemporary racial politics and black politics. Finally, I explain how the dissertation provides methodological tools to study American political culture, African American political thought and African American literature.

In the final analysis, my own agnosticism about the transformative power of narrative prevents me from substantiating or rejecting arguments that it can be used as a medium through which political solidarity and empathy may be forged<sup>40</sup> and human cruelty revealed.<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding this reservation, I nonetheless aim to show throughout each chapter how each thinker's work can help inspire a more conscientious and informed form of citizenship. This is undoubtedly the most difficult aspiration because this project's thrust is largely exegetical but nonetheless reflects my hope that important ideas can and should matter outside the books in which they are written.

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<sup>40</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>41</sup> María Pía Lara, *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).



## Chapter 2: James Baldwin's Critique of American Freedom and Racial Justice

*We, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations.*<sup>42</sup>

*The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar people and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it's very serious, that people who have had no experience have no compassion.*<sup>43</sup>

-James Baldwin

### Introduction: Baldwin on Freedom and Vulnerability

A dominant belief in American political culture is that America was founded in an exceptional commitment to freedom. Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) argued that Americans understood America to be a unique society that made possible and was committed to the exercise of self-determination without fetters or constraints. Typifying an argument advanced by Cold War consensus historians like Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Boorstin,<sup>44</sup> Hartz argued that the Declaration of Independence's enunciation of freedom established an irrational Lockean liberal faith in equality of opportunity, property, limited government and representative government.<sup>45</sup> During the postwar period through the late 1960s, this equation of freedom with America became a centerpiece of liberal Civil Rights rhetoric. Liberals invoked it to persuade white Americans to enact reforms to end Jim Crow racial segregation.<sup>46</sup> The social scientist,

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<sup>42</sup> James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 672. Unless noted, all essays are taken from this collection.

<sup>43</sup> Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," in *Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 79.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made it* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>45</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

<sup>46</sup> For a fuller account of this tradition, also known as "racial liberalism," see Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Gunnar Myrdal, famously argued in *An American Dilemma* (1944) that America was exceptionally committed to what he called the “American Creed” of which the moral idea of freedom was central.<sup>47</sup> Social activists, like Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked this argument to persuade white Americans to support legislation that would grant African Americans equal legal protection, full political enfranchisement and equal opportunity.<sup>48</sup> Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program centralized it to support federal policies aimed at advancing equality of results for African Americans through jobs, healthcare, welfare and adequate housing. As Johnson described it in his much-discussed commencement address at Howard University, "To Fulfill These Rights," on June 4, 1965, “[s]o, it is the glorious opportunity of this generation to end the one huge wrong of the American Nation and, in so doing, to find America for ourselves, with the same immense thrill of discovery which gripped those who first began to realize that here, at last, was a home for freedom.”<sup>49</sup>

From the immediate postwar period through the late 1960s, James Baldwin’s rejection of this liberal argument and rhetorical strategy put him at odds with these contemporaries. Baldwin’s contention was that the white American majority’s belief that they were irrationally attached to freedom allowed them to preemptively dismiss African American grievances against structural racial injustice. This prompted him to advance a fundamental critique of Americans’ self-perception as freedom-loving and free, which he believed would be serviceable for helping them confront such injustice. His critique was unique because it neither showed how structural

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Carolina Press, 1997) and Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have A Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 217-221.

<sup>49</sup> Lyndon Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill Those Rights,’” See Lyndon Johnson, *LBJ Presidential Library*, 28 June 2013, <<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>>.

impediments to individual progress made self-reliance impossible<sup>50</sup> or called upon Americans to embrace the ideal of equality over freedom.<sup>51</sup> Baldwin's essays instead dramatized how Americans' historical and ontological psychological and social vulnerability compromised their freedom. First, he illustrated white and black Americans' historical lack of control over and unconscious susceptibility to feelings such as alienation, fear, anxiety, guilt and anger. This narrative challenged the idea that racial progress would simply be fulfilled over time or could be achieved through better laws and public policies aimed at socioeconomic redistribution. Second, Baldwin illustrated white and black Americans' ontological susceptibility to the unavoidable fact of sickness, suffering and death. This narrative provided the context for his argument that white and black citizens needed to assist each other unconditionally with critical respect and solidarity. Baldwin's turn to the personal reflected his belief that a revised understanding of Americans' interior lives, everyday habits, emotional lives and physical limitations, rather than a revision of public policies, laws or legislation, was crucial for a better awareness of and ethical response to racial reality. Colm Tobin correctly contends that Baldwin understood the country's racial dilemma to be a "poison which began in the individual spirit and only made its way then into politics...that social reform could not occur through legislation alone but through a reimagining of the private realm."<sup>52</sup> But as I show below, Baldwin also sought to enable Americans to confront this racial dilemma by rendering fictitious their belief they could ever be unbridled or invulnerable agents.

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<sup>50</sup> Donald R. Kinder and Tali Mendelberg, "Individualism Reconsidered: Principles and Prejudice in Contemporary Public Opinion," in David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racialized Politics: The Debate About Racism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 44-74.

<sup>51</sup> For this line of argument see Amy Gutmann, "Responding to Racial Injustice," in ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 106-178.

<sup>52</sup> See Colm Tobin, "Baldwin and the American Confusion," in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* eds. Bill Schwarz and Cora Kaplan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 57.

At the level of political theory, Baldwin's project bared striking resemblances with St. Augustine's critique of pride. In *City of God*, Augustine contended that man's fall from grace came through overweening pride, or self-love, which "is the start of every sin."<sup>53</sup> The corrective to this for Augustine, like Baldwin, was humility, skepticism of one's free will and recognition of one's compulsion to sin.<sup>54</sup> Yet Baldwin, unlike Augustine, sought to persuade Americans to feel more humility about their freedom in a way that compelled them to confront earthly political power rather than disengage from it. Reading Baldwin in this way offers four important contributions. First, it provides important insights into Baldwin's own use of prophetic rhetoric,<sup>55</sup> the role of race-consciousness in political theorizing,<sup>56</sup> his thinking about self-work and critique<sup>57</sup> and the link between history and politics.<sup>58</sup> Second, it deepens contemporary thinking about the normative value of recognizing vulnerability for democratic citizenship. As central to a late-modern ethos, Stephen White argues that citizens' recognizing their mortality could allow them to identify with and exhibit generosity towards others whose experiences are radically different.<sup>59</sup> More so than White, Baldwin illuminated that the significance of recognizing vulnerability could be in making citizens more aware of their own potential complicity in harming others and ensuring that their generosity was unconditional. Third, it revises the interpretation that Baldwin's work simply sought to radicalize individualism for racial justice.

Jack Turner reads Baldwin as a black Emersonian, a social- democratic individualist who

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<sup>53</sup> St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 571.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 573.

<sup>55</sup> George M. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill From Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Lawrie Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999)

<sup>57</sup> Joel Alden Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America," *Political Research Quarterly* September, 66:3 (2012), 487-499.

<sup>58</sup> See P.J. Brendese, "The Race of a More Perfect Union: James Baldwin, Segregated Memory and the Presidential Race," *Theory & Event*, 15 (2012).

<sup>59</sup> Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

radicalized the rugged-individualist idea of personal responsibility by suggesting that responsibility required citizens to examine their complicity in injustice and work against it.<sup>60</sup> Good evidence exists to support Turner's interpretation, but I show how Baldwin's narratives also sought to demonstrate that citizens' lack of control over dark emotions and suffering compromised, if not rendered impossible, self-mastery and self-sovereignty. Fourth, it revises scholarly understandings that cast Baldwin as a politically irresponsible African American intellectual. Stanley Crouch famously argued that from *The Fire Next Time* onward Baldwin's writings became politically irresponsible because they were characterized by anger, polemics and prophecy instead of sophisticated political critique.<sup>61</sup> In a similar way, F.W. Dupee has argued that Baldwin's replacement of prophecy for criticism cheapened his art and style.<sup>62</sup> Yet, both Crouch and Dupee problematically gauge Baldwin's political sophistication through his rhetoric and professed beliefs about black political strategy, rather than the ways in which his work actually sought to raise Americans' consciousness about the implications of, as well as revise, their core self and national understandings. Baldwin's focus on consciousness-raising was itself made clear at the conclusion of *The Fire Next Time*, which rendered racial justice dependent upon "the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks" to "create the consciousness of others."<sup>63</sup> Reducing Baldwin's political contribution to his own growing pessimism about the potential for black-white solidarity and racial integration thus ignores that his work offered diagnostic and normative resources, both of which are crucial preconditions for

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<sup>60</sup> See Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 89-111.

<sup>61</sup> Crouch, *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews 1979-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 231, 234.

<sup>62</sup> F.W. Dupee, "James Baldwin and the 'Man,'" in *James Baldwin: Critical Insights*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Hackensack: Salem Press, 2011), 266.

<sup>63</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), 347.

political action even if not directly a call to it.<sup>64</sup> Attention to this challenges Dupee's accusation that Baldwin was socially irresponsible. Criticizing Baldwin's replacement of "criticism for prophecy" in *The Fire Next Time*, Dupee caustically remarked, "is not a writer of Baldwin's standing obliged to submit his assertions to some kind of pragmatic test, some process whereby their truth or untruth will be gauged according to their social utility?"<sup>65</sup> Dupee's reduction of social responsibility to social utility holds black intellectual work, like Baldwin's, hostage to reality's contradictions, imperfections and conventions. Yet social responsibility comes precisely from a willingness to explode conventional modes of thinking and provide new visions, rather than confirming extant ones. By exemplifying this, Baldwin's work challenged Jerry Watts' insistence that his art was impoverished by his adoption of the victim status, a desire to achieve from whites recognition of black suffering.<sup>66</sup> If anything, Baldwin's essays sought to universalize victimhood across racial lines, address whites and blacks and say something truly unique about American individuality and society.

The uniqueness of Baldwin's artistic-political contributions also connected to a unique understanding of art's function, as a weapon of consciousness-raising centered on dramatizing universal truths. Baldwin rejected the perspective that art was a private matter in which citizens were driven by personal standards of excellence. For him, the responsibility of artists was to provide citizens a richer emotional and linguistic context to understand their society, which was indispensable for social health. Central to the artist's role was an exposition of society's unspoken truths. As Baldwin explained, "life is important, vastly more important than art... [but]

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<sup>64</sup> For an astute interpretation of how Baldwin's late 1960s writings nonetheless retained the devastating criticism of American ideals as bound by white supremacy and how they continued to assert that white supremacy was maintained partly through the renunciation of American black-white cultural hybridity, see Will Walker, "After The Fire Next Time: James Baldwin's Postconsensus Double Bind," in *Is It Nation Time?*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 220-230.

<sup>65</sup> Dupee, "James Baldwin and the Man," 262.

<sup>66</sup> See Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 19.

artists are the only people in a society who can tell that society the truth about itself.”<sup>67</sup> Baldwin’s blackness and homosexuality in a nation that marginalized blackness and demonized gay men and women inspired in him an obvious concern with exposing unspoken truths about black and gay life that many white, heterosexual Americans misunderstood.<sup>68</sup> However, race and sexuality did not exhaust his artistic concerns.<sup>69</sup> Baldwin was thoroughly convinced that the artist’s responsibility was to show that certain elements of the human condition were universal and inescapable, elements such as “the state of birth, suffering, love and death.”<sup>70</sup> This indirectly political understanding of art stood in tension with the overtly political claims some of Baldwin’s essays made about white racism, Black Nationalism, black and white homophobia and white liberalism.<sup>71</sup> Yet this belief also captured a unique understanding of art’s political reach, which countered Richard Wright’s assertion, central to African American protest literature, that art was sometimes needed to exaggerate oppressive circumstances to persuade citizens to feel pity and compel them to direct action against them.<sup>72</sup> A reasonable argument is that Baldwin jettisoned his non-political conception of art with his increasing pessimism and radicalization or never quite made concrete in his work. However, throughout this chapter, I show that Baldwin’s exposition of white Americans’ love of America, shared black and white suffering and susceptibility to death and dramatization of radically new modalities of compassion and generosity challenge both claims.

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<sup>67</sup> Baldwin, “Words of a Native Son” (1964), 208.

<sup>68</sup> Baldwin’s biographer, David Leeming, claims that illegitimacy was a “constant” theme in Baldwin’s work. Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Relyea argues that Baldwin exploded racial as well as sexual myths about American identity and directly parted company not only with “the aesthetics of the popular front but with the 1950s intellectuals who strove toward a cohesive ideology of America” Sarah Relyea, *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin* (London: Routledge, 2007), 30.

<sup>70</sup> Baldwin, “The Creative Process” (1962), 670-671.

<sup>71</sup> For a closer analysis of Baldwin’s rhetoric see Brian Norman, *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 87-116.

<sup>72</sup> Baldwin advanced this critique of Wright in “Alas, Poor Richard” (1961), 247-268 and “Many Thousands Gone” (1951), 19-34.

My thesis proceeds through examining Baldwin's essays not because his fiction was uninteresting but because his essays from "Many Thousands Gone" (1951) through his collected book of essays, *No Name on the Street* (1972), represented a coherent body of work theorizing racial justice. Baldwin was a prolific essayist, publishing in well-regarded journals that were popular with intellectuals and educated citizens. Beyond several essay collections, *Notes of Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin published in journals such as *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Commentary*, *Esquire*, *Harper's* and *The New York Times Book Review*. Additionally, although I do not believe *The Fire Next Time* (1963) represents a dividing line between his early, political nuanced and later politically simplistic work, my aim is not to offer an interpretation that invalidates this thesis.<sup>73</sup>

#### Baldwin's Critique of Americans as Free and Freedom-Loving

Born in segregated black Harlem in 1924, a neighborhood marked by black ghettoization and white police brutality, Baldwin, unlike his liberal contemporaries, was exemplary in his awareness that the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) U.S. Supreme Court decision would not solve the national, pervasive and entrenched problem of structural economic and social racial inequality that existed beyond the law. As he wrote, "Negroes are, therefore, ignored in the North and are under surveillance in the South, and suffer hideously in both places."<sup>74</sup> Equally unique was his argument that such inequality was centrally a problem of the white American majority's belief that America was an exceptional nation comprised of "freedom-loving heroes."<sup>75</sup> At some moments, what Baldwin meant by this was that the conviction that America was a free society perpetuated the ideology of equal opportunity, which rendered white

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<sup>73</sup> Henry Louis Gates claims that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, Baldwin lost his early skepticism and independence. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Fire Last Time: What James Baldwin Can and Can't Teach America," *New Republic*, 1 June 1992, 37-43.

<sup>74</sup> Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" (1960), 170.

<sup>75</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), 345.



Americans unable to see structural conditions that impaired African American progress. In “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem” (1960), he wrote how “the existence—the public existence—of, say, Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr., proves to them that America is still the land of opportunity and that inequities vanish before the determined will.”<sup>76</sup> Equal opportunity for all enabled the belief that there were little or no structural obstacles to individual flourishing. Exceptional individuals’ success suggested that all were given equal opportunity to overcome their poverty. As a consequence, white and black citizens were seen as solely responsible for personal uplift through hard-work. At other moments, Baldwin meant white Americans’ embracing the idea of freedom as individualism, which conceptualized individuals as free actors personally responsible for their own success, rendered African Americans singularly responsible for their uplift. He wrote that,

“joy is the fruit of Yankee thrift and virtue and makes its sweet appearance only after a lifetime of cruel self-denial and inveterate moneymaking...if the Negro is ‘happy’ in his ‘place,’ as we still would be only too delighted to believe, then it becomes, it becomes, in us, a virtue not only to keep him there but to frustrate, for the sake of his continued happiness and the protection of our property and our profits, any attempt of his to rise out of it.”<sup>77</sup>

On this interpretation, because African Americans refused to adopt the idea of individualism, as a consequence of culturally different priorities, white Americans saw themselves as under no obligation to dismantle their abject living conditions. Because white Americans saw themselves as virtuous in terms of their own embrace of individualism they felt no obligation to risk their own wealth and property to liberate African Americans.

Yet Baldwin’s later work, *No Name in the Street* (1972), revealed his understanding that what made these beliefs about freedom so problematic was a prior understanding that Americans were irrationally and affectively committed to it (as “freedom-loving”). The problem stemmed

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<sup>76</sup> Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem,” 173.

<sup>77</sup> Baldwin, “Color” (1962), 674.

neither simply from an inaccurate understanding of structural impediments to success nor a misguided faith in individual perseverance. It came instead from an ideological construct: Americans' belief that they *loved* freedom, rather than simply finding it instrumentally or politically valuable, convinced them that Americans were obsessed with ensuring and actively dedicating themselves to the nonexistence of oppression, even in the most unpleasant of circumstances. Yet this positive self-assessment, a surplus rather than deficit of love, was what helped delegitimize and displace African American grievances about racial oppression. In response to one juror's comments in the 1967 trial of Black Panther, Huey P. Newton's alleged murder of an Oakland police officer, that racism needed to be eliminated from the minds of citizens and not through black confrontations with police officers in their streets, Baldwin made this argument clear:

This is a fairly vivid and accurate example of the American piety at work. The beginning of the statement is revealing indeed: “—racism, bigotry, and segregation is something we have to wipe out of our hearts and minds and “not in the street.” One can wonder to whom the “we” here refers, but there isn't any question as the object of the tense, veiled accusation contained in “not in the street.” Whoever the “we” is, it is probably not the speaker—to leave it at that: but the anarchy and danger “on the street” are the fault of the blacks. Unnecessarily: for the police are honorable, and the courts are just. It is not accident that Americans cling to this dream. It involves American self-love on some deep, disastrously adolescent level. And Americans are very carefully and deliberately conditioned to believe this fantasy: by their politicians, by the news they get and the way they read it, by the movies, and the television screen, and by every aspect of the popular culture.<sup>78</sup>

Notwithstanding Baldwin's uncritical celebration of the Black Panthers and their romantic view of self-defense and resistance in the late 1960s,<sup>79</sup> his point was that white Americans' clinging to the idea that they were irrationally driven by freedom rendered them unable to see that the American state protected some of its citizens more than others. By 1972, the real gains of the

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<sup>78</sup> Baldwin, “No Name in the Street” (1972), 451-452.

<sup>79</sup> For an excellent account of Baldwin's fascination with black power in the late 1960s see James Campell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 217-228.

Civil Rights movement made it unlikely that an audience would accept a critique of racial inequality based in white Americans' impoverished ethical imagination, failure of white American political willpower to enact the public policies necessary to mitigate it or the more nefarious, concerted effort of social control stemming from the fear of black deviance. Playing on the white juror's ambiguous use of the pronoun "we" to designate the uncertainty of who was responsible for ending racial tensions between blacks and whites, Baldwin thus explained that racial inequality partly came forcefully, even if indirectly, from white Americans' failure to imagine themselves as *not* affectively attached to freedom. This argument offered an implicit theory of misrecognition that emphasized how it came from citizens' deep attachments and self-perceptions rather than failure to understand others. Some recognition theorists insist that a failure to acknowledge the moral salience of one's reality constitutes a form of disrespect that comes from an individual failure of moral responsibility or reification of others as objects.<sup>80</sup> Misrecognition in American racial politics, for Baldwin, came from white Americans' deep-seated belief that police officers would not abuse their power and that their courts would always issue impartial decisions necessitated the assumption that the problem lied beyond their institutions. African Americans were thus responsible for the police response their actions elicited because they adopted violent or anti-authoritarian attitudes when they resisted police authority ("the anarchy and danger 'on the street' are the fault of the blacks"). Several pages later, Baldwin crystallized how this prevented whites Americans from acknowledging the real lack of police security afforded black citizens and justified their failure to dismantle the black ghetto: "[w]hite America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real...and the effect of this massive and hostile incomprehension is to increase the danger in which all

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<sup>80</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

black people live here, especially the young.”<sup>81</sup>

### Vulnerability throughout American History

Yet one crucial rhetorical strategy of Baldwin’s that sought to make white and black citizens tackle such racial injustice was retelling American history. It is not hyperbolic to argue that Baldwin’s obsession with history was more central than his preoccupation with race. At the personal as well as national level, history was the collection of events, experiences and actions that solidified identity. Knowing history was crucial for life. The suppression of darker historical truths was not simply problematic on factual or normative grounds but was harmful because it imprisoned Americans to repeat those truths. As Baldwin once put it, “we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations.”<sup>82</sup> Baldwin’s conception of history’s power explains why, as David Blight correctly notes, his essays in the 1950s and 1960s engaged in a public, popular revision of American history that centralized the unromantic, anti-liberal, violent and exploitative history of slavery when such an account was missing from the public discourse.<sup>83</sup> No matter how insightful, Blight’s account inadequately explores how a central concern of Baldwin’s work was to advance a public-historical narrative of American history that emphasized shared white and black vulnerability in everyday life. This narrative offered a critique of Americans’ romantic conceptions as free and freedom-loving and of the idea that racial inequality was aberrational or easy to dismantle. Baldwin demonstrated that from American origins through American racial history unwanted, unconscious feelings compromised

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<sup>81</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 455.

<sup>82</sup> Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 672.

<sup>83</sup> David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 189-250.

and perpetually threatened Americans' potential to be sovereign over their behaviors. This narrative did not simply tell American origins or slavery in a way that rendered factually inaccurate American political culture's commitment to freedom, equality, tolerance, democracy or declaration of ever-present progress. It instead tried to disrupt the *force* of American liberal ideas to ever be successfully manifest or gain traction in American institutions, even if public commitment to them was widespread. Understanding Baldwin revision of history clarifies his call for historical awareness, long seen as central to his political thought.<sup>84</sup>

First, Baldwin highlighted the pervasiveness of depthless alienation in American origins. His own experience of alienation as gay black man in America made him an expatriate in Paris, yet this expatriate experience itself occasioned his first sustained consideration of American identity in his essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). Following his cursory statement in "Encounter on the Seine," (1950) that "this depthless alienation from oneself and from one's people is, in sum, the American experience,"<sup>85</sup> he claimed in "Question of Identity" (1954) that

"our history...is the history of the total, and willing, alienation of entire peoples from their forebears. What is overwhelmingly clear, it seems, to everyone but ourselves is that this history has created an entirely unprecedented people, with a unique and individual past. It is, indeed, this past which has thrust upon us our present, troubling role."<sup>86</sup>

The vast majority of scholars have interpreted Baldwin's rooting American origins in citizens' unprecedented alienation from their culture and tradition as reflecting his own early American patriotism. Some insist that this expressed an optimistic conviction that America's beginning in a productive kind of amnesia allowed for a spirit of continued national reinvention, which could

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<sup>84</sup> George Shulman, for instance, argues that Baldwin's central claim was that the disavowal of the history of slavery shaped all aspects of American life. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 138. Furthermore, Lawrie Balfour argues that Baldwin believed American identity was itself structured by this disavowal. Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>85</sup> Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine" (1950), 89.

<sup>86</sup> Baldwin, "Question of Identity" (1954), 100.

ultimately eradicate race.<sup>87</sup> Others insist that it expressed his thesis that the cultural alienation of both American blacks and whites allowed America to be exemplary in disproving the validity of race.<sup>88</sup> But what these readings overlook is that Baldwin's narrative of citizens' alienation *from* culture dramatized the psychological unease felt upon arrival. Not only were the first Americans strangers in a new land, but they were without social status or cultural memory. A feeling of vast uncertainty, terror and loss of identity rather than freedom marked the American national beginning. What made this past so troubling was therefore a primordial disconnection, marked by a loss of one's roots, rather than simply a new optimistic beginning. To highlight this as a universal, cross-racial experience, Baldwin argued that this alienation was also true for African slaves. He wrote how "in the case of the Negro the past was taken from whether he would or no."<sup>89</sup>

Second, Baldwin's later essays highlighted how this primordial alienation was inspired and accompanied by a host of contingent, corporeal desires driven by desperation. In a 1963 essay, "A Talk to Teachers," months after Birmingham, Alabama safety commissioner, Bull Connor, authorized city police officers to use attack dogs upon non-violent, young black protestors and white terrorists murdered four young girls in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Baldwin argued that a commitment to freedom was nonexistent at the American founding:

What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors. It's astounding to me, for example, that so many people really appear to believe that the country was founded by a band of heroes who wanted to be free. That happens not to be true. What happened was that some people left Europe because they couldn't stay there

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<sup>87</sup> See Robert Reid Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 104.

<sup>88</sup> For this interpretation see Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Also see James Miller "What Does It Mean to Be an American? The Dialectics of Self-Discovery in Baldwin's 'Paris Essays' (1950–1961)," *Journal of American Studies*, 42 (2008), 51–66.

<sup>89</sup> Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 125.

any longer and had to go someplace else to make it. That's all. They were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts. Those who were making it in England, for example, did not get on the Mayflower. That's how the country was settled.<sup>90</sup>

Baldwin's narrative of Americans origins as founded in human frailty and bare necessity at once tried to contextualize such white racial violence in the 1960s and challenge Cold War patriotic narratives that rendered the pilgrims as invincible, omnipotent and irrationally obsessed with freedom. Pervasive anxiety rather than invincibility, need rather than idealism, contingency rather than necessity formed America. The first settlers came to the New World to survive rather than flourish, driven by the banal needs to stave off hunger, poverty and the pragmatic desire to escape from religious persecution.

On the one hand, Baldwin's other writings made clear that the *white majority's* feeling of alienation, anxiety and desperation were managed through anti-black racism, which positioned the black minority at the bottom of the social ladder and kept slavery intact. He argued "In Search of a Majority" (1960) that "the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall below him.*"<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, he described that the uneasy feelings whites sought to manage were simply displaced unequally onto blacks. Anti-black racism itself created in blacks intense anxiety, terror, humiliation and doubt about their self-worth, all of which was simply intensified through a long history of denigration, rape and torture of black bodies. As he explained in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "this past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers" (1963), 684.

<sup>91</sup> Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority" (196), 218-19.

<sup>92</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 342.

Third, Baldwin's early essay, "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), narrated the American racial experience as one in which white Americans' envisioning blacks as radically sub-human and super-human created in blacks an uncontrollable rage but in so doing also solidified white Americans' uncontrollable anxiety. Political theoretical interpretations of the essay usually stress Baldwin's centralization of African American slavery to American history to challenge the dominant trope that American history was somehow beautiful, exceptional and morally exemplary.<sup>93</sup> It is true that he began the essay with the assertion that "the story of the Negro in America 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."<sup>94</sup> Yet a central objective of the essay was to dramatize the hidden unpleasant emotions, rather than empirical fact of racial oppression, that actually made this black-white history of America not so pretty:

Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, ferociously literate, well-dressed...Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask where they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo they have vanished?

However inaccurate our portraits of them were, these portraits do suggest, not only the conditions, but the quality of their lives and the impact of this spectacle on our consciences. There was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger and more pious and more loyal or wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral. Uncle Tom, trustworthy and sexless, needed to drop the title "Uncle" to become violent, crafty and sullen...[but]this was the piquant flavoring to the national joke, it lay behind our uneasiness as it lay behind our benevolence: Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at last evaded us; they had a life--their own, perhaps a better life than ours--and they would never tell us what it was. At the point where we were driven most privately and painful to conjecture what depths of contempt, what heights of indifference, what prodigies of resilience, what untamable superiority allowed them so vividly to endure, neither perishing nor rising up in a body to wipe us from the earth, the image perpetually shattered and the word failed. The black man in our midst carried murder in his heart, he wanted vengeance. We carried murder too, we wanted peace.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Lawrie Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said*, 43-49.

<sup>94</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 19.

<sup>95</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 21-22.



Notice that the purpose of Baldwin's narrative was not simply to show that these racist images expressed whites' single-handed, vehement dehumanization of blacks, to highlight their social constructivism or to render them factually inaccurate. Deploying the racially ambiguous pronouns "our" and "we," Baldwin instead described these images as functioning dialectically, themselves imprinting upon and governing both black and white consciences. His description that these images evaded "us," or came to exercise a power over those who wielded and experienced them, showed how they carried an almost sovereign ability to single-handedly, unexpectedly shape black and white feelings, which invariably determined their behavior. That blacks were cast as superhuman in their trustworthiness, forgiveness and chastity created a deep doubt in whites about whether their own behavior was moral exemplary. That blacks were also exemplary in their viciousness resentment and hyper-sexuality made whites fearful that they would violently retaliate against them. However, these humiliating images fostered for blacks feelings of anger, rage and a thirst for vengeance and retribution. Paradoxically, white fear of black retaliation, at first a product of an inaccurate, fantastical and misguided understanding of black identity, became real. Baldwin described this black rage, what he elsewhere called the "rage of the disesteemed," "an internal warfare from which "no black man can hope to entirely liberated,"<sup>96</sup> in the following way: "And there is, I should think, no Negro living in American who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull...simple naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter..."<sup>97</sup> This narrative was at odds with the essay's critique of Wright's *Native Son*, which he believed problematically foregrounded the singularity of black rage at the expense of the much larger, complex psychological reality that contained genuine, even if painful, anguished, love towards

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<sup>96</sup> Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" (1953), 122.

<sup>97</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 29.

whites. Yet Baldwin's emphasis on black Americans' lack of control over their rage, read alongside whites' attendant lack of control over their anxiety and fear over blacks, paralleled and in certain ways continued the cross-racial alienation evident at the founding. Alienation not from one's past or culture, but from one's self. That there was an emotional reality to this black rage and white fear showed that the dubiousness of these stereotypes made them no less real, powerful and threatening to black and white citizens' freedom. Against declarations from liberal intellectuals in the 1950s that racial progress was just around the corner, the much-discussed following passage argued that the persistence of these racial images suffocated the potential for black-white receptive listening and communication so necessary for racial justice:

In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics. It is this which defeats us, which continues to defeat us, which lends to interracial cocktail parties their rattling, genteel, nervously smiling air... Wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable.<sup>98</sup>

Situating this point within the context of the essay reveals that its purpose was not simply to show that, as P.J. Brendese suggests, “[racial] histories are lodged in the subconscious registers, habituated practices and presumptions that make up who we are.”<sup>99</sup> That “our image of the Negro” continued to exist through what he described earlier in the essay as “statistics, slums, rapes, injustice, remote violence,”<sup>100</sup> which threatened to reproduce earlier white racial assumptions that blacks were dangerous but also pious for withstanding oppression, made the beast of this past of psychological vulnerability alive. Foregrounding how uncontrollable emotions could easily undo the possibility of the reasoned, undistorted communication so central to what Jürgen Habermas sees as deliberative action,<sup>101</sup> Baldwin highlighted how these images

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>99</sup> See P.J. Brendese, “The Race of a More Perfect Union: James Baldwin, Segregated Memory and the Presidential Race.”

<sup>100</sup> Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” 19.

<sup>101</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *A Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

would undermine Americans' freedom to listen and deliberate. Contra Habermas, neither the regulative force of reason nor truthful, non-coercive speech acts were sufficient for promoting agreement if citizens were fundamentally governed by emotional states. Baldwin's was not a critique Habermas' unwillingness to value emotion but instead his failure to see that emotion was itself constitutive of and often threatening to communication.<sup>102</sup>

Fourth, Baldwin's narrative emphasized how this racial history created and perpetuated white feelings of guilt. In "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), he reframed racism as not that which simply promoted in whites an unthinking kind of moral apathy but that which produced an entrenched guilt from a latent realization that they were responsible for dehumanizing other human beings. As he put it,

The [white]American found himself in a very peculiar situation because he knew black people were people...For one thing, it created in Americans a perpetual guilt, hidden, festering and, entirely unadmitted guilt. Guilt is a very peculiar emotion. As long as you are guilty about something, no matter what it is, you are not compelled to change it.<sup>103</sup>

Baldwin's argument that anti-black racism created white guilt was obviously a speculative leap. It assumed white Americans to be latently moral rather than purely self-interested and that their investment in racism engendered, rather than masked, negative feelings about themselves. These problems notwithstanding, Baldwin's claim was not simply an argument about racism but itself a narrative that tried to persuade white Americans' to rethink themselves as fundamentally weak rather than powerful. That this guilt was real and festering, even if hidden and unadmitted, suggested that their behavior was governed by things and in ways over which they had little control. That this guilt immobilized the action necessary for overturning it and from which it originated pointed to its debilitating effects for change.

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<sup>102</sup> For a critique of discourse ethics centered on its marginalization of emotion and rhetoric see Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52-80.

<sup>103</sup> Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," 76.

Yet Baldwin's later writings supplemented this narrative about white guilt coming *from* racism with an account that stressed how an entrenched, almost uncontrollable investment in racism itself came from white guilt over perpetually denying their responsibility for slavery. Writing in August of 1965 just months after president Lyndon Johnson's commencement address at Howard University, which argued that a "blanket of history and circumstance" or "the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and injustice"<sup>104</sup> Baldwin, like Johnson, made clear how the past shaped the present. In his essay, "White Man's Guilt" (1965)" he wrote,

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even, principally, the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.<sup>105</sup>

Baldwin, like Johnson, sought to persuade Americans to see themselves as their own beliefs and actions as subject to a past not of their own choosing, rather than as freely and self-consciously determined. Baldwin's ambiguous understanding of how history shaped the present implied everything from a claim that certain past events or an accumulation of past events shaped the contours of the present to the idea that past events were repeated in the present. Furthermore, it ranged from an argument that past events informed Americans' political, social and economic opportunities (placed one where one is) to a more broad account of how it shaped their outlook on the world (frames of reference, identities and aspirations). Whatever Baldwin's intention, Deak Nabers argues that Baldwin's turn to historical legacies by his mid-1960s writings sought to persuade white Americans that the Civil Rights legislation that promised African Americans

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<sup>104</sup> Lyndon Johnson, "Commencement Address at Howard University: 'To Fulfill Those Rights,'" See Lyndon Johnson, *LBJ Presidential Library*, 28 June 2013, <<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>>.

<sup>105</sup> Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt" (1965), 722-723.

formal equality under the law could not undo the effects of white racism.<sup>106</sup> Nabers is correct that passages such as this offered the armor for arguments that the legacy of slavery made blacks vulnerable by creating a pathological culture, a position that could easily reinforce white racism.<sup>107</sup> As the essay unfolded, Baldwin problematically echoed this cultural pathology argument so central to Johnson's speech when he suggested that slavery destroyed the black nuclear family, led to black drug addiction and criminal behavior. Rather than narrowly argue that slavery and Jim Crow diminished African American access to socioeconomic opportunities, like equal housing, schooling, jobs and healthcare, he suggested that "the black American finds himself facing the terrible roster of his lost: the dead, black junkie, the defeated, black father; the unutterably weary, black mother; the unutterably ruined, black girl."<sup>108</sup>

Yet Nabers overlooks how a central rhetorical objective of "White Man's Guilt" was to argue that white Americans' lack of control over entrenched guilt for racial oppression itself exemplified a form of cultural pathology. Nabers ignores that Baldwin universalized cultural pathology in a way that challenged Johnson's reduction of it to black culture, describing uncontrollable white guilt as paradoxically creating an ever deeper, irrational and compulsive investment in racism. On Baldwin's interpretation, white Americans' vulnerability came not, as it did for blacks, from a legacy of slavery that constrained their socioeconomic opportunities but from a latent feeling of guilt that came from their public-cultural and personal denial of responsibility for slavery. He wrote,

"What they see is an appallingly oppressive and bloody history, known all over the world. What they see is a disastrous, continuing present, condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility. But since in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it...In any

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<sup>106</sup> See Deak Nabers, "Past Using: James Baldwin and Civil Rights Law in the 1960s," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 18 (1968), 221-242.

<sup>107</sup> Nabers, 22.

<sup>108</sup> Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 724.

case...the guilt remains, more deeply rooted, more securely lodged, than the oldest of trees.”<sup>109</sup>

If “In the Uses of the Blues” Baldwin argued that guilt came from racism, what he suggested here was that racism was reinforced through the very guilt that came from a repeated failure to accept responsibility for slavery. Several passages later he made vivid this point through the example of the interracial everyday encounter, which has been repeated since the abolition of slavery:

This is the place in which it seems to me, most Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly aware that the history they have fed themselves is a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. This incoherence is heard nowhere more plainly than in those stammering, terrified dialogues which white American sometimes entertain with the black conscience, the black Man in America. The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea: Do not blame *me*, I was not there, I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway, it was *your* chiefs who sold *you* to *me*. I was not present on the middle passage.<sup>110</sup>

The above example showed how white guilt over failure to accept responsibility for slavery became rationalized on the basis of black inferiority: as the cause of African tribal chiefs, rather than white society. African tribal chiefs became a racist representation of blacks as either power-hungry or less moral than whites and allowed whites to conceptualize themselves as innocent bystanders who were passively forced to deal with enslavement. Yet this racism created not simply a morally abhorrent worldview but morally abhorrent violent behavior. As he wrote,

No curtain under heaven is heavier than the curtain of guilt and lies behind which white American hide. That curtain may prove to be yet more deadly to the lives of human beings [than the Iron Curtain]. The American curtain is color. Color. White men have used this word, this concept, to justify unspeakable crimes, not only in the past, but in the present...One has only to ask oneself who established this distance, who is this distance designed to protect, and from what is this distance designed to offer protection.

I have seen this all very vividly, for example, in the eyes of southern law enforcement officers barring, let us say, the door to a courthouse...In a moment, because he could

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 722.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 722-723.

resolve this situation in no other way, this sheriff...began to club these [unarmed black people] down...And for a moment, therefore, he seemed to be pleading with the people facing him not to force him to commit yet another crime and not to make yet deeper that ocean of blood in which his conscience was drenched, and his manhood perishing...So the club rose, the blood came down, and his bitterness and his anguish and his guilt were compounded.

And I have seen it in the eyes of rookie cops in Harlem...who pretend to themselves that the black junkie, the black father, the black child were of different human species than themselves. The southern sheriff, the rookie cop, could, and I suspect still can only deal with their lives and their duties by hiding behind the color curtain...They thus will barricade themselves behind this curtain and continue in their crime, in the great unadmitted crime of what they have done to themselves.<sup>111</sup>

Violence and moral apathy, both of which perpetuated black oppression, culminated the process that began with guilt. As the curtain created by lies and guilt and that behind which whites hid, racism perpetuated guilt by making whites degrade blacks. The example of the white Southern sheriff's violence towards black protestors and the white Harlem rookie cop's moral apathy towards northern black citizens languishing in the ghetto illuminated something important about white Americans' agency. That neither the sheriff nor cop wanted to see blacks as inferior but to did so to insulate themselves from the latent guilt they felt about their failure to take responsibility for slavery illustrated that guilt compromised white Americans' freedom to renounce racism. This narrative made increasingly difficult for whites to displace the cause of contemporary structural racial inequality upon a history of black American cultural degradation or see their own culture as non-pathological.

Baldwin's psychological narrative of freedom's compromise in America differed from the account of the psychoanalytic critical theorist, Erich Fromm. Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) was that freedom in modernity was existentially unbearable because its giving of power to the individual rather than the community created anxiety, which was managed

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 725.

through embracing authoritarianism or social conformity.<sup>112</sup> Baldwin, like Fromm, showed how internal, psychological, individual rather than strictly collective, political forces compromised freedom not simply because of feelings of anxiety over loneliness, but over social status, fear, rage and guilt. Furthermore, Baldwin's pre-political, personal and social history also implicitly challenged his contemporary, Hannah Arendt's, thesis in *On Revolution* (1963) that the American political founding was an exemplary political revolution precisely in its prioritization of the public sphere of political freedom and equality as opposed to the social sphere of necessity and inequality.<sup>113</sup> Baldwin made clear instead that the social could never be easily divorced from the political, even if it was artificially divorced in the fabricated documents of the American state, the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Dark personal feelings and social anxieties could always threaten the transformative power of the political. Yet at the same time, Baldwin's narrative dramatized the political value of history differently from Arendt. Arendt believed that history was politically transformative because recalling forgotten deeds and concepts in the public sphere could revise and enliven political possibility in the present.<sup>114</sup> Baldwin instead used history to draw Americans' attention to their limitations, rather than simply energize their political thought and action. His belief was that Americans' ability to recognize their origins as founded in alienation, desperation, division and a general feeling of anxiety could make them increasingly less likely to assume that their society was somehow driven by freedom. He wrote,

I know the myth tells us that heroes came looking for freedom...but the relevant truth is that the country was settled by a desperate, divided, and rapacious horde of people who were determined to forget their pasts and determined to make money. We certainly have not changed in this respect and this is proved by our faces, by our children, by our absolutely unspeakable loneliness, and the spectacular ugliness and hostility of our cities.

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<sup>112</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1991).

<sup>113</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 49-106, 207-274.

<sup>114</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95.



Despair: perhaps it is this despair which we should attempt to examine if we hope to bring water to this desert.<sup>115</sup>

Departing from Arendt, Baldwin argued that acknowledging these basic, disruptive and amoral human truths and realities evident in American origins would enable citizens to understand how these motivations became manifest in lonely individuals and decrepit American cities.

Mobilizing the interracial “we,” Baldwin implied that only through an honest examination of this history would it become evident for whites and blacks that the standards conducive to psychological and social health, peace and prosperity were not yet in place. Only through this examination would it become clear that such standards would not magically come into being. And only then would the potential for a conversation about the need to establish them emerge. In this sense, Baldwin’s telling of a hidden black-white psychological experience throughout American history thus offered a powerful critique of the idea that racial inequality contradicted and departed from America’s founding commitment to freedom. Narrating this everyday, private reality governed by vulnerability challenged arguments that blacks were free to determine their lives and whites would continue to extend and realize for all the liberal ideals so central to American public culture. Uncontrollable, unconscious everyday emotions would continue to constrain, compromise, if not completely undermine, Americans freedom and ability to be freedom-loving. The existence of these emotions would continue to make increasingly difficult the idea that racial inequality could simply be abolished with better, non-discriminatory laws or that it would eventually be achieved over time.

Notwithstanding this, Baldwin’s rhetorical revision of American history was problematically insensitive to gender differences. That his revision failed to specify the difference in black women’s oppression confirms the troubling fact that Baldwin’s intersectional

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<sup>115</sup> Baldwin, “Nothing Personal” (1964), 694.

identity did not prevent him from failing to account for black women's experiences and the gendered nature of racial power. Indeed, Lawrie Balfour correctly notes that his increasing use of masculinist language and preoccupation with emasculation in the 1960s and 1970s itself "deafen[ed] Baldwin to claims about the gendered structure of power among African Americans."<sup>116</sup> This blindness threatened Baldwin's project, but an even deeper critique could be made. That Baldwin could have depicted these feelings in the present without referencing history raises the question of whether his retelling of history was logically necessary. A preliminary answer centers not on the logical but pragmatic-political importance of revising history. During Baldwin's time, the historical narratives of Myrdal, Johnson and King sought to authorize political action for racial equality during the Civil Rights movement and Cold War era. Today, influential political scientists have reiterated this assumption and tried to describe the kinds of historical stories of nationhood necessary for collective action.<sup>117</sup> That historical argumentation has been and can still be a crucial source of American political action makes it important to engage politically even if not logically.

Finally, understanding Baldwin's work as retelling American history as a "nightmare from which no one can awaken"<sup>118</sup> complicates understandings of his relationship to Cold War intellectuals. One interpretation is that while his later work in the 1970s distanced itself from the pro-American rhetoric of American exceptionalism, Baldwin's early work, launched on the cusp

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<sup>116</sup> Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said*, 54. Yet Balfour also explains how Baldwin's own insights into double consciousness, as always gendered, in his earliest essays can be seen as providing a corrective to this blindness. Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said*, 49-55. For an excellent overview of Baldwin's contribution to gender studies, with a specific focus on his critique of American masculinity see Yasmin Y. DeGout, "'Masculinity' and (Im)maturity: 'The Man Child' and Other Stories in Baldwin's Gender Studies Enterprise," in *Re-Viewing Baldwin* ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 128-154.

<sup>117</sup> Rogers Smith has argued that "ethically constitutive" stories of collective political membership are crucial for collective action." Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 98. Richard Rorty has argued that "insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely." Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 3.

<sup>118</sup> Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 119.

of the Cold War, embraced it for strategic reasons.<sup>119</sup> Another interpretation is that Baldwin's participation in what Vaughn Raspberry calls the "anti-colonial zeitgeist's" critique of racial integration as progress militated against the arguments of Cold War intellectuals.<sup>120</sup> There is ample evidence to support reading Baldwin as member and critic of Cold War intellectuals, but my interpretation suggests something more complex. That Baldwin retold American history as a way to persuade Americans to rethink their self-understandings as free reflected his awareness that core American narratives required engagement and an optimistic faith that change was possible. At the same time, Baldwin's historical narrative countered the image of history as a dream progressively moving towards greater freedom, but did so indirectly: not as a direct political critique of progress but through a narrative of an un-patriotic, darker psychological American history. We should therefore read Baldwin's project as governed by a constitutive tension between his personal hope in the creation of a new, moral American people and initiating a new American founding and a sober understanding of and rhetorical presentation of reality that undermined this hope.

#### The Ontological State of Vulnerability: Suffering and Responsibility

Baldwin's historically specific account of American vulnerability itself extended to a deeper account of how it was an ontological, inescapable and permanent fact of human life. His narrative of human suffering as inevitable sought to undermine the belief that it was something from which some Americans could be immune or permanently transcend through personal willpower. Suffering was either lurking somewhere beneath the shadows or would eventually surface, even when it seemed nonexistent. As Baldwin put it, "every person, everybody born,

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<sup>119</sup> Cheryl Wall claims that Baldwin adopted what she calls "strategic American exceptionalism" to address his white audience. See Wall, *Stranger at Home: James Baldwin on What it Means to be an American*, in *James Baldwin America and Beyond*, 35-52.

<sup>120</sup> Vaughn Raspberry, "Now Describing You: James Baldwin and Cold War Liberalism" in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, 84-105.

from the time he's found out about people until the whole thing is over, is certain of one thing: he is going to suffer. There is no way not to suffer."<sup>121</sup> Not only could social obstacles always counteract one's personal resolve, he declared, but lack of control over sickness and death, "the only fact we have,"<sup>122</sup> could come unexpectedly. Baldwin's making suffering ontological challenged John Locke's formulation that human equality meant individuals' equal access to reason or free birth. His description of emotional and bodily vulnerability could always compromise one's freedom mirrored Thomas Hobbes's assertion that human life in the state of nature was defined by the ever-present specter of violence and death.<sup>123</sup> Yet Baldwin's point ultimately differed from Hobbes' because it positioned this reality as a foundation for ethics, rather than as a justification for a social contract that empowered a sovereign, powerful state. As Baldwin put it, to understand that suffering was inescapable was to be "responsible to life... the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return."<sup>124</sup> To be sure, most accounts equate Baldwin's conception of ethics with "love," which, as Stephen Marshall notes, was a model of civic virtue that called upon would be loves to disclosed a hidden reality to their beloved who could not see this reality but needed to in order to change their personally and socially damaging ways.<sup>125</sup> However, Baldwin did not simply advocate, as was made clear in his introductory letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*, for African Americans to approach whites compassionately or to see the world through their perspective. He argued instead that recognizing the ontological nature of suffering would make citizens more empathetic

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<sup>121</sup> Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," 72-73.

<sup>122</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 339.

<sup>123</sup> See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980). See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). For an interesting but not fully developed understanding Baldwin's understanding of human equality as a susceptibility to superiority and sickness, see Lawrie Balfour, *Evidence of Things Not Said*, 26.

<sup>124</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 339.

<sup>125</sup> Marshall defines Baldwin's understanding of love as "refinement of character for a new polity and that will not endorse activities that seek only dissolution and disorder... [it] is a condition of human freedom" Stephen Marshall, *The City on the Hill From Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 160.

and unconditionally responsive to others out of respect rather than pity. Baldwin's essay, "The Uses of the Blues" (1964) made this point apparent:

The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar people and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it's very serious, that people who have had no experience have no compassion...[they] suppose that if a man is a thief, he is a thief; but, in fact, that's the most important thing about him. The most important thing about him is that he is a man and, furthermore, that if he's a thief or a murderer or whatever he is, you could also be and you would know this, anyone would know this who had really dared to live. Miles Davis once gave poor Billie Holiday one hundred dollars and somebody said, "Man, don't you know she's going to go out and spend it on dope?" and Miles said, "Baby, have you ever been sick?"<sup>126</sup>

Baldwin's argument was that Americans' persistent demonization of those deemed morally deficient like thieves and murders came not from apathy but from a belief that they were suffering from deficient willpower, incapable of adequately mastering their weakness to perform heinous acts. Those who did not kill or steal thus reflected exemplary moral virtue, as they successfully mastered their weakness, desire through personal dedication. Insofar as this understanding discouraged generous assistance Baldwin showed through Miles Davis' exemplary awareness of the inescapability of pain, anguish and lack of control over his and others' freedom how a revised understanding could encourage it. Davis' rejoinder to the argument that his aid to Billie Holiday was misguided because it only enabled her addiction reflected an awareness that vulnerability was something that all had or would experience throughout their lives. His response, "Baby, have you ever been sick?," was a critique of the idea that some could freely and permanently manage their sickness. That Baldwin framed this awareness as that which enabled Davis to respond ethically to Holiday's plea itself anticipated Judith Butler's recent argument about the importance of reframing life as governed by

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<sup>126</sup> Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," 79.

constitutive precariousness, under threat and subject to injury, for responsibility.<sup>127</sup> Yet, through Davis' example, Baldwin went farther than Butler by showing how this understanding was crucial for assistance based in critical respect, itself crucial for challenging the paternalism and assumption of inferiority so central to maintaining racial inequality. Davis' acknowledgement of the inevitability of sickness gave way to an assumption that Holiday was his equal rather than inferior, which made him feel empathy based on personal experiences he shared with Holiday and sympathy based on a generalized identification without knowing or sharing her emotional state. Even though Holiday's plea came for an unhealthy drug addiction, Davis assumed Holiday's agency and humanity. Yet this understanding also made his aid unconditional, centered on mitigating suffering and not governed by condescending charity or moral chastisement since he knew full well that he would almost certainly require such assistance in the future.

Baldwin's casting of Davis' model as exemplary provides insights into his own theory of ethics. His theory departed from accounts that made responsibility dependent upon Kantian rational determinations about universalizable norms<sup>128</sup> or utilitarian calculations about the greatest happiness.<sup>129</sup> Ethics, for Baldwin, came from an almost hyper awareness of one's and others' physical and emotional precariousness just as it consisted of an unconditional response that did not rely upon or reproduce a hierarchical relationship. Ultimately, Baldwin's concluded "The Uses of the Blues" with a sober optimism. There was no guarantee that recognizing vulnerability, captured in the slave songs from which the blues originated, could inspire

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<sup>127</sup> As Butler writes, "to say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore...its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life)." See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 14. Also see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>128</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

legislative reforms, more just public policy or more accountable political or economic institutions. However, it could increase the likelihood that citizens approached others with deeper respect, more generosity and less distance in everyday life. As Baldwin explained, “[p]eople who in some sense know who they are cannot change the world always, but they can do something to make it a little more, to make life a little more human. Human in the best sense. Human in terms of joy, freedom which is always private, respect, respect for one another, even such things as manners.”<sup>130</sup>

From a different angle, Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* foregrounded something “The Uses of the Blues” only implied: that individuals’ willingness to accept vulnerability was itself an intrinsic part of genuine assistance. The following passage made explicit how Davis’ providing Holiday assistance, despite outside social ostracism and it making him one hundred dollars poorer, reflected an exemplary willingness to risk oneself. He wrote,

It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself--that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving.<sup>131</sup>

Selfishness or rational self-interest, Baldwin insisted, was not problematic because of its petty, self-centered concern with one’s needs but because it reflected a desire to preserve one’s reality and self-assumptions. Genuine assistance entailed a non-rational willingness to renounce self-preservation because it was based in an anti-individualistic, radical deferring to the agency of others. This meant one’s preparedness to risk their social and economic security and accept an unknown, radically transformed reality. Giving required accepting greater psychic burden, social unease and self-doubt. Several pages later, Baldwin argued that racial justice itself depended on

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<sup>130</sup> Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” 80-81.

<sup>131</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 336.

whites' embracing this understanding. As he wrote, "[t]he price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has so long been rejected, must now be embraced, and at no matter what psychic or social risk."<sup>132</sup> To concretize this argument politically, genuine ethical assistance required fully dismantling the black ghetto even if it imposed higher taxes on white citizens; ensuring that full legal equality meant equal African American participation in constructing laws, even if it entailed changes to the electoral system that diminished the white electorate's power; honoring African Americans' distinct visions of the good life, even if this meant white Americans' abandoning the belief that their visions of the good life were universal. Such giving depended on willingness to accept that the possibility of pain, uncertainty and ambiguity that loss of white-skin privilege would necessitate.

Ultimately, these arguments reflected Baldwin's awareness that confronting racial injustice required dispensing with racist images of black difference upon which it subsisted. Reframing suffering as inescapable challenged the racist assumption that blacks were somehow inferior and unequal to whites. Reframing assistance as requiring the acceptance of suffering sought to undermine the every-present possibility of white paternalism and whites' ability to have complete sovereign control to shape black lives. Yet Baldwin's writings failed to theorize what acknowledging vulnerability might mean for African Americans. At times, he himself slipped into a problematic form of racial essentialism and generalization, where he implied that black culture's attentiveness to vulnerability through the blues, jazz and spirituals itself enabled blacks to understand it more deeply than whites.<sup>133</sup> More generally, he was strikingly silent about how recognizing vulnerability might shape African American conceptions of responsibility towards the black community along the lines of class, sexuality and gender. This myopic focus

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 340.

<sup>133</sup> See "The Uses of the Blues," 70-74.



on persuading the white majority reflected a pragmatic-realism that limited the reach of his insights for blacks.

### Freedom, Vulnerability and Politics

It could be argued that a glaring contradiction throughout Baldwin's writings was the coexistence of his critique of Americans' self-perceptions as free and freedom-loving with a call upon Americans to be free. Yet this apparent paradox is resolved when we understand Baldwin's own definition of freedom, based not in unbridled agency but in a more accurate understanding of reality. He wrote, "[t]he failure to look reality in the face diminishes a nation as it diminishes a person, and it can only be described as unmanly...human freedom is a complex difficult—and private—thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion."<sup>134</sup>Baldwin's invocation of problematic masculine language notwithstanding, freedom was something that needed to be achieved rather than something already existing. The core question concerning freedom was not, as the dominant paradigm suggested, what kind of choices citizens would make. The question was instead whether one was capable of engaging in the laborious process of eliminating self-delusion. Only when individuals jettisoned their illusory beliefs would they create a solid foundation from which to live and act. That freedom required will and desire ensured that it was never a foregone conclusion, easily achievable with no difficult investment from citizens. This deeply personal matter was nonetheless a crucial precondition for politics. As he wrote, "I have met only a few people--and most of these were not Americans--who had any real desire to be free. Freedom is hard to bear...the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of the nation."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" (1956), 208.

<sup>135</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 337.

Yet that Baldwin's reconceptualization of freedom depended on knowing truths made it something that could become too subjective. One could easily reject Baldwin's understanding of truth, his selective depiction of reality, in favor of an alternative truth and still be free. Furthermore, his essays depended upon a speculative assumption that recognizing the reality of vulnerability would lead American citizens to engage rather than withdraw from struggling for justice. But such awareness could just as easily make citizens more, rather than less, pessimistic about changing their ways. That this points to the potential limitations of Baldwin's arguments does not diminish their value for explaining why Americans' ongoing self-perception as freedom-loving in contemporary American cultural discourse, from the libertarian, right-wing Tea Party social movement to the liberal reformist, Barack Obama, needs to be undermined for the sake of racial justice. Dramatizing his own intellectual limitations, Baldwin remained silent about the kinds of standards would need to govern the future non-racial society he so desperately called for. Whether its political institutions needed to be social democratic, liberal or radical democratic was ultimately up to future citizens. As he concluded "In Search of a Majority (1960)," "the majority for which everyone is seeking which must reassess and release us from our past and deal with the present and create standards worthy of what a man may be—this majority is you. No one else can do it."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," 221.

### Chapter 3: Ralph Ellison's Reconstruction of Democratic Commitment

*Not that it is the novelist's role to "create the uncreated conscience" of his group or nation, for that was in motion long ago; rather it is to sensitize the nation's ever-floundering conscience by making us conscious of our strengths in our weaknesses and the triumphs of our failures.<sup>137</sup>*

*Inspiring our minds and bodies, they dance in our bones, spurring us to make them ever more manifest in the structures and processes of ourselves and our society. As a nation, we exist in the communication of our principles, and we argue over their application and interpretation as over rights of property or the exercise and sharing of authority...They interrogate us endlessly as to who and what we are; they demand that we keep the democratic faith.<sup>138</sup>*

-Ralph Ellison

#### Ellison and Democratic Commitment

Like freedom, Americans have always seen democracy as central to American political culture. Democracy names an organization of government or society centered on the concept of freedom, equality and rule of law in which the people are sovereign. Some American political thinkers have seen democracy as nothing more than a formal-political institution that guarantees citizens equal participation in free and fair elections, power over representative political institutions and control over the political agenda.<sup>139</sup> Others have seen democracy as measured by citizens' social participation, promoted through social egalitarianism, equality of opportunity and freedom from basic want. Nineteenth-century transcendentalists like Ralph Emerson and Walt Whitman and twentieth-century progressives like John Dewey defined democracy to mean radical socioeconomic egalitarianism.<sup>140</sup> For their part, political thinkers concerned with racial equality have always linked the realization of democracy to African American inclusion. The 19th century abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, explicitly saw the democratic promise of citizens'

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<sup>137</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Presentation to Bernard Malamud" (1983), 466. All of the essays are taken from *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995).

<sup>138</sup> Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1978), 501-502.

<sup>139</sup> Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942).

<sup>140</sup> See Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003); John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1988).

ability to self-govern embedded in the Declaration of Independence as requiring the abolition of slavery.<sup>141</sup> 20th century liberals like Gunnar Myrdal and Martin Luther King, Jr. saw it as incompatible with Jim Crow racial segregation. This incompatibility led them to argue that democracy required full African American political and socioeconomic participation.<sup>142</sup> Today, contemporary racial justice theorists see the fulfillment of democracy as requiring the abolition of white-skin privilege that implicitly defines American citizenship,<sup>143</sup> social and economic justice through color-conscious public policies like affirmative action<sup>144</sup> and a reformed electoral system more responsive to the interests of African Americans.<sup>145</sup> The core assumption animating these arguments is that racial justice requires acknowledging democracy's sublime and transformative participatory ethos. Since these positive values of democracy call for an expansion of the polity, whether along purely political or more socioeconomic lines, African American exclusion becomes unacceptable and requires redress.

Situated within this context, what made Ralph Ellison's essays and classic novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), so unique was that it demonstrated that understanding democracy's unseen tragic implications, rather than its positive ideals, was itself crucial for racial justice. First, his work showed that racial injustice would remain intact insofar as citizens failed to acknowledge that exercise of democratic autonomy could easily promote self-centered, amoral activity and that faith in one as an autonomous actor promoted blindness to social obstacles. Second, insofar

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<sup>141</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000), 188-206.

<sup>142</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995); Martin Luther King, Jr. explicitly argued that "And if there is a victory it will not be a victory for fifty thousand Negroes. It will be a victory for justice, a victory for goodwill, a victory for democracy." King, Jr. "Power of Nonviolence," in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 13.

<sup>143</sup> Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>144</sup> Amy Guttmann, "Responding to Racial Injustice," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, Amy Guttmann and K. Anthony Appiah (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 106-178.

<sup>145</sup> Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lani Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

as citizens failed to acknowledge that commitment to democratic equality required those in power to renounce their privileges. Third, insofar as citizens failed to acknowledge that the conscientiousness so central to ensuring democratic autonomy and equality helped take attention away from long-term political strategy. Fourth, insofar as citizens failed to acknowledge the tremendous effort and ongoing, unending turbulent process of perfection that came from the transcendental nature of democratic idealism. Ellison's reformulation of democracy's implications, like Baldwin's critique of freedom, showed that it was not simply a purely utopian, positive and desirable organization of politics and society but constitutively carried unexpected, harmful and burdensome consequences. Ellison, unlike Baldwin, nonetheless implied that what was needed was not dispensing with this core cultural commitment, but greater attentiveness to its implications or, as he borrowed from his namesake, Ralph Emerson: "conscience, consciousness, more consciousness and more conscientiousness!"<sup>146</sup>

By democracy, Ellison meant social freedom, equality and justice that exceeded full political participation or protection under the law. Insisting that democracy was "the ground-term of our concept of justice, the basis of our scheme of social rationality, the rock upon which our society was built,"<sup>147</sup> he resisted a narrow construction of democracy as simply a form of government that was made manifest through representative institutions, fair elections, due process and various civil liberties. His understanding of "the tragic," however, was less clear. Although he used the term throughout his essays, often in conjunction with democracy, he never defined it. It is thus risky to infer his understanding given that, as Terry Eagleton notes, the term is popularly understood to mean "very sad" but also invokes elements common to Greek Tragedy

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<sup>146</sup> Ellison, "Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949" (1974), 423.

<sup>147</sup> Ellison, "Tell it Like it is, Baby" (1965), 31.

such as suffering, catastrophe, reversal of fortune, frail heroes and violence.<sup>148</sup> The aspect of the tragic Ellison's work considered, I suggest, came closest to what his intellectual influence, Kenneth Burke, understood as the "tragic frame," marked by the way the human drive toward perfection would itself be responsible for unintended, unexpected and potentially harmful consequences.<sup>149</sup> Ellison offered a glimpse of this understanding through a revealing interpretation of Melville's *Moby Dick*: "[t]ragedy always involves making the ideal manifest in the real world...Moby Dick is a tragic story because Ahab is using the resources of technology and his great courage in a misdirected way. His enemy was not nature but his own wild ambition, his uncontrollable obsession...."<sup>150</sup> A tragic situation, for Ellison, was one in which negative consequences were inextricably linked to, engendered by and a direct result of action or an idea seen as irreducibly positive. This point paralleled sociologist George Simmel's definition that "in general we call a relationship tragic – in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive –when the destructive forces directed against some being spring from the deepest levels of that very being."<sup>151</sup> Emphasizing the tragic nature of commitment to democracy placed Ellison squarely alongside a tradition of political theorists who have argued that the tragic elements of contingency, suffering, ambiguity and human frailty, which challenge modern, liberal conceptions of progress, reason and agency, are constitutive of politics.<sup>152</sup> However, for Ellison, commitment to democracy was not tragic because, as some critics of democracy assert, its moral utopianism and universalism made it politically impractical or economically inefficient. Not because it promoted mob rule, threatened individual freedom and the rights of property,

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<sup>148</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 1.

<sup>149</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37-44.

<sup>150</sup> Ralph Ellison and John O'Brien, "Interview Ralph Ellison," (1972) in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amrijit Singh (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 224

<sup>151</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 43. Quoted in Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 5.

<sup>152</sup> See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

diminished individual excellence and made for inefficient or thoroughly compromised public policy.<sup>153</sup> One astute interpretation states that Ellison, drawing from Burke's complex understanding of the "ritual scapegoat" in the tragic frame, saw the invention of race as necessary to rationalize the guilt that came from white Americans' failure to extend democracy to slaves at the founding.<sup>154</sup> This argument is not incorrect but inadequately captures how Ellison showed that citizens' commitment to *democracy* itself was tragic, rather just *American* democracy's historical invention of race.

Ellison's insights offer a major contribution to contemporary theorizing of racial justice by showing why it depends as much on citizens' attentiveness to the unseen paradoxes and negative implications of democratic commitment as understanding what democracy's core ideals are. Recent work on Ellison's political-theoretical contributions to making a confrontation with race central to American democratic individualism,<sup>155</sup> to showing that everyday skin-color both enables and disables remembering slavery for racial justice<sup>156</sup> and to pointing towards a trust-generating citizenship has overlooked this.<sup>157</sup> I argue that attention to this aspect of Ellison's work shows theorists why racial justice depends on more than knowledge of whether democracy is state-sanctioned or a fugitive practice enacted temporarily by citizens, whether it carries a substantive moral vision or is nothing more than a process, whether it should be majoritarian or not. Equally crucial is citizens' attentiveness to how deep commitment to its core values can

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<sup>153</sup> For an excellent historical survey of these various critiques, see Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>154</sup> Bryan Crable, *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 145-149.

<sup>155</sup> Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>156</sup> William James Booth, "The Color of Memory: Reading Race with Ralph Ellison," *Political Theory* 2008 36: 683-707, 702.

<sup>157</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown V. Board of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101-119.

have debilitating repercussions or require them to accept more of a burden than they had previously understood.

Reconsidering Ellison's political thought in this way challenges a dominant interpretation that his patriotic championing of American democratic rhetorics impoverished his theorization of racial injustice. As Jerry Watts notes, too often such "hegemonic American democratic rhetorics" diverted Ellison's attention from diagnosing the pervasive problem of structural racial inequality.<sup>158</sup> Upon first glance, two major pieces of evidence support Watts' interpretation. First, Ellison's assertion that his preoccupation was ultimately not with "injustice, but with art,"<sup>159</sup> suggested that, like Baldwin, his art was not specifically concerned with exposing injustice. Ellison argued that focusing on oppression was a fragile ground for emancipatory action, as "tears were a betrayal of the struggle for freedom...tears can induce as well as deter action."<sup>160</sup> Second, one could read Ellison's own defense of and celebration of America, which was problematically overdetermined and implied contempt for those who were unpatriotic, as threatening to his own critical reflections. Ellison, unlike Baldwin, argued that a core responsibility of the African American writer was to illuminate the moral character of American democratic identity. This project was driven by cultivating hope in readers by recovering strength from weakness and hope from despair, to "sensitize the nation's ever-floundering conscience by making us conscious of our strengths in our weaknesses and the triumphs in our failures."<sup>161</sup> Yet this decidedly nationalistic project, bent on making vivid whatever moral content lay beneath the sedimentations of immoral American practices was infinitely more complex than

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<sup>158</sup> Jerry Watts argues that "Ellison utilizes hegemonic American democratic rhetorics as well as the resilient hopeful outlooks of many black Americans to divert his attention from the most debilitating aspects of black existence in America." See Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 108.

<sup>159</sup> Ellison, "Address at the Whiting Foundation" (1992), 852.

<sup>160</sup> Ellison, "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971), 671.

<sup>161</sup> Ellison, "Presentation to Bernard Malamud," 466.



Watts acknowledges. First, Watts overlooks that Ellison *was* deeply attentive to racial injustice throughout his writings. One of his earliest essays, “*American Dilemma: A Review*”(1949), written before the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) U.S. Supreme Court decision rendered school segregation unconstitutional, argued that Gunnar Myrdal’s depiction of blacks as culturally pathological could confirm harmful racial stereotypes that would keep white racism intact. One of his later speeches, “Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949” (1974) claimed that post-Civil Rights African American opportunities were stifled by concerted strategies that went beyond political disenfranchisement or unequal treatment by the law. Ellison’s optimism that the Civil Rights movement aligned American society more closely with the ideals of the Constitution and Bill of Rights was chastened by a sober recognition that white resistance to affirmative action programs and to public school desegregation threatened to make racial equality stillborn. As he wrote, “[n]orthern whites have reacted to the pressures of black northerners for more equality as vehemently and in some cases as violently and irrationally as their southern counterparts.”<sup>162</sup> Second, Watts overlooks how Ellison’s patriotism was at odds with his work’s critique *and* radicalization of democracy. Its critique of how democratic autonomy and conscientiousness carried the very ingredients for its undoing challenged romantic positions that saw it as uncomplicated or purely positive. Its radicalization of democratic equality and the ideal of democratic commitment challenged positions that saw democracy as easily realizable. Such decidedly unorthodox insights resisted ideological characterization as liberal, conservative or socialist and rendered fictitious the ideology of progress and triumphalism upon which conventional American patriotic rhetorics subsisted. Understanding this point complicates interpretations that see Ellison as nothing more than a Cold War liberal, whose work tried to reaffirm the hegemony of American moral exceptionalism against the threat of Soviet

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<sup>162</sup> Ellison, “Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949” (1974), 423.

Communism<sup>163</sup> or issue cultural criticisms of racial liberalism's unexamined denigration of black culture.<sup>164</sup> The theory that emerged from his work challenged thinkers like Myrdal and Johnson who invoked democracy to convince a white audience to respond to racial injustice. Not only was his work directed across the color line but it sought to heighten sensitivity to democracy's complex, dark nature and unseen logic. Ellison's exegesis and exposition of this amounted to a kind of consciousness-raising, which aligned closely with his conception of art's radical potential. This potential came not from its aesthetic beauty but from dialectically locating truth within falsehood and falsehood within truth. Art was at its best, he explained, when it could "challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of the few—and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth."<sup>165</sup>

The final contribution of this chapter is a fresh interpretation of *Invisible Man*'s core political insights. *Invisible Man* chronicles the turbulent life of an unnamed African American man who struggles to become a conscious actor in a world marked by white supremacy. Invisible Man moves south to north, from a student in an all-black college to the Harlem district organizer of an organization, the Brotherhood, which is committed to the idea of social equality for all citizens. This moves him from a state of naïve optimism, to one of disenchantment and pessimism; from a position of darkness where he believes his invisibility can be overcome, to one where he finally recognizes his fate. This has led critics to argue that the novel provides

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<sup>163</sup> For this interpretation, see Richard Purcell, *Race, Ralph Ellison and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>164</sup> For this critique see, Kenneth Warren, *So Black and So Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Ellison advanced this point forcefully in "An American Dilemma: A Review" (1944), 328-340.

<sup>165</sup> Ellison, "The World and the Jug" (1963), 154.

crucial insights into the possibility of freedom under conditions of constraint<sup>166</sup> and the role of sacrifice for citizenship.<sup>167</sup> This examination is central to the novel, but something is lost if we overlook how it also theorized the way citizens' ability to successfully confront racial inequality could be shaped by their understanding of democracy. Ellison himself never offered irrefutable evidence that any of the novel's characters were consciously committed to democracy: indeed, the word "democratic" is only invoked once throughout it.<sup>168</sup> However, there are two major sources of evidence to support reading the novel in this way. First, that the novel's chief internal conflict, Invisible Man's confusion about his grandfather's treacherous last words to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermining 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction,"<sup>169</sup> resolves with a recognition that it was based upon the need "to affirm the principle on which the country was built."<sup>170</sup> This provides space to read Invisible Man's own intellectual journey as a confrontation with democracy: the faith in autonomy, the desire for social equality and the practice of conscientiousness that Ellison argued was central to democracy. Second, Ellison's hope that *Invisible Man* would keep Americans on track to fulfill the democratic ideal. He wrote that he crafted the novel "as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we [try] to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal."<sup>171</sup>

### Autonomy and Debilitation

Ellison's centralization of autonomy to democracy challenged a prevailing idea that democratic self-rule strictly meant negative freedom from government interference into individual's choices.

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<sup>166</sup> Lucas Morel, "Recovering the Political Artistry of *Invisible Man*," in Lucas E. Morel, *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 8.

<sup>167</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown V. Board of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101-119.

<sup>168</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 220.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, XXI.

This followed from his understanding that democracy was a social rather than simply political ideal, centered on creating an open society where individuals were encouraged to achieve their own potential without the fetters of tradition, to transverse social boundaries and to reinvent themselves. A democratic society, for Ellison was an “open society in which the individual could achieve his potential unhindered by his ties to the past...[and in which] social categories are open, and the individual is not only considered capable of transforming himself, but is encouraged to do so.”<sup>172</sup> Arguing that democracy encouraged an art of individualistic self-making, improvisation and perfection put Ellison squarely in a tradition of American democratic individualism, exemplified by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.<sup>173</sup> For Ellison, autonomy was not protection from government but individuals’ pursuit of their own posited conceptions of perfection beyond adhering to the rule of law or acquiring property. He noted that the “democratic process” allowed individuals “to move about, to change their identities if they would, to advance themselves, to achieve results based on their own talents and techniques.”<sup>174</sup> Emphasizing this part of Ellison’s conception of self-rule might simply challenge assertions that he was a mainstream liberal.<sup>175</sup> Yet closer inspection reveals that *Invisible Man* provided a unique angle from which to demonstrate the tragic implications of autonomy. A standard contemporary argument is that the individualist call for personal responsibility, hard work and self-reliance associated with autonomy is one crucial factor for nullifying strong claims for

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<sup>172</sup> Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” 503.

<sup>173</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>174</sup> Ellison, “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” (1967), 757.

<sup>175</sup> It is true that Ellison himself never adequately distanced himself from Bledsoe throughout his writings or criticized the now too-familiar conservative understanding of freedom as personal responsibility, which calls for personal responsibility without any social or governmental interference. Perhaps this failure had to do with the fact that the equation of democratic commitment with rugged-individualism only become manifest *after* Ellison’s public influence, in the early 1980s with the rise of Ronald Reagan. For this reading, see Hortense J. Spillers, “‘The Little Man at Chehaw’ Today,” *Boundary 2*, 30:2, 5-19.

socioeconomic redistribution necessary for racial equality.<sup>176</sup> The idea of self-rule, in other words, authorizes resistance to government intervention. Ellison identified that the problem with the exercise of autonomy is instead that the power it crucially provides marginalized African Americans to personally control their life chances is also what could be responsible for harming others and themselves.

The clearest exposition of this came through Invisible Man's encounter with Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the all-black college he attends. In what becomes a formative moment for him, Bledsoe expels Invisible Man for showing an influential white donor, Mr. Norton, the poor black outskirts that surround it. After Invisible Man protests his expulsion, Bledsoe tells him that he himself does not need to offer a justification for his decision because, through his own effort, he controls the school:

[t]he white folk tell everybody what to think--except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about...It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in this country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.<sup>177</sup>

Originating not from some primordial human self-interest or a lack of moral sense, but from a haphazard, improvisation upon distorted social circumstances, Ellison showed that Bledsoe's exercise of personal autonomy to expel Invisible Man was not tragic, as critics from Plato in *The Republic* to James Madison in *Federalist 10* insisted, because it allowed him to enact his darkest desires, pleasures and interests without any regard for order, stability or the common good.<sup>178</sup> He instead captured how it was tragic because its centrality for helping him navigate his own destiny

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<sup>176</sup> For a survey of the public opinion literature as well as complex corroboration of this point, see Donald Kinder and Tali Mendelberg, "Individualism Reconsidered: Principles and Prejudice in Contemporary American Opinion," in *Racial Politics: The Debate About Racism in America* ed. David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius and Lawrence Bobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 44-75.

<sup>177</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 142.

<sup>178</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 227-233; James Madison, "Federalist #10" in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

was itself responsible for harming Invisible Man. On the one hand, Ellison showed the positive value autonomy offers marginalized citizens to shape their destiny. First, insofar as autonomy does not provide a substantive vision of how anyone should act but only enables them to personally improvise in a world that is decidedly distorted and non-ideal, racially marginalized citizens are free to devise the means to achieve their happiness. This constitutive emptiness of autonomy made it incredibly flexible, subject to creative improvisation and renegotiation, which provided endless possibilities for acting. Second, autonomy provides these citizens the individual power to secure their happiness in a society fundamentally distorted by white supremacy. Power becomes vested in the citizen, rather than the state or others; one's mind, energy and decisions become the determining factors for restructuring their life. Bledsoe's understanding that expelling Invisible Man would enable him to protect his status within the black college as well as the college thus exceeds simple ruthlessness. Exercising his autonomy is an outcome of a deeply flawed perception of an already distorted reality, but nonetheless exemplifies Bledsoe's own, partial devising of a life strategy to achieve personal happiness without any direct guidance of what secures it. Him telling Invisible Man to be a "fighter"<sup>179</sup> and that he should "accept responsibility" for his act and "avoid becoming bitter,"<sup>180</sup> reflects not simply a conservative or strategically misleading understanding of personal responsibility but his own, chosen account of the good, a personal maxim to live by, which he genuinely believes would enable Invisible Man to become in charge of his destiny. On the other hand, Ellison implies how the constitutive emptiness and open-ended nature of autonomy offers no intrinsic justification to act morally towards others. Furthermore, the self-centeredness of autonomy is what can lead to outcomes that prevent others from exercising it. Bledsoe's exercise of autonomy, his personal, improvised

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<sup>179</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 145.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

and amoral choice to expel Invisible Man as a way to secure his status is precisely what denies Invisible Man an education.

Not only was the exercise of autonomy potentially tragic, but Ellison also showed that so too was deep faith in its possibility. This faith promoted the hubristic belief that one's destiny could be shaped through individual dedication, which blinded one to their limitations. Deep admiration for Bledsoe is the force behind Invisible Man's individual resilience. This becomes clear when he tells a potential white employer, Mr. Emerson, that, "...I guess I'd like to become Dr. Bledsoe's assistant," and in response to Emerson's claim that this was ambitious, "I guess I am, sir. But I'm willing to work hard."<sup>181</sup> It would be mistaken to trivialize Invisible Man's faith in his autonomy, as Ellison shows that it provides him the requisite energy to vigorously seek out work up North rather than remain destitute in the South. Yet this faith is also what blinds Invisible Man to real obstacles that thwart him from single-handedly taking charge of his destiny. Emerson himself warns Invisible Man that "[t]he only trouble with ambition is that it sometimes blinds one to realities."<sup>182</sup> These obstacles soon become clear after Emerson shows that Bledsoe's letters of introduction to prospective white employers were nothing more than denunciations of Invisible Man.<sup>183</sup> Social obstacles beyond his control govern his fate, doubly illustrating the limited power of his self-rule to achieve happiness as well the impossibility of him to genuinely exercise it. Yet deep faith is what blinds him to the white employers and powerful black leaders who secure their own power and make it impossible for him to truly be autonomous. This is lost on Invisible Man. His lack of consciousness is precisely what helps secure his racial marginalization.

#### Equality as Vulnerability

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 193.

No less than freedom, Ellison argued that equality was central to democracy. At times, he offered a liberal definition of equality that meant equality of opportunity. He asserted that the framers “committed us to a system which would guarantee all of its citizens equality of opportunity.”<sup>184</sup> At others, he gestured towards a more social-democratic understanding that meant equality of results. Often buried in many of his essays, this social-democratic definition would become apparent in a 1990 Columbia University address. Ellison, reflecting on his walk along Riverside Drive in uptown New York City where he saw visible structural social inequality in the form of “the homeless, young drug hustlers and addicts who make use of the benches on Riverside Drive,” suggested “The Declaration is the moral imperative to which all of us, black and white, are committed...our history has also been marked by endless attempts to evade our moral commitment to the ideal of social equality.”<sup>185</sup> Ellison’s reading of homelessness, drug dealing and drug addiction as a deviation from the Declaration of Independence’s ideal of social equality revised racial inequality as a collective social failure in need of remediation and radicalized the Declaration of Independence’s call for equality to exceed equal political rights. Yet debates mired over whether Ellison was a liberal, social democrat or conservative miss a larger, more poignant point about his understanding of equality.<sup>186</sup> One of his most direct meditations suggested that racial injustice would remain firmly intact if white Americans were unable to acknowledge that equality’s radical call for social transformation required them to remain attentive to and fight against their own power and privilege. Ellison explained this thesis through a revised account of the American founding in “Perspective of Literature” (1977):

At Philadelphia, the Founding Fathers were presented the fleeting opportunity of mounting the very peak of social possibility afforded by democracy. But after ascending

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<sup>184</sup> Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” (1964), 206.

<sup>185</sup> Ellison, “Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University” (1990), 840.

<sup>186</sup> A standard interpretation is that Ellison vacillated between cultural conservatism and political liberalism following Lyndon Johnson, Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2008).



to within a few yards of the summit they paused, finding the view to be one combining splendor with terror. From this height of human aspiration the ethical implications of democratic equality were revealed as tragic, for if there was radiance and glory in the future that stretched so grandly before them, there was also mystery and turbulence and darkness astir in its depths. Therefore the final climb would require not only courage, but an acceptance of the tragic nature of their enterprise and the adoption of a tragic attitude that was rendered unacceptable by the optimism developed in revolutionary struggle, no less than by the tempting and virginal richness of the land which was now rendered accessible. So having climbed so heroically, they descended and laid a foundation for democracy at a less breathtaking altitude, and in justification of their failure of nerve before the challenge of the summit, the Founding fathers committed the sin of American racial pride.<sup>187</sup>

Ellison's formulation, unlike Baldwin's, which centralized alienation, anxiety and fear as undermining Americans' freedom at the American founding, strikingly rendered the radical principle of democratic equality responsibly for anxiety. Anxiety *came from* a moral commitment central to American political culture, rather than something peripheral to it.

Ellison's narrative of the American founding ironically offered a much stronger indictment of American culture than Baldwin's because it refused to make anxiety independent of its moral radicalism. Its exceptionalism came from the fact that the sublime sense of social and moral possibility so intrinsic to equality itself engendered terror that would compel citizens to constantly violate it. Yet embedded in Ellison's reading was also a much more radical account of equality. For Ellison, democratic equality was not tragic simply tragic because, as conservatives would suggest, it threatened individual freedom<sup>188</sup> or because, as Friedrich Nietzsche worried, it stifled individual excellence and creativity.<sup>189</sup> Instead, it was tragic because to give the *demos* equal power entailed following through with the consequences that issued from it, no matter the costs. To grant all citizens this power would always threaten to revolutionize reality, engender

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<sup>187</sup> Ellison, "Perspective of Literature," 777.

<sup>188</sup> See William Graham Sumner, *On Liberty, Society and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner* ed. Robert C. Bannister (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992); Barry Goldwater "Conscience of a Conservative" in *American Political Thought: An Anthology* ed. Isaac Kramnick and Theodor Lowi (New York: Norton, 2008), 1256-1264.

<sup>189</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

great unpredictability and compel the powerful white majority to willingly risk the social and psychological privileges white-skin afforded them. Yet Ellison's reframing of equality also offered a unique critique of racial injustice. A traditional critique of American racial injustice is that white Americans simply failed to extend equality to African Americans or that this failure itself rendered fictitious Americans' commitment to equality. The problem, this argument assumes, was that either equality was only ever realized for whites rather than for all or that this lack of universalization showed its absence.<sup>190</sup> For Ellison, failing to unequivocally accept an unpredictable future that could perpetually threaten their status, resources and security, what Ellison described as a "tragic attitude," was what kept racial injustice intact. It not only allowed for the continued the existence of slavery but also occasioned the need for racial categories. Yet race, which allowed whites to rationalize their unwillingness to become vulnerable, itself provided the justification for reserving equality to whites and helped whitewash the tragic essence of equality from American consciousness. African American inclusion became a political nonstarter as African Americans were seen as subhuman, "ignorant, cowardly, thieving, lying, hypocritical and superstitious in their religious beliefs and practices, morally loose, drunken, filthy of personal habit, sexually animalistic, crude and disgusting in their public content, and aesthetically just plain unpleasant."<sup>191</sup>

*Invisible Man* contextualized this argument by juxtaposing it against a standard understanding of what makes equality tragic, which sees its institutionalization as requiring a strategic compromise of its idealism. This became evident during *Invisible Man*'s encounter with Hambro, a white member of the Brotherhood member, who tells him that his Harlem district's

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<sup>190</sup> See Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 48-65. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 171-211.

<sup>191</sup> Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter" (1985), 639.

interests need to be sacrificed for the interests of the whole. He says, “your members will have to be sacrificed...we are making temporary alliances with other political groups and the interests of one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole.”<sup>192</sup> Danielle Allen’s astute reading of this dialogue as shedding insight into the role of sacrifice for citizenship overlooks how it shows how one understanding of equality’s tragic essence obscures another one.<sup>193</sup>

Understanding a crucial link between equality and sacrifice, Hambro imagines democratic equality as requiring one group’s need for social equality to be temporarily delayed for the sake of strategic political concerns and temporary political alliances. Equality is tragic, on this interpretation, because of the tension between its pure ideal and the impure tactics crucial for its realization. Furthermore, equality is tragic because its realization and institutionalization in an imperfect power-saturated world requires decidedly inegalitarian tactics or unequal sacrifice. Yet *Invisible Man* contends that Hambro’s interpretation of democratic equality’s tragic essence obscures the fact that equality requires sacrifice for those in power. African Americans, he says, are merely “demanding equality of sacrifice...we’ve never asked for special treatment...so the weak must sacrifice for the strong?”<sup>194</sup> *Invisible Man*’s critique demonstrates that understanding equality as tragic because it requires sacrifice from the weak is dubious because it ignores and helps ignore how the powerful are not ethically powerless and unequal to the weak. At the same time, abandoning those who are unequal and asking them to accept more inequality violates equality’s moral core. Accordingly, *Invisible* implies that social equality demands sacrifice of the Brotherhood’s former strategy towards African Americans, to devise new tactics and strategies to better adjust to their obstacles. Social equality demands Hambro’s sacrifice of his white

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<sup>192</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 501-502

<sup>193</sup> Danielle Allen correctly points out that this passage has much to do with question of whether democratic citizenship demands that one group be sacrificed for the interest of the whole or whether it demands an equality of sacrifice. See Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 101-119.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 502-503.

American privilege to make paternalistic decisions on behalf of African Americans rather than the compromise of African Americans to have equal voice in collective decision-making. Acceptable sacrifice must always include the strong rather than simply the weak. Sacrifice must instead be enacted by those like the Brotherhood and many of its white members who stand to benefit most from existing social hierarchies. Hambro's blindness to this enables the Brotherhood's withdrawal from Harlem and reinforces the existence of his white privilege. Hambro tells Invisible Man that the abandonment of Harlem residents is for "their own good."<sup>195</sup>

### The Limits of Conscientiousness

For Ellison, central to the realization of autonomy and equality was a conscientious concern for concrete individuals beyond one's immediate family or group. Political scientists have long argued that democracy depends on a vibrant civil sphere. This pre-political realm of social life was where, Tocqueville argued, citizens could refine their habits of thoughtful citizenship and thwart the state's monopolization of public opinion.<sup>196</sup> For Robert Putnam, robust civic engagement promoted robust political participation.<sup>197</sup> What Ellison centralized instead was that conscientiousness that exceeded civic concern for the institutions of a democratic system of government, or what he described as the "conscious and conscientious concern for others... [which was] the essence of the American ideal,"<sup>198</sup> was crucial for maintaining democracy. He understood this concern as decidedly selfless and preoccupied with others' well being. At some moments, Ellison spoke about this conscientiousness as love, which he believed was interchangeable with democracy. As he once put it, "the way home we seek is that condition of

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<sup>195</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 505.

<sup>196</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>197</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>198</sup> Ellison, "Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary," 413.

man's being in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy."<sup>199</sup> These sporadic, largely disconnected reflections on conscientiousness frustrate a substantive interpretation of its role in Ellison's political thought, but some important insight is found in *Invisible Man*. Jack Turner correctly asserts that the closest emulation of disinterested love's significance for democracy is found in Invisible Man's grandfather's *agape*, his loving of non-specific neighbors and enemies.<sup>200</sup> But Turner inadequately considers that the novel also explored the tragic nature of interested concern for *specific* others so crucial for democracy. Addressing racial inequality would be increasingly difficult if citizens ignored that the conscientious concern for concrete others was alone an inadequate foundation for and sometimes at odds with devising long-term strategy or strategic coalitions so necessary for political action.

Ellison makes this point clear through Invisible Man's arrival to Harlem, when he comes across an elderly black couple being evicted from their home. He identifies the power of sympathy for social equality, as the sight of the couple crying, along with their accumulated objects, sprawled across the sidewalk, transforms Invisible Man from a passive observer into an active participant. He wants to leave, but can't because he feels himself becoming "too much a part of it to leave."<sup>201</sup> Ellison's observation sides with Baldwin's valorization of compassion for racial justice, but also excavates its counterproductive consequences. Invisible Man's shifting tactics meant to appease the restless crowd emerging before him to protest the couple's eviction demonstrates how care shifts the focus on directly responding to others rather than upon a concrete strategy for resisting larger scale structural racial oppression. Ellison describes how these shifting tactics are partly caused by him being moved emotionally, "rapidly without

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<sup>199</sup> Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" (1953), 154.

<sup>200</sup> Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 84.

<sup>201</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 270-271.

thought but out of my clashing emotions.”<sup>202</sup> He first begins by suggesting that the black crowd abide by the law and accept the eviction, an obvious riff on Booker T. Washington’s conservative idea that African Americans ought to improve relations with whites rather than fight for social equality.<sup>203</sup> After the crowd assaults the officer he begins encouraging it to be law-abiding to a higher law (presumably social equality or equal dignity) that would make the eviction itself unacceptable. Invisible Man subversively interprets law-abiding to mean cleaning up the couple’s possessions: “take it, hide that junk! Put it back where it came from. It’s blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that’s against the law.”<sup>204</sup> Yet Ellison makes the limits of this conscientiousness clear. Just as the crowd feels a sense of empowerment, someone from it yells “[w]e’re citizens. We go anywhere we like,”<sup>205</sup> the police officers quickly call for back up, arbitrarily designating the crowd’s actions as constituting a riot and reinstating the power of the law backed by state power. That Invisible Man’s care delays eviction and inspires in the crowd a sense of collective political efficacy but neither advances a clear set of demands nor a concerted strategy that builds towards a larger policy goal such as fair housing or better relations between the community and police shows its centrality but limitation for racial justice. A widespread understanding among scholars is that sympathy, love and care are crucial preconditions for justice, as they draw citizens to identify with others in ways that exceed the law or political institutions.<sup>206</sup> Ellison’s illustration confirms but offers a sympathetic critique of this argument by showing that care, especially at a phenomenological, interpersonal level, is radically distinct

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>203</sup> Booker T. Washington, “The Atlanta Exposition Address” (1895) in *The Booker T. Washington Reader* (Radford: Wilder Press, 2008), 92-100.

<sup>204</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 281.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>206</sup> For the power of love and sympathy see Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013); for an excellent collection of the relationship between justice and care ethics, see *Care and Justice: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* ed. Virginia Held and Carol Oberbrunner (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

from and often shifts focus away from political strategy, which is less concerned with concrete others and based on means-ends logic. To sympathize is to feel, acknowledge and recognize others' pain, rather than to construct strategies about what to do about it in the future. To fail to recognize these limitations, Ellison shows, makes it more difficult to strategize against state power, as the officers' ability to unilaterally redefine the protest into a riot makes sympathy alone insufficient for change. The abrupt conclusion, which shows Invisible Man fleeing the scene, makes obvious that when this happens the law of power and power's law get the last word.

Another instance where Ellison theorizes how failure to understand conscientiousness' tragic outcomes is during Invisible Man's defense of his decision to orchestrate a public funeral for Tod Clifton, a former black Brotherhood member killed by police officers. What he shows is that the personal origins of conscientiousness are often at odds with the impersonal goal of social equality for all. Invisible Man's organization of the protest is an exercise in personal responsibility not driven by any strategic or tactical goals. It is instead based on a conscientious concern to commemorate a human yet racialized life unjustly killed by the state: "[h]e was a man and a Negro; a man and a traitor, as you say; [but] he was a dead man...we dramatized the shooting down of an unarmed black man...Isn't the shooting of an unarmed man of more importance politically than the fact that he sold obscene dolls?"<sup>207</sup> Without question, the Brotherhood's critique of Invisible Man's decision itself reflects a self-interested desire to preserve their organizational interests rather than strictly their professed concern for social equality. For them, Clifton becomes unworthy of a proper burial because his politically counterproductive selling of Sambo dolls constitutes a form a treason to the movement. Yet the Brotherhood's sarcastic critique of Invisible Man as the "the great tactician of *personal*

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 467.

responsibility”<sup>208</sup> and their critically asking of him, “[s]ooo! Is that all the great tactician has to tell us...In what direction were they moved?,”<sup>209</sup> identifies how dependence upon one’s own sense of what is right can be anti-democratic because it stands in opposition to the will of fellow citizens. Furthermore, this critique exposes a deeper tension between the *personalized* feeling of sympathy and the more detached concern for specific political outcomes. That Invisible Man first responds by saying “[t]hey were aroused. That was all we could do,”<sup>210</sup> and later claims that it “gave them the opportunity to express their feelings, to affirm themselves,”<sup>211</sup> indicates his own admission that his exercise in personal responsibility has no developed political strategy and the protest simply allowed citizens to positively affirm their feelings. Invisible Man refuses to acknowledge the Brotherhood’s astute critique, conflating it instead with the organization’s latent racism. Yet his attempt to subversion the Brotherhood with strategic affirmation, “I’d overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I’d agree them to death and destruction,”<sup>212</sup> carries no affirmative political value at the level of concerted political strategy. All this occurs while Harlem continues to unravel into greater poverty and social unrest.

### Spiritualism and the Impossibility of Democracy

The above reflections confirm Ellison’s understanding that the practice of democracy resembled a jazz-like process of improvisation, filled with unexpected possibilities as well as unimagined failures.<sup>213</sup> Yet this point itself followed from what Ellison believed was a much larger tragic truth about democratic idealism. The tragic implication of democratic commitment was not simply that the substantive ideals of democratic autonomy and equality unleashed difficult,

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>213</sup> Gregg Crane, “Ellison’s Constitutional Faith,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* ed. Ross Posnock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110-114.



sometimes counterproductive effects, but that the spiritualism, transcendentalism and universal aspiration of these ideals made their realization something that was fundamentally ongoing and impossible to fully complete. Ellison clarified this striking point in one of his most famous meditations on democracy, “Little Man at Chehaw Station” (1978):

The rock, the terrain upon which we struggle, is itself abstract, a terrain of ideas that, man-made, exerts the compelling force of the ideal, of the sublime...For while we are but human and thus given to the fears and temptations of the flesh, we are dedicated to principles that are abstract, ideal, spiritual: principles that were conceived linguistically and committed to paper during the contention over political ideals and economic interests which was released and given focus during the period of our revolutionary break with tradition forms of society, principles that were enshrined--again linguistically--in the document of state upon which this nation was founded...these principles--democracy, equality, individual freedom and universal justice--now move us as articles of faith. Holding them sacred, we act (or *fail* to act) in their names. And in the freewheeling fashion of words that are summoned up to name the ideal, they prod us ceaselessly toward the refinement and perfection of those formulations of policy and configurations of social forms of which they are signs and symbols. As we strive to conduct social action in accordance with the ideals they evoke, they in turn insist upon being made flesh. Inspiring our minds and bodies, they dance in our bones, spurring us to make them ever more manifest in the structures and processes of ourselves and our society. As a nation, we exist in the communication of our principles, and we argue over their application and interpretation as over rights of property or the exercise and sharing of authority... They interrogate us endlessly as to who and what we are; they demand that we keep the democratic faith.<sup>214</sup>

Ellison’s rehashing of Louis Hartz’s thesis that liberalism was *the* core tradition in American political culture departed from Baldwin.<sup>215</sup> For Ellison, unlike Baldwin, such democratic principles continued to inform the nature of political discourse because they were so deeply entrenched in the national vocabulary. Yet this optimistic depiction coexisted with a reformulation of democracy itself. At the most basic level, Ellison reframed democracy as a word, an idea rather than an incontestable fact: America’s founding democratic principles were nothing more than performative utterances that did not uncover something true about what

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<sup>214</sup> Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” 501-502.

<sup>215</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

already exists but tried to assert it into being.<sup>216</sup> That these principles were outcomes of human imagination thus made clear that their existence was far from certain. At a deeper level, Ellison's reformulation of the democracy as an abstract ideal rather than definite practice emphasize its opposition to the human corporeal world. This opposition highlighted how the ideal of democracy could always negate, challenge and transform extant realities but also was primarily an ideal. The ideal of democracy would thus never be purely or fully realized because no reformist public policy or legislation could account for its non-corporeal, transcendent and spiritual quality. Any concrete measure of inherently imperfect housing, welfare of health policy could be called "democratic" rather than oligarchic because it promoted popular interests but it could never fully capture democracy's immeasurable idealism.

Ellison's narrative thus challenged the belief that democracy was something that could simply be achieved through political processes, social or economic policies that enhanced freedom and equality. Yet he identified an aspect of democracy's fugitive nature that differed from Sheldon Wolin. Whereas Wolin understood democracy as an ephemeral moment of citizens' collective collaboration decoupled from elections or more generally statist practices, Ellison showed that democracy's fundamental idealism, much closer to a Platonic form, an ever fleeting horizon, made it impossible to be fully complete in the world.<sup>217</sup> From a different angle, Ellison identified a dimension of democracy's constitutive futurity that Jacques Derrida overlooked. Derrida's deconstruction of democracy identified how the conceptual, logical contradictions of democracy between, for example, freedom and equality and multiplicity and sovereignty, made democracy impure, self-sabotaging. Since democracy could never fully exist, its closest approximation occurred through citizens' attentiveness to these constitutive

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<sup>216</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>217</sup> Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 601-607.

contradictions.<sup>218</sup> At the general level, Ellison's foregrounding of democracy's tragic, self-sabotaging implications of autonomy, equality and conscientiousness did anticipate Derrida's immanent critique of democracy. Yet, unlike Derrida's, his point was less about its constitutive aporias and more about the gap between its idealism and practice. Still, much like Derrida's call for seeing democracy as something that was in the constant future tense, a "to come" made centralized the need for citizens to be vigilant, Ellison's narrative about democracy also implied that democratic responsibility was an almost unbearable, Sisyphean task, depending entirely upon frail, all too-human citizens. That it was an idea rather than a reality required citizens to engage in an unending process of working to instantiate it in their politics and lives. Genuine responsibility to democracy thus required burdensome vigilance and a willingness to commit oneself to call for its existence in the most difficult and unpleasant times, even if it was not politically expedient or economically viable.

Ellison asserted that this tragic knowledge that democracy was about perfection was kept afloat in American consciousness through African Americans' historical denial of and struggle for inclusion. As he once put it, "without the presence of blacks... [absent] would be the need for that tragic knowledge which we ceaselessly try to evade: the true subject of democracy is not simply material well-being, but the extension of the democratic process in the direction of perfecting itself. And the most obvious clue and test for that perfection is the inclusion, not assimilation, of the black man."<sup>219</sup> First, the idea that democracy was primarily about the turbulent process of collective, social transformation rather than the more stable, individualistic activity of maintaining middle-class standards of living, was kept alive through African American exclusion. Second, its spiritualism and radicalism were kept alive through African

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<sup>218</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 19-28, 56-63, 78-95.

<sup>219</sup> Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks" (1970), 582.

American citizens and social movements' insistence that it be realized in American life. Third, it was African American inclusion that served as a barometer of democracy in America. In a 1972 commencement address at the College of William and Mary, Ellison, as a representative of the excluded African American minority, sought to challenge the post- Civil Right era's racially unequal moment, which he believed was nothing more than a continuation of the failure of the Founding and Civil War generations to create a racially just society. American democracy required constant extension and perfection in American cities, education and neighborhoods. As he put it, "the state of the world into which you are about to enter isn't just a matter of laws. It is also a matter of the spiritual quality of our American principles and how they infuse not only our words and our laws, but the arrangement of our cities, the quality of our education and the disposition of our neighborhoods."<sup>220</sup> Serious commitment to democracy would not only require white and black Americans to collaborate together, but accept the unpleasant and unsettling fact that racial justice would never be fully achieved. Democracy's sacredness made it irreducible to so-called democratic-egalitarian legislation of the 1960s or equal political participation for African Americans. Its sacredness required more racially integrated cities, more and better quality education, more respectful and generous conversations between white and black citizens and more solidarity. To *more* effectively realize autonomy and equality, even if it could never be fully realized, meant ongoing effort rather than passivity, more risk and perpetual sacrifice. Only this realization, Ellison insisted, could make for a racially just society. Yet during the late 1970s such knowledge was absent. At the conclusion of "Perspective on Literature" (1977) Ellison wrote,

But I think something else should be said, since much of the atmosphere of our time is created by major transformations in the our way of looking at the law and at the racial aspects of the law, going back to 1954 and up the measures passed in the sixties.

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<sup>220</sup> Ellison, "Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary," 411.

We went about that with a feeling of good intentions. We sacrificed. We did much to rectify past injustices. But then, with our usual American innocence, we failed to grasp that it was going to cost us something in terms of personal sacrifices and in the rearrangement of the cities and the suburbs. It would cost us something in terms of the sheer acceleration of turmoil and conflict. And so, we have become a bit tired of this old business.<sup>221</sup>

Using a racially ambiguous “we,” reminiscent of Baldwin’s invocation of white and black Americans, Ellison, unlike Baldwin, cast the then racial unequal present as originating in Americans’ unwillingness in the unending, ongoing self and collective work in all realms of life, rather than a self-perception of free and freedom-loving. White Americans were unwilling to accept more and ever-greater sacrifices like the rearrangement of cities and neighborhoods, which went beyond granting African Americans legal equal voting rights or equal protection under the law. Some black Americans were also unwilling to accept that democracy could not be instantiated through racial separatism but instead required acceptance of the psychological and social costs of racial integration.<sup>222</sup> This cross-racial, collective abdication of democratic responsibility was made easier, as Ellison would explain one year later in “Little Man at Chehaw Station,” through the revival of ethnic identity. White and black Americans’ belief that their responsibility was primarily to their ethnic group, rather than society as a whole, to each other and the ideal of democracy itself, left unfulfilled the rich possibilities of democracy. As he wrote, “the newly fashionable code word ‘ethnicity’... [is] circulated to sanction the abandonment of policies and the degrading of ideas. So today, before the glaring inequities, unfulfilled promises and rich possibilities of democracy, we hear heady evocations of European, African and Asian backgrounds accompanied by chants proclaiming the inviolability of ancestral blood.”<sup>223</sup>

Ethnicity made democracy stillborn by stabilizing a chaotic, turbulent existence. Ethnicity’s

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<sup>221</sup> Ellison, “Perspective of Literature,” 780.

<sup>222</sup> Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” 505.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 504-505.

centralization of the body and blood over ideal, history over potentiality, the particular over the universal, what was most immediate over what was abstract, diminished potential for collective action. To reverse this Americans needed to paradoxically accept a burden that was impossible to carry, to continue an ongoing struggle with no end in sight.

### Ellison, Patriotism and Comedy

That Ellison's work actually raised serious questions about whether democracy itself was a viable institution made this championing of American democracy intellectual questionable. Furthermore, he himself seemed to overtly question his own democratic faith when he wrote that the essence of the "terrible" in American life could not be localized to race because in "so much of American life which lies beyond the Negro community [there lies] the very essence of the terrible."<sup>224</sup> Yet Ellison continued to champion American democratic values precisely at a Cold War moment when these values were being used to reinforce American fears against communism and silence critical dissent.

Ellison's own problematic patriotism should not simply be disavowed, but to make it the basis for *ad hominem* critiques misses a larger theoretical point about American political culture and political action. Accusations that his patriotism illuminated that Ellison was singularly obsessed with recognition, status and concern with participating in a monumental tradition of American intellectual life miss his critical awareness that liberal hegemonic rhetorics, for better or worse, were crucial for shaping American politics. Writers, Ellison believed, were charged with the responsibility of "creating and broadening our consciousness of American character, of creating and re-creating the American experience...because it is our good-and-bad fortune that we Americans exist at our best only when we are conscious of who we are and where we are

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<sup>224</sup> Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" (1961), 79.

going...”<sup>225</sup> Following theorists of American political culture like Alexis De Tocqueville, Sacvan Bercovitch and Louis Hartz, Ellison himself understood the ideological limitations of American political culture.<sup>226</sup> We can thus read his glorification of American democracy, reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s depiction of America and democracy as convertible terms,<sup>227</sup> as reflecting a belief that Americans were unable to conceptualize national reinvention without it.

Understanding this also contextualizes Ellison’s perplexing claim that the task of “surviving” the pain and making “sense of American experience” required that it be viewed “the wry perspective of sanity-saving comedy.”<sup>228</sup> At first glance, comedy is a problematic, if not completely futile, way to understand the American experience that only promotes patriotism: comedy deploys humor to elicit laughter, whereas the American experience seems to be marked by the horrors of racial violence and exploitation and so requires tears; comedy depicts a happy resolution of tense conflict, whereas the American experience seems to be marked by seemingly irresolvable conflicts and deep wounds that can never be sutured. Yet Ellison’s subversive call for comedy itself cast the American experience, much like democracy itself, as ambiguous, contradictory, perplexing and disjointed, which itself resisted seriousness and romance, the genre most often associated with patriotism. That laughter rather than tears was most effective for resilience constitutes Ellison’s subjective understanding of what energizes human endurance. But his call for understanding the American experience comically sought to play on Americans’ patriotism but disrupt their conviction that they understood what their country was all about.

Ellison’s project of consciousness-raising, like Baldwin’s, was partial, itself nothing more than a product of what he believed was the process in which minorities struggled with “the major

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<sup>225</sup> Ellison, “On Initiation Rites and Power” (1974), 533-534.

<sup>226</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>227</sup> See Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*.

<sup>228</sup> Ellison, “Address at the Whiting Foundation,” 855.

group's attempt to impose its ideal upon the rest, insisting that its exclusive image be accepted as *the* image of the American."<sup>229</sup> This struggle would need to be continued by citizens in the future: "despite the impact of the American idea upon the world, the "American" himself has not...been finally defined."<sup>230</sup> A new, future American majority would be charged with the task of advancing an account at once more persuasive, imaginative and democratically serviceable.

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<sup>229</sup> Ellison, "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953), 89.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. Ross Posnock argues that Ellison problematizes the stability of "Americanness" and presents it instead as shifting, fluid and lacking any kind of core or substantive essence. As Posnock claims, "as if seeking to prevent, or at least defer, either term from freezing into a foundational or national essence, Ellison turns "essential 'Americanness' " into another oxymoron by grounding it in practice not identity." See Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 206.



## Chapter 4: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Generosity and Racial Justice

*I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment...My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws are, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it.*<sup>231</sup>

*But I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on it...or are tenacious about love. About love and how to survive—not to make a living—but how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something.*<sup>232</sup>

-Toni Morrison

### American Political Culture, Generosity and *Beloved*

As with freedom and democracy, the idea that Americans are committed to generosity is a crucial part of American culture. Whether viewed as a description or aspiration, generosity, or its related term of charity, is understood as willfully giving to others without being coerced to do so. Giving one's possessions, time and effort reflects attentiveness to and care for others just as it puts one at the service of others. Early political thinkers like John Winthrop called upon Americans to exemplify generosity, as it was a constitutive part of the Puritan faith. In "A Modell of Christian Charity" (1630), Winthrop claimed that Americans were obligated to love their neighbors because the bonds of "brotherly affection" bound them together into an organic community.<sup>233</sup> For Alexis De Tocqueville writing in the 1830s, generosity was less as an ideal and more an empirical fact in American society. Without using the term explicitly, Tocqueville observed how Americans' construction of civic associations at an unprecedented rate reflected a deep concern with their community. Without any incentive or coercion, they gave up their

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<sup>231</sup> Toni Morrison and Danielle Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 121.

<sup>232</sup> Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Morrison*, 40.

<sup>233</sup> John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in ed. Theodor Lowi and Isaac Kramnick, *American Political Thought: An Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2008), 12.

minds, hearts and bodies to tend to one another.<sup>234</sup> Recently, reflecting on Americans' charitable donations at home and abroad, the conservative commentator, William J. Bennett, claimed that generosity "is an inherent part of America's cultural fabric."<sup>235</sup> Such arguments that Americans are generous reinforce the idea of American exceptionalism and offer proof that individualism is unchallenged by other core American cultural values. Generosity implies moral commitment and selflessness, which challenges arguments that that Americans are purely self-interested, greedy and engaged in a competitive struggle where each is against all in the quest for upward mobility.

Yet understandings of generosity have also taken up specific forms. Throughout the 20th century one dominant understanding of generosity was that it needed to be tethered to recipients' adherence to normative moral standards. Early 20th century Progressives developing social welfare programs to combat the massive economic inequality engendered by the Gilded Age tethered these programs to moral uplift, social cleanliness and the eradication of degeneracy.<sup>236</sup> Some explicitly argued that this enactment of generosity could purify American society and the human race. In the words of historian Michael Katz, "from its inception, eugenics had close ties to welfare."<sup>237</sup> More recently, 1980s neoconservatives argued for generosity to be tied explicitly to developing in needy citizens a sense of self-reliance, responsibility and virtues of frugality and sexual abstinence.<sup>238</sup> For the political scientist, Lawrence Mead, the permissiveness of the federal government's proliferation of social welfare programs from the 1960s through the 1980s, with no expectations placed on recipients, accounted for its failure as well as the reproduction of dependence. For Mead, the solution lied in a new understanding of public generosity:

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<sup>234</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>235</sup> William Bennett, "America the Generous," December 15, 2011.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/15/opinion/bennett-generosity/>.

<sup>236</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>238</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Pink and Brown People: And Other Controversial Essays* (Palo Alto: Hoover Institution, 1981) and Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

reconstructing welfare programs with conditions and obligations in order to make them full, functioning citizens. As he put it, the needy “need to face the requirements, such as work, that true acceptance in American society requires. To create those obligations, they must be made less *free* rather than more.”<sup>239</sup>

At the height of this 1980s neoconservative assault on the welfare state and embrace of conditional aid tethered to work, itself made possible through demonizing images of African American men and women as fiscally and morally irresponsible, Toni Morrison’s classic novel, *Beloved* (1987), provided a theoretical exploration of generosity for racial justice. The novel showed that a model of conditional generosity tethered to adherence to normative standards was problematic for racial justice because it reinforced the power of those who enacted it and was tentative. It showed that conditions constituted a form of power antithetical to the ethical impulse behind giving because they relied on means-ends logic and reproduced the sovereignty of those who gave at the expense of those who received. The novel showed that this, combined with the fact that conditions relied upon and reinforced images of difference, helped sustain racial inequality. At the same time, *Beloved* showed that although the love that underpinned a model of unconditional generosity could become self-sabotaging and monopolizing, the fact that it had no expiration date, was genuinely selfless and concerned with the well-being of others made it valuable for racial justice. The lack of conditions in this model could enable ethical responsiveness unfettered by means-ends calculations and could promote a form of vulnerability that threatened one’s sovereignty over others. The novel showed that this, combined with the model’s assumption that all were deserving of equal respect and capable of agency and that vulnerability was inescapable, was crucial for counteracting the paternalism so central to racial inequality. These reflections were indirect because, as a work of literature rather than political

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<sup>239</sup> Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 4.

theory, *Beloved* neither provided direct arguments about politics nor advocated for certain public policies. Nonetheless, the novel provided a much more sustained meditation on generosity than Baldwin or Ellison and more clearly demonstrated why the assumptions upon which it relied upon could themselves shape the possibility for racial justice. Additionally, far more than Baldwin's and Ellison's work, which was often blind to gender and insufficiently attentive to class difference, *Beloved* articulated these points with close attention to how it could affect African American women and working-class citizens. This made for a richer analysis at once more sensitive and complex.

Reading *Beloved* as I do here makes clear that the novel's political-theoretical value lies beyond its critique of neoconservative arguments about African American cultural pathology,<sup>240</sup> its political theorization of prophecy and racial redemption in American politics<sup>241</sup> and the significance of coming to terms with a traumatic past for post-colonial identity<sup>242</sup> or for black psychological health in a dominant, racist white culture.<sup>243</sup> All these interpretations point to the novel's central narrative, which depicts a Postbellum community of ex-slaves in Cincinnati grappling with the traumatic legacy of slavery as it is embodied in an infant ghost named Beloved, murdered by her mother Sethe in an effort to save her from enslavement. What they inadequately explore is that another central narrative thread in *Beloved*, in which the characters struggle to create a flourishing community during Reconstruction with few economic resources or opportunities, theorizes the politics of generosity. The novel examines the politics of generosity through the town's white abolitionist, Edward Bodwin's, social assistance in

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<sup>240</sup> James Berger "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report," *PMLA* 111:3 (1996), 411.

<sup>241</sup> George M. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 202.

<sup>242</sup> Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 67.

<sup>243</sup> Evelyn Jaffe Schrieber, *Race, Trauma and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 32-64.

exchange for work and adherence to normative standards. To attend to this is not to consider *Beloved* a Morrison's ongoing literary attempt to formulate an ethical narrative and meta-narrative of the African American racial experience.<sup>244</sup> It is instead to consider how *Beloved*'s fictionalization of a too-often neglected or disavowed African American historical moment illuminates Morrison's political-theoretical consideration of community, freedom, equality and care that cuts across the color line.

*Beloved*'s epigraph gestures towards this dual objective of particularity and universality, as Morrison quoted St. Paul's assertion in Romans 9:25 that God would love Gentile Romans who showed no fidelity to him, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved."<sup>245</sup> On the one hand, Morrison's naming and loving the painful African American experience of slavery and Reconstruction remakes the experience of "her people" as valuable and worth recalling. On the other hand, Morrison's naming and loving the white American majority of which she was not part, "my people, which were not my people," positions her audience as potential recipients of the novel's insights about how generosity could shape the possibility for justice. The novel thus participates in political-theoretical debates about care. Some political theorists see the totalizing moralism inherent in generosity as inherently problematic for politics, which is based in and requires plurality, disagreement and contention.<sup>246</sup> Generosity's historical connection to theology thus undermines its secular potential. Others, cognizant of these limitations, reconstruct generosity to chasten its moralism while retaining its ethical impulse. Generosity becomes valuable for politics because it offers something for enriching community life and political coalition building that reason or the rule of law alone

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<sup>244</sup> Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1-28.

<sup>245</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

<sup>246</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51, 242.

cannot.<sup>247</sup> Yet, insofar as racial equality depends on an elimination of white paternalism and an end to the unequal distribution of authority what has remained unexplored is how different practices of generosity contain and reinforce assumptions about human agency, mastery, control, equality and reciprocity. *Beloved* develops powerful insights into this.

Morrison's use of the black experience to provide broader political-theoretical insights about the human condition followed from what she believed was the chief responsibility of African American intellectuals. First, like Baldwin and Ellison, she saw as decidedly myopic African American protest literature's concern with persuading white America of the plight of Afro-America or exposing the cultural connections between Afro-America and Africa. Morrison instead asserted that all American writers needed to "enlighten [and] strengthen" Americans through providing coherence to a world in which ideas were constantly in flux and communities renegotiating themselves.<sup>248</sup> Understanding African Americans' response to a condition of precariousness, Morrison insisted, not only illuminated something specific about the African American experience<sup>249</sup> but also something about the universality of victimhood, which like Baldwin, she understood as inescapable: "all of us, in some measure, [are] victims of *something*."<sup>250</sup> Second, Morrison, like Baldwin, understood the function of her work not as describing reality or prescribing solutions to its contradictions, but as that which bore witness to an American condition of vulnerability too difficult to digest or come to terms with. Third, Morrison's art, unlike Ellison's, was unconcerned with exposing contradiction, ambiguity or

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<sup>247</sup> Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>248</sup> Toni Morrison and Danielle Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 40

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

paradox, but with taking “cataracts off people in an accessible way.”<sup>251</sup> Far more than for Ellison, Morrison maintained that the novel’s reliance on narrative enabled its democratic potential, as it enlisted readers to infer meaning from a language that would resonate with their experience of everyday life.<sup>252</sup> This was partly why Morrison asserted that, rather than logical argumentation, “narrative remains the best way to learn anything, whether history or theology.”<sup>253</sup> Fourth, tragedy was the genre through which Morrison constructed her own narratives. Yet far more than Ellison, she saw tragedy’s core value as coming from its inducing of catharsis, revelatory effects and haunting impact upon readers.<sup>254</sup> Tragedy was especially suitable for a strong visceral emotional response that allowed citizens to contemplate and reassess their deepest commitments. As she explained, “I want a very strong visceral response and emotional response as well as a very clear intellectual response, and the haunting that you describe is testimony to that...I want to give them something to feel and think about.”<sup>255</sup>

#### Conditional Social Assistance, Sovereign Authority and Dependence

It is through the character of Edward Bodwin, a white former abolitionist, that Morrison most obviously dramatizes how conditional generosity exacerbates African American marginalization. There is good evidence that Bodwin exemplifies a spirit of generosity as he and his sister, committed abolitionists, provide African Americans jobs, housing and other forms of financial assistance. Bodwin’s care, sensitivity and provision of assistance reflect a counterpoint to the violent slaveholder, schoolteacher’s whip, animus towards, objectification of and utter contempt for his African American slaves. Bodwin is presented as always welcoming, or, in the words of

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 125, 146.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 147.

Stamp Paid, “somebody never turned us down. Steady as a rock.”<sup>256</sup> Yet, Paid’s characterization fails to grasp the full picture. Bodwin’s generous aid is itself conditionally tethered to low-wage work, which effectively reproduces African American economic marginalization. Whereas Suggs performs certain domestic tasks for Bodwin in exchange for financial support, such as cobbling, canning, laundry and seamstress work, she dies with few assets, and on her deathbed describes herself as nothing but “a nigger woman hauling shoes.”<sup>257</sup> Likewise, although Denver does nighttime domestic work for Bodwin, she seeks out extra opportunities to make money, still struggling to support herself and her destitute mother Sethe: “she had heard about an afternoon job at the shirt factory. She hoped that with her night work at the Bodwins’ and another one, she could put away something and help her mother too.”<sup>258</sup> Bodwin is certainly no slaveholder, but Morrison shows how his instrumental understanding of black labor itself parallels the slave-owning classes’ understanding of black life as a source of profit-making. At the novel’s conclusion, Bodwin’s rationale for arriving to 124 Bluestone in order to “bring back the girl [Denver],”<sup>259</sup> which sees African Americans as nameless workers with labor power instead of sentient, multifaceted human subjects, mirrors schoolteacher’s rationale for retrieving Sethe and her children alive. This uncanny similarity is evident in schoolteacher’s statement that his decision is predicated on a calculation of his nameless ex-slaves labor and exchange value, for “a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin.”<sup>260</sup> Bodwin’s profit from the exchange of these women’s labor for his aid only benefits him and keeps both Suggs and Denver economically marginalized. Bodwin benefits from their domestic

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<sup>256</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 265.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 266

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.



work but undervalues it so that Suggs and Denver spend hours to improve Bodwin's domestic life only to struggle for financial stability and the free time to enrich their own lives.

Yet Morrison shows that Bodwin's aid is counterproductive for racial justice not solely because it requires low-wage work but because it also depends on African Americans' adherence to what he deems to be moral standards, which they neither create nor control. Readers learn in one passage that Bodwin has told Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, that her rent-free residence is contingent on self-discipline: "they would permit her to stay there. Provided she was clean. The past parcel of colored wasn't."<sup>261</sup> In another, we learn that Bodwin's decision to provide Sethe's daughter, Denver, with employment is presented as also requiring her to submit to a reeducation program according to his sister's, and presumably his own, moral standards. Denver explains, "Miss Bodwin taught [me] stuff... 'She says I might go to Oberlin. She's experimenting on me.'"<sup>262</sup> Morrison demonstrates that Bodwin's aid places the burden of proof on African Americans to show that they are "clean," a broad character trait which connotes sexual purity and honesty, as well as its more literal meaning of personal hygiene. The problem with these characterizations is not simply that they are inaccurate, demeaning or hateful. The problem instead comes from the fact that those who are subjects to these characterizations have no control over whether they properly adhere to them, but depend upon this adherence to sustain decent living conditions. Morrison makes clear that Bodwin's sovereign judgment is especially troubling not simply because of his unilateral power to decide and influence, but because of his latent, unreconstructed and presumptive racism, his centralizing of deviance as integral to black culture. Although believing in the equitable sanctity of humanity ["human life is holy, all of

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 266.

it”<sup>263</sup>] Bodwin assumes that blackness is fundamentally marked by dependency and laziness. A racist moneybox in Bodwin’s home depicts a black boy with bulging eyes and gaping mouth, bending towards its owner with excitement at being paid a pittance. Denver notices it as soon as she arrives to the Bodwin home: “sitting on a shelf by the black door, a blackboy’s mouth full of money...Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had about the gaping red mouth...And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service....Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words “At Yo Service.”<sup>264</sup>

Morrison gestures towards the way Bodwin’s absolute power to define and assess adherence to moral standards, alongside his assumption of African American deviance and inferiority, presents a continuation of African American oppression under slavery. Bodwin’s aid only marginally improves African American financial hardship but itself keeps his power over African Americans firmly intact. Morrison thus positions his actions as not only paralleling schoolteacher’s argument that “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined”<sup>265</sup> but his argument that African Americans must be humanized and enlightened. Schoolteacher’s notebooks chronicle his slaves’ deviation from the idea that all individuals possess universal reason as he limns their animal characteristics alongside their human ones.<sup>266</sup> It is ambiguous whether schoolteacher believes there to be some intractable biological difference between whites and blacks that simply cannot be cured through education, but Morrison illustrates that his enlightenment faith put into the service of enslavement anticipates Bodwin’s behavior. Like Bodwin, schoolteacher, as his name itself connotes, sees knowledge, connected to moral uplift,

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 193.

as a way towards freedom. Schoolteacher's own reasoned anthropological categorization maps out his slaves' humanity and simultaneously reifies this humanity as fundamentally different. At the same time, his characterization of blacks as somehow not quite reasonable and certainly inferior to whites reinforces his power and authority, implying that to become more reasonable they must follow his advice. Paul D describes it at one point,

...for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes. The information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them. He complained they ate too much, rested too much, talked too much, which was certainly true compared to him, because schoolteacher ate little, spoke less and rested not at all.<sup>267</sup>

Schoolteacher, like Bodwin, presumptively assumes African Americans to be impure, lazy and dependent: neither sees them as equals and believes their salvation depends upon submission to white authority. Paul D recognizes as much when his first impulse is to tell Denver, who has just revealed Bodwin's sister's plans to educate her, "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher."<sup>268</sup> Morrison's illustration thus confirms Michel Foucault's argument that power is dispersed and decentralized through knowledge discourses. At the same time she shows that these discourses almost unconsciously and unequally frame the real-world power of the dominant groups over those who are marginalized.<sup>269</sup> Schoolteacher's scientific racism and Bodwin's embrace of cultural pathology arguments solidified their dominance over the novel's black characters. Morrison's depiction of these discourses as so entrenched, natural and central to each character's worldview implicitly challenge Foucault's argument that resistance to them from below was likely or even possible.

Notwithstanding the obvious parallels with schoolteacher, what Morrison illuminates about the conditional nature of Bodwin's generosity is that it makes his aid fundamentally

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>269</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 51-75.

tenuous and unreliable. At the novel's conclusion, Sethe attempts to stab Bodwin with an ice pick as he arrives to pick Denver up for work. Bodwin interprets her action as governed by a pathological worldview, much as he views the black women gathered at Sethe's doorstep to exorcize Beloved from her home as driven by a pathological rage toward one another, a predictable collection of "colored women fighting" at a place "full of trouble."<sup>270</sup> Reflecting his own limitation to listen generously, Bodwin fails to comprehend that Sethe mistakenly stabs him because she identifies him as schoolteacher, whose prior arrival there prompted the infanticide around which the narrative revolves; or that Sethe's mistaken identity as pathological is partly a circumstantial outcome of her increased alienation as a black single-mother who has just lost her low-wage job and savings. In other words, Morrison points out that Bodwin is unable to comprehend the world that Sethe inhabits as one that undervalues black women's work, a product of what Patricia Hill Collins calls "the interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression."<sup>271</sup> All that he is able to see is Sethe's failure to fulfill the condition he has earlier articulated to Baby Suggs: cleanliness. Yet his obliviousness has real consequences, as Bodwin decides to sell 124 Bluestone, putting Sethe on the brink of homelessness.

Understanding these effects of Bodwin's conditional generosity revises a dominant interpretation of how Sethe's decision to stab him represents Morrison's critique of liberalism. James Berger argues that Sethe's decision demonstrates Morrison's repudiation of white liberal paternalism but simultaneous acknowledgment that white American liberals' historic commitment to assisting African Americans nonetheless deserves respect.<sup>272</sup> For Berger, Sethe's increasing impoverishment and grief render her delusional, unable to see that Bodwin is not

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>271</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77.

<sup>272</sup> James Berger, "Ghosts of Liberalism," 417.

schoolteacher but instead an imperfect friend. However, Berger's wish for this twofold interpretation deprives Sethe of moral agency and critical awareness, which forms the impetus for her conscious decision to kill Beloved for fear of allowing her back into slavery. We may actually interpret Sethe's attempted stabbing of Bodwin as a conscious, rather than delusional, attempt to protect her living daughter, Denver, from Bodwin's problematic generosity. Sethe's statement, which references schoolteacher's arrival at 124 Bluestone, that Bodwin is "coming into her yard...coming for her best thing,"<sup>273</sup> "best thing" can be taken to mean her fear that Bodwin has come to retrieve Denver to work for him. On this interpretation, Sethe understands that Bodwin's unconditional generosity has no value precisely because it continues racial inequality through low-wage work and forcing African Americans to adhere to the moral standards that he deems adequate.

#### Conditional Listening, Thoughtlessness and Distrust

Yet *Beloved* also dramatizes how conditional listening, which exceeds conditional economic assistance, could shape the potential for racial justice. A narrow focus on economic assistance misses the power of citizens' capacity to respectfully attend to, acknowledge and absorb others' perspectives, needs and experiences. Morrison illustrates conditional listening through Paul D's transformation from someone who is open, sensitive, and compassionate towards and mutually identifies with Sethe to someone who is closed, insensitive and feels intractable distance from her. This shift occurs upon his hearing Sethe confess her killing of Beloved, which stands in stark contrast to Paul D's understanding of normative behavior. Sethe's explanation, which presumes that Paul D's initial compassion would be made manifest in his willingness to unconditionally listen, is that "...they ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got them...it's my

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<sup>273</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 262.

job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.”<sup>274</sup>

Morrison’s illuminating the difference between the violent act and Sethe’s decidedly moral, even if tragic, intentions behind it highlight the obvious space for Paul D to try to thoughtfully understand, respect and acknowledge her perspective and experience. However, he fails to register any of this. Mirroring schoolteacher’s racist anthropology, he interprets the act as reflecting Sethe’s animal, non-human character, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four.”<sup>275</sup> Satya Mohanty reads this response as Morrison’s dramatization of the post-colonial male’s difficulty of acknowledging the importance of marginalized black women’s experiences within colonialism.<sup>276</sup> Yet from a different vantage point, Paul D’s behavior reflects Morrison’s critique of conditional generosity for gender and racial equality. His giving, like Bodwin’s, is tentative and unreliable because it is governed by standards over which he maintains complete sovereignty. But Paul D’s normative standard is more explicitly gendered than Bodwin’s, reflecting a problematic attachment to black masculinity. Upon hearing her story, he is horrified by the “bitch...looking at him.” No longer a passive object in need of his male guidance, Sethe becomes something more monstrous: “That she lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice...The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle’s girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work crazy (like Halle). He was wrong.”<sup>277</sup> Even if it arises as a consequence of a postmodern black masculinity simultaneously self-aware of one’s male power and emasculation,<sup>278</sup> Morrison’s describing of Paul D’s nameless characterization of Sethe as a sweet home girl, whose identity is irreducibly tied to her husband, makes vivid the ease with which masculinity can denigrate black women’s sovereignty and

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>276</sup> Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, 217-219.

<sup>277</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 164.

<sup>278</sup> Susan Neal Mayberry, *Can’t I Love What I Criticize* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 157.

agency. Yet, she also shows that Paul D's failure to see Sethe as his equal works in conjunction with his conditional listening to make racial justice increasingly difficult. First, Paul D's unilateral judgment stifles the potential for emotional solidarity and mutual trust between him and Sethe, which could become a powerful source of resilience within a condition of racial oppression. This point is crystallized in Sethe's reflection that "a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet"<sup>279</sup> and later "Paul D...gave her back he body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news...but when he heard *her* news, he counted her feet and didn't even say goodbye."<sup>280</sup> This intensifies Sethe's feeling of hopelessness, increasing obsession with a wounded past and thwarts any effort at responding to her own or other African Americans' insecurity. This withdrawal is captured in her claim that "[w]hatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be."<sup>281</sup> Second, the breach of unlimited, non-judgmental listening prevents Paul D from understanding how racial oppression itself is layered, complex and dependent upon subject positions rather than something abstract or generalizable. Morrison thus illuminated a unique aspect of the politics of recognition. Disrespect and disesteem of others' identities and experiences could be produced not simply through malicious bad faith or ignorance<sup>282</sup> but through deep attachment to what are imagined as higher, universal moral norms. Sethe's violation of the moral prohibition against murder is what accounts for Paul D's failure to listen to her perspective. Paul D's failure to listen precludes him from acknowledging Sethe's awareness of the threat of unequal sexual violence directed towards black women: the rape she experienced

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<sup>279</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 165.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>282</sup> For these interpretations, see Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Patchen Markell, *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

at the hands of schoolteacher's nephews and the rape her mother experienced on the slave ship across the Middle Passage, as she was "taken up many times by the crew."<sup>283</sup> This awareness translates into Sethe's concern, in the words of Denver, "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 think it up."<sup>284</sup> Sethe understands that black women face a specific kind of marginalization because they are both considered racially inferior as blacks and as women are objects of masculine desire in a society where their implicit consent is always assumed and their bodies inadequately protected by official political institutions. Neglecting this makes it difficult for Paul D to see that Sethe's concerns and needs are radically distinct from his own. Sethe's reluctance about welcoming him into her home and her implicit resistance to him assuming the role of the family patriarch for fear of patriarchy is something he can neither grasp nor honor.

#### Unconditional Generosity, Freedom and Flourishing

From a different perspective, *Beloved* also demonstrates an alternative if neglected model of unconditional generosity symbolized through the novel's women. A focus on the novel's depiction of the African American community's regeneration through historical recollection, as both an *apotropaic* act of preemptive self-healing through a paradoxical self-wounding, misses its making vivid a productive mode of ethical engagement.<sup>285</sup> What the novel shows is that the conceptualization and practice of unconditional aid and listening contains rich possibilities for racial justice because it has no expiration date and primarily aims to enable its recipients to live a flourishing existence.

At a general level, Morrison shows how their generosity, strikingly opposed to Bodwin's

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>285</sup> Kathleen K. Marks, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).



model, embodies a feminist argument that all individuals are equally entitled to care. As Virginia Held writes of care ethics generally, “the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility.”<sup>286</sup> Morrison’s description of Baby Suggs’s generosity to all who enter her home reveals this ethic of care:

“...124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon.”<sup>287</sup>

Without conditions or stipulations, Suggs offers individuals free emotional support, food, clothing and shelter. That she does this even for strangers shows that an ethical imperative rather than a rational calculation drives her action. She provides care to all, whether it is costly, troublesome or personally disadvantageous: like her home, her care is free and available to all. Suggs’ exemplary practices echo what the political theorist, William Connolly, understands as a crucial ethos of democratic citizenship: “[c]ritical responsiveness takes the form of careful listening and presumptive generosity to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy to a place on one or more of those registers.”<sup>288</sup> There is, however, the obvious difficulty of acknowledging this vision amidst the seductive ideology of individualism. Sethe refuses to ask for support from her community not simply because of immobilizing grief but because she harbors excessive pride. She not only engages in sex-work, rather than asking for financial assistance, in order to pay for Beloved’s tombstone, but she bears the grief, pain and guilt issuing from Beloved’s death personally, without any help. This individualism is echoed in Denver’s

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<sup>286</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>287</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 87.

<sup>288</sup> William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 126.

approaching the black women of her community for aid, when she thinks that “asking for help from strangers was worse than hunger.”<sup>289</sup>

Eddie Glaude reads Denver’s decision to approach the women amidst hardship as a model for a pragmatic-tragic vision of black politics, which acknowledges the constrained nature of black agency in America but nonetheless constructs creative ways to practice it.<sup>290</sup> But what he misses is Morrison’s illustration of the women’s countering Denver’s individualism and recollection as Suggs’ care-based assistance as central to black politics: “[a]ll of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. Others remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt.”<sup>291</sup> Denver relies on Bodwin’s assumption that all aid requires work and that she has no entitlement to care when she asks one of the women, Lady Jones, “could she do chores in the morning?”<sup>292</sup> What Lady Jones makes clear is that Denver’s request and her need are the only two criteria for aid: “if you all need to eat until your mother is well, all you have to do is to say so.”<sup>293</sup> Rather than being dependent upon the judgment of a benefactor, Morrison emphasizes how the black women’s assistance is available regardless of whether they see in Denver failure of moral character: “[s]ome even laughed at Denver’s clothes of a hussy, but it didn’t stop them from caring whether she ate...”<sup>294</sup> The women provide Denver with food to maintain her bodily health, “some rice, four eggs and some tea”<sup>295</sup> and basic emotional support and receptive listening through weekly meetings to alleviate her distress. Denver eventually learns that this is aid based on the responsibility to care, rather than strategic interest,

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<sup>289</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 248.

<sup>290</sup> Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 41-44.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

and that all it requires is a sincere expression of gratitude, a “Thank You.”<sup>296</sup>

Yet *Beloved*'s exploration of this model of generosity also shows that what makes it valuable for racial justice is its assumption of critical respect towards others, deference to their authority and acceptance of benefactors' greater vulnerability. This exploration enriches care theory in ways that go beyond justifying the political importance of and ethical obligation to care. First, through Baby Suggs', Morrison demonstrates that this model of unconditional generosity reflects the assumption that all subjects are equally deserving of respect, which undermines the disrespect so central to racial hierarchy. At some level, the novel makes clear that Suggs' aid is predicated upon enabling citizens to love themselves, or seeing themselves as sources of self-worth, which is a counterpoint to the logic of black objectification under slavery. The slave system reduced the constitutive parts of the black body to its property value for profit-maximization, as is made apparent through Paul D's recognition of his worth, “He has always known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm—but now he discovers his worth, which is to say his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future.”<sup>297</sup> For Suggs, in contrast, the black body must be loved, sanctified and seen as more than just an economic source of use or exchange value. The sanctity of the body calls for its protection and preservation, rather than its violation and denigration. Seeking to convince ex-slaves to repossess their bodies, she makes this clear when she says:

[a]nd O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!*...More than your life-holding womb and your life giving parts, hear me now, love your heart.”<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 226

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

Morrison demonstrates that Suggs' generosity is itself driven by urging individuals to love themselves, which assumes that all individuals are agents capable of self-love and themselves deserving of others' love. The radicalism of this assumption comes not from challenging the ideology of negative freedom or exceeding the liberal preoccupation with ensuring security through laws. Its radicalism comes from its viewing and approaching others as worthy of respect, value and dignity. This is a counter-model to the perspective that requires recipient to adhere to normative social standards, encapsulated by Bodwin and Paul D, which presumes them to be somehow unequal, always potentially deviant or incapable of properly articulating what is in their best interest.

Second, Morrison demonstrates that the black women's rationale for this model of unconditional generosity, which rests on the assumption that all citizens deserve basic resources that liberate them from oppressive need, centralizes how vulnerability is an inescapable condition for all black citizens. Understanding this undermines feelings of superiority, moralism and distance within the black community. The black women eventually reflect on their decision to help Denver, describing one probable justification as simply that "...when trouble rode bare back among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up."<sup>299</sup> This implies that their feeling of responsibility stemmed from a belief that they were obligated to minimize any obstacle to her freedom; a belief that parallels capability theorists' arguments that freedom is only possible after the establishment of basic necessities. Following Amartya Sen's claim that "[human] development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedom that leave people with little choice and little opportunity for exercising their reasoned agency,"<sup>300</sup> Martha Nussbaum contends that the basic necessities which allow us to develop a sense of the good and

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>300</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xii.

engage in meaningful relationships include bodily health and integrity, emotions, and practical reason.<sup>301</sup> Yet, far more than capability theorists, the black women cast the inescapability of suffering for all black citizens, rather than a reformulation of what freedom requires, as the condition for giving basic resources. The black women's use of the term "when" that signals anticipation and necessity, "*when* trouble rode bare among them" as opposed to "if," which connotes possibility and uncertainty, makes clear an understanding that suffering will necessarily come, that it is inescapable. This view is captured most forcefully through Ella, who leads the women of Sethe's community to gather around 124 Bluestone to exorcize Beloved. Ella is, in many ways, the anti-Sethe: a devout-pragmatist and amoralist. Morrison highlights her *phronesis*, what Aristotle understands to be practical wisdom about negotiating reality,<sup>302</sup> when describing her as "a practical woman who believed there was a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment."<sup>303</sup> Not only is Ella skeptical of any model of ethics born of victimization but she also believes that love cannot be the foundation for action, "for she considered love a serious disability."<sup>304</sup> These differences, along with Ella's outspoken hostility for what she understands as Sethe's hubristic decision to isolate herself from her community, create little reason for Ella to exorcise Beloved. But they are insufficient for preventing Ella from unconditionally assisting Sethe, as she believes that no one should be left alone, without resources, to negotiate oppression. Morrison notes how Ella "could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had...Slave life; freed life--every day was a test and a trial. Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a

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<sup>301</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

<sup>302</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108-117.

<sup>303</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 255.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

solution you were a problem.”<sup>305</sup> Ella’s racialized statement centered on how *black* citizens cannot escape insecurity, danger and being a problem to others departs from Baldwin’s centralizing of vulnerability as a condition for all citizens, irrespective of race, class and gender. Yet, far more than Baldwin, Ella’s understanding provides a way to think about how black Americans’ acknowledging shared vulnerability can establish solidarity within the black community, which is neither monolithic nor immune from moralism, classism, homophobia and sexism.<sup>306</sup> Ella’s understanding that white supremacy makes black Americans socially insecure promotes an understanding of Sethe as an equal rather than superior. Ella’s attentiveness to this is sharpened by her own experience of being raped and forced to give birth to her white slaveholders’ child but also reflects a general understanding of how the potential for white racism make black everyday life a perpetual struggle against hardship, irrespective of formal, legal freedom. Ella’s recognition prompts her to jettison her philosophical differences with Sethe, as *Beloved*’s exacerbation of Sethe’s difficulties makes Ella come to Sethe’s aid, without any expectations or conditions. Sethe’s gratitude for this deed is conveyed at the conclusion of the novel, as she is depicted as running into the black women’s arms and “loving faces”<sup>307</sup> as they exorcize *Beloved*, as well as the pain, hopelessness, and despair that the ghost has caused her.

Third, through Amy Denver, Morrison illustrates that this model of unconditional generosity reflects the willingness for one to become vulnerable, which helps challenge the norms by which racial inequality is sustained. Amy is a white woman, an indentured servant heading to Boston, who encounters a pregnant Sethe who is on the verge of starvation upon escaping Sweet Home. It is Sethe who at first fails to generously listen to Amy’s story, quickly

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>306</sup> For an account of how these exclusions shape black politics see Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: Aids and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>307</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 260.

judging her as “the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw” who “needed beef and pot liquor like nobody in this world...[and] talked so much it wasn’t clear how she could breathe at the same time.”<sup>308</sup> Despite this, Amy offers Sethe unconditional support by naming the “chokecherry tree,” the scar from her beatings by schoolteacher’s nephews, massages her feet and helps her give birth to her daughter, who she eventually names after Amy: Denver. Amy Denver’s response shows how unconditional generosity cuts across racial lines and reflects Baldwin’s and Ellison’s claim that an ethical obligation to others requires one to become vulnerable. Yet far more than Baldwin and Ellison, Morrison illuminates how Denver’s face-to-face encounter with Sethe itself exemplifies what the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, understood as the first condition of ethics. Confronted with the face of the stranger, one is held in a condition of hostage, of obligation to it. As he wrote, “[t]he being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal.”<sup>309</sup> For Levinas, one abandons their sovereignty, threatens their own security and puts them at greater risk to meet the obligations that another sentient being imposes upon them. As if to dramatize the ways in which she has little rational reason to help, Morrison foregrounds Amy’s awareness of the distance and inequality between herself and Sethe when she says, “[a]in’t nobody after me but I know somebody after you.”<sup>310</sup> Moreover, Amy herself knows that this encounter is ephemeral, “they never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less.”<sup>311</sup> However, Amy’s self-imposed vulnerability, which comes not only from her complete deference to Sethe’s needs but from her risky, illegal decision, to assist a fugitive slave, who occupies an obvious position of social weakness before

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>309</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 200.

<sup>310</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 78.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 85.

her, exemplifies Levinas' point. Morrison illustrates Amy's awareness that an ethical obligation is violent, an act of self-sacrifice and immolation. That it puts one at risk by undoing self-sovereignty exemplifies a form of irrationalism; but this irrationalism helps reverse a racial order in which whites are independent, powerful and autonomous and blacks are dependent, weak and with compromised agency.

Fourth, Morrison shows that a core, even if implicit, assumption of these practices of generosity is that all individuals are presumptively seen as capable of exercising their own account of the good, which challenges the racial assumption that African Americans are incapable of this endeavor. A form of giving that defers to and assumes the capacity for recipients' judgment, without conditions or stipulations, reflects a belief that those who receive assistance might be constrained but not incapable of self-governing. Suggs, Lady Jones, Ella and Amy Denver see Sethe and Denver as capable of volitionally and independently constructing their desires in ways not directed by men or whites. This presumption itself connects to a larger understanding throughout the novel that freedom is about exercising this judgment, rather than being independent of external impediments. Paul D crystallizes this idea of freedom in the positive sense as based on a guarantee ("to *get* a place") that enables one to desire anything they choose without permission: "to get a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom."<sup>312</sup>

#### Love and the Limits of Unconditional Generosity

Yet just as *Beloved* highlights the productive value for racial justice of the care upon which this unconditional generosity rested, it shows that it could be counterproductive for it. In a certain sense, Morrison follows Ellison by showing that care's direct focus on responding to the task at hand makes it a potentially unstable stable ground for long-term decisions. Sethe herself defends

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 162.



her thick love as a basis for the immediate task of preventing her children from coming back to Sweet Home, “[t]hey ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em”<sup>313</sup> but the long-term effects of this love are much murkier. Sethe’s thick love is at least partly responsible for the guilt and remorse she feels for her daughter’s death, a guilt that incapacitates her ability to remain resilient amidst intense poverty and painful memories. Eventually, Morrison describes how Sethe comes to accept Baby Suggs’ dying words of despair—“Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and Shield. Down. Down. Both of em Down..[against] “misery, regret, gall and hurt.”<sup>314</sup> Yet Morrison’s illustration of love’s limits illustrates something Ellison overlooked. First, Sethe’s defense of the infanticide as an act of immense love itself shows how love could actually sabotage the flourishing of those towards whom it is directed. When Paul D tells her, “[y]our love is too thick,” gesturing towards the way excessive love can have a suffocating effect, Sethe responds emphatically, “love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all...They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em...It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them from what I know is terrible. I did that.”<sup>315</sup> That Sethe’s maternal love, rather than fear, motivates her decision to save her children from the brutal institution of slavery foregrounds her complex moral agency. Yet, the force of this love, which forms the basis of a judgment that exceeds the dictates of the law, is not problematic because it leads to an illegal action but because it is blinding and totalizing. Sethe unilaterally makes the determination about whether Beloved’s life is worth living. This sweeping, all-encompassing love blinds Sethe to her Beloved’s agency and desire, compelling her to make sovereign decisions about her life over which she have no choice. Second, Morrison shows that love could be self-sabotaging because its outward investment in others could leave little room to attending to the needs of one’s self.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 165.

Sethe's investment in Beloved's ghost, her desire to lavish her with unconditional generosity in the form of fancy food and dresses and unlimited attention, ultimately brings Sethe to the brink of death. She spends her thirty-eight dollars of life savings and alienates herself from everyone close to her. Sethe's absorption by Beloved is still maintained even after Beloved is exorcized by the town's women: the concluding scene shows Sethe expressionlessly staring out the window mourning the loss of Beloved who she calls "her best thing." When Paul D reminds her that she is "her best thing," Sethe's response illuminates her inability to recognize that she herself requires love. Perplexed, she responds, "Me? Me?"<sup>316</sup>

### *Beloved, Generosity and American Public Policy*

This concluding depiction of Sethe jobless and on the verge of being homeless, alongside Denver working multiple low-wage jobs struggling to support her, calls into question whether any kind of generosity is sufficient for combating deep and pervasive racial inequality. Generosity's transformative potential might be limited given that it is individual rather than state-based, that it depends on fickle, fragile citizens rather than the coercion of the state, that it can be momentary and everyday rather than something directed through long-lasting public policies. The novel's final word, "Beloved," which can refer to the traumatic effects of slavery, seems to suggest that Sethe's and Denver's destitution is itself a continuation of slavery shaping African American socioeconomic opportunities and psychological well-being. Critics thus note that the concluding refrain of the novel's epilogue, "it was not a story to pass on,"<sup>317</sup> seems to suggest Morrison's own ambiguous directive to readers. Either this legacy of slavery is too difficult, troubling and depressing to transmit to posterity or it should not be overlooked.<sup>318</sup>

Yet to read the final word, "Beloved," in conjunction with the refrain, "this is not a story

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>318</sup> Shulman, *American Prophecy*, xvii.

to pass on,” in this way is to overlook another, equally plausible, interpretation. That what should not be overlooked is the narrative’s depiction of divergent models of generosity about how citizens ought to “be-loved.” The final question then becomes: will readers acknowledge the pernicious effects and problematic assumptions of a model of conditional or embrace an unacknowledged, even if not completely unproblematic, model of unconditional generosity? Will they pass these lessons to others or will they pass on them? In addition, just because the novel examines everyday interactions does not mean that the larger political theoretical insights that emerge from this exploration should be seen as applicable only to them. For example, a theoretical understanding of why conditional generosity is problematic for racial justice helps clarify the ramifications of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 transformation of American welfare policy’s program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). AFDC was a federal entitlement program designed to give benefits to low-income households on the basis of need, but TANF makes aid contingent upon the performance of wage labor and encourages states to use federal money to discourage of out-of-wedlock births. Some states even make TANF eligibility contingent upon mandatory drug testing or restrict it for those with drug felony convictions. *Beloved* provides crucial theoretical insight into how these factors threaten to solidify the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, make African Americans’ lives, including many African American single mothers’ lives, dependent upon minimal financial assistance tethered to low paying jobs, reeducation into normative standards of family life and a host of other conditions. It also provides a lens through which to examine how such a policy itself could reinforce white American paternalism, intensify white American assumptions about black cultural pathology and contain a host of problematic assumptions about gender. At the same

time, *Beloved* dramatizes the importance of unconditional forms of assistance for racial justice in which respect and equality are assumed and self-sacrifice enacted. Whether in discussions about welfare policy, affirmative action or monetary reparations for unpaid black labor under slavery and Jim Crow, perhaps the crucial question that should motivate the distribution of resources to citizens is whether it enables them to “be loved.”

## **Chapter 5: Beyond Reconstructing the Nation**

This dissertation has argued that twentieth century African American political thinkers illuminated how dominant cultural understandings about the extent of freedom in American society, democratic commitment and generosity need to be revised for racial justice. A careful engagement with the essays and fiction of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison has shown each thinker's demonstration of the way these understanding might shape citizens' enactment of care, their sense of obligation, self-perception, communication with others, sense of political possibility and willingness to act at a level that precedes public policy or legislation. I have shown how attention to this deepens thinking about each thinker, broader discussions about racial justice, African American radicalism and the art and politics of African American intellectuals. In this conclusion, I discuss this dissertation's broader implications.

First, my analysis confirms yet complicates the time-honored thesis of the American studies scholar, Sacvan Bercovitch, that Americans across the political spectrum return to the set of values associated with America because "America" "continues to provide the terms of identity and cohesion in the United States."<sup>319</sup> That Baldwin and Ellison directly tethered the political cultural beliefs they engaged as central to American identity and Morrison's *Beloved* did so indirectly illuminates that even American dissidents draw upon the ideas, symbols and myths associated with the transhistorical idea of "America." Yet, by at once critiquing and showing how these beliefs should be revised for emancipatory politics, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison illustrated that understandings central to American identity could be constructed to resist the

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<sup>319</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (London: Routledge, 1992), 355.

narrow confines of liberalism and to discourage an uncritical form of patriotism, faith in triumphalism and progress.

Second, their work provides a unique contribution to debates in political theory. Reading their work as enriching political theory follows Michael Hanchard's argument that black political thought's unique concern with racial domination and racism in modernity can complicate understandings of the political, emancipation, freedom and community.<sup>320</sup> To this end, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison provide answers to perennial debates within American political thought. To the question of what makes America exceptional, each challenges the social democratic interpretation espoused by Walt Whitman and Richard Rorty<sup>321</sup> and the liberal interpretation of Alexis De Tocqueville and Louis Hartz.<sup>322</sup> American exceptionalism is for social democrats founded in its commitment to radical democracy whereas for liberals it is rooted in its irrational Lockean commitment to the values of political equality, individual freedom, private property and a limited state. Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison each show in contrast that one potential source of American exceptionalism comes from Americans' ability to rationalize personal ambiguity and social contradiction; from a refusal to accept the inescapable nature of vulnerability and a refusal to be vulnerable to honor their ethical commitments; from an ability to conceptualize and practice liberal or emancipatory ideas in ways that reinforce domination. To the question of whether liberalism is a valuable organization of American social and political life, each shows how it is problematic not because of its denigration of tradition, community and exploitation of

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<sup>320</sup> Michael Hanchard, "Contours of Black Political Thought: An Introduction and Perspective," *Political Theory*, 38:4 (2010), 512.

<sup>321</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010); Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

<sup>322</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

the working-class<sup>323</sup> or its support of a representative democratic system that creates tyrannical majoritarian rule.<sup>324</sup> Each instead demonstrates how the problem comes from liberalism's ability to provide the intellectual resources for domination but also the resources to deny or blind citizens to this process; how liberalism's championing of the individual could be counterproductive for the larger goal of equality for all; how liberalism's moral force could become chiefly responsible for its most debilitating exclusionary effects. Relatedly, to the question of the value of individualism in American life, each provides in a critique that goes beyond individualism's problematic promotion of ruthless self-interest.<sup>325</sup> Each instead centralized how its debilitating effects came from its radical promise of self-mastery, a promise so important for managing one's precarious existence. Yet each also shows how this wish needed to be renounced for the sake of responsibility because ethics means giving one's sovereignty over to others' needs, even if this renunciation challenges the rationalism and means-ends logic of politics. To the question of whether progress towards greater freedom, opportunity, democracy and equality was inevitable, Baldwin, Ellison and Morison show why it wasn't. However, they also challenge the idea of progress not because it is invalidated by the empirical fact of slavery or other forms of historical oppression but because of constitutive, even if all-too human, frailty, weakness and fear. Each shows how progress would always be uncertain and tenuous not because of imperfect political institutions but because of imperfect subjects. Even if political elites could orchestrate policies that would enable more socioeconomic and political participation for all, individuals in everyday life would continue rejecting the burden of modeling an egalitarian existence in their beliefs and practices, would be plagued by insecurity and anxiety

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<sup>323</sup> John C. Calhoun, *The Essential Calhoun: Selections from Writings, Speeches and Letters* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

<sup>324</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>325</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 175-204.

and would refuse to take on the risk, courage, and sacrifice necessary for this. To the question of what role should love have in American politics,<sup>326</sup> each dramatizes its fundamental importance for and tension with justice and politics. For each, love's political value comes not simply from its exceeding the bounds of narrow liberal-democratic civic-mindedness, as an abstract commitment to the rule of law, respect for or detached solidarity with fellow citizens. It comes instead from its promotion of interpersonal care, compassion and concern for concrete others. Each also shows how this value is also what accounts for love's incommensurable tension with the collective and impartial objective as well as the instrumentalism of politics. For them, it is precisely this tension that needs acknowledgment, acceptance and preservation. Finally, to the question of what constitutes American radicalism, their work exemplifies a radical critique and reconstruction of core American values distinct from the political radicalism of American abolitionism, anarchism, communism, Black Nationalism or feminism.

This contribution to American political thought also extends to larger debates within political theory. For theorists debating the politics of recognition, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison goes beyond arguing for the importance of acknowledging culturally different perspectives, experiences or identities or supplementing this acknowledgment with socioeconomic redistribution.<sup>327</sup> Instead, their work dramatizes why recognition itself required citizens' presumption of critical respect, mutual reciprocity and generous listening towards others; that it requires the awareness that one could always fail to grasp others' multi-varied, sometimes radically different, experiences. For those theorists concerned with the politics of identity and

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<sup>326</sup> For this argument central to Puritan political thought see <sup>326</sup> John Withrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in ed. Theodor Lowi and Isaac Kramnick, *American Political Thought: An Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2008), 12. Also see the idea of agape in Martin Luther King Jr., "An Experiment in Love" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 16-21.

<sup>327</sup> Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, *Recognition or Redistribution? A Political-Philosophical Debate* (New York: Verso, 2004); Patchen Markell, *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).



transformative, emancipatory politics, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison show why emancipation requires the marginalized to neither wed themselves to wounded identities nor simply disavow the histories that make these identities wounded.<sup>328</sup> Each demonstrates why emancipation requires marginalized citizens to recognize that real obstacles for flourishing come from a unique history that thwarts the possibility for unconstrained political agency but also from their own perceptions and actions. For thinkers concerned with the politics of memory, each illuminates that the core issue for transformative politics is not simply whether citizens remember how the past shaped the present<sup>329</sup> or whether they renounce this past for strategic coalitions and political strategy oriented towards the future.<sup>330</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison thus follow Hannah Arendt's insights about memory, that the way in which the past is remembered and narrated helps disrupt conventional understandings of what the present means and what political possibilities it allows for.<sup>331</sup> For those theorists concerned with genre and politics,<sup>332</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison illustrate not only that narrative is a powerful source for thought and action but that the non-romantic genres of irony, comedy and tragedy also accomplish political work. Rather than simply critique the genre of romance for its triumphalism, celebration of invulnerable heroes and wish for reconciliation, each illuminates that there is something politically productive about these non-romantic genres because they stress contradiction, ambiguity and dissonance.

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<sup>328</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>329</sup> James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity and Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>330</sup> John Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>331</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>332</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 115-122.

Yet what is arguably the most unique contribution they make is to contemporary democratic theory debates about the kind of communicative ethics are most serviceable for democracy. Deliberative democrats have argued for the importance of aspiring to dialectical communication that focuses on reciprocity, respect and tolerance as the mode through which to reach the most reasonable deliberative outcomes. For them, democracy requires a collective that deliberates freely and exchanges morally defensible public reasons without the sacrifice of equal respect and the reality of disagreement.<sup>333</sup> Agonistic democrats maintain skepticism over this as both a realistic possibility and ideal because it polices the boundaries of acceptable discourse and embraces the ideal of agreement.<sup>334</sup> For them, deliberative democrats' commitment to reasoned conversation leaves little room for emotional or rhetorical discourse, their commitment to universality marginalized the role of complex, multidimensional lived experience especially of the oppressed and their commitment to reasonable outcomes encourages the misguided belief that democratic communication can be settled rather than ongoing, turbulent and unending. Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison not only resist categorization as deliberativists or agonists but they theorize core dynamics about democracy overlooked by both camps. Their work shows how a core threat to democracy is not simply a failure to engage in undistorted communication or the wish for its closure but the failure of citizens to acknowledge their own unexamined, unreconstructed personal beliefs and limitations. A core problem in need of address for successful democratic communication is subjects' recognition of their own lack of transparency, their inability to see their own latent wish for power and emotional and social unease. Vigilance

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<sup>333</sup> Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998); Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press); Joshua Cohen, *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>334</sup> William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (New York: Verso, 2003), *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2009).

about this is a crucial step for keeping democracy vibrant, dynamic and open to continual expansion.

Third, notwithstanding their contribution to contemporary theoretical debates, it is also illuminating to read their work in light of the contemporary racial moment. At the level of thinking through the contemporary American discourse's assumption that we live in a "post-racial" society, Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison did not criticize the idea that race no longer allocates power, shape public attitudes and collective decision-making. They also did not offer a strong position on whether post-racialism was itself ontological possible or desirable. What they provide instead are tools for showing why the very possibility of racial equality depends not on changing attitudes about race or even equal opportunities for African Americans but on a revision of beliefs that inform everyday citizenship. Failure of citizens to practice critical respect, assume a shared condition of vulnerability, work in concert and risk themselves to extend freedom and equality would continue to make post-racialism nothing more than a fantasy. This can help explain why Barack Obama's recent ascendance to the American presidency is inadequate for racial justice. As the first African American President, Obama himself represents an obvious shift in white Americans' public attitudes about race and improved opportunities for African American elites to attain positions of political power, something unforeseeable a half-century ago. Yet just because African American elites can better shape political outcomes at the federal or state levels does not make them telling barometers for real structural change. This is not because elites are driven by the self-interested goal of reelection or the demands of the political institutions of which they are part,<sup>335</sup> but because their constituents' everyday attitudes, modes of being, self and collective perceptions are themselves powerful sources for shaping racial inequality. Finally, Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work also provides a lens through

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<sup>335</sup> David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

which to think about how the changing nature of American demographics can shape racial equality. Over the past few decades, the growing number of Latinos has threatened to challenge the white American electorate's power and complicate the meaning and durability of the white-black binary. As a sizable voting block for national elections and marginalized minority whose political interests closely align with African Americans, Latinos themselves can have a powerful role in shaping African American lives. Yet that Latinos, like earlier generations of non-black ethnics, are decidedly neither black nor Caucasian encourages them to become whiter by adopting anti-black racism to distance themselves from African Americans.<sup>336</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison do not theorize this particular process or whether Latinos can create successful political coalitions with African Americans. Instead, they provide a lens through which to examine the ways in which Latinos' wish for Americanization through an embrace of core political cultural beliefs about freedom, democracy and generosity might inadvertently shape African American equality.

Their work's contribution to theorizing the contemporary racial moment also extends to theorizing contemporary black politics. One central question of black politics is whether black political leadership should be organized around black elites or the black masses.<sup>337</sup> Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison do not provide a direct answer to this question but show how the success of black leadership to achieve racial justice depends on a critical self-awareness and respect for others. Those who lead must be attentive to their own vulnerability to be blinded and seduced by the belief in complete autonomy and self-sovereignty. They must also see others, despite their

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<sup>336</sup> Victoria Hattam, *In the Shadow of Race: Jews, Latinos and Immigrant Politics in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

<sup>337</sup> Contemporary critics Du Bois' talented tenth hypothesis, which suggested that black elites should organize black politics, include Adolph Reed, *W.E.B Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

differences in status and identity standpoints, as being fundamentally equal in terms of their capacity to be vulnerable and to exercise political and moral agency. Another question of black politics to which Baldwin, Ellison and Morrison provide insight is whether the subject of black politics should be shared, pragmatic interests or shared black identity.<sup>338</sup> Whatever the basis or substance of these interests, each shows that the political reforms advocated through black politics need to espouse a principle of unconditional care for all black citizens irrespective of class, gender and sexual differences and ensure that such reform is flexible and ongoing rather than static or temporary.

All these political-theoretical insights raise a larger normative question of whether American citizens' revised cultural understandings are alone sufficient for contesting real structures of racial inequality. To directly tackle this question requires engaging the obvious criticism that citizens' revision of dominant cultural understandings is insufficient because political transformation depends on collective power, which comes from real-world strategy, strategic coalitions, social movements and public policy reforms. This is an undeniable truth, as change depends on power. But such an argument reifies our understanding of these various elements. For example, strategy, coalitions and reforms are not abstract things but are determined and enacted by real citizens whose worldview is governed by concrete political values, ideas and understandings of freedom, equality, justice, subjectivity, agency and community. To ignore this prior but nonetheless crucial ideational aspect of decision-making and action is to miss an important site of politics. At the same time, the question of Baldwin's, Ellison's and Morrison's work's transformative political value extends to a question of its global reach. Even if we assume

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<sup>338</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Dubois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007); Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

that it is valuable for thinking about American racial inequality, can its insights extend beyond the national frame? Does not a revision of dominant cultural understandings of freedom, democracy and generosity as a source of political transformation already assume a political culture in which these values resonate? What of non-liberal societies where this language is marginal or nonexistent? Does this mean that their work is only valuable for American society or societies similar to it? If we assess their work from the perspective of whether it can motivate large-scale transformation and political mobilization, then the answer might be yes. Reformist movements in nations where the currency of ideas like freedom, democratic commitment and generosity carry little weight might have trouble mobilizing citizens to act on them. On the other hand, if we assess their work for its theoretical meditation on these political ideas, independent of their cultural resonance, then the answer is no. Their rich insights about how political ideas can shape everyday life as well as one's interactions provide important diagnostic and normative insight into thinking about citizenship, obligation and ethical action more generally.

Fourth, this dissertation offers important methodological tools for future studies. On one level, it can enrich thinking about American political culture theoretically. Historical studies of American political culture largely debate the question of whether American political culture is liberal,<sup>339</sup> civic republican<sup>340</sup> or ascriptive.<sup>341</sup> These studies seek to explain the nature of American politics and discourse so as to better understand its contours and chart its future development. But what remains inadequately unexplored is the theoretical implications of American cultural beliefs themselves: for example, what is it about the ideal of freedom that is individually debilitating and that which encourages hostility towards community interests? What

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<sup>339</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

<sup>340</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>341</sup> Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

is it about democracy that makes it a subject of deep attachment but also of anxiety? What is it about certain understandings of generosity that blind citizens to their own debilitating implications? First, answering these conceptual questions deepens understanding of how ideas shape agency, responsibility and political possibility. Second, grasping this also provides a deeper understanding of why certain configurations of American political culture might be so durable, persistent and entrenched. Third, it creates the imaginative-intellectual space for rethinking these values anew.

Relatedly, this dissertation provides a framework for studies of African American intellectual life. I have restricted my consideration from the immediate postwar period through the early 1990s but a similar method could be used to explore how 19th and early 20th century African American intellectuals revised American culture for an emancipatory politics. For example, how thinkers like Frederick Douglass engaged and revised the cultural understanding of freedom by dramatizing its deprivation, hope for and ultimate experience of ex-slaves;<sup>342</sup> how Ida B. Wells engaged and revised Americans' understanding of the state's securing and protecting all citizens' lives with a description of the horrors of lynching<sup>343</sup>; how W.E.B. Du Bois engaged and revised Americans' understanding of exemplary citizenship through narratives of the African Americans' struggle for and exemplification of democratic values during Reconstruction.<sup>344</sup> Examining these thinkers in this way would deepen understanding of their political thought and our understanding of African American intellectual life throughout history. In a different way, this dissertation provides methodological tools useful for literary critics studying African American literature. Literary critics have concerned themselves with whether there is a distinct

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<sup>342</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009).

<sup>343</sup> Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2002).

<sup>344</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

black aesthetics or set of intellectual issues central to African American writers.<sup>345</sup> This dissertation shows how to read literature politically. To glean the insights literature has for real world citizenship rather than simply conceptualize how it responds to certain real-world political developments; to better understand its diagnosis of the possibilities and limits of political contestation rather than it as a reflection of a politics of authorship through authorial language, plot and character development. Finally, grasping these political insights could itself deepen understanding of African American literature's literary devices of genre, metaphor, personification and trope and its concern with larger issues not explicitly concerned with race.

In the final analysis, this dissertation's consideration of African American intellectuals' theorization of justice reflects my own value judgment that power is not all encompassing, that change is possible and that a better future is within reach. There is good reason to be skeptical of this aspiration for justice because it can be seen as incapable of contending with the force of state and capitalist power, is dependent upon citizens' willpower and implies what is arguably a modest call for fairness, equality, freedom and participation rather than a revolutionary abolition of private property or the state. Yet such skepticism about taking justice seriously rests on an idealized reading of the transformative potential of skepticism itself and models an exclusionary ethos threatening to any emancipatory politics. There is no reason that theorizing justice cannot coexist with, complement and enrich a radical critique of power or a revolutionary political program. The tradition of thinking about justice I have examined is imperfect and open to critique but my aspiration is that it be read generously as something carrying political value and transformative potential.

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<sup>345</sup> Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).



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