Brandon M. Terry
John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences
Harvard University
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The following is a chapter from my book, *The Tragic Vision of the Civil Rights Movement* (Harvard University Press). For those interested in a more complete sense of the book, I have included some material from the introduction to clarify my methodological approach and a short section from the chapter on "romantic" history to explain what I think Afro-pessimist and other "ironic" histories are principally responding to in their criticism. These supplementary materials begin at page 51. **This is work-in-progress. Please do not circulate or quote without the author's permission.**

The Changing Same: Irony and Its Politics in African American Critical Thought

A specter haunts the American discourse of race – the specter of pessimism. The high tide of optimism about "race relations" or the prospects for achieving racial equality that surrounded Barack Obama's ascendency to the presidency collapsed mightily by his administration's end, and has lingered in the doldrums ever since.[1] Prominent scholars argue forcefully that "a deep and abiding racial pessimism now pervades our politics, transcending the divisions of left and right," and is manifest in the resurgence of white nationalism and racial paranoia on the right, racial despair on the left, and paralyzing melancholia concerning the elusive search for interracial consensus and comity among liberals.[2]

While Obama presented himself as a tonic to such tendencies, his administration was notable in part for coinciding with the influence of a growing number of African American intellectuals who gained substantial popularity for their bleak diagnosis of the role of white supremacy in shaping the American social order, and even bleaker prognosis about the country's prospects for transcending what the most prominent among them, Ta-Nehisi Coates, described as its "heritage" of destroying black bodies.[3] In academia, perhaps the most striking development in this vein is the movement of philosophy and cultural criticism known as "Afro-Pessimism."

Fashioning themselves as the philosophical descendants of leading African American critical theorists like Derrick Bell, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillars, and Afro-Caribbean theorists like Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, the movement and its leading figures (e.g.,

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[1] Lydia Saad, "U.S. Perceptions of White-Black Race Relations Sink to New Low," *Gallup News* (September 2, 2020) << https://news.gallup.com/poll/318851/perceptions-white-black-relations-sink-new-low.aspx>>See also, Michael C. Dawson, *Not in our lifetimes : the future of black politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
[2] Corey Robin, *The enigma of Clarence Thomas* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2019).
[3] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the world and me*, First edition. ed. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 103.

National Book Award winner Frank Wilderson, III, Calvin Warren, Christina Sharpe, Jared Sexton) are unified by what the literary critic Jesse McCarthy carefully identifies as four common theses:[4]

> (1) The exceptionality thesis: Blacks are distinctive among modern peoples for the unprecedented and unrestrained violence, animus, and obsession they are subjected to around the world (perhaps especially in the United States).
>
> (2) The immutability thesis: Antiblackness and black subordination are permanent features of the U.S. social order and, indeed, the modern world. Political struggles like anti-slavery abolitionism or the civil rights movement have not fundamentally altered this arrangement, and perhaps only "apocalyptic" collapse could.
>
> (3) The structural antagonism thesis: Antiblackness works at the level of social ontology to structure and overdetermine the interactive possibilities, opportunity structures, institutional forms, cultural lifeworlds, interpersonal relations, and judgments of value between blacks and non-blacks. Afropessimists are notoriously disparaging toward the ideal of solidaristic, interracial politics (i.e., "people of color" talk, or Third Worldism) or even "*analogies*" between the sufferings of blacks and non-blacks. Indeed, they argue that the modern concept of the "human" is constituted by permanent reference to its enduring "Other": the black.
>
> (4) The abjection thesis: Blackness has no meaning or ontological substance apart from its signification and constitution as "social death." Blackness is a mark of generalized dishonor and abjection, created by and given meaning through the Indian and Atlantic Ocean slave trades. The slave ship creates and tethers the meaning of Blackness, and despite the gallantry of various black nationalist projects of cultural self-assertion or demands for cultural "recognition," these projects will always be self-defeating, repeating the terms of subjection *ad nauseum.*

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[4] Jesse Mccarthy, "On Afropessimism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 20, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/. On the view defended here and in McCarthy, it is probably misleading to characterize Hartman as an Afro-pessimist. Her commitments to a revival of Pan-Africanism in *Lose Your Mother*, and her interest in certain practices of redemptive memory and "care" ethics are at odds with a more thoroughgoing and nihilistic pessimism. Taking McCarthy's helpful reconstruction of four pillars of Afro-Pessimism -- the exceptionality thesis, the immutability thesis, structural antagonism thesis, and the abjection thesis – the Pan-Africanism seems to undermine (2) and (4), while the argument in *Scenes of Subjection*, I contend, should be read not as endorsing (3) structural antagonism, but as showing that attempts to enact that antagonism in practice, especially via the law, consistently falls into contradiction, crisis, and aporia. This does not mean that there will be some dialectical progression toward inevitable redemption, but it does mean – similarly to Walter Johnson's critique of "dehumanization talk" in the analysis of slavery, that any attempt to erect a division like Black/Human as a stable opposition gets entangled in its own impossibility. At the same time the slave is supposed to be chattel/livestock or a tool/instrument, the law cannot help but, in certain domains, ascribe responsibility, intention, reason, and other features that are constitutive of the grammars of humanism. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of subjection : terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*, Race and American culture, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose your mother : a journey along the Atlantic slave route*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Walter Johnson, "To remake the world: Slavery, racial capitalism, and justice," *Boston Review* 20 (2018).

While each element of this discourse has long circulated in black political life, two features of the peculiar Afro-pessimist combination are especially striking considering the history of black letters. The first is that, in a marked break with other black intellectuals (including many who endorse *some* of the theses above), leading proponents of Afro-Pessimism explicitly endorse "nihilism" as the appropriate political response to these converging judgments. Criticizing not only any sustained "investment" in politics, they argue that even "political hope" itself is a ruse of racial domination that must be disavowed for psychic, intellectual, and spiritual integrity.[5] Another striking feature of Afro-Pessimism is that, despite the frequent claim that their account of the social ontology of antiblackness "takes place at a level of abstraction that is too high for narrative and the logic of storytelling," their arguments are predicated upon a unique mode of "ironic" history and historical narration and an attack on what they describe as "redemptive" narrative alternatives.

Concerned by the popularity and influence of Afro-Pessimist thinkers and their arguments in such wide-ranging domains as Black Lives Matter activist reading groups, high school debate tournaments, and critical theory circles, a growing number of scholars have sought to bring external standards to bear against the movement, charging it with myopic ignorance regarding the truth of political economy, an ethically indefensible solipsism, or the objectionable diminishment of other forms of oppression (e.g., settler colonialism).[6] Despite sharing these concerns, I approach from another, more self-consciously *therapeutic* vantage. The motivation, in other words, is not *solely* to unmask logical inconsistencies, insist on definitional clarity, and adduce contrary evidence to cast doubt on particular conclusions. Although these conventional philosophical strategies are indispensable, the goal of therapeutic critique is also, to use Martha Nussbaum's words, *practical, responsive, and value-relative.* It aims to break the spell and undermine the cravings and desires, the captivating illusions and pictures, and

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[5] Calvin L Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (2015).
[6] See, for example, Mccarthy, "On Afropessimism."; Michael C Dawson, "Hidden in plain sight: A note on legitimation crises and the racial order," *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016); Iyko Day, "Being or nothingness: Indigeneity, antiblackness, and settler colonial critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015); Greg Thomas, "Afro-blue notes: The death of afro-pessimism (2.0)?," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018).

metaphysical and ethical commitments that undergird the attachment to Afro-pessimist thought.[7]

Focusing specifically on the Afro-pessimist defense of nihilism, I offer a therapeutic critique that takes Afro-pessimism's predication on what I describe as a practice of "ironic history" as a productive point of entry to disclose and immanently critique four major flaws in its picture of the world: (1) its incoherence regarding race and reference, (2) its self-undermining and ontologically essentialist conception of "politics," (3) its metaphysical privileging of purity and permanence in its exercise of ethical and political judgment, and (4) its pathological attachment to a conception of the vocation of black intellectualism that has rightly collapsed in the post-Jim Crow era. These shortcomings should lead us, I argue, to adopt a more *tragic* approach to the narration of, and philosophical reflection upon, African American history.

Irony, Critique, and History

Irony, as commentators have long noted, is characterized in its simplest or most stable form by a capacity for *negation.*[8] A central element of this negation stems from their creative fixation on the ever-present possibility for incongruence between what is said and what is meant germane to language itself.[9] If irony exploits, or is otherwise inextricably tied to the proliferation of this incongruity and the consequent possibility of negation it entails, radical implications may swiftly follow. Kierkegaard immediately grasped the possibility for irony to become "absolute infinite negativity," a conception which deconstructionists like Paul de Man would later come to embrace where Kierkegaard recoiled.[10] "Irony in itself," de Man argues, "opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads and there is no inherent reason for

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[7] This conception of therapeutic critique owes a great deal to Martha C. Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire : theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*, Martin classical lectures, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire : theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*. See also the sympathetic, yet critical take in Michael Temelini, *Wittgenstein and the Study of Politics* (University of Toronto Press, 2018).

[8] On negation as a simple or stable form of irony, see for example Alexander Nehamas, *The art of living : Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Sather classical lectures, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53-55. Nehamas makes the important point that negation is but one form of irony. More fundamentally, irony involves strategies of creating distance between what we say and what we mean, and may take the form of negation, concealment, refusal, partial silence, or other strategies.

[9] Kierkegaard, Concept of Irony

[10] Paul de Man "The Concept of Irony" 166

discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity…pursued to the end, an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents."[11]

In other words, ironic critique can move rapidly from the incongruity between a statement and its meaning toward a critique of the contents of consciousness, the adequacy of language to represent subjectivity or the world, to the very coherence of "world" or "subjectivity" very quickly. In this sense, *some* degree of irony is a basic feature of all sophisticated social or political inquiry. Insofar as we do not assume, for instance, that actors have transparent access to their own motivations or that the descriptions they give to their own actions are fully adequate to analysis, we have already embraced some measure of "ironic" distance.[12]

When we move from simply the presence of ironic critique, to a *historical discourse* that can be characterized as ironic at the level of narrative form, however, I aim to track something more specific: namely, how tropes and generic conventions associated with irony are critical to forging a narrative structure that conveys, as its overarching meaning, the *negation* of progress, either by insisting that what *appears* as progress or improvement is, arguably more compellingly described as, *decline* or at least *stasis*.[13] In one sense, my argument seeks to deepen the *rhetorical* dimension of Albert Hirschman's famous study of the "rhetoric of reaction," especially his claim about the "*appeal* of the arguments" about the futility of social reform resting "largely on the remarkable feat of contradicting, often with obvious relish, the commonsense understanding of these events as replete with upheaval, change, or real reform."[14]

Hirschman found himself returning frequently to the French Revolution and its inheritors, I contend, because irony is *occasioned* by "something else on which it might produce its negative effects" – in this case an existing historiographical and philosophical discourse taking this exemplary event as evidence of radical possibility.[15] For our era, especially in the realm of reflection on American and African American history, ironic critique is *occasioned* by the ascendancy and entrenchment of a romantic version of history, especially one centered on the civil rights movement.

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[11] Paul de Man, "Irony" 166

[12] This is exploited to great effect, for instance, in Socratic irony. See Nehamas, *The art of living : Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault.*

[13] Deinstag, Pessimism 25.

[14] Albert O. Hirschman, *The rhetoric of reaction : perversity, futility, jeopardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1991), 70.

[15] On irony needing an occasion, see Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and De Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 8

Ironic narratives of African American history should be considered part of a broader tradition of thought characterized by deep suspicion toward the idea of "progress" or progressive history.[16] Yet, understanding the specificity and particular occasion of *this* ironic response requires attention to the fusion of horizons characteristic of contemporary engagement with romantic ideas and stories about the "civil rights movement." One must confront, first, that there is a growing sense of crisis concerning the authoritative pillars and imagined futures of black political tradition which once provided stable hermeneutic orientation toward the past and within the problem-spaces of African American political life.[17] Certain assumptions that once governed inquiry into, and practical understanding of, African American politics as a unified or coherent practice, for example, are no longer *authoritative*, in the sense that we can intuitively appeal to them for understanding.

Aside from the general hermeneutic dilemma that compelled a rethinking of black political life across the humanities, romantic narratives of African American history seem especially susceptible to forms of skepticism that appeal to the enduring injustice and marginalization that characterizes much of contemporary African American life. The sociologist Patrick Sharkey, for example, offers a battery of dispiriting statistics that testify to the endurance of racial inequality since the death of Martin Luther King in 1968:

> When one considers only Americans who have been in the United States since at least 1970, there is even less change in racial inequality [than if recent black immigrants are included]. At the start of the 1970s, about 40 percent of African Americans were in the poorest fifth of the 'non-immigrant' U.S. income distribution, compared to about 35 percent at the end of the 2000s. About 82 percent of African Americans were in the bottom three-fifths of the non-immigrant income distribution at the start of the 1970s, compared to 78 percent at the end of the 2000s. What these figures tell us is that when we consider only families that have been in the country for the last several decades, we see virtually no progress toward racial equality.[18]

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[16] Joshua Foa Deinstag, *Pessimism Joshua Foa Dienstag, Pessimism : philosophy, ethic, spirit (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). Publisher description http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0654/2005056513-d.html*
Table of contents only http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0668/2005056513-t.html
Contributor biographical information http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0734/2005056513-b.html.
[17] These pillars, as described in the previous chapter, are (1) racial realism, (2) church vanguardism, (3) the imagined futures of integrationism and black nationalism, and (4) practical faith and normative commitment to the cultural politics of progressive racial representation.
[18] Patrick Sharkey, *Stuck in place : urban neighborhoods and the end of progress toward racial equality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4.

Such conditions exert a kind of downward pressure on narratives of African American history (and especially civil rights movement history) that emphasize overcoming and transcendence, or reconciliation and unity. Sharkey, for instance, cannot help but ask the question: "How is it that the first generation of children able to take advantage of expanded civil rights has made so little progress toward economic equality?"[19]

That a problem of the present bleeds "backward" into historical judgment reflects the triadic relation between past, present, and future at the heart of historical judgment, especially when concerned with *exemplary* events in political culture. In these special instances, where the historical example is meant to serve as a touchstone of judgment, historical narration is asked more forthrightly to bear the weight of accounts of the present, as well as connect in some meaningful way (perhaps even as nostalgic rebuke) to the imagined futures that animate the political and social discourse of the present.[20]

The Subcurrents of Ironic History

Part of the utility of a vocabulary (e.g., the "ironic") harvested from literary criticism is that it helps disclose ontological, political, and ethical commitments that are too often implicit in the kinds of storytelling that historians and political theorists engage in or find compelling. The language of ironic history, in particular, helps us characterize at least three subcurrents of historical discourse that often fit together and are, at present, inspiring broad engagement in critical theory and social movements alike: qualified fatalism, a hermeneutics of suspicion, and intensive, ultimately inward-facing skepticism.

First, *qualified fatalism.* Ironic historical discourse reflects a deep skepticism of the possibility of redemption, especially conceived as a kind of authentic freedom, a rational (or at least non-pathological) social order, or other forms of collective transcendence (e.g., religious salvation). For Hayden White, ironic and romantic narrative modes are at odds for this reason. The former represents a "drama of diremption …dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming

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[19] Sharkey, *Stuck in place : urban neighborhoods and the end of progress toward racial equality*, 5.
[20] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity David Scott, Conscripts of modernity : the tragedy of colonial enlightenment (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).*

definitively the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy."[21] If a central pillar of romantic narrative is the invocation of redemptive unity, consensus, transcendence, or enlightenment, ironic narratives instead deploy history to unmask our captivity to pathology and finitude, and those fissures and fractures that give the lie to consensus and the supposed integrity of identity.

Second, this negating skepticism is directed through an expansive *hermeneutics of suspicion* arrayed against the appeal to "ethical" motivations and explanations in history.[22] It seeks to find baser motives and interests behind appeals to virtue, self-conceptions based on moral or ethical ideals, and professed meanings of human action. The ironist's hermeneutics assume that behind these appearances lays egoism and self-interest, duplicity and self-deception, or concealed forms of domination waiting to be unmasked. The concerns about sincerity, authenticity, and legitimacy that this engenders helps produce a broader crisis of "heroism" in ironic narratives that is at odds with romance. The emergence of irony, White argues, "represents the passage of the age of heroes and of the capacity to believe in heroism" by stressing not only fragility, but *complicity* -- the "destructive aspect" that inheres in or follows the hero's ostensible triumphs. Innocence lost, the ironist "looks for the worm in the fruit of virtue everywhere—and finds it," often condemning the fruit accordingly.[23]

Last, and in line with de Man's contention that irony's absolute negativity has no natural endpoint, the most fully developed form of irony begins to turn its powers of negation inward upon its own categories and self-conception. Subjecting our vocabularies and practical identities to *intensifying forms of skepticism* engenders increasingly radical doubts about their very capacity to adequately describe, disclose, or orient us toward the world (including one another).

The cascade of scare quotes, parentheticals, and strikethroughs (e.g., "race," ~~being~~) in post-structuralist texts registers one wing of this dilemma of understanding oneself to be burdened with a vocabulary that is judged inadequate, while remaining unable to discover another vocabulary capable of resisting self-undermining skepticism while remaining properly

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[21] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1973) p. 9. This invocation of *death* is meant also to figuratively conjure what W.E.B. Du Bois called "a death that is more than death," namely the defeat and demise of those commitments and collaborations, ideas and ideals which accrue for us the imperative of duty.

[22] Perhaps the leading defender of a moralist explanation for the end of slavery is David Brion Davis. See, for example, David Brion Davis, *Inhuman bondage: The rise and fall of slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[23] White, *Metahistory* p. 231

critical.[24] This sense of inadequacy not only inspires historical inquiries into the putative failures of various political discourses or ideals, also generates a further skepticism toward the justifications or self-conceptions upon which reconstructive critique, practical identity, and practices of politics themselves might reasonably proceed.[25]

Together, this combination of qualified fatalism, suspicion concerning motivation and meaning, and skeptical anxieties about purchase of our vocabularies and practical identities combine to forge an ironist form of *pessimism* that seeks out history as part of its warrant. More hopeful or empowering descriptions of the world become implausible, if not absurd, and what appears heroic or emancipatory in romantic narratives is treated as an occasion for unmasking as illusory. Such ironic pessimism is distinguished not only by what White describes as "a manifest disgust with the society, but a refusal to countenance the notion that any public or private action could possibly change the society for the better," and that any authentic flourishing will be episodic, fugitive, or altogether chimerical.[26]

Irony and Its Orders of Analysis

As the preceding discussion insinuates, a key problem with understanding ironic discourse is diagnosing the order of description and explanation to which it aspires, whether aesthetic, political, cultural, ontological, or metaphysical. Ironic *history*, particularly in the realm of politics, seems meant to narratively dramatize particular contradictions or misalignments that reveal the above frustrations as having an ostensible logic or pattern within human affairs or human-scale temporalities. There is, however, an instability here. White argues that at its extremes, such histories reflect an "Absurdist *view of the world* [my emphasis]," involving the intractable and inescapable frustration of human purposes, longings, and self-understandings.

One need not universalize this claim to realize White's diagnosis of the "absurd" reflects a genuine pattern of treating cultural or political phenomena as placeholders for a more ambitious ontological or metaphysical claims about the amenability of the world or cosmos to

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[24] See, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Writing, "Race", and Difference*
[25] Jonathan Lear, drawing from Kierkegaard, illuminates this problem as emerging in the awareness of a gap between *pretense* and *ideals* in practical activity and identity. Taking Kierkegaard's famous query, "In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?" as the paradigmatic statement of irony, Lear helps reveal the intimate relationship between existential anxiety, epistemic crisis, and ironic critique which calls into doubt the vocation of the historian, critic, and political actor alike. Jonathan Lear, *The Case for Irony*
[26] Ibid 243.

particular human purposes, ambitions, needs, and expectations *as such*. Indeed, these grand metaphysical or ontological speculations are often revealed, not simply in the ironist's descriptions of *the past*, but by the way that ironic histories are extrapolated into projections or predictions regarding *the future's* fidelity to the identified patterns. The ironic histories we will assess, for instance, are far more enamored with predictions about the social world than the resolute stance of humility and openness to unexpected possibilities that characterized, by contrast, some measure of the existentialist obsession with absurdity as the radically unintelligible, unjustifiable nature of human beings' "thrownness" into our condition.[27]

The chief difficulty, however, with discerning the order of explanation at which ironic narratives aim, is that it is difficult for them to remain fixated on any particular historical moment or phenomena. Their cascading and self-undermining dynamic tends to spill over into ever-larger historical scope, in some instances transforming historical claims into metaphysical or ontological stories about the world's fundamental mis-alignment with human flourishing that are no longer recognizable as event-laden *histories*, although they may retain some tethering to temporality. This is, after all, what led Schopenhauer, in his polemical restatement of the philosophy of history to declare:

> History is untruthful not only in its arrangement, but also in its very nature since, speaking of mere individuals and particular events, it always pretends to relate something different, whereas from beginning to end it constantly repeats only the same thing under a different name and in a different cloak. The true philosophy of history thus consists in the insight that, in spite of all these endless changes and their chaos and confusion, we yet always have before us only the same, identical, unchangeable essence, acting in the same way today as it did yesterday and always…The motto of history in general should run: *Eadem, sed aliter* [The same, but otherwise]."[28]

The Ironic History and Analytic of the Civil Rights Movement

These preliminary remarks, I hope, will help clarify my specific focus in this chapter, which is to sketch and understand the emergence of an ironic historiography and critique of the civil rights movement aimed at negating its "romantic" alternative as well as the political and

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[27] H Gaston Hall, "Aspects of the Absurd," *Yale French Studies*, no. 25 (1960).
[28] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On History," in *Philosophical writings*, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher, German Library (New York: Continuum, 1994), 109-10.

public philosophy built upon its scaffolding. Fundamental to the *ironic* emplotment of the civil rights movement are, above all, two ideas: (1) the ineradicable permanence and deep logic of systemic "anti-blackness" as the foundation of the American (or global) order, and (2) skepticism about the stability and adequacy of the vocabularies and significations we rely upon to describe and disclose blackness, anti-blackness, and black political life over time.

Derrick Bell and Permanent Subordination

One of the most influential defenses of the idea that African Americans' history and future would always be shaped by permanent racial subordination was advanced by the legal scholar Derrick Bell and his influential interpretation of the civil rights movement. Surveying the United States' historical record on race, and especially the ostensible triumph of *Brown v. Board* (1954), Bell concludes with the following proposition:

> Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance.[29]

Bell's argument for perpetual subordination turns principally on two claims. First, he argues that the stigmatizing symbolism of race that saturates American society makes it impossible for all but a few whites "to identify with blacks as a group." Without group identification at the social psychological level – or *solidarity*, to use the preferred term of political theory – whites cannot develop the necessary levels of civic trust or empathy towards blacks. Instead of alleviating black suffering, they will meet black demands and black participation largely with aversion or suspicion.[30] This treatment is manifestly unjust, but the power of the symbolic order of race is such that it masks, ideologically, what would otherwise readily appear as hypocritical or shameful.

Secondly, Bell argues that the social psychological dimension of this racial group division is ultimately reproduced through racism's powerful function as a complex mechanism for generating enough material, political, psychic, and social privileges for whites in order to

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[29] Derrick Bell, *Faces in the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism.* (New York: Basic, 1992) p.12
[30] Bell, *Faces in the Bottom* p. 4

maintain cross-class solidarity and social stability in a white-dominated polity. Black Americans, Bell argues, play a "critically important stabilizing role" in American society and history.[31] African Americans serve as convenient scapegoats for the failure to securely establish egalitarian social policy, and their broad exclusion from higher-status jobs and other opportunities ensures genuine material and psychic privileges that whites have grown accustomed to and invested in.[32]

Where there *appear* to be "gains" made for blacks, like the end of slavery or the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, Bell exhorts us to understand these as something other than a significant transformation of the racist foundations of American society. Instead, Bell contends that such apparent inflection points or moments of moral awakening are really contingent instances of "interest convergence." Whenever a critical mass of whites adopt more racially liberal or progressive policy at the macrosocial level, or behave in racially inclusive patterns at the microsocial level, close scrutiny will reveal that it was "profitable or at least cost-free" for them to do so.[33] This casts a pall of suspicion over the supposed triumphs of racial liberalism as an ethical project.

In Bell's treatment, for example, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), reflects an interest-convergence situation where the promotion and protection of black civil rights served the more efficacious purpose of thwarting the propaganda efforts of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, a policy goal advanced by Cold War struggling to win Third World support and operating under the presuppositions of anti-communist "domino theory."[34] Indeed, in one essay, Bell goes so far as to insist that *Brown v. Board* was *wrongly decided*, and that instead of declaring "separate but equal" inherently unequal, the Court should have simply compelled

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[31] Ibid 8

[32] Ibid 9

[33] Ibid 6-7, See, also, Derrick M. Bell, "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma." *Harvard Law Review* 93.3 (1980) pp. 518-33

[34] Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); The domino theory argued that in an era of decolonization, where new nation-states were emerging and seeking allies, that ceding any nations' political allegiances to Communism and Soviet influence would inevitably risk losing that nations' neighbors to Communism as well, and so on. Thus, the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union played out almost entirely on the terrain of "Third World" countries as both superpowers sought to limit the expanded influence of the other through diplomacy, propaganda, international aid, espionage, sabotage, military advice and assistance, and, finally, warfare – most spectacularly in Vietnam.

state governments to genuinely equalize funding for separate black institutions (e.g., schools, universities, public spaces).[35]

Part of Bell's skepticism toward the civil rights movement stems from his account of the social conditions of the "post-civil rights" era, with its undeniable entrenchment of ghetto poverty, social marginalization, and political animosity. He sees these pathologies not as residues of an incomplete revolution, but as a "regeneration of the problem in a particularly perverse form."[36] The depth of this perversity becomes clearest when we learn that accepting Bell's account of the radically instrumental, egoistic, and solidaristic foundation of racial politics means, not only, that all racial liberalism is inherently precarious, but more frighteningly, that the mass sacrifice of black life is "always lurking in the shadow of current events." This horizon-shaping horror, which Bell articulates by way of speculative science fiction, is the ineliminable possibility of there being some future point where whites "reach a consensus that a major benefit to the nation" (e.g., the civil war-like resolution of some deep public philosophical or political conflict between whites) "justifies an ultimate sacrifice of black rights – or lives."[37] Bell's inheritors, it should be noted, differ primarily in the view that such genocidal logics require no such fictional explication; they are *already* at work, especially in mass incarceration and policing.[38]

Given this bleak picture of progress as precarious illusion, it is not altogether unsurprising that we see Bell begin his *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* with an appeal to existentialist ethics culled from the early Albert Camus and the psychiatrist-philosopher Frantz Fanon. From Camus, Bell wants us to learn "the need for struggle even in the face of *certain* defeat," and from Fanon, Bell hopes to educate his reader to the importance of an ultimate

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[35] J. M. Balkin and Bruce A. Ackerman, *What Brown v. Board of Education should have said the nation's top legal experts rewrite America's landmark civil rights decision* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Bell's argument seems bizarrely sanguine about the prospects for equal funding jurisprudence in the white-dominated bureaucracies and regionally partitioned governmental entities that would be tasked with carrying out such measures. It is, perhaps, tempting to think that budgetary mathematics would provide comparative clarity over the belabored and byzantine efforts at busing and desegregation that halfheartedly followed the implementation decision in *Brown II* (1955), but it seems that such hopes would be similarly dashed by the decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) that allowed existing municipal boundaries to thwart most efforts at desegregation and metropolitan equality. The "integrationists," for all their faults, at least understood that America's existing civic boundaries remained a major obstacle to any racial egalitarianism.
[36] Bell, *Faces* p. 3
[37] Bell, *Faces* p. 13
[38] Laura Whitehorn, "Black power incarcerated: Political prisoners, genocide, and the State," *Socialism and Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2014).

obligation to assume the responsibility of freedom through resistance to domination – even in the face of impossible odds.[39]

Such claims set the stage for a dramatic recasting of the ethical significance of the civil rights movement. In Bell's hands, the meaning of the civil rights movement is that it reveals, in bold strokes, both the illusory nature of racial liberalism *and* the existentialist heroism of black struggles against the (inevitable) triumph of white supremacy. We are far afield from Obama's portrait of King and others as a "Moses generation," for no Israelites will make it across the river Jordan into Canaan. Yet, Bell's pessimism uncannily transforms the civil rights movement into our contemporaries. They become models for the courageous among us who strive to realize Bell's repetition of Fanon's catechism: man has but "one duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices."[40]

The Ironies of Emancipation and the Crisis of Vocabulary

Bell's near-total desiccation of any imagined future beyond existentialist struggle against a permanent and intractable white supremacy, constantly reinventing itself after peaks of "interest convergence," is an important pillar of the turn to irony in Black critical thought. There are, however, limits to Bell's ironic gaze that become clearer as we turn to critiques of the civil rights movement and its historiography levied by black nationalists, socialists, and feminists, as well as the more sweeping skepticism introduced by post-structuralist critics. Despite their profound political differences, these critics all share an abiding concern about what forms of domination are being concealed by or instantiated through political discourse, especially in ostensibly progressive, liberal, or neutral rhetoric.

Among the central concerns of these critics is the rhetorical gesture, popular throughout the civil rights movement, and once a historiographical standard, toward a collective black subject. Often identified as the collective "Negro" or "the black man," and capable of bearing romantic narratives foregrounding unity and transcendence, "his" purportedly singular interests, identity, and problems are targeted with deconstructive critique. These critics have, rightly, unmasked how the ostensible "victories" of the civil rights movement in legislation and ethical transformation, nevertheless did not fundamentally uproot problems of black ghetto and rural

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[39] Bell, *Faces in the Bottom* p. x
[40] *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove, 1967) p. 229

poverty, or many of the cumulative disadvantages that continue to place downward pressure on the black working class. They have also challenged the ways that practices of anti-racist politics have marginalized the voices, interests, and unique vulnerabilities of black women and black queer communities, often conscripting them into forms of solidarity that reproduce subjection along other axes. Beyond this critique of the black subject or general will, these traditions also share, to varying degrees, an interest in "unmasking" triumphalist claims about progress and national consensus, raising doubts about the analytical and moral adequacy of prevailing vocabularies and categories of social analysis, and expressing skepticism about the functions of moral discourse and moral explanations in politics and history. Most radically, some of these critics argue not simply that the civil rights movement's goals were *unfulfilled*, but that their rendering in the course of the movement ironically facilitated the reconstitution of injustice or its entrenchment in other domains. These ills – the marginalization of sexual violence in accounts of racial domination, or the limited attention integrationists gave to the dignity of black cultural practices -- are often concealed by romantic histories' investment in moral progress, and their invocations of unity (nationally, or even among blacks).

[….section cut for length][41]

While the arguments advanced by nationalist, Marxist, and feminist critics are appropriated and redeployed in what I would call more fully ironist narratives, I do not consider these revisionist traditions of critique to *themselves* be "ironic history." They are skeptical, to be sure, of discourses, forms of solidarity, and reconfigurations of the political order that conceal domination beneath claims of progress, freedom, and unity. These criticisms, however, remained tightly tethered to relatively thick descriptions of social oppression, strong normative or evaluative ideals, and practical faith in the emancipatory possibilities of collective political and cultural praxis by particular groups (i.e., the black nation, the working classes, radical democratic feminists, etc.). Where practical faith in these imagined futures, self-confident idealizations and representations, and collective action becomes subjected to severe

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[41] For representative texts, see Cornel West, "The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion"; Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*; Harold Cruse, *Plural But Equal*; Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*; Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; Cathy Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*

skepticism and dissolves into a sense of ruin or collapse, we broach more unflinchingly ironist terrain.

The Eclipse of Emancipation, or, the Prison of Language

A crucial element of this skepticism stems from the post-structuralist critique of race, which lodged a sense of the inadequacy of our linguistic capacities for representation in the heart of race-talk. Illustrative of the opening days of this turn is the early work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who sought to move the philosopher Anthony Appiah's critique of racial essentialism toward a deconstruction of the sign of "blackness."

"If we believe that races exist as things, as categories of being already 'there'," Gates warned, "we cannot escape the danger of generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if these differences were consistent and determined, *a priori*" – a danger that he calls "racial reasoning."[42] From this ethical-epistemological plea, Gates' early scholarship turned toward the deconstruction of literary representations of "blackness" wherever they may be found to be aspiring to postulation as essences or entities.

This critical, ironist gesture certainly aimed at patently racist representations of blacks, but for Gates, it was also to be turned against oppositional discourses like the black cultural nationalists of the Black Arts Movement or black political intellectuals who speak in idioms of shared interests or racial authenticity. These intellectuals, on Gates' critique, make the mistake of turning the "trope of blackness" into a "transcendent presence."[43] The search for the "blackness of blackness," Gates writes, using Ralph Ellison's ironic turn of phrase, is declared futile. Ellison, in Gates' interpretation, rightly "parodies the idea that blackness can underwrite a metaphysics or even a negative theology; that it can exist outside and independent of its representation."[44]

The argument, therefore, is that blackness has no essence; it just *is* this so-called "play of signs," wielded not-so-playfully in the discursive, but dangerous, realm of racial signification and the institutional formations that serve to fix, provisionally, meaning and reference in human

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[42] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Talkin' That Talk," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1986), p. 203; Cornel West, *Race Matters*. (Boston: Beacon, 1993)

[43] Gates, *Figures in Black* p. 275

[44] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "What's In a Name?: Some Meanings of Blackness" *Dissent* Vol. 36, No. 4 (September, 1989), p. 492

societies. "The vast and terrible text of blackness," Gates proclaims, "has no essence; rather, it is signified into being by a signifier."[45] Not only does this complicate the stability of *historical references to "race"* as an unchanging representation, but it also engenders an *ironic* understanding of "racism" as well. Gates first defined "racism" as when "one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly)" – often taking the form of projecting physically definable or biological essences into "'metaphysical' characteristics."[46]

For some postmodern critics, who emphasize the instability of these significations, unmasking and acknowledging them opens the possibility of epistemically and ethically undermining the symbolic regimes of racial difference that fuel racism. This playful conception of irony sees opportunities to reconstruct identity and enjoy contingent forms of freedom and solidarity through deconstruction.[47] Feminist and socialist critics have also sought to emphasize the need for a *deconstructive* politics with regard to race, although they more forcefully foreground the importance of fundamental economic and structural changes to achieve such resignifications.[48]

For the intellectuals associated with the emerging movement of Afro-Pessimism, however, the fact that "blackness" accrued its original meaning in the crucible of slavery and the slave trade as a *negation* of the human (or its ostensible defining attributes -- rationality, civilization, beauty, etc.) means that blackness and negation, or blackness and abjection are inextricably linked, even as the precise *shape* and *morphology* of each era's significations change[49] For them, the "meaninglessness" of blackness is not an occasion for joyful, subversive creativity, but for furious, pessimistic meditation on a permanent condition of abjection, a fate as a perpetual outsider to the most fundamental ontological and metaphysical categories of modernity. As the editors of a recent collection of Afro-Pessimist writings contend, "it is Blackness, and more specifically anti-Blackness, that gives coherence to categories of non-Black – white, worker, gay, i.e., 'human'…it is Blackness that is the dark matter surrounding and holding together the categories of non-Black."[50] Or, as Calvin Warren puts the point, "the very structure of meaning

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[45] Gates, *Figures in Black* p. 274

[46] Gates, *Figures in Black pp.* 204-5

[47] See, for example, Anthony Appiah's defense of a self-described "banal postmodernism" in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) pp. 103-4

[48] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking recognition," *New left review* 3 (2000).

[49] Wilderson, Afropessimism 41

[50] "Introduction," *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017) https://rackedanddispatched.noblogs.org/files/2017/01/Afro-Pessimism.pdf

in the modern world – signifier, signified, signification, and sign -- depends on anti-black violence for its constitution."[51]

This view has immediate social and political theoretic consequences. For one, no extant theoretical or interpretive paradigm – not Marxism, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, or liberalism– would remain capable of grasping the *depth* of black abjection. These traditions are guilty of what Frank Wilderson charges is an "unspoken, assumptive logic," which tries and inevitably fails to "analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings" in a shared grammar or redemptive *telos*.[52] Indeed, one feature of the Afro-pessimist position is to attempt to move arguments about blackness out of a vocabulary that treats it as one instance amongst many of racial *kinds,* insofar as to treat blacks as one "family" amongst humans would undermine the opposition between "blackness" and "the human."[53]

More combatively, these traditions' commitments to "redemption," Wilderson argues, are *parasitic* on black abjection for their coherence; the fantasy of redemption uses the abjection of blackness as its unarticulated and constitutive Other. This grounds what Jesse McCarthy describes as the "structural antagonism" thesis within Afro-Pessimism.[54] Not only is every other inhabited category of "Human" identity defined, subconsciously, against Blackness as its "foil," but there is a perpetual need for non-Blacks to produce, reproduce, and give sanction to forms of antiblack violence to sustain them.[55]

Antiblack violence helps reconstitute in practice, and remind non-Blacks psychologically, that the categories upon which social life is premised are ontologically real. Wilderson provocatively calls anti-Black violence "not a form of racist hatred but the *genome* of Human renewal; a therapeutic balm that the Human race needs to know and heal itself…[to] prevent them from suffering the catastrophe of psychic incoherence."[56] Such violence stabilizes the boundaries of society (by producing the "socially dead," society's other), the category of "human," and the "psychic health" and coherent identity of non-Blacks.[57]

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[51] Calvin Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," 226
[52] Wilderson, Afropessimism 14
[53] I am greateful to Robert Gooding-Williams for this point. For ongoing debate about the metaphysics of race, see Joshua Glasgow et al., *What is race? : four philosophical views* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[54] McCarthy, On Afropessimsim
[55] Wilderson, Afropessimism 13; "I let Humanity say, with a sigh of existential relief," Wilderson laments, "'At least we're not him.'"
[56] Wilderson 16
[57] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 40-41.

There are black nationalisms that have approached such despairing judgments about a supposed "structural antagonism" created by antiblackness, but where Afro-pessimism is distinguished from the nationalist tradition is in its refusal of the politics of recognition and redefinition. For them, not only are Blackness and Black existence caused by anti-black violence and abjection, but blackness is constitutively constructed in this register as well. In Warren's view, the "affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself,'" a view echoed by Sexton's charge that antiblack subjection is both "presupposition and consequence" of black existence.[58] These critics, in short, do not deny that "blackness" is fecund, but they insist that all the myriad meanings find their way centripetally back to the same ur-text of abjection and enslavement. In this way, they square the ironist circle: "race" is always changing, but the fact of antagonism and domination remains the same.

Afro-Pessimism and Ironist Historical Imagination

The combination of radically skeptical, semiotically-oriented conceptions of blackness and anti-black racism *and* an endorsement of the permanent racial domination thesis, is the most distinctive feature of Afro-pessimism in black letters. This juxtaposition, it must be acknowledged, appears *prima facie* contradictory, insofar as it tries to reconcile radical malleability and contingency in racial signification, with a social theory that posits the intractable, totalizing permanence of anti-black racism and the association of blackness with abjection. Afro-Pessimists, however, attempt to flesh out this contention and persuade their readers of their arguments through the mobilization of what I think can rightly be called an ironic narrative of African American history.

The ironic historical imagination of Afro-Pessimism, above all, seeks to topple the organizing motifs of romantic history: progress, unity, transcendence, and triumph. According to Wilderson:

> "The changes that begin to occur after the Civil War and up through the Civil
> Rights Movement, Black Power, and the American election of a Black president

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[58] Sexton, quoted in "Introduction" 10; Warren "Nihilism" 226

are merely changes in the weather. Despite the fact that the sadism is no longer played out in the open as it was in 1840, nothing essential has changed."[59]

Such sweeping accounts of African American history give ample lie to Wilderson's frequent claim that Afro-Pessimism is at odds with narrative. Such confusion stems, in part, from Wilderson's insistence that only *redemptive* narratives count as narratives, properly construed, perhaps because they have an ending.[60] Yet even the "historical stillness" that Wilderson, appropriating Spillers, takes to be the vision of Afro-pessimism must take narrative form because the significations of race, ostensible civic status, or political demands of African Americans have at least the *appearance* of transformation. The Afro-pessimist must produce an alternative, ironic history that seeks to *unmask* this appearance as illusory.

It is the only way, for instance, that Afro-pessimists can claim to show that the popular view that the civil rights movement represents "progress" is disingenuous. On their view, the "reformist ideologies" of the movement, and "their disastrous integration with bureaucratic machinery" fell into the impossible trap of trying to "affirm Blackness itself without at the same time affirming anti-Black violence."[61] Calvin Warren, for example, claims to unmask Martin Luther King's appeals to the redemptive power of the spectacle of voluntary and undeserved suffering in civil rights protest, as the cruelest ruse in American life – blood sacrifices for a democracy never to come.[62] To re-inscribe a redemptive narrative with black suffering at its center, Warren argues, imposes a kind of masochism and cruel optimism upon African Americans, where "attempts at recognition and inclusion in society will only ever result in further social *and real* death."[63]

These claims avail themselves of, and radicalize, an existing civil rights historiography that also breaks with the chronological ordering of conventional historical discourse to juxtapose and rearrange judgments about the past, present, and future in order to convey

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[59] Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 96.

[60] Ibid 226

[61] "Introduction," *Afro-pessimism: An introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), https://rackedanddispatched.noblogs.org/files/2017/01/Afro-Pessimism.pdf.

[62] Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," 216-7.

[63] "Introduction" in *Afro-Pessimism*, 10. Afro-pessimism has appropriated Orlando Patterson's concept of "social death," which was meant to mark the extreme refusal of social recognition that characterizes enslavement, extending not just to generalized social dishonor or susceptibility to violent coercion, but even the standing to make legitimate claims on one's ancestors, progeny, and human equals. Afro-pessimism has picked up on an ambiguity in Patterson's uses of the term to deploy it as a description of lived experience. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1-17. Also, see Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Aftermath of Slavery"

unwavering continuity underneath apparent contingency. The aim of this literature is to show how, as the historian Leon Litwack concludes in his ironist account of black political history (titled appropriately, *How Free is Free?*), "It is all very different. It is all very much the same."[64]

A closer look at the last chapter of *How Free is Free?* ("Fight the Power") which covers the period from World War II to the present may help clarify the point. Litwack renders his hermeneutical fusion of horizons explicit, moving back and forth between evocative renderings of some of the most famous events of the classical civil rights movement (e.g., the march to Selma, the Birmingham campaign, the lunch counter sit-ins, the Freedom Rides) and the contemporary ceremonies meant to recognize and honor the previously scorned activists as American heroes. This romantic move, however, ultimately reveals itself as a dramatic narrative device to occasion and deepen the sense of irony. Litwack's hermeneutic movement and implicit claim of significance turns toward the yawning distance between the redemptive symbolism of events like *Brown v. Board* and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and such contemporary phenomena like the deepening of intergenerational poverty among the poorest fourth of African-Americans, the correctional control of one in nine adult African-American males, and the fact that segregation levels in U.S. public schools have returned to what they were in the 1960s.[65] "For all the political gains, the dismantling of Jim Crow, the mass marches, and the optimistic 'We shall overcome' rhetoric," Litwack concludes, "many of the same tensions and anxieties persisted and festered, the same desperate struggle for survival, the familiar sense of expectations betrayed, of promises not kept."[66] Warren, updating these arguments for a post-Black Lives Matter era, offers the long list of African Americans infamously killed by police or vigilantes in recent years as "a fatal rupture" that "haunt[s] political discourses of progress, betterment, equality, citizenship, and justice."[67]

This controlling pattern, once "unmasked" by ironist critique, spills over, ever backward into the past. The failures of the civil rights movement, therefore, mirror earlier failures of emancipation from slavery. Indeed, Afro-Pessimists regularly refer to emancipation as a "nonevent." "Formally," they argue, "the Black subject was no longer a slave, but the same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained—upheld explicitly

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[64] Litwack, *How Free is Free?* p. 143
[65] Leon Litwack, *How Free Is Free?: The Long Death of Jim Crow.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009) pp. 95-128
[66] Litwack, *How Free Is Free?* P. 109
[67] Warren 217

by the police (former slave catchers) and white supremacy generally—hence preserving the equation that Black equals socially dead."[68] Or, as Frank Wilderson puts it, "1865 is a blip on the screen," when compared to the "continuum of slavery-subjugation that Black people [continue to] exist in."[69]

Again, marshaling a contentious reading of the post-BLM present in this light , the Afro-Pessimist goes so far as to suggest that "blackness itself is criminalized" to such a degree, that "a Black person on the street today faces open vulnerability to violence just as the slave did on the plantation."[70] This approach to historical imagination is, as Saidiya Hartmann writes, a kind of "recombinant narrative," which "weaves present, past, and future…in narrating the time of slavery as our present."[71] This constant folding inward on itself is what leads Wilderson to contend, however exaggeratedly, that "Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative at a meta-level rather than a crisis or aporia within a particular narrative."[72]

Afro-Pessimism and Social Theory

At the level of social theory, Afro-Pessimism contains deep resonances with the early work of Loic Wacquant on the historical-institutional study of the black ghetto and American prisons. There the paradox between the contingency of racial signification and permanent black subordination is "resolved" through an implicitly functionalist approach that takes the chronological succession of four "peculiar institutions" as evidence of an underlying anti-black logic to American civilization: (1) chattel slavery, (2) Jim Crow, (3) the pre-1968 racially segregated, but class differentiated urban ghettoes of the north, (4) and the "symbiosis" between the post-1968 "hyperghettoes" of concentrated poverty and extreme segregation and the expansive prison regime that has grown alongside them. This foundational white supremacy is rooted, similarly to Bell's account, in a widespread social interest in maintaining racialized caste divisions in order to stabilize society enough to continue providing vast privileges and profits to elites, and lesser material and psychic benefits to working-class whites, "model" minorities, and a somewhat-integrated black managerial-supervisory class. These institutions, therefore, serve the

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[68] Introduction 9
[69] Wilderson, Master/Slave 18.
[70] Introduction 9
[71] Sadiya Hartmann, "Venus in Two Acts" 12
[72] https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/

apparently fundamental and self-perpetuating social function of defining, controlling, and confining African Americans.[73]

The inclusion of *defining* is the crucial conceptual move here, as each of these peculiar institutions are identified as the primary "race-making" institutions of American society – veritable signification factories that give rise to, legitimate, and revise the discourses of "race" in order to sustain the control and confine functions of the ineliminable American caste system through broader socioeconomic transformations (e.g., the Industrial Revolution, Fordism, deindustrialization, global corporate capitalism etc.). The meaning of "blackness," therefore, changes over time not only in the "essence" it references – the cowardly, submissive, pacifist slave imagined by paternalistic racism in 18th century America, for example, transforms into the violent, merciless, and predominantly black "superpredators" of late twentieth century criminology.[74]

Afro-Pessimists retain the implicit functionalism of Wacquant, but abandon his American exceptionalism and place more emphasis on psychic and libidinal features of racial domination. For them, the investment in anti-blackness is rooted even more fundamentally in the psychic integrity and libidinal constitution of modern subjects and society, as well as in the metaphysical and ontological presuppositions of modern thought and subjectivity. For Wilderson and others, the absurd, erotic, conflicted, compulsory, and excessive character of arbitrary violence against blacks exposes a commitment to anti-blackness that is libidinal and ontological. The performance of anti-black violence, in this view, serves to produce, regenerate, and stabilize the boundaries of society (by producing the "socially dead," society's other) and the "psychic health" and coherent identity of non-Blacks (again, as their constitutive outside).[75] These psychic and functionalist investments produce and sustain anti-blackness' "labile" dimensions, how it "change[s] and endlessly refashions itself."[76]

It is important to emphasize the significance of stability, or more accurately, *historical equilibrium*, to the social ontology of Afro-Pessimism. Unlike, for example, Marxist social theories that posit that capitalism will collapse under contradictions and crises generated from its own systemic dynamics, Afro-Pessimists treat the anti-black world order they describe as totalizing,

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[73] This argument is laid out at length in Loic Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Prison and Ghetto Meet and Mesh," in *Punishment and Society* (2001)

[74] John Dilulio, My Black Crime Problem and Ours

[75] Wilderson, "Master/Slave," 19, 24

[76] Warren 239

resilient, and so intractable as to be almost certainly permanent.[77] They try to sustain this contention by an appeal to ironic history. For Warren, it is "history" that proves that black emancipation, defined as the disentangling of blackness from metaphysical anti-blackness, is impossible. In his depiction, not only has "every emancipatory strategy that attempted to rescue blackness from anti-blackness inevitably reconstituted and reconfigured the anti-blackness it tried to eliminate," but the persistent repetition of this pattern authorizes a judgment that, even in the future and no matter the intentions behind our political strivings, "anti-blackness will escape every emancipatory attempt to capture it."[78]

Or, for Wilderson: "The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black*…is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line, what Hortense Spillers calls "historical stillness": a flat line that "moves" from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated."[79] The depths of this equilibrium are made apparent by the utter improbability or impossibility of the accounts that Afro-Pessimism entertain – less as practical horizons, than logical ones – of what the overcoming of anti-blackness would entail. Wilderson does, for example, "believe that there is a way out," but describes it as demanding "a kind of violence so magnificent and so comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries," and which would result in "epistemological catastrophe" that would radically overthrow human relations and even the unconscious.[80] In Warren's hands, this horizon moves from a total revolution to the apocalyptic, with a Heideggerian gloss: "Black emancipation, he writes, "is not an aperture or an opening for future possibilities and political reconfigurations…it is impossible to emancipate blacks without literally destroying the world."[81]

Pessimism and Politics: On Apostasy

In the Afro-Pessimist conversation, the appeal to ironic history authorizes, as we can see, a foreclosure of practical faith in emancipatory political action, realistic utopias based around political and ethical ideals, and a devotion to the idea of progress. Commensurate with

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[77] See, for example, David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*
[78] Warren 239
[79] https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/
[80] Wilderson, "Master/Slave" 30
[81] Warren 239

the broader tradition of pessimism, however, they seek to replace these commitments with "a philosophy of personal conduct" and not "a scheme of ideal government structure or principles of justice."[82] This element of Afro-Pessimism is, in my view, best excavated via sustained critical attention to the recurrent figures – the fugitive slave, the suicidal-matricidal slave (e.g., Toni Morrison's *Beloved*), and the apostate – that attain pride of place in Afro-Pessimist writing and the modes of action they perform that these authors render as historically and philosophically significant. In what follows, I focus on the apostate.

In his provocative essay, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," the Afro-Pessimist philosopher Calvin Warren endeavors to unmask what he considers the most insidious implication of what I have described as romantic narratives of African American political history. For Warren, the insistence on racial progress enables and authorizes a broader commitment to "political hope" that is not only illusory, but which ironically compels blacks to endure pointless suffering aimed at civic redemption, forge self-destructive libidinal attachments to "cruel optimism," and corrupt their capacity for hope via its attachment to a political realm which can only produce anti-black domination.[83] Political hope, for Warren, is "a vicious and abusive cycle of struggle" that conscripts black death into its obscurantist categories like "perfection, betterment, struggle, work, and utopian futurity" (243).

Warren calls, instead, for African American philosophy to turn away from hope, and embrace, instead, *nihilism*, which he treats as a "'demythifying' practice" capable of unmaking the ways that hope works to subjugate blacks and undermining its status as an animating ideal of our present (221). Elsewhere he characterizes the necessary form of black nihilism as a kind of "political apostasy," which he describes as "the act of abandoning or renouncing a situation of unethicality and immorality – in this sense, the Political itself," while refusing "to participate in the ruse of replacing one idol [anti-blackness] with another" (233). The point is not to "change political structures or offer a political program" – indeed such investments would be worse than "pointless" – but instead achieve a kind of spiritual retrieval. Hope must be recaptured from the grips of "the Political," and instead enacted within a "*spiritual* practice of denouncing metaphysical violence, black suffering, and the idol of anti-blackness" (244) [emphasis added].

Warren is surely correct to draw attention to the enduring persistence of anti-black racial ideology and various mutations of racial domination in American history. A healthy

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[82] Deinstag 7
[83] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

suspicion toward purportedly emancipatory black politics is surely warranted, especially in light of criticisms concerning forms of marginalization *among* blacks from black radical traditions of political theory and historiography. Further, Warren is to be applauded for insisting that to reduce nihilism to mere pathology, unworthy of philosophical explication, is to miss important judgments worth explicating.[84] Above all, Warren is also right to criticize the ways that romantic narratives can minimize the ethical import of injustice by reifying past wrongs into an evaluative standard, intuiting the inevitability of moral progress, or insulating their guiding ideals from critique by invoking a perpetually receding "not-yet" as the appropriate horizon of judgment. Indeed, *The Tragic Vision of the Civil Rights Movement* shares with Afro-Pessimism a refusal of those forms of historical narration that conscript death and suffering into a teleological narrative and recast it as *sacrifice* in ways that the bearers of those lives could not and would not endorse.

In the most profound passage of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, he echoes this sentiment, writing to his son:

> "You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history…it is wrong to claim our present circumstance – no matter how improved – as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never compensate for this." (70)

Despite these worthwhile aims, however, Warren's project reveals much that is politically retrograde, ethically objectionable and epistemically incoherent in Afro-Pessimist thought, all helpfully disclosed by the focus on narrative genre. Four elements, in particular, demand attention: (1) the problem of race and reference, (2) a self-undermining and ontologically essentialist conception of "politics," (3) an implicit metaphysical commitment to purity and permanence, and (4) his narrative mystification.

Race and Reference

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[84] Although Warren seems to reduce this broad terrain of "pathology" to nihilism, this need not follow. There is a long tradition of black social thought, from Du Bois and King, to Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis that suggests more robustly normative and even emancipatory content to such practices as refusal to work, drug abuse, crime, fraud, etc.

One dilemma for Warren and other Afro-Pessimists is that in their ironic language, they slip between referents for blackness that may not, upon considered reflection, be available to them. Recall that, as Wilderson puts the point, "Afropessimism is premised on an iconoclastic claim: that Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness," and cannot be "disimbricated from slavery" as a position within social ontology.[85] What it means to be a slave, in this sense, is to stand in relation to human beings in two ways: (1) as subject to forms of violence without limit or libidinal excess, or which exceeds any rational explanation (e.g., economic) and (2) as an implement to be *used* without regard to one's own interests or benefit, and figured as outside of realm of mutual human recognition.[86]

But how to substantiate the link between "Blackness" and "Slaveness"? There is a tension between how Afro-pessimists run together the view that Blackness has *no* positive or clustered content and instead marks *only* a position of vulnerability to extreme violence, subjection to the status of equipment, or a locus of psychic projections of fear and abjection. If African descent, group identification, cultural traditions, or even being vulnerable to anti-blackness (rather than the more radical ontology of "slaveness") are not constitutive of blackness, but *Slaveness* is, we are led to the ironic query: who among "the blacks" is *black*? For Warren to treat a judgment like "black suffering is getting worse" as valid, there needs to be some more robust sense of whom the term is meant to identify and a tracking of that continuity over time for cross-temporal comparison and evaluation.[87]

To put the point more squarely in the idioms of analytical philosophy, the argument that the category of blackness was *causally* constructed by an anti-black practice of slavery does not entail that we are justified, analytically or normatively, in arguing that blackness is, as a matter of metaphysics, *constitutively* constructed by this continuum of practices. For one, modern slavery has not been abolished. If blackness is slaveness, are South Asian victims of sex trafficking in the Arab world, or forced laborers in East Asian sweatshops *"blacker" than "blacks"*? In other words, jarring divergence in the lives of middle-class and wealthy blacks in the United States versus, say, lower-caste groups suffering from debt bondage in India, or

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[85] Afropessimism 225
[86] Afropessimism 216
[87] For a similar critique of attempts to appeal to antecedent histories to ground post-essentialist conceptions of blackness, see Appiah, *Color Conscious* and Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, chapter 2

Uighurs herded into containment in China, should raise the question, within Afro-pessimist metaphysics, of whether any putatively non-Blacks have become "Black" via their proximity to "Slaveness"? If not all slaveness is blackness, but all blackness is slaveness, the hidden necessary condition remains to be clarified, as too does an explanation of why the appeal to "slaveness" (a category that invokes Slavic ancestry at its origins) does not run afoul of the movement's various broadsides against the legitimacy of analogy.

Wilderson has attempted to answer such questions, but the results have been confused and self-contradictory, eliding the complexities of class, capital, and condition.[88] On one hand, Wilderson insists that all blacks are "slaves" (in a relation of social death, subjection, and generalized dishonor) regardless of their various socioeconomic standings or self-conception. He even proclaims himself, in an interview and memoir, the "slave" of his white wife.[89] On this view, blackness is slaveness, but not all slaveness is blackness.

Elsewhere, however, he seems to contend that when African Americans attain forms of social standing or mobility, they become *"whiter"* (perhaps achieving, individually, an intermediate zone akin to what he calls "colored immigrants").[90] These inconsistencies cry out for explanation, especially when we have no better evidence of violence, libidinal excess, and usurpation than empirically verifiable patterns of treatment. Retreat to subjective feelings of alienation, raising notoriously impossible standards of comparative evaluation, are not helpful. One suspects here that, in perhaps the most sobering irony of all, Afro-pessimism represents Black political thought's matriculation into that long tradition of Western political thought which avails itself of loose-fitting metaphors of slavery to pursue the aims of bourgeois dissent.

Either way, these questions of race and reference raise especially difficult ethical quandaries because Afro-Pessimists tend to focus so extensively on forms of violence that, in fact, happen to many sorts of persons (e.g., police brutality, rape, enslavement, lynching, archival erasure, genocide), but try to make distinctions between violence that are, in Wilderson's words, *gratuitous* and happens to blacks rather than *contingent* and *utilitarian* and happens to non-blacks.[91] Yet, how are we to make these determinations? We cannot appeal to

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[88] For more on a class-conscious critique of Afro Pesssimism see Michael Dawson, temporalities of racial capitalism

[89] Frank B. Wilderson, III Interviewed by C.S. Soong, "BLACKS AND THE MASTER/ SLAVE RELATION" in *Afro Pessimism Reader*, 28-29 << https://rackedanddispatched.noblogs.org/files/2017/01/Afro-pessimism2_imposed.pdf >>

[90] Ibid 21

[91] Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx" 229

explicit justifications of violence against blacks, because even on Wilderson's view, these are often to be disingenuous, dissembled, and in bad faith.

Settler colonial violence against Native Americans, Wilderson tells us, "recognized" and "incorporated" "Native American sovereignty" in the contents of its consciousness, even as such sovereignty was practically violated. Police violence against blacks, however, is a denial of *humanity* as such – there is no reciprocity, only living and dead.[92] This contrast, however, borders on the absurd. Both patterns involve extensive and fatal practices of grotesque violence, often disingenuously invoke legal procedures, and show severe contempt and a lack of appropriate responsibility for the form of life inhabited by the victim. Indeed, settler colonialism, where it does not even deal in the ritual of treaty or contract, may be even more radically evil than police brutality. The latter, for what it's worth, at least avails itself of the juridical categories of criminality, which might *plausibly* might be said to have a reciprocal dimension that recognizes, however contradictorily or confusedly, familiar categories of humanism: responsibility, agency, and intention.[93]

Indeed, arguably the most striking feature of law, even under slavery, is the *instability* of any attempt to erect a permanent binary between Blackness and Humanity. At the same time the slave is supposed to be chattel or livestock or a tool and implement, the law cannot help but, in certain domains, ascribe responsibility and intention and reason and other capacities that, at least since the Enlightenment decisively broke with the medieval era of "beast trials" for pigs and cows, modern epistemes tend to treat as constitutively human.

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that anti-blackness in Afro-Pessimism functions here as a non-falsifiable "just so" claim rooted in a totalizing conception of "antiblackness." Here, any "violence" that befalls people of African descent counts on the ledger of gratuity, contradicting the semiotically sensitive injunction to seek "blackness" at the site of abjection and remain receptive to so-called "social death" revealing itself in unexpected domains. The persistent slippage between the self-professed method of Afro-pessimism and the judgments it actually arrives at, raise a deeper worry that its ontological claims are subordinate to the political answer positions its proponents feel compelled to produce.

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[92] Wilderson, Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption << https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/ >>

[93] Although they claim fidelity to Sadiya Hartmann, it seems to me that they strongly differ on this point. Also, see Walter Johnson on dehumanization and its flaws as an analytic for slavery.

David Scott warns that descriptions of the social world or of the "problem-space" of politics, can become *overdetermined* by congealed expectations that we must stake out and repeat certain kinds of familiar political answer-positions. In these cases, given the narratively underdetermined nature of historical facts, we actually end up emplotting the type of story we need to justify our answer. For Scott, the paradigmatic case is the postcolonial "longing for total revolution," which surreptitiously encourages a radically romantic emplotment of Caribbean history where the domination enacted by colonialism is so totalizing, that only "total" revolution can render history complete and redeemed. Consequently, the justification of, or compulsive repetition of, certain types of political answers or attachment to the figures that exemplify these modes, have an elective affinity with how we construct historical narratives. For Wilderson certainly, and Warren perhaps, their current longing for "total refusal" is rooted the defeat of an excessively *romantic* conception of black liberation which has now been disappointed, and lived as the ruins of the present. The consequence is that they are stunningly susceptible to empirically untethered accounts of black suffering and black political action that are blind (or dissembling) not only to basic empirical questions about black life and politics, but also to how class stratifies many of the claims about suffering, deprivation, or power he ascribes to the group *writ large*.

Politics

This is perhaps clearest in their accounts of democracy, and their treatment of the vote as its constitutive feature. Warren presumptively declares voting as "an ineffective practice in gaining tangible 'objects' for achieving redress, equality, and political subjectivity." Given that he thinks these objects cannot be obtained, black folks' attachment to democratic politics is judged irrational on its own terms. Indeed, Warren characterizes black voting as a kind of displaced ritual of fidelity to the dead, a consecrating ritual for a progressive conception of history. Voting is meaningful largely as a "way to contend with a painful (and shame-full) history of exclusion and disenfranchisement" and as a mode of historical consciousness meant to fulfill debts to the sacrifices of ancestors for the progress of the present (220).

The significance of metaphors for democratic theory is not an "aesthetic" question in the narrow sense that can be shunted off as a stylistic gesture. As Danielle Allen (2004) has compellingly argued, metaphors are a fundamental feature of politics and political thinking. They embody our habits of conceptualizing our relations with others, guide our judgments and

aspirations, and—when subjected to innovation and creativity—can extend our capacities for thought onto new and unprecedented terrains, for better or for worse.

Warren's charge of irrationality hews closely to a conception of political participation rooted in and authorized by self-interest, narrowly conceived. This may be glimpsed, in part, via the metaphors both authors deploy. For Warren, voting is akin to monetary expenditure. "Traditionally," Warren says, again without engagement with the any of the African American theorists of democracy, "political participation is motivated by self-interested expectancy; this political calculus assumes that political participation, particularly voting, is an investment with an assurance of a return or political dividend" (219). The goal, therefore, is to exchange votes for material returns and political dividends. Unreliability – the failed return on investment, to use the language of investment capital – in this process renders black voting *irrational.*

Warren offers, ostensibly, a critique of *politics*, but what is the conception of politics that he invokes for our disavowal? Reflecting his Heideggerian influences, Warren practices what Seyla Benhabib has called elsewhere a kind of "phenomenological essentialism," which presumes that "each type of human activity has a proper 'place' in which it can be carried out. In her critique of Hannah Arendt, Benhabib argues that "phenomenological essentialism frequently leads her to conflate conceptual distinctions with social processes, ontological analyses with institutional and historical descriptions."[94] For example, Warren posits an ontological opposition between "the spiritual" and "the Political," and, further, suggests – in strikingly quantified and monetary language – that hope is a "spiritual currency" that we "are given as inheritance to invest in various aspects of existence." The problem is that "the political" has colonized (akin to Hannah Arendt's "blob" of the social) the spiritual currency of hope, compelling and conscripting blacks to investment under the idea that "politics is the natural habitat of hope itself."

It would surely count toward the persuasiveness of Warren's argument if he took seriously contravening empirical accounts that purport to show the vital significance of voting for resource distribution to black communities, or comprehensive studies of American politics which show that it is the policy preferences of the *rich* (rather than simply the white) that are most rewarded.[95] Our suspicion should be heightened further by the fact that Warren cites no

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[94] Benhabib, Reluctant Modernism 123-124
[95] Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, Chapter 6; Jeffrey Winters, *Oligarchy*; Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*

major African American intellectuals, because it is not clear that any major black figure of note holds such a monist position about the value of politics as the singular, discrete, determinate hope in the struggle against anti-blackness. Indeed, one of the single most distinguishing things about African American political thought as a *genre* of modern political thought is the ecumenical stance its participants tend to take toward cultural production, religious worship, virtue or perfectionist ethics, and other forms of human endeavor in order to experiment with, and enlarge conceptions of "politics" beyond the enactment of solidarity, the founding of institutional orders, and the contestation of power.[96] Even the single most influential work of political theory in the African American tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, is an enactment of, and defense of, hope in cultural creativity, political struggle, affective intervention, and a perfectionist ethics (for ourselves and others) all as constitutive elements of a democratic politics of redemptive refounding. This Du Boisian mélange is best exemplified in his immediate turn from the claim that "there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes," to a reflection on black music and folklore as ethical resources of democratic renewal.

More importantly, however, it is important to note that this consumerist standard of evaluation for political participation is itself an *artifact* of nihilism, not its *justification.* This conception of politics, while appealing to the thinnest and most exchange-oriented defenders of democracy, is actually corrosive of many of the ideals that make democracy possible: the ethos of sacrifice, the cultivation and protection of common goods and public things, and the kind of political friendship that involves learning from, being changed by, and taking pleasure and pride in the flourishing of those with whom we share a form of life.[97] A closer reading of democratic theory from within the civil rights movement illuminates this point.

The legendary civil rights organizer Ella Baker, for example, departs dramatically from this market model of democratic participation, whose failure would only underscore her judgment that *radical democratic praxis* is the most important weapon against the hopelessness, self-doubt, and despair engendered by domination. Baker championed a "developmental style of politics" where committed activists and volunteers would help cultivate among historically disempowered citizens a sense that they have the *right* to define the needs and problems that

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[96] On this point, see Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance*; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*; Paul Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*; Nick Bromell, *The Time is Always Now*; Eddie Glaude, ed., *It's Nation Time!*
[97] See, for example, Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*

structure politics, the *capacity* to shape their own destiny, the *moral authority* to hold representatives and institutions accountable, and the *dignity* to declare their equal moral worth.[98] The right to vote was considered paramount, but as *part* of these broader ethical aims. This work inspired the community organizing wing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that Baker helped found, as they attempted to build a militant civic movement to uproot the byzantine and brutal obstacles to black voting in the South.

SNCC activists envisioned subjecting vast dimensions of civil society to a demand for the participatory parity of ordinary, everyday people, operating without subjection to vanguards, elites, charismatic leaders, or experts.[99] This form of grassroots democracy, on Baker's account, would perform the work of recognition-respect, showing genuine acknowledgment and enthusiasm for the moral agency, equal standing, and civic potential of all citizens.[100] It would also further the work of *empowerment*, allowing ordinary people to undermine relations of domination, resist evolving forms of oppression, and contest the unjust usurpation of their prerogatives over important domains of human life, including politics itself.[101]

This democratic ideal, Baker provocatively argued, was incompatible with forms of charismatic, messianic, or autocratic political leadership even *within* civil rights organizations ostensibly organized to deepen democracy. These features of movement politics, she claimed, disavowed valuable local knowledge and culture, arbitrarily marginalized important voices (especially women and working-class or poor blacks), distorted deliberation and corroded citizens' capacities for taking initiative and articulating their needs.[102] "Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man," Baker argued, "you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program."[103] Tightly tied to practice, this developmental, community organizing vision relied heavily on open-ended deliberations among SNCC members, informal education initiatives

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[98] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* p. 68. Also see Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

[99] On "participatory parity," see Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), chapter 4.

[100] On the idea of recognition-respect, see Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), esp. 122-133.

[101] Patchen Markell, "The. Insufficiency of Non-Domination," *Political Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (February 2008), pp. 9–36

[102] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, p. 191; Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, p. 7

[103] Ella J. Baker, quoted in Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, p. 188

(e.g., workshops, "Freedom Schools," etc.), and the development of alternative political practices and rituals like independent elections and parties (e.g., the Freedom Ballot).

Much of the late twentieth century enthusiasm for "participatory democracy" in political theory and left politics can be traced back to these efforts.[104] A number of SNCC activists, for example, went on to be prominent within the "New Left" and its principal organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Tom Hayden, for example, after joining the Freedom Rides and reporting on SNCC projects in McComb, Mississippi and Albany, Georgia, drew in large part on his interpretations of SNCC culture to produce the initial draft of SDS's Port Huron Statement, arguably the most influential statement of "participatory democracy" as an ideal.[105] Distilling, in part, their sense of how SNCC's organizing style cultivated a passion for democracy and enhanced the capabilities for negotiation, argument, analysis among the most dispossessed, Hayden and SDS argued for an entire society where problems are generalized, clarified, and deliberated on, political decisions are made by "public groupings," such participation builds communal solidarity and public freedom, alongside individual fulfillment and independence.[106] Warren's short-term, market model of democratic consumerism does not take seriously either the content or time-horizon which informs this Bakerist conception of democracy, or the philosophical significance of its attempt to build intergenerational communities of memory and struggle.

It also misreads the moral import of African American defenses of formal political participation and the democratic practice of ordinary life, defended by Baker and others. These theorists view formal political participation as striving to *model* a practice of freedom as non-domination, nurturing its sustained existence in the world of ideas and its link to a conception of political rights and participation as expressive of dignity and dignified conduct.[107] Perhaps most at odds with the Afro-Pessimist interpretation, forms of democratic practice like Bakerism are

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[104] The so-called "third generation" of Critical Theory emerged out of the New Left, and has been deeply engaged with social movements around racial justice and radical democracy more broadly. See, for example, Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[105] Tom Hayden, ed., *Inspiring Participatory Democracy: Student Movements from Port Huron to Today* (New York: Routledge, 2015). See also, Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, pp. 127-128

[106] "The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society," in Hayden, ed., *Inspiring Participatory Democracy*, pp. 127-184.

[107] On voting as an attempt to achieve non-domination, see Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*; on voting as expressive of dignity, see Derrick Darby "A Vindication of Voting Rights," *To Shape a New World*; on voting to avoid complicity with injustice, see MLK, statement on Barry Goldwater, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*, ed., Clayborne Carson (Time Warner, 1998), 247.

also understood as seeking to avoid total *complicity* with injustice.[108] On this view, black voting is explained less by a theory of "indebted consciousness" to past generation's sacrifices, than a democratic tradition based on the *self-respecting* commitment that racial domination should not reproduce or extend itself with our complicity. Similarly, the democratic self-reflexivity at the heart of Baker's suspicion of hierarchy, patriarchy, and charisma, insists that the norms that should characterize organizing and movement-building are aimed at cultivating a stance of personal political integrity as well, rooting out habits, forms of affect, and ideological dispositions that engender complicity with forms of structural and interpersonal injustice.[109]

Metaphysics and the Problem of Judgment

These counter-ideals of democracy, which reject the simple consumerist model, also help underscore a more profound anxiety about *plurality* that haunts Afro-Pessimist discourse. This problem sits at the heart of Warren's distinctions between the spiritual and the political, and Wilderson's thematizaton of redemption, grounding the nihilism of both accounts and providing, unannounced, the foundations of their professed apostasy and nihilism.

Warren, for instance, criticizes political hope on the grounds that it promises to lead one "beyond extant structures of violence and destruction," to a foundation where love, hope, and meaning are built upon grounds of selfhood and society that are *not* "subject to shift, transform[ation], and decay" (222). For Wilderson, politics is defined "as a very rational endeavor" with prediction and modeling at its heart. Indeed, one of his charges against Marxism is that it is *incapable* of "predict[ing] the structural violence of slavery in its performative manifestations" (223). But to hold spiritual and societal strivings to a standard of purity and permanence that is *immune* to crisis and conflict, or change and unpredictability is to imagine a standard beyond *any* possible world. This impossibility holds, not just for blacks, but for all human beings.

This is especially true, given that our lives unfold in a state of being-with-others who have the capacity for action.[110] We inhabit a world shaped by the actions and reactions of others, and which precedes us and will, in all likelihood. It is not taken seriously by the

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[108] For fuller account of complicity argument see Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name*
[109] Patricia S. Parker, *Ella Baker's Catalytic Leadership*, 40
[110] Arendt, Human Condition

conceptions of politics advanced within Afro-Pessimism, but the philosophy of nonviolence articulated by movement intellectuals like King, Bayard Rustin, and James Lawson incorporated into their politics this ontological claim, that as King put it, we are caught up in "an inescapable network of mutuality…a single garment of destiny." While extended and exacerbated by the interpenetrating structures of global capitalism, imperial projection, mass media, and the climate dynamics of the Anthropocene, this mutuality, or plurality in Arendt's term, is a recalcitrant feature of the human condition.

This existential fact excites understandable resentment, fear, anxiety – even horror (to use Warren's favored affect). The temptation to envision a realm where this is not the case, to picture a "pure" self-sufficiency that transcends not just the world-as-is, but the human condition as such, is a crucial source of Afro-pessimist nihilism. It even appears in Wilderson's attempts to categorically distinguish antiblackness from other identities or oppressions on the basis of workers and (non-Black) colonized peoples as having a "prehistory" to their oppression, that he treats as the site of their distinctive "plenitude…before the Enclosures…*before the settler*."[111] The despair that pervades Wilderson's broadsdes against narrative and redemption stems from his fixation on, and disillusionment with, a specific kind of romantic narrative sequence that moves from a time of purity and plenitude to the fall of domination to restorative redemption.

These ideals loom quietly behind the politics of refusal and nihilism proffered by the pessimists, and structure a whole "picture" of the world – in the Wittgensteinian sense – that persistently seems to support judgments of certainty that African American history is profane, ironic, and without meaning. There is an implicit "exasperation" with the unpredictability, irreversibility, and tragedy of political action, and Warren's talk of apostasy and withdrawal reflect what Arendt called the desire to seek "shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end."[112] This picture, which ennobles sovereign agency, the philosophy of the will, and an apolitical epistemology, may simply – like the view from nowhere, or the fantasy of total consensus – be a picture which holds the pessimist captive, leading him to bludgeon the hard-won victories of the world as it is, with the image of a world that belongs more to God than the kind of beings we are.

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[111] Wilderson, Afropessimism 217
[112] Arendt, *The Human Condition* p. 220

The consequence of this stance is an unearned and unwarranted *confidence* in Afro-pessimism's ability to project a permanent future of anti-blackness. This epistemic arrogance is "sustained," as Theodor Adorno wrote of such doctrines, "by the false inference that because there has been no progress up until now, there will never be any."[113] While Warren excoriates the romantics for shielding themselves from critique by appealing to an unknown and unknowable future, his futural gestures toward the "impossibility" of alternative political arrangements are similarly insulated in a posture devoid of epistemic humility. This is especially bewildering given that, for Warren, black abjection is not ordained by God, written into cosmology or biology, forged in a messianic transformation, or even the *necessary* outcome of human history. The anti-black order, insofar as one can discern from his account, is the artifact of a complex, interdependent web of decisions, ideas, practices, desires, and other myriad strivings and sayings of human beings that coalesced to create the African slave trade, imperialism, and anti-black racial ideology. If this web of actions can be said to have created, the unforeseen consequence, of an anti-black world, it is unclear how, without escaping these human dynamics into the realm of metaphysics, the Afro-Pessimist can presume, *a priori*, to predict the whole range of possible outcomes of interpenetrating complex systems of scientific research, global governance, economic markets, cultural production, climate change, and more. Indeed, given that we are on the cusp of absorbing innovations like artificial intelligence, space travel, gene editing, quantum computing, cloning, and advanced robotics – it seems especially overconfident to hang political judgment on such precarious predictions.

This stance toward the future is self-undermining in another way. To substantiate the claim that *all* political struggles to overcome or even substantively ameliorate the perpetually restructuring condition of antiblackness will be defeated, requires that people continue to engage and experiment with political action to try to do so. Yet, the Afro-Pessimist, in their recommendation that they do not, would foreclose a range of various strategies, ideals, and possibilities untested against changing social facts. Indeed, the discontent that motivates Afro-Pessimism itself emerges from the very longing for total revolution via which black movements produced in the course of struggle and sustained, self-consciously, as a historical inheritance with an eye toward sustained, intergenerational resistance of an unspecified character.

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[113] Adorno, "Progress," 153

The pessimist, in both heaping scorn upon past traditions *and* counseling withdrawal from the practice of politics, would, if "successful," dissolve the possibility for its own reproduction. The pain of oppression, as Afro-pessimists well know by the fact the broader black tradition of letters disagree with them, is not enough to lead one to their view. Their interpretative claims, defeated historical struggles, and even self-articulation would need to be sustained by something other than anti-blackness itself. If the rejoinder is that these past forms of resistance can never die, and are exemplary events inscribed into the memory of peoples, galvanizing them always toward something other than abjection, then this appears to further doubt on their theses that treat "social death" as the *sine qua non* of black life.

Adorno rightly charges the advocates of such totalizing pessimism with "self-righteous profundity," and it is impossible to avoid the sense in which the most extreme blend of ironic history and pessimistic prophecy is extraordinarily flattering to the supposed oracular and cognitive gifts and moral purity of its proselytizers. Indeed, given the underwhelming grounds for Afro-Pessimists' confident claims about all future worlds, it strikes me that Warren's defense of apostasy turns more on a commitment to a metaphysics of purity and permanence than any "facts" about history; indeed, the "facts" of history are organized and narrated (ironically) in light of these commitments. It is yet another iteration of the view which Nietzsche criticized long ago, that because "our highest values cannot be realized in this world, and…there is no other world in which they can," we should live in nihilistic despair.[114]

Like Schopenhauer's ascetic, Warren treats (black) suffering as the crucial evil of existence, and seeing no way to eliminate suffering altogether or to change the world, suggests withdrawing altogether to minimize the worldly hopes, strivings, and desires that engender suffering instead. Indeed, like Schopenhauer, Warren's view must lead him to the conclusion that it would be preferable if the world simply did not exist. This view, embedded in his narrative forms, entails that the past is too catastrophic to be redeemed, the present an enduring catastrophe, and the future already foreclosed as anything other than the repetition of this traumatic present-past. When tied to, or ostensibly justified by, appeal to historical narrative, despair can seem like the only reasonable assessment of the historical "facts" at hand *and* the only rational stance toward the future.

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[114] Reginster, *Overcoming Nihilism* 8

Beyond Pessimism

Part of why I emphasize the narrative modes of historiography is to unsettle the conceit that the relationship between historical reflection, contemporary judgment, and imagined future flows naturally and inevitably in that order. In reality, these hang together far more messily: Warren's remarks on the civil rights movement are as much about Michael Brown as they are about Martin Luther King. Where writers, like Wilderson, tell us that they have divined a history "beyond the grasp of narration," and moved "from the Symbolic to the Real," we should be suspicious of what that foreclosure means for our political practice, imagination, and judgment. As Joshua Deinstag writes, "the independent act of narration is the first, necessary step in opposing those who would control our future by controlling our understanding of the past…an inability to narrate…is an impediment that must be overcome on the path to freedom" (197).

The question which philosophical reflection on African American history and the interrogation of the role that such historical imaginings play in political philosophy must pursue if it is to enhance political freedom rather than retreat into nihilism, are – as one might expect – Nietzschean questions: can (black) suffering be revalued without falling into romanticism? Can we devalue the presuppositions of purity that give ironist history and pessimism its moral claims? What generic forms can sustain historical imaginings requisite to these tasks? Can we find ways to maturely affirm (black) life and (anti-racist) political action, in a contingent world without the promise of impending reconciliation or unyielding abjection? And, as Nietzsche asked of the "ascetic priests" and Schopenhauer, why are people attracted to the lure of pessimism?

These are questions I was pursue in the next chapter, but the last is worth suggesting an answer to here. One of the most seductive things about Afro-Pessimism, is that in its inflation of "antiblackness" to the level of metaphysical totality and, in Warren's terms, "ontological terror," it transfigures nearly everything black people do under such conditions into a kind of *heroism.* Jesse McCarthy, in his brilliant critique of *Afropessimism* asks the question of why Wilderson reaches for hyperbole in descriptions of banal racial incidents in his National Book Award winning memoir. For instance, as McCarthy writes of Wilderson's anecdote about a friend's mother asking him how it felt to be Black:

"Wilderson says that this was a learning moment for his mother about the lengths whites might go to injure a Black person, in this instance by psychologically attacking their children. "She knew now how it must feel to be killed by a guided missile," Wilderson comments. I don't doubt the psychological violence of the incident in question, but that doesn't make moving into Kenwood *like* having a Hellfire missile hit you in the Gaza Strip."

On my view, the allure of hyperbole here, is that it *symbolically* raises the stakes of every crevice of bourgeois social life to an occasion for heroism, while obscuring its practical banality and mundanity.

The structure of feeling that Afro-pessimism taps into goes far beyond the general despair of left melancholia, and reflects the intellectual canonization and practical foreclosure of a set of collective scripts regarding heroism, achievement, and meaning. It is not often enough admitted, but one of the most deep-seated cultural legacies of the strange career of Jim Crow was that any number of otherwise mundane things a black person might do – becoming the local postmaster, or buying a home in a suburban neighborhood – was consecrated as a heroic achievement by communal ritual (especially in the black press).

Such practices invited scorn on occasion. E. Franklin Frazier, in *Black Bourgeoisie* derided it as part of "a world of make-believe," and Malcolm X, discussing professional blacks he saw growing up in Boston, wrote:

"I'd guess that eight out often of the Hill Negroes of Roxbury, despite the impressive-sounding job titles they affected, actually worked as menials and servants. "He's in banking," or "He's in securities." It sounded as though they were discussing a Rockefeller or a Mellon-and not some gray-headed; dignity-posturing bank janitor, or bond-house messenger…It has never ceased to amaze me how so many Negroes, then and now, could stand the indignity of that kind of self-delusion."

The end of Jim Crow dealt a crippling blow to this cultural tendency, but the election of Obama killed it for the forseeable future. The first black president, an idea which absorbed the most sustained and widespread burst of African American political energies in American history, represented, in a sense, the last first black that mattered. Afterward, especially as the Obama administration's limits led to profound disillusionment with romantic narratives of African American history, the prevailing stance toward "first black" honorifics shifted from pride to disdain, disgust, and embarrassment at their *belated* character – it should have

happened already.[115]The draining of this shallow end "heroism," combined with the far more spectacular collapse of late 20th century black freedom struggles, converged to place their inherited scripts of heroism into crisis.

For those who yearn for a life of bourgeois endurance to be imbued with the drama of a heroic black past, the Afro-pessimist worldview offers a surprisingly amenable blend of solipsism, pathos, and fatalism. Paving the way for a levelling down of heroism through its ironic critique of all-preceding history, it then transfigures the heroic into something closer to make-believe than "worldmaking."[116]

This is especially intoxicating, one imagines, for black intellectuals who, at least since W.E.B. Du Bois, have inherited a sense of the vocation of black intellectualism as *heroic*, with a conception of African American politics as a practice of group leadership and rule by those who share an identity with the folk.[117] The central story of black politics and identity in the post-Jim Crow era has been the sense of fragmentation around divisions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (e.g., with unprecedented waves of black immigrants), not to mention reasonable political disagreements about "where do we go from here." This fracturing of even the reliable mythos of a black collective subject to be represented, spoken for, interpreted has occasioned much serious reflection across African American Studies, but it would be surprising if it did not provoke anxiety and bad faith evasion as well.

What Afro-pessimism offers, then, is a way of beginning from this sense of crisis about black representation, but instead of abandoning the purported task to speak on behalf of Blacks to the wider world, it plunges beneath the *prima facie* divisions of black life to rediscover unity via "ontology." In doing so, it restores to its theorists the lost treasure of the past: interpretive authority over every permutation of black life. This is what makes sense of Wilderson's striking talk of Afro-pessimism as having a "mandate" to speak on behalf of "black people at their best," and the striking vignette at the opening of Warren's *Ontological Terror*, where he coldly disparages an older black woman in a panel audience for chastening his bleak nihilism. It was, he says, his "*nihilistic responsibility*" to deliver to her and the audience the terrible truth that there is "no solution to the problem of antiblackness" and that hope only produces more "pain and disappointment" (3). But it is not nihilism that commits Warren to inform his fellow Blacks of

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[115] Thankful to Durba Mitra for this point.
[116] Getachew
[117] RGW, Shadow, 14

their Slaveness – "nihilistic responsibility" appears an unbridgeable contradiction -- it is his attachment to the traditional task of (heroic) black intellectualism. After all, the true nihilist would be as indifferent to the ruminations of the "herd" as they are to the continued persistence of the world.

In the end, the price of this reforging of the unified mass of Blacks is that eschatology replaces politics. Yet, as Reinhart Koselleck warned, "the moment the figures of the apocalypse are applied to concrete events or instances, the eschatology has disintegrative effects. The End of the World is only an integrating factor so long as its politico-historical meaning remains indeterminate" (Koselleck, *Futures Past* 13). The rediscovery of black intellectual authority is, in other words, deeply precarious, and the underlying reality of social divisions strain not only at the seams of the rhetoric of Slaveness and Blackness, but at the traditional aura of the vocation itself.

From Irony to Tragedy

If Du Bois, perhaps, leads us somewhat astray in our conception of vocation of black intellectuals, he proves more promising as a guide to taking Afro-pessimism seriously without succumbing to its confusions. In *Souls'* "Of the Passing of the First Born," Du Bois channel's Schopenhauer's legendary, world-negatiing challenge that no person in full grasp of the depth of human suffering, would rationally choose to reproduce, given the sentence to which they would condemn their offspring. Du Bois invests this abstraction with the concrete horror of his own child, Burghardt's, death, as well as the terror that any black child he would bring into the world would have to be raised in a racist society, one organized to cruelly crush her aspirations, degrade her self-respect, and steal her life, over the arbitrary myth of "race."[118]

Riding home from the funeral, Du Bois narrates his apprehension of pessimism:

> "There sat an awful gladness in my heart… No bitter meanness now shall sicken
> his baby heart till it die a living death, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood.
> Fool that I was to think or wish that this little soul should grow choked and

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[118] There are few descriptions of the degradations of childhood in a racist society more succinctly powerful than the one that begins Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in his *Why We Can't Wait* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), pp. 85-110.

deformed within the Veil! …Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you."[119]

The language and imagery of the "nameless void," is crucial here. In deploying a rendering of death as nothingness so absolute that it negates even the venture of anticipatory description, Du Bois underscores the terrible truth of life on the underside of the "Negro problem" by refusing to seek refuge in the consolation and comfort of heaven. In *Darkwater* (1920) Du Bois lifts the veil to reveal that this Schopenhauerian challenge is one that routinely haunts African Americans, writing that "the mothers and fathers and the men and women of my race must often pause and ask…Ought children be born to us? Have we any right to make human souls face what we face today?"[120] How blacks answer such a question is freighted with extraordinary consequence for Du Bois, because, it is "in the treatment of the child [that] the world foreshadows its own future and faith." It is the child, he writes, that represents "that vast immortality and the wide sweep of infinite possibility" that underwrites hope in justice and the good.[121]

Such assertions resonate with Hannah Arendt's treatment of "the fact of natality." Taking birth as both metaphor and world-disclosing phenomenon, Arendt argues not only that "with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world," but that this underwrites and corresponds with the human capacity for action – the ability to introduce something "unexpected" and "improbable" into the world.[122] Natality, "the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born," continuously introduces not only the possibility of "interrupting" forms of life as they presently exist, but also the possibility of trying to sustain them through storytelling and solidarity as well.[123] Arendt contrasts this emphasis on contingency, possibility, and a shared world beyond any individual life with the necessity, regularity, and fatality of "natural processes."[124]

Given that natality presupposes that we are born into a world alongside others that precede us, and that we live alongside others who will, in all likelihood, survive us, natality is perhaps best understood as a way of speaking intelligibly about a kind of human freedom,

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[119] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of black folk; essays and sketches* (Chicago,: A. C. McClurg & co., 1903), 213.

[120] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater : voices from within the veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 202.

[121] Ibid

[122] Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177-78.

[123] Ibid 176-177

[124] Arendt, *The human condition*, 246.

namely the freedom to cooperatively and collaboratively make judgments about what forms of life we want to disavow or preserve – the latter being the shared ground of Arendt and Du Bois' invocations of "immortality."[125] Natality, Arendt sweepingly proclaims, is "the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin." It is natality that "can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope," because it allows for the unmaking of ignoble worlds, the forging of new bonds of solidarity in pursuit of the good, and the discovery of new forms of meaning by which to make sense of our fate together – none of which can be fully anticipated or determined.[126]

For Du Bois, the most pressing hope was that the capacities to create something new would be realized in the transfiguration or revaluation of the ignoble inheritance of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. In grasping the "shameful" evil of white racial domination, and the "glory" and "lofty ideal" embodied in the intergenerational struggles against it, he argues that our children's children may be furnished with a grand "life motive" -- "a power and impulse toward good," put to service in the "great battle of human right against poverty, disease, and color prejudice."[127] This indeterminate hope, as Richard Rorty might put it, involves "the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past."[128]

That it is only *possible* and not *guaranteed*, however, is important – natality and tragedy go together in tandem. As Cornel West puts the point, "the decline and decay in American life *appears*, at the moment, to be irreversible; yet it may not be. This slight possibility – the historic chance that a window of opportunity can be opened by our prophetic thought and action – is, in part, what keeping faith is all about" (West, KF, xvi). This faith comes from seeking those narratives capable of bearing both the evil that provokes ironic retreat, *and* the beauty that the romantic pretends is permanent, to instead hold them in tension, with appreciation for their mutual fragility. In this re-description of the past, we hope to tell a story of our inheritance that does not disparage the non-sovereign, fragile, and finite strivings toward justice, and while keeping track of their failure, nevertheless does not use that failure to abstain from caring for

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[125] Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and disclosure : critical theory between past and future* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 14-15, 195-97.
[126] Arendt, *The human condition*, 246-47.
[127] *Du Bois, Darkwater : voices from within the veil.*, p. 204
[128] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and social hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 120.

the plurality, agency, and natality that makes life, even black life, worth living, and the world worth our concern rather than our rejection.[129]

If, as West argues in his legendary essay on black nihilism, that combating it demands a "politics of conversion," one important and under-emphasized element of it must be about uprooting the fear, of ourselves and of the world in all of their gloriously tragic fragility. This, I take it, is the crux of Du Bois' declaration, from the oft-ignored *Darkwater* (1920):

> "Pessimism is cowardice. The man who cannot frankly acknowledge the "Jim-Crow" car as a fact and yet live and hope is simply afraid either of himself or of the world. There is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the "Jim-Crow" car of the southern United States; but, too, just as true, there is nothing more beautiful in the universe than sunset and moonlight on Montego Bay in far Jamaica. And both things are true and both belong to this our world, and neither can be denied…From such heights of holiness men turn to master the world. All the pettiness of life drops away and it becomes a great battle before the Lord."

The question that I think Du Bois sets for himself, and the movement he hoped to philosophically guide, is how to describe social reality and narrate history without losing grip on this insight that "both things are true and both belong to this our world"?

For Du Bois, there is something in this insight that steels us for the "great battle" of human emancipation. One key to understanding this view lies in the same chapter, among the densest and most opaque of Du Bois' writings, when immediately after these statements on pessimism, Du Bois makes a strange and immediate turn to offer aesthetic reflections om the Grand Canyon. How could such things be related?

One unappreciated feature of this juxtaposition is, I think, the precise way that Du Bois renders the dramatic experience of the Canyon's sublimity as, in part, a perspectival problematic. Describing his view from the heights of the Canyon, the image is strikingly overpowering, violent, and horrifying:

> It is a sudden void in the bosom of the earth, down to its entrails—a wound where the dull titanic knife has turned and twisted in the hole, leaving its edges livid, scarred, jagged, and pulsing over the white, and red, and purple of its mighty flesh, while down below—down, down below, in black and severed vein, boils the dull and sullen flood of the Colorado.

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[129] For a similar view, see Hagglund, *This Life*

The opening experience of the Du Boisian sublime, if we can put it that way, is the feeling of the absurd – "the earth and sky gone stark and raving mad. The mountains up-twirled, disbodied, and inverted, stand on their peaks and throw their bowels to the sky. Their earth is air; the ether blood-red rock engreened. You stand upon their roots and fall into their pinnacles, a mighty mile." It seems impossible to orient oneself in such a world, not only because it is not fitted for the scale of our faculties and capacities ("One throws a rock into the abyss. It gives back no sound. It falls on silence."), but also because the time-scale it signifies mocks our finite temporality with "the shading of eternity." Du Bois implores us, in this vein, to "listen to the accents of that gorge which mutters: 'Before Abraham was, I am.'" Coming immediately on the heels of his description of the segregated "Jim Crow car," I argue that we should see him as imputing a similar existential-epistemic dimension to racial oppression: its absurd, imposing, and dispiriting character.

Yet here, Du Bois makes the characteristically Kantian turn in his depiction of the sublime, where where "the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature…whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion" (§28, *Critique of Judgment*). For Du Bois, however, the turn is engendered by a shift in perspective from the rim of the canyon toward the view from the Colorado River:

> "I have been down into the entrails of earth—down, down by straight and staring cliffs—down by sounding waters and sun-strewn meadows; down by green pastures and still waters, by great, steep chasms—down by the gnarled and twisted fists of God to the deep, sad moan of the yellow river that did this thing of wonder,—a little winding river with death in its depth and a crown of glory in its flying hair.

> I have seen what eye of man was never meant to see. I have profaned the sanctuary. I have looked upon the dread disrobing of the Night, and yet I live. Ere I hid my head she was standing in her cavern halls, glowing coldly westward—her feet were blackness: her robes, empurpled, flowed mistily from shoulder down in formless folds of folds; her head, pine-crowned, was set with jeweled stars. I turned away and dreamed—the cañon,—the awful, its depths called; its heights shuddered. Then suddenly I arose and looked. Her robes were falling. At dim-dawn they hung purplish-green and black. Slowly she stripped them from her gaunt and shapely limbs—her cold, gray garments shot with shadows stood revealed. Down dropped the black-blue robes, gray-pearled and slipped, leaving a filmy, silken, misty thing, and underneath I glimpsed her limbs of utter light."

Why does the confrontation with the river instill a newfound *courage* (recall, pessimism is *cowardice* for Du Bois), and an enhanced sense of insight and agency? I take the "little winding river with death in its depth," the river that "did this thing of wonder," to be Du Bois' early metaphor for what he would later call the "long siege" social movement that would be required to attack "the color bar."[130] The river represents the currents of human action, whose accumulated significance may be dimly perceptible and easily dismissed from a distance, but upon a perspectival shift, shown to be capable of "thing[s] of wonder" which exceed our naïve imagnings of the world.

This perspectival shift dramatized as going down the canyon mirrors Du Bois' broader sociological, philosophical, and political interest in the first- and second-personal judgment rather than the spectatorial and disengaged remove of the third-person. It also, I think, reflects his demonstration, in his *John Brown*, *Darkwater*, and later in *Black Reconstruction*, of a tragic approach to African American history. This approach to history is given aesthetic foundation in "Of Beauty and Death," which ends with another strange reflection on the nature of ugliness and beauty:

> Ugliness to me is eternal, not in the essence but in its incompleteness; but its eternity does not daunt me, for its eternal unfulfilment is a cause of joy. There is in it nothing new or unexpected; it is the old evil stretching out and ever seeking the end it cannot find; it may coil and writhe and recur in endless battle to days without end, but it is the same human ill and bitter hurt. But Beauty is fulfilment. It satisfies. It is always new and strange. It is the reasonable thing. Its end is Death—the sweet silence of perfection, the calm and balance of utter music. Therein is the triumph of Beauty. So strong is the spell of beauty that there are those who, contradicting their own knowledge and experience, try to say that all is beauty. They are called optimists, and they lie. All is not beauty. Ugliness and hate and ill are here with all their contradiction and illogic; they will always be here—perhaps, God send, with lessened volume and force, but here and eternal, while beauty triumphs in its great completion—Death. We cannot conjure the end of all ugliness in eternal beauty, for beauty by its very being and definition has in each definition its ends and limits; but while beauty lies implicit and revealed in its end, ugliness writhes on in darkness forever.

This statement is not just a philosophy of aesthetics, but one of politics and historical judgment as well. Du Bois' corpus, from his ruminations on Alexander Crummell to John Brown to

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[130] Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn, 3

Reconstruction to his own autobiographical reflections on his political efforts, returns again and again to the question of whether our "spiritual strivings" are worthwhile pursuits and whether lives committed to justice are worth living.

For Du Bois, one answer to this question begins in the critique of what I have called romantics (here, "optimists") for their evasion of ugliness and social evil. This requires creating a space for mourning, lingering over the wounds, defeats, and lost causes (especially economic justice struggles) of black emancipatory struggle. Yet, against those who insist that "ugliness" is completeness (for me, the radical ironist), the excavation of these defeated struggles – their "death," as it were – is motivated by three sensibilities. First, that their *significance* is not determined by their defeat – that they can be returned to, in their novelty and uncanniness to inspire our own struggles and sharpen our own sense of judgment and possibility. Second, that their existence is a constitutive part of what makes ugliness and injustice *incomplete*, and our persistence in struggle staves off the finality of defeat. Last, that sustained investigation and reconstruction of these historical moments reveals the contingency and opportunity structures that are not visible from a distance, renewing our sense that things *could* have turned out differently, and better.

In the final chapter, I argue that tragedy, given its focus on human agency, even in the midst of epistemological limitations, unintended consequences, serious defeat, and the fleeting opportunity structure for particular actions, can recover – as Du Bois demonstrates – this sense of expansive political imagination and empowerment. It can bear more easily accounts of history that emphasize the *interpenetration* and *semi-autonomous logics* of various political practices (e.g, anti-black racism, capitalism, sexism, and colonialism) rather than inflating one axis to a comprehensive, seamless totality and flattening out all human desire and action along its arc. Such a stance *trains* our judgment to look for and notice the seams for action that emerge through the interpenetration of systems of power, and their emergent properties that no one can predict in total. Contingency is crucial; the hopes embodied in struggles are only *possible* and not *guaranteed* -- natality and tragedy go together in tandem. Nevertheless, the recognition of the interrelation helps steel us against both the fetishism for spectacular eruptions that dominate romantic narrations, and the paralyzing disappointment that governs irony. Narrating the complex, long-term web of actions that coagulate into the statement of important ideals or, even, the achievement of partial victories helps orient political struggles

toward the kinds of dispositions needed for the long siege" – an appropriate description for emancipatory struggle if there ever was one.

Brandon M. Terry
Harvard University

From, "Introduction: A Methodological and Historiographical Preamble"

Exemplarity and Excavation

The passage of time is a cruel arbiter of the enduring significance of human action. Even those societies that compulsively archive the detritus of the past nevertheless consign much of the course of human events to obscurity, if not obliteration. Few events or personalities truly insinuate themselves into the common self-understanding of political peoples or their authoritative categories of thought with any permanence. Yet, in the United States, and indeed much of the wider world, the twentieth-century revolt against Jim Crow and American racial oppression known as the "civil rights movement" has managed to ascend to this stature, becoming something of an "exemplary" event within the political culture of the present.

To describe the civil rights movement as "exemplary" is – first and foremost – to suggest that it serves as a common touchstone of political and ethical judgment. It shapes and structures disagreement around many of the identities, ideals, and concepts that we rely upon to understand or critique our forms of life.[1] In recent decades, invocations of the movement, or its iconic events and personalities, appear persistently amidst the leading debates of political and public philosophy. Indeed, the civil rights movement holds pride of place in such debates even as movement figures are still not appreciated as thinkers of note in their own right.[2] In the fields of professional philosophy and political theory, the iconography of the civil rights movement serves as a central field of battle in disagreements over, among other concerns: the use of religious argument in public reason, agonism and affect in contentious politics, tensions between "recognition" and "redistribution," and the ethics of civil or uncivil disobedience.[3]

This fact reflects a more fundamental phenomenon. Thinking about politics appears profoundly entangled with how we understand and narrate exemplary events, or deploy them as examples in argument and expression. Indeed, on some accounts of the evolution of theorizing about politics, the enterprise itself began as "almost *entirely* a collection of examples."[4] Political theorists once understood their vocation as the curation and distillation of

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[1] Jaeggi, Form of Life; Azmanova
[2] Shelby and Terry
[3] See, for example, Rawls/Sandel/Carter/Stout; McIvor/Honig/West/Cherry/Nussbaum; Fraser/Honneth/Taylor; Delmas/Harcourt/Rawls/Walzer/etc.
[4] Joshua Foa Deinstag, "The Example of History and the History of Examples in Political Theory," *New Literary History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Summer 2017), 484. Emphasis added.

a storehouse of historical examples and exemplary figures meant to educate practical judgment, provide models of virtue and vice, and aid in making perceptive generalizations about the problems of political life. This approach to political theory arguably reached its apotheosis in ancient Rome, where thinkers like Livy defended the study of history as "wholesome and profitable," insofar as the past is replete with "good examples" and other experiences to contemplate and extract from them what is worthy of imitation or avoidance.[5]

This is not to suggest that this conception of political theory as inductive reasoning from key examples survived the advent of modernity unscathed. The ascendancy of modern scientific reasoning in Enlightenment Europe helped entrench a hierarchical picture of knowledge, with rule- or law-like generalizations and predictions often bearing the weight of science's newfound authority. To the extent that political thought or history attempted to mimic scientific reasoning, the "exemplary" events of politics that once served as anchors of cultural authority were recast as *merely* illustrative of more general laws that philosophers claimed to discern within bold narratives of "universal" history and progress.[6]

In their stark judgments about an epochal, progressive break between past and present, these stories also tended to deny that the particulars of history could cast much edifying light on an unparalleled present and unknown future.[7] Akin to a ladder used to reach a problematic height and then cast aside, the "exemplary" particulars of the past were mainly valuable insofar as they helped disclose a far grander subject's developmental course, whether that be Reason or Mankind, Progress or Freedom.[8] As Denis Diderot, the 18th-century French *philosophe* put the point in his monumental *Encyclopedia*: "Philosophy knows only the rules founded on the nature

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[5] Livy, *History of Rome*, *Volume 1: Books 1-2*. Translated by B.O. Foster. Loeb Classic Library 114. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 7. Perhaps unsurprisingly, modern "republicanism," the most self-consciously neo-Roman tradition in political theory, allows a similar practice of historical reflection to take "center stage," and relies upon the persuasive power of examples and stories to reason about politics. Even the distinctive ethical and political commitment of republicanism to the ideal of "non-domination" -- a way of understanding political or civic freedom as independence from the arbitrary power of others to interfere in out vital affairs – is anchored in the exemplarity of institutions, political regimes, and, above all, in the practices of mastery and slavery. It remains nearly impossible, even in the present, to find a republican tract that does not avail itself of the archives of slavery to anchor its insight that not simply unjust interference, but any political power akin to mastery must be resisted. Alessandro Ferrera, *The Force of the Example* 99-100; Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* 60-61; Pettit, *Republicanism*
[6] Kant, "Idea" p. 53
[7] Alexis de Tocuqeville, *Democracy in America*, Book 4, Chapter 8
[8] Deinstag, 492

of beings, which is immutable and eternal. The last century furnishes us examples; it is up to ours to prescribe the rules."[9]

The self-conceit of Enlightenment *philosophes* aside, this dismissive picture of the economy of exemplarity has long been implausible. As Kant discovered in his inquiry into aesthetics, the attempt to subsume every particular – a work of art, for instance – into a set of "rules" starts to look like a violent evasion of their significance rather than authentic understanding.[10] Perhaps more perniciously, however, such approaches tended to ignore how profoundly entangled the invocation, evaluation, and judgment of examples is with the creative faculty of imagination. As Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann argue, "examples do not merely illustrate, but produce knowledge and condition its production."[11]

In other words, to take something as an example or as exemplary is not to engage in "pure description." Instead, it "already implies comparison and differentiation, that is, a linguistic structuring of perception, be it in the form of concepts or of narrative."[12] Moreover, it is not that examples simply betray the intentions of those who deploy them (though, of course, they may); examples reflect particular presuppositions, pragmatically structure our understanding, and bleed into evaluative judgment and concept formations. To speak in the language of exemplarity, at least in critical theory, means more than merely noting the curious way that thinking and talking about politics seems to converge upon particular events, personalities, or actions to treat them as bearers of more general significance and import. It is to subject to critical attention *how* such particulars come to "*mingle* the singular with the normative," and try to understand the kind of *force* they exercise over and through our judgment as they circulate through thought, discourse, and other forms of symbolic practices.[13] It is to take seriously Arendt's charge that "most concepts in the historical and political

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[9] Denis Diderot, "Encyclopedia." *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project.* Trans., Philip Stewart (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2002) <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.004> (accessed August 17, 2020). Originally published as "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers,* 5:635–648A (Paris, 1755)

[10] Kant, Third Critique. Hannah Arendt, appropriating Kantian aesthetics for the domain of political philosophy, went so far as to charge the desire for the particularity or exemplarity of political events and subjects to be subsumed into determinant judgments and rule-bound thinking as a threat to human freedom in the present, and the memory of human action from the past Arendt, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, esp. 76-77

[11] Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann, "Introduction" *Exemplarity and Singularity*, 2

[12] Ibid 1-3

[13] Alexander Gelley, "Introduction," 2

sciences…have their origin in some particular historical incident," which "we then proceed to make… 'exemplary' – to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case."[14]

    In recent years, many working in the domain of political philosophy and theory have become more explicitly concerned with historical interpretation, so much so that at least one scholar has described a "hermeneutic turn in political philosophy." This turn entails, after decades of attempts to minimize such gestures, a more explicit embrace of the ability of theorists and citizens to "uncover and articulate the principles already embedded in or implied by a community's practices, institutions and norms of action…[and] elucidate for a culture what its shared understandings are."[15] One consequence of this preoccupation has been a growing, if still insufficient, interest in the ways that exemplary "reference points" (i.e., the civil rights movement) shape the discourses of politics and structure, orient, and anchor our disagreements.[16]

    These reference points, or *topoi*, are a presupposition of the *communicability of disagreement* constitutive of politics. As Albena Azmanova compellingly describes, these reference points serve to orient our oft-implicit agreements about the domain of the political, and what we judge so significant or relevant about our shared life together that it becomes the terrain upon which we stake our arguments.[17] It is the task of a thoroughgoing critical theory, Azmanova contends, to account even for these knotty processes "of attributing relevance and signification to issues of justice in practical political life."[18] This means subjecting to interrogation even the questions of what matters, our conceptions of critical problems, the legitimate parties to debate, and our hierarchical renderings of relevance. In taking up this task, I argue, political theory must focus most intensely on a challenge that Azmanova's penetrating insight only glances across: *the problem of historical imagination.* What historical "particulars" become exemplary phenomena or events capable of serving as mediating touchstones for political discourse, argument, identity, and understanding?

    The preceding question represents a critical task for political theory. While in some traditions, like republicanism, this foregrounding of historical reflection takes "center stage,"

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[14] Arendt, LKPP 85

[15] Georgia Warnke, *Justice and Interpretation* p. 5. If only in this regard, then, these traditions of political philosophy increasingly overlap with those approaches more familiarly associated with these presuppositions, including republicanism, conservatism, and communitarianism.

[16] Albena Azmanova, *The Scandal of Reason* 12-13

[17] Albena Azmanova, *The Scandal of Reason* 12-13

[18] Azmanova, *Scandal of Reason* 16

even less *explicitly* historically oriented traditions, like liberalism, can be subjected to illuminating scrutiny by taking such gestures seriously.[19] The towering liberal philosopher John Rawls, for instance, in attempting to articulate a *political, not metaphysical* conception of "justice as fairness," argues that such a conception is justified not by "being true to an order antecedent to and given to us, but [by] its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and aspirations and our realization that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us."[20] What and how events, personalities, and documents *exemplify* those traditions or define "us" is a question of enormous portent.

Rawlsian liberalism, for instance, was motivated in large part by what Paul Weithman calls a "naturalistic theodicy," or the attempt to "vindicate faith in our having [a moral] nature – against historical evidence to the contrary – by showing how a just society is possible."[21] The "historical evidence" that occasions this theodicean mission is what we may describe, following Alessandro Ferrara, as the "negative exemplarity" that shapes Rawls' philosophy.[22] In Rawls' case, the determining negative exemplar in history was Weimar Germany's descent into National Socialism, which Rawls interpreted as a horrifying lesson in what the collapse of practical faith in the possibility of achieving a reasonably just democratic society might augur, and thus a spur to his own efforts and conceptions of the tasks of political philosophy.[23]

My emphasis on these economies of historical exemplarity, or how the appeal to *historical* examples circulate through political thinking and disagreement, aspires to more than a kind of unmasking of "interests" through rhetorical critique.[24] Ultimately, I am more interested in how exemplarity functions as a concealed or obscured *force* within our political imaginations, partially authorizing and constituting the judgments, rules, and principles we

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[19] Alessandro Ferrera, *The Force of the Example* 99-100; Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* 60-61

[20] John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory"

[21] Paul Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?* P. 368

[22] On negative exemplars, which Ferrara describes variably as "that from which we recoil in utter horror," "the exemplification of the worst we could possibly be," or "that which is repugnant to our conscience to bring into any kind of relation to the good, *even in opposition to the good*," see Alessandro Ferrara, *The Force of the Example*, chapter 4, esp. 80-81. Ferrara also mostly discusses the Holocaust in that chapter.

[23] Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?*, esp. pp. 362-369; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, p. 4; John Rawls, *Lectures on Political Philosophy*, p. 6. Also, Melissa Lane, "Constraint, Freedom, and Exemplar: History and Theory Without Teleology" in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Philosophy versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 128-150

[24] John O'Neill, "Rhetoric, Science, and Philosophy," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 28 (1995), pp. 205-225

generate and defend in the course of political argument. Irene Harvey illuminates this point, asking:

> "How do the examples *betray* what they are supposed to exemplify or reproduce? Are they in fact *productive* and *creative* rather than *reproductive*? Are they pre-text that only *appears* in the guise of a postscript, seeming to come after the fact as accidental appendages to the theory, *but are in fact its progenitors, its unacknowledged city fathers*? [emphasis added]"[25]

A compelling answer to this incisive line of questioning must derive from a hermeneutics that scrutinizes the appearance of historical reference in political and public philosophy even as "example," and even where it does not emerge wearing the ostentatious garb of "realism" or "republicanism." This hermeneutics is an approach perhaps best characterized as *excavation*, insofar as it aims to disinter those gestures and references to exemplary events scattered throughout philosophical and political discourse. The aim is to interrogate the *uses* to which these invocations get conscripted, the abstractions they appear to authorize, and their prismatic function as structuring nexuses for discourse, disagreement, critique, and judgment. The hope is that in reconstructing this economy of historical exemplarity within texts and discourses, we might make interpretive advances in understanding various intellectuals or traditions and better grasp the significance of historical *imagination's* structuring hold on political thinking. This, I aim to show, is crucial for the practice of critique with an emancipatory interest.[26]

Historical Imagination and Narrative Form as a Site of Critique

In foregrounding the imagination, I am attempting to highlight that historical invocation inevitably relies on a *productive* act. This claim, pressed most trenchantly by Hayden White, is that historical accounts do not merely discover the "true story" or the unmediated "real" and relate it to us with simple rhetorical finery. Instead, histories *organize* events through

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[25] Irene Harvey, "Exemplarity and the Origins of Legislation," in *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. Alexander Gelley, p. 225
[26] Lucious Outlaw, *Critical Social Theory in the Interests of Black Folks*

narrative form and rhetorical figures. They imaginatively *produce* representations of historical reality that entail various political, ethical, aesthetic, and ontological commitments.[27] White called this feature of historical narration *emplotment*: the inevitably selective inclusion and exclusion of events and characters as well as the overarching development of a "structure of relationships" -- including where a narrative begins and ends – through which "the events contained in the [historical] account are endowed with a meaning…as parts of an integrated whole."[28]

Even when political figures or theorists briefly invoke historical examples, they often arrange (or rely on others' arrangements) of various elements into the "event" or "exemplar" they invoke, permitting us to be able to understand such invocations as situated within, or constituted by, *stories*. Moreover, insofar as stories are intelligible, coherent, and meaningful, they will necessarily deploy specific criteria of significance irreducible to positivistic attempts of causal explanation. These criteria will, often implicitly, authorize the inclusion, priority, and placement of particular events, personalities, and developments over others that might have plausibly been included or emphasized in alternative ways. Given this, White argues, it becomes incumbent upon critical and philosophical accounts of historiography and historical narration to ask what notions of reality, criteria of significance, or styles of attention toward the world *authorize* the construction of both particular narratives (or for White, narrative *as such*).[29]

The critical term here is White's notion of "emplotment." As W.B. Gallie argued, "if it is true that in the physical sciences there is always a theory, it is no less true that in historical research there is always a story."[30] If being capable of following a story is *constitutive* of historical understanding, we must pay close attention not only to historical-explanatory arguments about causality but also to *plot* structure and how its oft-implicit criteria of significance authorize certain moves of inclusion, emphasis, priority, or closure. Far from being purely descriptive or analytical, these ostensibly "formal" or "aesthetic" dimensions of narration *are* part of the imaginative production of meaning. As White explains, "the 'content' of the discourse consists as much of its form as it does of whatever information might be extracted

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[27] White, "The Value of Narrativity and the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1980) 4-5
[28] White, "The Value of Narrativity" p. 9
[29] White, "Value of Narrativity" 14
[30] W.B. Gallie, "Narrative and Historical Understanding," in Geoffrey Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 50

from a reading of it." Thus, "to change the form of the discourse might not be to change the information about its explicit referent, but it would certainly change the meaning produced by it."[31] That historical narration works this way is a necessary consequence of the *under*determining character of historical "facts" and archival traces for narrative construction, as well as the fusion of horizons that cause judgments about the past to be shaped by judgments about the present and imaginings of the future.

Rhetorical or figurative elements inhere in the practice of narration.[32] If historical discourse relies on the story-form, the ability to narrate and follow these stories means is powerfully shaped by our immersion within a cultural horizon where we inherit and repeat certain story-forms and narrative modes, with characteristic figurative and symbolic effects. To follow a story often means to follow it as a particular *type* or *genre* of story, with all the patterns of expectation that entails.

As Martha Nussbaum writes, "the selection of genre" is one of the features of narratives that "expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections."[33] Nussbaum's interests here are primarily literary, but the implications of her claims extend far beyond into the more diffuse realm of narration as such. The most prevalent, powerful, and influential plot forms circulating among historians and other political thinkers overlap with those available to other imaginative writers: romance, tragedy, comedy, irony, melodrama, epic, and the like.

Genre provides dynamic expectations and conventions to guide interpretation and the production of meaning *within* a particular genre and –necessarily – in *relation to* and *differentiation from* other genres and their identifying traditions or conventions.[34] Apart from the formal efforts of demarcation by critics, the practical experience of generic interpretation reveals an "intuitive" or, better yet, *habituated* structure to our understanding that we imbibe

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[31] Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (February 1984), p. 19

[32] For White, the story-form of historical narrative is not "found," but intuited or imposed, albeit to varying degrees of consciousness. This is true especially to the extent that story-forms demand a beginning, climax, and end. White challenges in particular the notion that there are adequately *historical* grounds for these sorts of interpretive decisions. Instead, he argues, claims of "ending" betray a demand or desire "for moral meaning" since "we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real have ceased to happen." Hayden White, "Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form* p. 10, 23

[33] Martha Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 3

[34] Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter 1986), pp. 203-218

through the rich languages of human expression. These traditions have a pervasive effect on what we find intelligible, appealing, and persuasive in stories. Our understanding reflects deeper (usually implicit and often intuitive) commitments to particular significance criteria that mediate between plot, meaning, and explanation.[35] These narrative elements convey a "representation of reality," and involve literary devices that procure for them a sense of meaning, closure, or at least intelligibility based in part on aesthetic, ethical, and figurative grounds.

It is vital to take note of the challenge this insight poses. Noël Carroll, criticizing White, argues that the latter's insistence that events may accrue different meanings in divergently emplotted narratives only leads us to the unproblematic recognition that multiple stories can be told. Only in rare instances, which are usually adjudicated by the explanatory aims of historiographical methods, will these numerous stories conflict.[36] White, however, despite his injunction to disentangle narrative form and explanatory claims, shows us how much more complicated this story is. The essential "causal" claims at the heart of explanation are grounded in interpretive moves based on notions of significance whose articulation is likely best *achieved by excavating the narrative forms underlying the invocation of historical examples.*

White is right to draw our attention to the problems of inclusion, emphasis, and narrative emplotment. These are not "merely" aesthetic choices that reflect historians' deliberate formal commitments, but reflect deeper (usually implicit and often intuitive) commitments to specific criteria of significance or value that mediate between plot and explanation. The importance of emplotment to historical narrative helps us recognize, *contra* Carroll, that the existence of multiple narratives is neither uninteresting nor unexceptional.

Where they coexist "unproblematically" for him, this is likely the result of shared conceptual underpinnings that we can best retrieve through a focus on narrative form – despite the ostensibly different "subjects" of the narrative. Where these narratives do *conflict*, this attentiveness to narrative form can help *reveal*, rather than *conceal*, the non-metaphorical truth-claims that Carroll wants to adjudicate the dispute. Critical attention to narrative form also

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[35] Ralph W. Rader, "The Concept of Genre in Eighteenth-Century Studies (1974)" in *Fact, Fiction, and Form: Selected Essays*, eds. James Phelan and david H. Richter (Columbia, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011), p. 63
[36] Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative," p. 259

helps disclose the "picture" of the world that holds an alternative explanation together or serves as the "bedrock" for various truth and falsity judgments.[37]

This approach is especially helpful in grasping the ethical and political stakes of revisionist historiographical movements, including the one currently raging in civil rights history. What appears, *prima facie*, to be a debate about "periodization" – the revisionary advocates of the so-called "Long" Civil Rights Movement paradigm against the defenders of a "classical" Civil Rights Movement narrative – involves evaluative claims, normative ordering, judgments of significance, analytical frameworks, and political commitments. In a *broader* public and philosophical discourse where these invocations of the civil rights movement serve as key reference points, or as presumed terrain for (dis)agreement, unraveling the presuppositions and commitments at work is tremendously important. Misunderstanding the contours of competing narratives leads critique and judgment awry.

If the imagination allows us to think beyond or otherwise temporarily bracket "the epistemic demand of deciding the true and the false," then it is this faculty of imagination that allows for those instances of productive figuration and creation which are capable of serving as provisional grounds for, or entry points into, new ways of organizing, perceiving, or evaluating our experiences, categories, descriptions, and values.[38] The force of the example, in other words, means to describe those ways in which specific modes of engagement with events, objects, figures, or phenomena set the imagination *in motion*, in ways not beholden to determinant judgments, existing frameworks, or conventional rules. This "free play," as Kant describes it, can compel us to consider our experiences and judgments of exemplarity as *illuminating* or *disclosing* novel features of our forms of life. More radically, these workings of the imagination might even provide the scaffolding from which we can begin to *transform*,

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[37] See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* and Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*

[38] For instance, it is so familiar to us now that it can occasionally be difficult to remind ourselves that the idea of a "social contract" is one such productive figuration of the imagination. By creatively representing the historical origins of human societies as mutually beneficial pacts between individuals in a "state of nature" (also a figure of the imagination!), early modern political philosophers were able to analytically and normatively recast the entire drama of political order and obligation through the metaphor of a contract. The richness of this projection served as fertile soil for a wide-ranging genre of political philosophy dedicated to evaluating real and imaginary societies and their defensible obligations through the relentless parsing out the implications of the compact metaphor. The success of the social contract tradition in altering the prevailing conception of society in the West has been so successful that even though its originators' claims to have given a factual account of the origins of human societies have been long since discarded, the contract is widely seen as an intuitively obvious hypothetical device for understanding and judging societies, as well as articulating claims of justice within them.

redescribe, or *found our normative orders and their central concepts anew*.[39] By excavating the economy of exemplarity in political thought, we become better attuned to how invocations of historical exemplarity work to remake our memories and morals and may fall into reification. In doing so, we can recover from an uncritical (and often equipment-like) relationship toward the historical past and the deployment of examples to develop a more critical and constructive stance toward the narrative modes that bear the examples that anchor our public political culture and serve as touchstones for political philosophy.

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[39] This line of argument has been most well-developed in the realm of philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Take, for example, Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917) or Andy Warhol's "Brillo Box" (1964). Both pieces are widely claimed to have provoked radical reevaluations of aesthetic and other values (i.e., beauty, sublimity, craftsmanship, creativity, etc.), the practices of "the artworld" (that institutional matrix of galleries, critics, museums, and public commissions which functions, sociologically, to legitimate and define art), as well as the very *definition* or *concept* of art, and whether such a thing might be intelligible. Insofar as it is claimed that these particular artworks serve (and *should serve*) as phronetically orienting "reference points" to these debates in these ways, they can be said to manifest *exemplarity*. On these works of art see the late Arthur Danto's *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) esp. pp. 23-53

Brandon M. Terry
Yale University

From Chapter 3:

Conventional Civil Rights Exemplarity: The Romantic Mode

In one respect, claiming that the civil rights movement is exemplary seems almost trite. The very landscape of American communities, many of which have a built environment of streets, schools, memorials, museums, and other structures that bear the name of movement heroes or commemorate movement events, seems to root this exemplarity in the relevant permanence of asphalt, concrete, and bronze.[170] Although these sorts of memorials occasionally appear as mundane features of the built landscape from the perspective of ordinary life, Dwyer and Alderman are right to remind us that even something as purely symbolic as naming streets "allows a certain vision of the past to be incorporated into the everyday settings and activities of the city, structuring the very language that people use" [emphasis added]. This "matter-of-factness," they argue, "suggests that a memorial's message enjoys a measure of orthodoxy," and consequently accrues "the power of the norm" in service of "a particular interpretation of the past."[171]

But what is this particular interpretation of the past which prevails in America? The most prevalent and pervasive mode of narration concerning civil rights movement history, I contend, is *romance.*

Romantic narratives are devoted to the portrayal and description of forms of unity – national, familial, ideological, etc. – in a temporal process of becoming. Relying heavily on metaphorical and symbolic representation, romance – as a style of attention to political and social life – organizes judgments about the periodization of history, the significance of particular events and figures, and its attention to specific themes around the dramatization of emergent forms of consensus, conciliation, and inclusion. Moreover, this emphasis on unity and becoming is *moralized* by a narrative structure that dramatizes heroic transcendence and the struggle of higher-order virtues and goods against ultimately transitory or inessential

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[170] "Mississippi Lawmakers Approve Civil Rights Museum," *Reuters* (April 5, 2011) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/05/us-mississippi-museum-idUSTRE7344UY20110405>; "Civil Rights Museum proposed for Lincolnville," *The St. Augustine Record* (June 12, 2011) <http://staugustine.com/news/local-news/2011-06-12/civil-rights-museum-proposed-lincolnville>; "In America's Deep South, a Front Seat for Freedom Riders," *The Christian Science Monitor*, (July 13, 2011) <http://staugustine.com/news/local-news/2011-06-12/civil-rights-museum-proposed-lincolnville>; Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008) p. 10
[171] Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, p.13

obstacles of vice, injustice, and unfair circumstance.[172] Akin to many efforts in theodicy, it *presupposes* a world (or cosmos) that is *not* fundamentally at odds with realizing the higher purposes or ideals it treats as the subject of its inquiry.

Taylor Branch's monumental trilogy of civil rights history – *America in the King Years* – is an excellent instance of this narrative mode, imbued as it is with religious themes of heroic transcendence, civic deliverance, and redemptive suffering culled from the biblical story of Exodus. Metaphorically oriented around Martin Luther King, Branch initially figures King as the prophetic representative of essential national unity, an emergent anti-racist consensus, and an enduring and emancipatory spirit whose redemptive horizons are opposed to the worldly evil of injustice.[173] This now-conventional narrative of civil rights history, which resonates powerfully in a culture saturated by Christian doctrines of original sin and redemption on the cross, places King in the position of dying to enable our collective redemption for the original sin of black subordination.[174]

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[172] Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 8-9, 150

[173] See, for example, Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Branch, Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Taylor Branch, At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) pp. 507-522;

[174] This mode of understanding American history emerges most forcefully in those accounts thoroughly steeped in what some scholars identify as "American civil religion." Michael V. Angrosino, drawing from the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz, defines American civil religion as "an institutionalized set of beliefs about the nation" that "like other religions, creates potent, compelling, and 'uniquely realistic' moods and motivations in its adherents." American civil religion, manifest in widespread symbols and rituals, religious nationalism, and transcendent religious belief, undergirds popular understandings of right and wrong and good and evil – at least with respect to the interpretive work of self-understanding called forth by American national identity. In such a tradition, actual historical persons, places, and events are subject to "legendary embroidering," and mythologized to convey the central themes and ethical lessons purportedly realized in the course of American history. In this vein, as Angrosino argues, "If [George] Washington is the quasi-divine embodiment of American virtue, Lincoln may well be the American Christ figure. Assassinated on Good Friday, he was a sacrificial victim who in death succeeded in a way he never had as a living politician—in helping to heal the wounds of civil strife. He died so that there might be a Union, a compact among diverse peoples who had torn the nation apart for the sake of their unrestrained self-interest. Lincoln's blood was shed for his people, sanctifying the very ground that had so recently been saturated with the blood of fratricides." Likewise, Conrad Cherry draws our attention to the social function of the funeral services, public eulogies, and state memorials for Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, among others, whose deaths are "canonized in the national consciousness as exemplars of American ideals and as particular bearers of America's destiny under God." Even in the immediate aftermath of King's death, there were eulogies and speeches that attempted to place him in a Christ role in American civil religion. This was partly inspired by the fact that Palm Sunday fell only two days after King's assassination. Long-time King ally and Memphis pastor, James Lawson, for example, proclaimed at a Palm Sunday rally and memorial service that "Memphis will be known for a long time as the place where Martin Luther King was crucified. Yes, crucified. We have witnessed a crucifixion here in Memphis." Days later, the widowed Coretta Scott King talked about her husband's death in similar terms, exhorting the audience at a rally to make bring forth a "resurrection" that would "make all people truly free and…make every person feel that he is a human being." See Michael Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2002) pp. 240-1, 250, 251; Conrad Cherry, "Two American Sacred Ceremonies: Their Implications for the Study of Religion in America," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter, 1969), esp. p. 744; and Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*, (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2007), pp.473-474 and 480-481. Stewart Burns, an editor of King's

This narrative form, in part, explains why King's Christological features are rivaled only by Abraham Lincoln in the heroic pantheon of American civilization. King's non-corporeal "resurrection" is said to be manifest in the consolidation and popular ratification of the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, the utter collapse and illegitimacy of the Jim Crow racial order of the late 19th and early 20th century, and in the monumental shift in racial attitudes away from explicit doctrines of anti-black racism toward professed commitments to racial equality and equal opportunity.[175] Immediately after King's death, government and media elites began to describe the speech (or, more precisely, the "dream" sections of the address) as if it were "a mystical synecdoche" for the entirety of King's career.[176] Our commitment to his "dream," most often distilled as a vision where his children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," is re-consecrated every year in a national holiday and other celebratory rituals honoring the man Branch calls our "new founding father" and his epochal social movement.[177]

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papers, goes so far as to argue that King understood *himself* in this fashion, conceiving of his "destiny as a mission to serve simultaneously as a black Moses and a Christ figure," and encouraged in this self-conception by similar characterizations of him made by fellow religious leaders. See, Stewart Burns, "From the Mountaintop: The Changing Political Vision of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The History Teacher*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Nov., 1993), p. 9, 16ff4.

[175] For example, Gerald Jaynes and Robin M. Williams report that "[v]irtually all observers concede that the Fair Housing Act of 1968 owes its existence to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the subsequent riots…and the package was passed within a week of the national turmoil following King's assassination." See Gerald D. Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American* Society, (Washington, DC: National Academies, 1989) p. 229. On the integration of higher education, see Henry Louis Gates' beautifully rendered firsthand account of the experience of being thrown "headlong into the abyss of integration," in elite, U.S. colleges after King's assassination in his "The Parable of the Talents," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). For a more detailed historical account of the shift in elite college admissions toward higher admission rates of blacks occasioned by the King assassination, see Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2006), esp. pp. 401-2, 406-7. On racial attitudes, Robert Riley and Thomas Pettigrew, in a natural experiment, argue that King's assassination had a liberalizing impact on white Texans, particularly in metropolitan areas in their "Dramatic Events and Attitude Change," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (Nov. 1976), pp. 1004-1015, while D. Garth Taylor et. al. claim that there is a "liberal leap" in white racial attitudes from 1970-1972 that is distinguishable even from the steady liberalization of white racial attitudes more broadly after the end of World War II. See D. Garth Taylor et. al., "Attitudes Toward Racial Integration," *Scientific American*, Vol. 238, No. 6 (June 1978), pp. 42-50. For the latest evidence on racial attitudes in the United States, see Lawrence Bobo et. al., "The *Real* Record on Racial Attitudes," in Peter V. Marsden, ed., *Social Trends in the United States 1972-2008: Evidence from the General Social Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013)

[176] Hansen 208; Hansen, while not quite in the vein of Long Civil Rights Movement historians, echoes their deep criticism of how this intensive hagiographical focus on the "I Have a Dream" speech precludes more sustained engagement with the breadth of King's concerns regarding poverty, social justice, and militarism. Also, in a fascinating two chapters, Hansen traces the initial response to King's speech by militants (nonplussed) and government officials (more concerned with the speech's warnings about potential black militancy) and its evolution over time into a central set piece of conservative criticisms of affirmative action. See Drew Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 167-231

[177] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters* p. 887

In characterizing this sort of account as romantic, I want to underscore that this description does not amount to a simple charge of naiveté, appropriate only for those accounts that treat the history of anti-black racism as largely insignificant or as having been definitively overcome. For many, the force of such narratives lies less in their hagiographic appeal or cynical ideological import than in their apparent ability to suture together a compelling story of "progress." The narrative allows for a contiguous set of identities and ideals that ground critical evaluative standards from past to present, as well as an insistent *faith* in an imagined future that will redeem the emancipatory hopes and strivings embodied in the civil rights struggle.

A More Perfect Union: Obama and the Romance of America

The potent admixture of these elements is on full display, for example, in nearly all of Barack Obama's most famous speeches on race. Throughout his campaign and presidency, Obama insisted vehemently on both the judgment that the civil rights movement and its aftermath had improved American racial order by any defensible moral standard. Obama urged Americans to acknowledge this truth to ward off the cynicism, resignation, and despair that are fundamental obstacles to further progress. In his renowned 2007 "More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia, organized hastily to confront anxieties over his pastor Jeremiah Wright's incendiary denunciations of the American racial order and foreign policy regime, Obama judges his pastor's "fatal mistake" to be that "he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country…is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past."[178] By disputing the knowledge and evidence of America's ability to change, Obama argued, Wright missed "the true genius of this nation" and undermined the power of past progress to inform hope in the present.

He reiterated these themes in one of his last major speeches as president, delivered at the 2016 Howard University commencement, forthrightly declaring "race relations" to be better than at any time in American history.[179] As evidence, Obama offered the decline in anti-black racial attitudes, the weakening of racial constraints on individual identity and expression, and the ascendancy of black elites in higher education, business, entertainment, and, of course, politics, as evidence for his contention.

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[178] Obama, "A More Perfect Union"
[179] For a blistering critique of the very concept of race relations, see Michael West, *Booker T. Washington*

To his credit, however, Obama never denied the persistent existence of racial injustice. His significant speeches on race always acknowledge the resilience of racial discrimination and the cumulative disadvantages that disproportionately burden African Americans, producing racial disparities in health care access and outcomes, quality education, economic opportunity, incarceration, employment, and life expectancy. However, it is interesting to note that these social facts accrue ethical significance from their incorporation into a romantic narrative. Part of the moral disgust their invocation evokes stems from the sense that these injustices or disparities are, somehow, not genuinely coeval in time with the broader society.[180] They are, at the same time, *condemned* by moral ideals and sacrifices said to be instantiated in a heroic past, while also serving as a future *horizon* of fulfillment for a politics meant to finally overcome the "not-yet" closed gap between ideals and reality.

This suturing across time is often achieved within romantic narratives through morally charged metaphors and tropes. As early as a 2007 campaign stop in Selma, Alabama, Obama followed Branch in deploying the biblical symbolism of Exodus to describe the civil rights movement. Characterizing civil rights activists as the "Moses generation" who successfully "led a people out of bondage" to the brink of "the promised land," Obama invokes the Old Testament figure of Joshua to position his cohort of black elected officials as *proof* of the movement's heroic victories, as *authentic inheritors* of a people's sacred struggle for unity and equality, and as the coming *authors* of the future fulfillment of this covenant in unprecedented terrain. As Joshua, Moses' faithful aide and scout, was called by God to secure the Israelites' faith and obedience to the Mosaic covenant, cross the River Jordan, and conquer Canaan, so Obama insists that a new generation of black politicians and their supporters have been "called to be the Joshuas of our time…the generation that finds our way across this river."[181] This mission entails not only the achievement of equality for an oppressed people but also the redemption and perfection of America's "common creed" of "tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice," enshrined in the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence.[182] With the Declaration as the covenantal origin and horizon-shaping *telos*, the civil rights

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[180] Fabian, *Time and the Other* p. 31
[181] It is, perhaps, reflective of the broad decline in biblical literacy in American intellectual culture that the figure of Joshua was so easily assimilated to Barack Obama's rhetoric of racial reconciliation, given that Joshua's conquest of Canaan is extraordinarily brutal, including the wholesale slaughter of opposing ethnic groups, including non-combatants.
[182] Obama 2nd inaugural

movement is figured as an articulation and dramatization of a deep American consensus on values, as well as an intimation of a more perfect union to come.

The faith in progress toward a more perfect union, at least for Obama, is to be secured by a form of historical consciousness deeply inflected by romantic conventions. The mode of historical consciousness that Obama has persistently defended has three principal dimensions.

First, it demands that charitable comparative reflection on the past be incorporated into the evaluation of our social order's justice and the question of whether one should keep some measure of faith and allegiance to it. "If you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born," Obama challenged the Howard commencement audience, "and you didn't know ahead of time who you were going to be -- what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you'd be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you'd be born into…You'd choose right now."

If we resign to this choice situation, the president's claim is perhaps persuasive, although one imagines some of the over 500,000 blacks presently incarcerated might have a particularly tortured choice. Yet, why pose this sort of question at all?

Perhaps the president means to invoke John Rawls, who famously advanced a thought experiment that bears some resemblance in his 1971 classic, *A Theory of Justice*.[183] Rawls uses the thought experiment of citizens blinded by a "veil of ignorance" regarding their personal characteristics, social location, and historical circumstances to model the sort of *impartial* perspective he considers necessary for articulating fair and reasonable principles of justice. But Rawls hoped that this way of thinking might help us clarify, defend, and practically realize those principles that *should* govern the terms of social cooperation in a *just* society while gaining more *critical* purchase on real-world democracies that fall short of these standards.

Obama's version mostly dispenses with this task, instead constraining the thought experiment to a kind of Russian Roulette within America's sordid histories of illiberal oppression. The distortions of any reasonable standard of ideal justice are inherent, as Obama indexes the choice to a measure of misery easy to surmount and incorporate into paeans to progress.

The second dimension of this romantic historical consciousness is that it narrates past political struggles as *heroic sacrifices* for future generations and national progress. The Moses metaphor allows Obama to ascribe a sense of "sacrifice and dignity" to forebears who "battled

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[183] Rawls tj

for America's soul…shed blood…[and] endured taunts and torment," while conceding that the Moses generation will never itself enter "the promised land" of genuine equality.[184] However, this gesture allows for the narrative transfiguration of vanquished aspirations, partial victories, outright defeats, and even absurd suffering into spiritual strivings and unintentional "sacrifices" that may yet be redeemed.

Obama's skill in articulating such promises brought forth hope from many African Americans that his election would itself achieve the romantic hope of redemption. In Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s euphoric essay published the day after the 2008 election, the pioneering African American Studies scholar declared Obama's victory "the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle, the grand achievement of a great, collective dream."[185] That day, Gates asked of his African-American ancestors:

> "Would they say that all those lost hours of brutalizing toil and labor leading to spent, half-fulfilled lives, all those humiliations that our ancestors had to suffer through each and every day, all those slights and rebuffs and recriminations, all those rapes and murders, lynchings and assassinations, all those Jim Crow laws and protest marches, those snarling dogs and bone-breaking water hoses, all of those beatings and all of those killings, all of those black collective dreams deferred—that the unbearable pain of all of those tragedies had, in the end, been assuaged at least somewhat through Barack Obama's election?"[186]

Tragically, an act of police misconduct forced Gates to existentially confront the question of the relationship between one's own suffering of racial humiliation and injustice and any presumed movement of history reflected by the forty-fourth president, when the police

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[184] https://www.cpr.org/2015/03/06/obama-returns-to-selma-for-50th-anniversary-of-historic-march/

[185] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "In Our Lifetime," *The Root* (November 5, 2008) << http://www.theroot.com/views/our-lifetime>>

[186] See my "A Stranger in Mine Own House: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Police in 'Post-Racial' America" *Huffington Post* (July 29, 2009) << http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brandon-m-terry/a-stranger-in-mine-own-ho_b_242392.html>>

wrongly arrested him for charges of "disorderly conduct" on the lawn of his Cambridge, Massachusetts home.[187]

In an incident that became a flashpoint for racial anxieties, resentments, and expectations in the early months of his presidency, Obama spoke honestly and off-script about how the Cambridge police officer, James Crowley, "acted stupidly" in arresting Gates. However, when a racially polarized backlash to these comments threatened to derail the president's policy agenda, Gates was pressured to moderate his more strident commentary and legal actions pertaining to the arrest and summoned to the White House for a "beer summit" with the offending officer, the vice president, and the president himself.[188]

Regardless of its concessions to racial paranoia, this spectacle evinced a deeper underlying commitment constitutive of the third dimension of Obama's practical faith in the nation's redemptive and perfectionist capacities. For Obama, underneath most of our political, cultural, or even metaphysical disagreements, lies some vital measure of consensus: the spare moral edict to treat others as one wants to be treated, a more robust American creed, or even a *modus vivendi* commitment to resolve conflict with democracy and compromise. Beneath such pronouncements as naming the activists of "Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall" as "our forebears," or his famous 2004 declaration that "there's not a liberal America and a conservative America…a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America," lies a venerable liberal view of discerning deep consensus as the task of public political philosophy.[189]

This conception, articulated clearly in Rawls' work, sees public political philosophy's *practical task* as uncovering "some underlying basis of philosophical and moral agreement" beneath "deeply disputed questions" to sustain respectful social cooperation. Alongside this is the *reconciliatory task* of showing how our "institutions, when properly understood, from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain the present, rational form."[190] Both tasks draw heavily upon *historical* judgments and are especially susceptible to seduction by romantic historical narratives that accord and resonate with these aspirations.

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[187] Gates' enthusiasm dissipated substantially during the Obama administration. In his *Stony the Road*, he draws a set of striking parallels between the Trump movement and the so-called "Redemption" era where, following the brief promise of multiracial democracy in Reconstruction, exceptionally vicious forms of white supremacy and Anglo-Saxonism consolidated racial domination in politics and economics, and systemic humiliation in popular culture and intellectual life.

[188] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/03/magazine/henry-louis-gates-jr-interview.html

[189] Obama, 2004 DNC Convention Speech

[190] Rawls, *Lectures on Political Philosophy*

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