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# An Introduction

## *The Timeliness of Democratic Faith*

In *Darkwater* of 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois offers incisive commentary on the meaning of democracy. Against those who would restrict the franchise, he remarks: “Such arguments show so curious a misapprehension of the foundation of the argument for democracy that the argument must be continually restated and emphasized.”<sup>1</sup> Although the context of this statement is about voting, Du Bois emphasizes the principle of equality as the foundation of democracy throughout his work, treating the equal standing of persons in and outside the voting booths as part and parcel of a democratic ethos—a way of life. Du Bois’s statement and the views that underwrite it are arresting given the historical setting. He wrote these words at a time when the insecurity of black life was always on display—a period in which, despite the Civil War amendments, Jim and Jane Crow were the law of the land and lynching a daily reminder of one’s vulnerability to premature death. Defending democracy against the persistence of racial violence, exclusion, and domination raises an important question that haunts the struggle for racial equality and, indeed, the legitimacy of the American polity. What is it about democracy that justifies our faith, especially African Americans’ faith, in it? This is the question to which this book attempts a response.

This question will seem untimely. Given how frequently the police kill African Americans, the ongoing structural inequality they experience, and housing and food insecurity suffered by so many from city to city and state to state, it is difficult to suggest commitment is ever justified. It may seem more appropriate to interpret the United States as working according to plan, connecting the horror of the earliest periods of African American life to the present moment in one story about the nation’s presumed

foundational commitment to racism. Writing, for example, in response to the 2012 killing of African American Florida teen Trayvon Martin, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates describes Martin's killing as the natural consequence of the functioning of American society:

When you have a society that takes at its founding the hatred and degradation of a people, when the society inscribes that degradation in its most hallowed document, and continues to inscribe hatred in its laws and policies, it is fantastic to believe that its citizens will derive no ill messaging. It is painful to say this: Trayvon Martin is not a miscarriage of justice, but American justice itself. This is not our system malfunctioning. It is our system working as intended.<sup>2</sup>

There is little to deny in Coates's analysis. To his claims, we can add other voices trying to get us to see that racism functions as a precondition for American progress. As Calvin Warren tells us: "It is the humiliated, incarcerated, mutilated, and terrorized black body that serves as the vestibule for the Democracy that is to come."<sup>3</sup> Warren stands in a tradition of thinking known as Afro-pessimism, including scholars such as Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson. All view the persistence of racial inequality and the vulnerability of black life as the *inescapable* "after-life" of slavery.<sup>4</sup> These thinkers raise the haunting suggestion that modernity—that period running roughly from the Glorious Revolution to the American and French Revolutions—specifies an ontology that "requires an alterity, a referent outside itself"<sup>5</sup> for its conceptualization of identity, freedom, and progress. The thirst for mastery Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno famously identified as part of the European Enlightenment has played itself out through the logic of racial domination in the Afro-pessimists' view. This ontological framework in which African Americans work, live, and struggle leads, as Juliet Hooker and Barnor Hesse tell us, to a central problem: "One of the fundamental paradoxes of black politics is the invariable futility of directing activism toward a racially governing regime historically founded on the constitutive exclusion and violation of blackness."<sup>6</sup>

The cold, cruel reality of American life often undercuts moments of hope.<sup>7</sup> It is no wonder we find it hard to stabilize our faith in creating a racially just society. Here, in brief, is a version of how the historical narrative goes. In the wake of black Americans' participation in the American Revolution, the nation witnessed a slow denial of their standing and contribution to the polity. With the ongoing development of slavery in the South, Northern states in the nineteenth century slowly rescinded rights previously extended to African American men. Although the Civil War amendments

sought to acknowledge black people's equal status, the nation-state denied the worth of African Americans through the ascendancy of debt peonage, economic exploitation, lynching, and Jim and Jane Crow. The civil rights movement killed Jim and Jane Crow. Still, the policing of black people reemerged through the rise of the carceral state, the welfare state, and the underfunded public education system that has been exacerbated by residential segregation. Whatever one might think of his success, the fact remains that the election of the first black president was followed by another figure who dedicated himself to removing any trace of its previous occupant. That figure's success was, without exaggeration, cultivated through the tropes of white supremacy, nativism, and the commitment to police black and brown populations. Claims of white supremacy's death—of the post-racialism supposedly evidenced by Barack Obama's presidency—have proven false.<sup>8</sup>

This is not merely *a* feature of the American story—this is *the* American Story, Afro-pessimists contend. For them, the historical record is not simply a collection of events that hang together one way rather than another given the interpretative framework one brings to it. Instead, the historical record reveals the deeper logic of America's self-understanding—indeed the self-understanding of the West—that is reflected in the facts regarding the status of black people and the standing of whites. Or to put it differently, one can infer from the facts the commitments held by the American community. This allows someone like Coates to call those struggling for racial justice “dreamers” in a pejorative sense and encourages Warren to do the same with those, especially black people, who deploy the language of hope. The Afro-pessimists' story functions as a making-it-explicit story.

This way of seeing things is powerful. Its power derives from the frequency with which the United States cycles through the emergence, decline, and reemergence of white supremacy. The appeal to transform the nation into a society that is racially just, I imagine, can all be so exhausting. I am sympathetic to this view; I see its allure. At a basic level, we might even think that for the sake of collective self-care, accepting the story as accurate may alleviate the disappointment that is likely to come for those who believe in the possibility of racial justice.

Even as I see the power of this position, I also see how it nonetheless relies upon, to appropriate Hayden White's thinking, a metahistorical framework. Herein lies the problem. By metahistorical, White means the kind of expectations or predictions built into “the content of the [narrative] form.”<sup>9</sup> The appeal to history that we often see in Afro-pessimism obscures a background determinism—the past's relationship to the present resolves itself in the form of a fixed future. This is what is on display

in Wilderson when he says, “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness,” or appropriating Hortense Spillers, he tells us that “Black . . . is not an arc at all, but a flat line . . . ‘historical stillness.’”<sup>10</sup> Facts about the past of racial injustice function as the immovable markers of American society. The result arrests the “distinctive story-potential” of development.<sup>11</sup> Where black lives are concerned, the story of the United States’ moral and political growth necessarily becomes a *closed tragedy*.<sup>12</sup> The citizenry is closed off from tragedy’s insights and we deny its educative function. In the case of black life in America, we cannot see that the scope and constraints of human flourishing follow from living under emergent white supremacist conditions. Institutions, norms, practices, and sensibilities seemingly follow some inevitable logic and are not the result of choices, unintended consequences, and unconscious decisions. Human agency dissolves altogether, and we fail to acknowledge that our institutions are what they are and our culture is what it is because we have made them so.

But if we step back a moment from determinism—if we allow ourselves to see our societies as something we have a hand in shaping—I think we can ask some critical questions. Is American democracy constitutionally at odds with our goals? Or might it be conducive to building a society in which we all can live equally and at peace with one another? Are there normative resources on which one can rely to advance affirmative claims regarding racial equality? Or must the resources of modern American democracy remain forever premised on racism?

These are not merely historical questions, the answers to which are wholly settled by empirical facts. Rather, what is at stake is the form of narration that already contains closures, openings, possibilities, and even settled futures. What do I mean by this? Consider two ways of telling the story of racial struggle. In our historical narration, we might emphasize the reconstitution of white supremacy amid persistent attempts to achieve racial equality. This is the story of Afro-pessimism. But we could just as easily, and often do, emphasize how multiple waves of racial inclusion disrupted white supremacy. In the end, the story goes, the true American Creed will win the day.<sup>13</sup> The first story has a dark, tragic conclusion that seems inescapable. The second is a romantic story of inevitable progress. Those who embrace the first of these as our “true” racial reality find themselves trying to prove to those of us who have benefited from racial struggle why our success is illusory or, at best, temporary. Those who locate America’s identity in its resistance to white supremacy have another problem. They cannot see the evidence of institutional racism,<sup>14</sup> or they readily describe it as anomalous, foreign to the political and economic structures of society and culture.

If the first posture seems unsatisfying because it denies human agency and gives the past too much power over the present and future, the second risks ignoring how institutional logics and state-sanctioned violence emerge from a culture that disregards black people. Both sides fail to distinguish between the somewhat different tasks of *studying* the past and *narrating* the past in a useful way for moving society in a promising direction. In Frederick Douglass's felicitous formulation of the matter: "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future."<sup>15</sup>

These words come from Douglass's famous 1852 address, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." This address, I suggest, has an important philosophical insight regarding the normative infrastructure of democracy; it contains, in abbreviated form, much of a response to the question with which we began. In that address, Douglass does not dismiss the past. He stands in a line of thinkers who see in America's past a vital principle that is both visionary and realistic. His intuition is that he can deploy the principle of making and remaking that underwrites the American polity—what political theorists call the people's constituent power—to reimagine who constitutes the civic "we" of society. The idea of the people forms part of the tradition of American life; it is often used to combat the white supremacist tendencies of the American polity. We see it in the abolitionist movement, the long civil rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement most recently. Douglass retrieves this principle from the past; he counsels his fellows to place it in the service of the present and future. This implies that acting and reimagining the future is worthwhile and meaningful, but progress is not inevitable.

Douglass was not alone in his thinking. He belongs to a complicated tradition of African American political theorizing that includes nineteenth-century abolitionists David Walker, Maria Stewart, Hosea Easton, and Martin Delany and twentieth-century figures such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Billie Holiday, and James Baldwin. Often, they see their efforts as forming part of the very complex tradition of American moral and political language. They are fully aware of the entanglement of democracy and white supremacy, freedom and slavery, even as they seek to pull from and transform those portions of America's traditions that might support a racially just society. America's meaning—its past, present, and future—is, for them, something over which to struggle. They see "struggle" as an emergent property of the contested notion of the people central to democracy. This at once acknowledges both their place within and contested relationship to American political and moral thought more broadly.<sup>16</sup>

In one sense, entanglement tells us something—namely, that for these thinkers, they recognize a connection between the United States’ style of democracy and white supremacy. But in another sense, it does not tell us anything at all. In just what sense are they connected? On the reading of the thinkers I advance, most of them see American democracy and white supremacy as what Rogers Smith calls a “contingent symbiosis.” Although discussing the discourse of rights in America, I think we can expand Smith’s reflections. The thinkers I discuss largely interpret “America’s historical partnership” of democracy and white supremacy “as a profoundly constitutive but still contingent political alliance that has never been inevitable or unalterable.” As Smith explains, thinkers who subscribe to the contingent symbiosis thesis “stress how efforts to deny rights [and standing] on racial grounds have always been contested.”<sup>17</sup>

As African Americans grappled with the permutations of white supremacy, theirs was not a quest to recover a vision of the exalted America from which we have strayed. After all, the origins of the United States were not merely evidenced in the idea of a free republic but also and more importantly in the exercise of arbitrary power over indigenous populations and black people. The Janus-faced character of the American polity means that the interventions of African Americans are less of a recovery than a reconstruction. Gathering the symbols of their present and America’s past, they deploy them and speak through them, but always to authorize something that never truly existed. In this, the general tenor of their outlook rarely treats white supremacy as anomalous to America, but nor do they see the connection between it and democracy as inescapable.

The question of what America *is* or *can be* may defy articulation, but we cannot get on with figuring out where we should go and who we ought to be without narrating the past to which we belong. Worrying, however, about offering the *True* or *Final* description of that past (whether in the form of a closed tragedy or a romance) may miss the point: we ask questions of the past (Who are we, really?) less to understand our identity once and for all and more to aid us in making decisions about who we should become. The meaning of the past is forever being revised in light of an unsettled future. This is the aspirational character of the American imagination; it forms the foundation on which African Americans have often relied to make sense of their appeals to the nation. In this, they have placed their faith.

In the remainder of this introduction, I lay out a more specific set of questions that structure the book and the problem space they suggest, consider the relationship between history and political vision against

which the thinkers in this book emerge, specify the key animating concepts that ground the answers to the book's central questions, and outline the path forward.

### *The Central Questions*

*The Darkened Light of Faith* offers a philosophical-historical reconstruction of the shared normative vision of the thinkers listed above: David Walker, Maria Stewart, Hosea Easton, Martin Delany, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Billie Holiday, and James Baldwin. It aims to distill these thinkers' philosophical and rhetorical arguments as they sought to transform America into a racially just society.

I opened this introduction with a question about what justifies faith in the American polity. I suggested that the answer is tied to an aspirational view of the people. This offers a more focused set of questions that animate the book:

- How should we understand the political-philosophical thinking of African Americans (i.e., the thinkers above) who so often found themselves dominated by the American society they so diligently sought to transform?
- What must their vision of democracy presuppose about the people to whom they appealed and the society in which they stood?

In focusing on these two questions, this book intends for its readers to understand the broadly ethical account of political life these thinkers defend. An ethical account offers an orientation for guiding interactions among persons outside of state or federally recognized institutions. An ethical account is broadly social, and not merely a description of programmatic points to inform our political-institutional environment (e.g., political parties, branches of government, and legal institutions). The idea, however, is that the latter political-institutional account is embedded in and draws support from the social vision.

In this book, an ethical account of democracy refers to those features of action, self-understanding, and the value attached to others that are themselves guided by the norms of *freedom* and *equal regard*. Freedom here refers to the ability to pursue one's plans of life without fear or threat of being subjected to the use of arbitrary power—that is, without being dominated.<sup>18</sup> Equal regard is a term of specific importance. To regard someone or community is to show concern for them. To modify regard with the word “equal” means that the concern you extend is not comparatively



diminished in relation to others. Invidious racial distinctions, for example, violate the norm of equal regard because they presuppose status hierarchies (sometimes grounded in a story about biology or culture).<sup>19</sup> Equal regard can thus have different modalities, displaying itself in electoral politics, the distributive logic of economic systems, and the social organizations of society. This should not obscure what we are paying attention to—a way of regarding persons not diminished by social hierarchies that attach higher and lower values as if people were set upon a scale of measurement. Equal regard can inform institutions, but the thinkers we consider throughout this book emphasize its role in shaping social life—the character and culture of its inhabitants. To think of democracy in ethical terms is to understand freedom and equal regard as forming key features of a cultural horizon to which we can become habituated.

Given this framework, questions such as “who are we” and “who should we be” figure centrally as these thinkers confront and seek to upend the workings and habits of white supremacy. White supremacy thus functions not as anomalous to American culture but as part of its historical workings, thus necessitating a deep reconstitution of society.<sup>20</sup> The book insists on this view against overly legalistic and institutionalist accounts of democratic theory in circulation. It also advances this view against pessimistic accounts that see in American democracy a fundamental commitment to white supremacy that renders appeals for racial justice naïve. Finally, the book treats the questions of “who are we” and “who should we be” as necessitating a form of responsiveness that guards against romantic or triumphalist narratives of progress.

Notably, the book is selective and does not treat the many complex “ideologies” that define this tradition of thinking—what Michael Dawson calls “Black Visions.”<sup>21</sup> It is a selective interpretation of African American political thought from the perspective of a quest to transform the American polity—my central preoccupation. The omission, for instance, of Marcus Garvey or the later work of W.E.B. Du Bois is not a negative commentary on their significant contributions. Similarly, my emphasis on Frederick Douglass or Ida B. Wells or the early to middle Du Bois in their aim to improve the polity does not mean they are more deserving of attention than others. Rather, it speaks to my inquiry into how a group of intellectuals, activists, and, in some cases, artists found a way to commit themselves to make the United States a racially just society. In focusing on this thread of the tradition, one comes to discover the normative vision of democracy that sustained them and that they helped shape and articulate.

Two concepts present themselves—democracy and tradition—and deserve additional comment. The first is explicit throughout the book. The second is implicit in how I proceed. Democracy<sup>22</sup> does not, as just mentioned, exclusively refer to the institutions and procedures specified in the U.S. Constitution. As I read them, these thinkers see democracy as a way of relating to one's fellows that acknowledges their freedom and equal ethical and political standing and shows care and concern in that acknowledgment. "Relating to" is embodied fundamentally in action and comportment. This explains why the archive of African American political and literary reflections is often characterized by a persistent request, often demand, that their white counterparts be more than they are in their treatment of black people, or to see themselves as having betrayed equality, freedom, or justice. Democracy is an embodied and acted upon way of life that black people are often trying to realize mainly because the existing way of life involves violence, exclusion, and domination. The idea of democracy functions as both a presumption of these thinkers' practical and philosophical orientation and a way of relating that they seek to elicit from their fellows. This account is commensurate with the representative institutions of a constitutional order, but democracy's meaning exceeds the workings of those institutions as it seeks a home in the habits and sensibilities of the community.

By tradition—the idea implied in how I proceed—I mean an ongoing practice of inquiry that emanates from a set of historical concerns and problems and their role in shaping the community's ethos. Understanding tradition in this way draws on the very different thinking of post-colonial scholar David Scott and the Aristotelianism of Alasdair MacIntyre. Traditions, as MacIntyre argues, are often defined "retrospectively," but they are nonetheless expressive of a set of themes immanent to communal life and structure the purposes of individuals within the community, even as they disagree on how one ought to understand those themes and on what are the best approaches to addressing them.<sup>23</sup> This is what Scott calls the "problem-space" of language and action—"an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes . . . hang."<sup>24</sup> Traditions have a dynamic character; their unfolding involves "an argumentative retelling" that assumes the possibility of conflict, harmony, abandonment, and growth.<sup>25</sup> Members of what we think of as intellectual traditions can be understood as responding to, elaborating, criticizing, or wholly rejecting claims put forward by parties to the conversation.

Here now is the problem space. The figures in this book belong to a wider "Afro-modern tradition of political thought" that first emerged in

response to eighteenth-century slavery and colonialism.<sup>26</sup> But they specifically and critically engage with the practices and habits of domination that emerge from white supremacy's hierarchy of value in the United States and believe they can use and redeploy the normative resources of democracy to imagine society anew. These two features bind them together across time that justifies speaking of something like African American political thought, while also marking them off from other problems that define the tradition of political philosophy.

Of course, it is significant that the collection of thinkers I take up in this book direct their reflections to the status of black people in the United States and do not concede ground on the ethical and political meaning of democracy. The first narrows the focus area, which means the book does not follow the current drift of important scholarship on black internationalism and transnational influences on African American political thought.<sup>27</sup> The second centers the book's goal to recover a thread of thinking within African American political thought that sees the practice of contestation as central to the legitimacy of the American democratic project.

Legitimacy is not a way of talking about adherence to a *de facto* polity but a way of marking the principle of revision and invention that can connect what the nation *is* to what it *may be*, and do so within the very boundary of the background norms with which the citizenry is familiar. In basic electoral terms, for example, this means losing need not be a permanent condition. In broad ethical-political terms, it means the culture of a democratic society is ideally open to development as a condition of its legitimacy. The criterion of legitimacy is the norm of openness, with freedom and equal regard guiding the purposes to which openness should be put.

The principle of openness provides political actors entitlement to improve the polity. This is not to suggest that existing institutional configurations and laws are insignificant. Rather, it claims that citizens will typically act in the name of a future-not-yet and treat responsiveness to that imagined future as the grounds for the legitimacy of democracy. This is because our institutions are not perfectly organized, our laws are never consistently followed, and the virtue of justice is always in short supply. This avoids any suggestion that these thinkers subscribe to democracy's inherent goodness.<sup>28</sup> Instead, I focus on what African American thinkers believe to be possible, given how they understand democracy (i.e., its commitments) and our capacities.

In using the language of a future-not-yet, the book follows a naturalistic line of thinking latent in these thinkers' writings. Their naturalism mingles with a perfectionist impulse regarding self and society's capacity to improve. By naturalism, I mean the basic claim that society's norms emerge from our interactions with each other and the wider world to which we belong. Our norms do not sit outside our everyday practices of critical evaluation—they exist in the space of reasons.<sup>29</sup> An ethical quality, as denoted in the utterance “that was a mean thing to do,” is susceptible to being a true or false statement on par with the claim “that dog is brown.” Notice, both intend to reference something in the world, although we treat human beings as natural parts of that world.

I use the language of perfectionism to track a way of thinking about the *existing* features of democratic life (e.g., norms, beliefs, and social practices) and the cognitive-affective dimensions of human beings that make possible imagined futures.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, I do not define perfectionism by referencing some static vision of the good or human excellence, even as perfectionism sits within a regulatory framework. Seeing self and society as subject to improvement takes off right at the point where the norms of freedom and equal regard function as regulative goods. These norms discipline the character and content of society's responsiveness and development, while opening intense debate about how to understand the meaning of those norms and who can lay claim to them. African American political thought often intervenes with creative reconfigurations and resignifications of the existing features of democratic life. But what they are often doing is directing their readers and listeners to an incompleteness to life as found in the treatment of black people. The aversion to or shame of this incompleteness, they hope, will push individuals beyond themselves (as a form of education) toward new patterns of living and ways of seeing one's fellows. Their perfectionist contributions are at once internal to American culture, even as they transcend the empirical realities black and white people live.

### *History and Vision*

The studies in this book are not exhaustive of the authors and texts under consideration. Some of the thinkers I consider have written only one main text (e.g., Walker) and others have written numerous works (e.g., Du Bois and Baldwin). In cases where I take up a thinker who falls into the second camp, I am not especially interested, as a biographer might be, in holding

the entirety of a thinker's corpus in view and exploring the relationship between context and ideas throughout a life. As political theorists often do, I am not attempting to articulate the philosophical holism of these thinkers. I do not claim to represent the ultimate integrity of their views throughout their careers. The book invites the reader to think about the themes here in the context of a single figure in just the way suggested by the biographer or the political theorist, but that is not my task.

Moreover, since I am interested in their thinking when they believed democracy susceptible to being improved and realized, I do not pursue those moments when despair set in. Here, "despair set in" refers narrowly to those moments when the quest to transform the United States was abandoned, never to be pursued again. Those moments are important and worthy of study. Reflecting on them, however, is not the task here. This book is after what, in their estimation, is necessary to transform the United States into a polity that affirms the self-worth and normative standing of black people and that grounds self-worth and standing in a firm basis of proper care and concern. Since the inception of this project, my thinking has been to proceed candidly regarding my approach and prepare the reader for precisely what they will receive from beginning to end. Suppose it turns out, at the very start, that my mode of proceeding stands in violation of the methodological commitments of the reader and the book is therefore unlikely to get a fair hearing. In that case, it stands to reason that this book is not for you and you should promptly put it to the side. But I hope you will instead stay and journey with me.

Notwithstanding, my historical sensibilities guide the method of engagement with these thinkers and I attend to the context. The working assumption is that what these thinkers are *saying* is coextensive with understanding what they are *doing* vis-à-vis their context. I treat their texts as ethical and political interventions seeking to transform their communities and as containing insights for us today.<sup>31</sup> Here, history becomes a means to envision a different community.

How we should stand to the past and allow it to inform our orientation toward the future has always been a lively debate within African American political thought. An example of the importance of this is in order. In his 1885 Storer College address, "The Need for New Ideas and New Aims," African American minister and nationalist Alexander Crummell worries about black people's constant "recollection" of slavery and domination, for "as slavery was a degrading thing, the constant recalling of it to the mind serves, by the law of association, to degradation."<sup>32</sup> Crummell attempts to free black Americans from what he calls the "commanding" thought

of slavery and domination so that they may imagine new ideas and new aims regarding their freedom. After all, Storer College was created in the wake of the Civil War to educate and usher black men into a bright future of freedom. “You will notice here,” Crummell argues, “that there is a broad distinction between memory and recollection. Memory . . . is the necessary and unavoidable entrance, storage and recurrence of facts and ideas to the understanding and the consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> But he seems to think that meditating on the past will only constrain the imagination of black Americans and serve to diminish them in their own eyes.

Douglass, who was in attendance, greeted Crummell’s remarks with “his emphatic and most earnest protest.”<sup>34</sup> But why protest? The reason is that Douglass wants both black and white Americans to keep in view (that is, recollect) the harms of slavery in order to discipline present and future action but also to ensure that one acknowledges the problems to which he and others were called to respond. Recollection is the process of bringing back to mind that which lives in our memory. Douglass, of course, was also after what scarred that past. Recollecting the past recognizes what Wells, Du Bois, Baldwin, and Morrison go on to observe: the past lives in us (Du Bois, explicitly, refers to this as the “present-past”), subtly shaping our habitual and perceptual capacities.<sup>35</sup> For them, the past functions as funded experience, making a claim on Americans and against which a properly imagined future comes into view.

This, too, is Douglass’s position. Speaking only two years earlier on the twentieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, with the Civil War still fresh in his mind, Douglass tells his audience: “Man is said to be an animal looking before and after. To him alone is given the prophetic vision, enabling him to discern the outline of his future through the mists of the past.”<sup>36</sup> He binds the future and past together, as he says elsewhere, if only to hold back the “many disguises” deployed by the “South” to explain away slavery as the reason for the Civil War and with it “influences, which will remain with us . . . for generations to come.”<sup>37</sup>

Douglass makes an important observation. The influence of the past is not merely something that we need to reckon with in order to imagine the future. The future itself (even in its imagined form) will likely bear the trace of the tragic past—the betrayals, the violent acts, and the deaths. The issue is how shall we stand in relation to this fact. Will we disavow, allowing the past to wreak havoc on our lives? Or will we try to be responsive and accountable to it, thus placing the past in a productive relationship with the future?<sup>38</sup> Throughout the book, I will insist that this second position runs through most, if not all, of the thinkers we consider and finally

leads to the idea of responsiveness to the past as a feature of democratic life given our racial history. We will see this most powerfully on display in the critical essays of James Baldwin.

### *The Animating Concepts*

I have provided a set of questions that motivate the book, but *The Darkened Light of Faith* also revolves around several concepts that serve as guides for addressing the questions above—"the people," "rhetoric," "affect," "aesthetics," "character," and "faith"—concepts that find powerful defenders in the thinkers that animate the book. The book argues that the workings of these concepts capture the deeper meaning of much of what African Americans are after. These concepts help disclose their understanding of the interiority of democracy and the resources that can enrich and extend its reach. I do not structure the book according to these concepts. Instead, they unfold throughout the book. Sometimes they emerge for analysis, and, at other times, they serve as presuppositions of the argument. They nonetheless work as substantive frameworks that shape these thinkers' understanding of the problem-space. These concepts are not unique to African Americans, but they redeploy them because they see in them the means for articulating social forms and ways of living not yet realized.

The book centralizes the meaning of "the people" as the animating ethical and political category of democracy. Although there is a historical lineage regarding the importance of the people, the term has received renewed interest in recent decades.<sup>39</sup> I join others in emphasizing the constitutive futurity of the people in American discourse. Critically, I add to that discussion by showing how African Americans put the concept of the people to work. The people function as both a descriptive term (referring to those with rights and privileges per the Constitution) and an aspirational term (a category in which new visions of self and society might be reimagined). The latter view captures the discontinuity between an evolving idea of the people and the relative stability of political society (i.e., governmental institutions, laws, and the policing apparatus) that claims to speak and act in the people's name and on their behalf.

The aspirational view gains the power that it does because it involves claims about the malleability of our cognitive and emotional faculties—that is, it presupposes the people's susceptibility to being transformed, expanded, and improved. This is a feature of American political and moral discourse generally, running from Thomas Jefferson through the transcendentalists to the pragmatists. As with them, the aspirational view

of the people forms a central thread in African American political thought. Democracy derives its legitimacy from this aspirational description, and thus the principle of openness forms a constitutive feature of democracy's self-understanding. This normative perspective imagines the American polity capable of receiving new visions of how it ought to be organized and how it ought to understand itself.

Rhetoric, as a mode of persuasion, is how these thinkers seek to induce their fellows to embrace new visions of the nation and their place therein. Throughout the book, rhetoric refers to a practice of speaking and writing that seeks to persuade one's audience. Simple enough. But one of the critical insights of scholarship on rhetoric is that it is neither an idiosyncratic feature of democracy nor a strategic framework of manipulation.<sup>40</sup> For our purposes, rhetoric functions in a twofold sense. First, rhetoric is a means to honor the judgment of one's interlocutors as well as denote the absence of sovereign control over those with whom we engage and on whom we depend for nurturing a safe and nourishing community. This is also true, as I read the tradition, of its religious prophetic form and its secular variety.<sup>41</sup> To say "I am persuaded" is not to make a claim about what the rhetorician has achieved, and so my account here disciplines the presumptive and coercive role the charismatic leader is thought to serve in African American political thought. On the account of rhetoric I use, the person who is persuaded is making a claim about their abilities—they have turned things over in their mind, they have used their judgment, and they have decided to live their lives in the light of that judgment. Rhetoric's internal logic thus invites contestatory engagement. It honors the reflective and affective agency of those to whom the rhetorician appeals.

In the second sense, rhetoric functions as a means to enter the discursive field of America's ethical and political life. We see this quite consistently when African American thinkers appeal, for example, to the Declaration of Independence or the American Founders or they figuratively place themselves into the story of Exodus (not uniquely American).<sup>42</sup> At just these moments, they pay deference to the legitimating languages of society. For without some horizon of legitimation, they can scarcely be thought persuasive in their appeal. In fact, it is unlikely they would be intelligible at all. But importantly, this is always the first step to transforming the reach of society's discursive and practical symbols. They thus understand rhetoric as a form of power.

We clearly see this idea of rhetoric as power if we focus on the cultural and characterological significance of white supremacy and racial domination. Here, rhetoric's ethical dimension is most clearly visible. African



American thinkers direct their rhetorical appeals to the affective dimension of persons, and personhood, for many of them, presumes a cognitive-affective bind. I run these two together (cognitive and affective) so that the reader understands that for the thinkers I discuss in this book, emotions do not merely lead to physical disturbances of the body (e.g., recoiling in horror or lowering one's head in shame) but significantly are also evaluative (e.g., I lower my head in shame because I stand in violation of my commitments or the commitments I should hold).<sup>43</sup>

As I maintain throughout, from Walker to Baldwin, these thinkers believe that human sensibilities perform a central role in our comportment toward the world and others. Whether it is in Walker's graphic invocations of the suffering slave, Du Bois's textured narrative of black life, or Wells and the NAACP's deployment of the lynched black person to reveal the horrors of America's character, they all see themselves as trying to reeducate the sensibilities of their white counterparts. Their deployment of fear, sympathy, love, shame, and horror is part and parcel of the normative infrastructure of human life. These emotions help us in our process of marking out just what kinds of life are worthy of inhabiting and what forms of life we should abandon.

For them, democratic politics is not merely an arrangement of institutions and procedural functions but a means for rearranging and transforming our sensibilities. Rearrangement and transformation are focused on having our perceptual capacities (i.e., the senses that enable us to perceive and respond to the world) attuned to the claim black Americans make and the pain they endure, thus locating them within rather than outside our cognitive-affective field. For example, Billie Holiday's late 1930s orchestrated performances of the haunting song about lynching, "Strange Fruit," in New York's Café Society provoke her audiences into displaying the appropriate emotions to lynching through a mimetic display of the horrific. The meaning of the song contains a somatic-affective road map that Holiday's gestures make explicit for consideration. Her words and performances reach out toward the audience, asking them to think and feel the norm being conveyed—that we should look at these events in horror. Or to put it differently, she performs the very thing she hopes to arouse in her listeners. This is not an evasion of politics but engaging politics at the deepest level of self and society. This is what Baldwin has in mind when he says in *The Fire Next Time*: "that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they really are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."<sup>44</sup> As with Holiday and Baldwin, the goal of this tradition is to cultivate new sensitivities toward black people (sometimes

by seeing things as we should and other times by seeing who we are in our treatment of black people) and to do so such that they emanate from white Americans' self-understanding.

In saying that *democratic politics is not merely an arrangement of institutions and procedural functions*, I do not mean to deny the necessity of regulation. I accept as settled Martin Luther King Jr.'s point that "judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless." There are many practices—slavery, racial segregation, unfair treatment based on race or gender differences—that are demonstrably wrong and thus require prohibitions and sanctions. For just this reason, the franchise has functioned and continues to do so as a tool of self-defense for African Americans. There is a place, then, for what King calls the "force of law" in realizing justice. But we must not be misled into believing that restraining the heartless is sufficient for rightly orienting us to the values the law defends. "We must admit," King continues, "that the ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the willingness of men to obey the unenforceable."<sup>45</sup> Here, the subjects of engagement are not the unfeeling actors—the heartless that King speaks about—but the ones whose hearts have not yet been touched. These are the people to whom King speaks when he says, "our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."<sup>46</sup> This qualitative change in our souls—this perfectionist ethic—informs many of the thinkers we will take up.

In proceeding this way, my reading of these thinkers overlaps with political theory's turn toward ethos, but my most proximate fellow-travelers emphasize the "habits" of racial disregard (e.g., Eddie Glaude, Danielle Allen, and Christopher Lebron) and the "culture" of racial ideology (e.g., Cornel West, Iris Marion Young, and Imani Perry).<sup>47</sup> Ethos refers to the "characteristic spirit . . . of a people or community."<sup>48</sup> African American political thought aims to uncover one kind of ethos that sustains what Allen calls the habits of "dominance and acquiescence."<sup>49</sup> These habits often structure the relationships and orientations among black and white citizens and narrow the cognitive-affective field of regard. But given that African Americans stand within the very community whose particular way of life they seek to transform, it is appropriate to frame their resistance as pressing against a *specific form* of American life.<sup>50</sup> Seen in this light, African American thinkers seek to engender feelings of horror (in some cases) and shame (in other instances) regarding the people we are when the habits of acquiescence and dominance are at play. They aim to cultivate an alternative ethos that affirms black Americans' social standing and proper

regard for them. It is not only then that these thinkers direct their reflections to the affective basis of self and society, but they see both as artistic productions in a fundamental sense—that is, as configurations that intend to “engender a certain sensibility toward” the reality they describe.<sup>51</sup>

By focusing on the importance of character as a site where affect and aesthetics combine, I resist accounts that confine political and ethical development to the domain of legality. One prominent contemporary thread in thinking about constituent power restricts its meaning to constitutional or, more broadly, juridical processes.<sup>52</sup> For the thinkers considered in this book, it leaves little room for addressing the political and ethical culture of society to which they direct their attention.

I have frequently invoked the language of character. In following King (although we see this in earlier African American thinkers), I have also used character’s semantic cognate—soul—to convey those ethical characteristics that define who we are. The soul functions as the bearer of the attributes we typically associate with character. I have used these terms to make clear what these thinkers are trying to transform.

The use of character or soul often makes many anxious because they worry it will only serve to indict those who are often the victims rather than those responsible for the harms. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century version of this among African Americans was decidedly mixed. Uplift ideology or respectability politics by African American thinkers—an ethical-political orientation that centers the practices and culture of black people as essential to their freedom—was consistently structured by criticisms of white supremacy.<sup>53</sup> From Walker to Douglass to Cooper to Du Bois, the emphasis was on black agency and on black people’s role in their own advancement, while also engaging in criticisms of the psychological, social, and institutional workings of white supremacy that constrained black flourishing. As African American thinkers struggled to articulate a robust vision of self and society necessary to sustain freedom and equality, they contended with dominant cultural norms that linked freedom to sovereignty on the one side and to crass individualism on the other.

Admittedly, against the backdrop of a culture that devalued black life and also affirmed ideas of sovereignty and individualism, the politics of respectability often produced its own irony. As Kevin Gaines puts it: “Elite Blacks replicated, even as they contested, the uniquely American racial fictions upon which the liberal conceptions of social reality and ‘equality’ were founded.”<sup>54</sup> The historical downstream result of this is the following: the context of domination falls from view, leaving only the will and character of the victims in place. Failing to free oneself from domination,

or so the argument goes, is a problem with you, not with the society to which you belong. Historically, the result of this, argues Adolph Reed, led to a vision of racial custodianship—a set of political and cultural actors that broker for black freedom while reinscribing worries of black people’s preparedness, especially poor black people, for freedom.<sup>55</sup>

While I am sympathetic to these worries, especially given how easily character-talk lends itself to conservative approaches to addressing the inequities in black life, I ultimately think leaning too heavily on this framework distorts the thinkers under consideration in this book. For on their account, they intend to get us to see that our political and economic institutions are not structurally immune from our faults. This claim, and primarily because of where power resides, is consistently directed at the failure of character and the short supply of virtue of white Americans. All of the thinkers considered in this book have something to say about black people regarding their role in securing their own freedom, but those claims are always housed within a critical analysis of the United States’ culture of devaluing black people that shapes institutions and, significantly, the outlook of white Americans. The implication, I hope, is clear: it is a mistake to think we can realize and institutionalize a healthy and inclusive democratic society without a set of habits and orientations that support the equal standing of citizens.

The emphasis in this book on character or soul is fundamentally about centering a question: *Who do we take ourselves to be in the lives we live and the practices in which we participate?* The “we” here is a general kind; the question is for members of the United States. The question deliberately does not focus on discrete actions of persons and, instead, emphasizes the patterns of living that shape and give expression to the lives we do live in relation to our black counterparts. As I interpret the thinkers in this book, it seems that what they have in mind above all else is the character of our lives, whose very workings often frustrate the flourishing of black lives.

Throughout, I invoke the use of character or soul, to use John Dewey’s language, to refer to “an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response”<sup>56</sup> in how we think, feel, and act. To say “acquired predisposition” is to say there are general patterns to our attitudes and actions that are themselves shaped by background beliefs. This is what gives our way of acting in the world a kind of predictive quality.<sup>57</sup> I shall assert that this notion of character or soul is applicable to communities—indeed, whole nations—as when we speak of fighting for or improving the “soul of the nation.” It is just simply possible for us to talk about the character of the American polity—its predicative tendencies toward black people and,

even, its countervailing tendencies. It is even possible to speak, as the language of countervailing tendencies suggests, of the national character warring against itself.

This view of character sits in the background of a great many African American thinkers. This is why Baldwin says that the “business of the writer is to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.”<sup>58</sup> Here, Baldwin discusses the writer’s goal as a social critic and as a model for democratic citizenship. We must go beneath the surface because it shapes how we see, hear, and think: “The things that people really do and really mean and really say and really feel are almost impossible for them to describe, but these are the very things which are most important about them. These things control them and that is where reality is.”<sup>59</sup> But we ought to be careful. White supremacy does not merely obstruct democracy because it shapes the institutional and economic structures through which we move (although it does) but, significantly, as Baldwin suggests, because it molds the orientation of white Americans who come to see themselves as more worthy than others, and certainly as more emblematic of the “True” or “Real” America.<sup>60</sup> White supremacy thus functions as a feature of the American character, and it is what makes that character an object of horror, of shame, of profound disappointment, and, dare I say, as something from which we must revolt.

Amid the workings of Jim and Jane Crow and the horror of lynching, Ida B. Wells points us to the logic of white supremacy in the form of the “unwritten law” that defines much of what African Americans intend to upset. Lynching, she explains in her 1900 article “Lynch Law in America,” represents “the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an ‘unwritten’ law that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath.”<sup>61</sup> The passage is gripping; she intends to capture the unstated habits of American life. It denotes the ever-present force of white supremacy (that which is unwritten) that shapes white Americans’ outlook and polices the boundaries between them and blacks (thus functioning as law). White supremacy forms a collection, as Baldwin tells us, of “habits of thought [that] reinforce and sustain habits of power.” For that reason, “it is not even remotely possible for the excluded to become included, for this inclusion means, precisely, the end of the *status quo*.”<sup>62</sup> At a basic level, by *status quo* Baldwin means the habits of believing white Americans are worthy of care and concern while non-whites, especially black folks, are not. In his last book, King points to this same force when he explains that “white America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap” between themselves

and black Americans to realize equality.<sup>63</sup> Wells's, Baldwin's, and King's remarks could have come from Walker or Easton or Du Bois. Precisely because the unwritten law informs white people's identity, African American intellectuals often direct their reflections to the characterological and psychological foundations of American life.

These thinkers are not naïve; they know that success is not assured. The reason is simple but often ignored: African Americans depend on the judgment and actions of those over whom they exercise no control. For this very reason, they rely on faith to sustain themselves during their struggles. However, the grand illusion of American popular thinking is in believing that it grants to its participants sovereign control over their lives. This belief is heightened by the specific ways white supremacy immunizes some segments from the racial harms experienced by other segments of society. In their struggles to contest white supremacy and transform society—in their dependence on those over whom they do not control—African Americans often model a form of non-sovereign existence that mirrors the interdependence and uncertainty of democratic life.<sup>64</sup> In other words, the specific and heightened state of vulnerability black people experience bespeaks a general form of vulnerability that all democratic citizens must confront in their reliance on their fellows.

There is, of course, an important caveat to this point. As it relates to black Americans specifically, the aim is to disentangle their vulnerability from their blackness. But they nonetheless ask us to remain attuned to the general vulnerability that comes with being reliant on one's fellows in a democratic society. In grappling with experiences of disregard, they reveal for themselves and their white counterparts that the logic of white supremacy turns on a fundamental rejection of the dangers (and the benefits) that come with democracy—with working in concert and community with others in contexts of uncertainty.

This uncertainty heightens the necessity of faith. Admittedly, "faith" is a term that does not seem like the kind of thing one would want to invoke where political life is concerned. On one level, faith readily brings to mind dependence on a non-human entity such as God. On another level, faith seems to involve us in holding beliefs that appear irrational for people to hold. This may unwittingly tether us to an irredeemably unjust polity. For example, Martin Delany worried that black people take their religious faith "too far," preventing them from acknowledging that their white counterparts are beyond repair.<sup>65</sup> Or, one might think that the need for faith is pointless precisely because of the existing legal and institutional safeguards that sidestep a game of chance that faith would seemingly involve us in.<sup>66</sup>

Faith, in the first instance, need not work in that way. People have faith in God's redeeming power, a naturalistic faith in humans' collective capacities to be better than what they are, and faith in the power of a political vision to capture the imagination of others and direct their actions. Throughout this book, I shall often emphasize the cooperative relationship between the last two objects of faith as forming part of one coherent whole.

Regarding the second worry—faith as holding beliefs that appear irrational—I also do not think this is necessarily true. I generally agree with Robert Merrihew Adams that “faith is, or involves, believing something that a rational person might be seriously tempted to doubt.”<sup>67</sup> As we will see with Douglass, but especially Cooper, faith in a vision of life will always be in danger of giving the society to which one belongs and the capacities of one's fellow citizens too much credit. Since our political and ethical standing is always in need of social support, it is not clear how we avoid uncertainty by emphasizing institutional configurations or constitutional norms.

As I interpret the thinkers throughout this book, faith is a stance toward a vision of life that one projects into a world at variance with that vision and for which one is willing to struggle in the service of and often against the odds. Faith, as the theologian Paul Tillich famously tells us, is a matter of “ultimate concern.”<sup>68</sup> And “our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or non-being.”<sup>69</sup> There is, then, a stubborn attachment to a vision of life precisely because were one to lose faith in it or come to think it could never be, one would lose something of constitutive significance. Precisely because faith takes uncertainty as a central feature of its existential and epistemic logic, faith-holders are capable of struggling in the face of democracy's likely compromises with injustice and disregard without giving in to pessimism or withdrawal.

Faith is less a species of a particular religion, although religious commitments may be involved, and more a function of the imagination seeking to realize the good related to one's very standing. Two observations about this point are worthy of note. First, given the connection between faith and ethical and political standing, it should be unsurprising that faith forms a central thread in African American political thought and action. As James Cone tells us, for an “abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out,” the formal structure of faith provides black people with the strength to struggle against the odds.<sup>70</sup> This need not depend on the thick eschatological framework informing Tillich's and Cone's reflections, if we see the general framework of faith as a feature of perfectionist longings in both sacred and secular forms. For African Americans,

worrying about their political and ethical standing is a matter of ultimate concern.

Second, in struggling against the odds, the ethical and political imagination is a central feature of perfectionist longings. The imagination figures prominently in African American political thought, carrying a role similar to that Percy Shelley assigned to the imagination in poetry—namely, that “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.”<sup>71</sup> For this reason, Douglass, to take just one example, tells us that the most interesting side of human beings, even as complex as we are, is our “dreamy, clairvoyant, poetic . . . side . . . the side which is better pleased with . . . things as they seem, than things as they are.”<sup>72</sup> For Douglass and others, this is not a retreat from reality but a confrontation with it and an attempt to fight against the deadening forces of “things as they are.” The imagination, as I use it throughout, is the ability to see the *not yet*. Faith becomes the imagination’s expression, and the courage to act functions as faith’s executive virtue.<sup>73</sup> When bound to the imagination, faith looks on the present from the perspective of the future. The vision of the future becomes part of the reason for resisting present actions that frustrate flourishing. This does not, however, involve denying the present (and, as a result, the past) since the ethical and political imagination always carries the ghostly after-effect of the reality that gave it life.<sup>74</sup> Resistance involves working through the present and past such that one is no longer under their control. The disciplined quality of faith comes from taking bits and pieces of the existing culture of American life (things as they seem, in Douglass’s language) and reweaving them into a narrative about freedom’s realization and equal regard. It is a way of helping others imagine more comprehensively than they do and from positions they do not occupy.

Both here and throughout, I invoke culture as a way to understand (once more) the register on which these thinkers work. Culture is the web of beliefs, norms, and values that shape from below and above the social-psychological horizon in which we forge our characters and understand our place and the place of others in society.<sup>75</sup> As Imani Perry puts it: “we have common ways of thinking that are reflective of a racial ideology and that sustains a belief in or an assumption of White superiority.”<sup>76</sup> These common ways of thinking provide the context in which ideas of who is worthy of regard and disregard form. Therefore, culture is not about the “best which has been thought and said”;<sup>77</sup> rather, culture embodies ways of living and the patterns of that life whose meaning is captured in the complex whole of society’s social understanding.



Importantly, in a diverse society, culture is always internally differentiated as it reflects the inner tensions and pressures of a community. I thus treat these thinkers as interested in focusing our attention on ways of living that disregard black life. They seek to offer alternative patterns of proper regard to reshape the culture of American life. In this sense, from Walker to Baldwin, and in political pamphlets, treatises, and music, the idea of democracy—how to understand it and its location—spans the field of culture itself. This explains why they often concern themselves with the normative underbelly of political life, speaking both to and beyond society's institutional and juridical practices. They concern themselves with trying to figure out just how it is that white Americans come to think of themselves in the way that they do and just how white Americans could come to choose to be something other than the false ideas they hold, the cruel actions they often commit, and the dehumanizing practices in which they participate.

### *The Path Forward*

Here now is the unfolding of the path of this book. Because of the book's internal complexity, I have found it necessary to preface each part with introductory remarks to remind the reader of where we have been and what we still have left to traverse. Part 1 outlines the central concerns of the first three chapters. It begins with a question: How did African Americans in the nineteenth century come to imagine themselves as political agents amid their exclusion and domination? In answering this question, I track the power of rhetoric, how it centralizes the capacity for judging as the essence of the citizenly standing of persons, the ability for transformation and improvement as a result, and the form of domination against which black Americans struggled.

Chapter 1 centralizes the importance of nineteenth-century abolitionist David Walker. There I offer a reading of his widely circulated 1829 pamphlet. Walker's famous and infamous *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* expresses a puzzle at the very outset. What are we to make of his use of "citizens" in the title given the denial of political rights and equal standing to African Americans? The chapter argues that the pamphlet relies on, because it emerges within, the cultural and linguistic norms associated with the term "appeal" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This allows Walker to call forth the political standing of black people. Walker's use of the term "citizen" dispenses with the recognitive legal

relationship we usually associate with constitutionalism. In contrast, it is the practice of judging that grounds one's citizenly standing. This, I argue, is the pamphlet's political power; it exemplifies the call-and-response logic of rhetoric as a feature of what Walker calls a republican society.

Chapter 2 extends the previous analysis by explaining the relationship between responsiveness (as embodied in Walker's goal to stimulate his readers' judgment) and political action. If the first chapter illuminates how rhetorical engagement affirms the political standing of addressees in a republican polity, chapter 2 asks what entailments follow from political standing in the face of domination. Walker tells us that he seeks to awaken his fellows. We must ask: To what is he trying to awaken them? His answer, I argue, is what I call the demand of freedom. To stand within the normative horizon of taking oneself to be free involves, quite simply, but powerfully, the demand to resist domination.

Walker's text is about freedom and how one can awaken blacks and whites—men and, importantly, women—to its demand. This is the place of his perfectionism but also that of several other prominent nineteenth-century thinkers such as Maria Stewart, Hosea Easton, and Frederick Douglass. All of them help fill out my discussion of the period. All are concerned with how domination distorts the aspiring feature of the self—what they call the soul—and how we are to guard against distortion. This involves thinking through black Americans' relationship to themselves amid domination but also, and critically, the comportment of white Americans. It is this second issue where the cognitive-affective features of self and societal improvement come into view as Walker appeals to fear, shame, and integrity. In this, we see the ethical character of the tradition with which we will be concerned.

Chapter 3 brings Walker's and others' reliance on republicanism, with its idea of freedom as non-domination, under critical scrutiny. The point of doing so is to explain how character and culture—the sites of perfectionist intervention—function in the criticism of white supremacy. This chapter pursues two arguments. First, the chapter contends that we should read nineteenth-century African American thinkers as resituating republicanism's idea of civic virtue in the context of chattel slavery and racism. The result transforms civic virtue into a defense of racial solidarity. This was supported by the various political activities of the nineteenth century that we see in periodicals by African Americans, literary societies, and the Negro Convention movement beginning in the 1830s. But it also found philosophical articulation and defense in various thinkers running from the 1830s to the 1850s.

The chapter enriches the meaning of non-domination (beyond its normal descriptions in the contemporary literature) by placing it in the context of white supremacy. In doing so, we see how these thinkers illuminate an essential difference between political slavery and chattel slavery that is often missing from defenses of republicanism. Political slavery involves denying a standing previously had (think, for example, of the British American colonists). In contrast, chattel slavery refers to beliefs that one was never *naturally* fit for standing at all.

These two different forms of slavery generate different responses. Historically, most variants of republicanism tie mastery to identifiable persons or institutions. This largely shapes the legalistic or institutionalist responses of redress. In contrast, African American thinkers see domination as emanating from the community—its culture—given the hostile and demeaning ideas about black people in circulation. Easton will refer to this as “public sentiment” in the 1830s, Douglass in the 1840s will refer to blacks as being the “slaves of the community,” and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper will say in the 1850s that blacks are enslaved to a “vitiating public opinion.”<sup>78</sup> In all instances, what they have in mind is the culture of disregard and they see it as the site on which transformation must occur.

By the end of part 1, we will be left with an important set of questions that frame the four chapters of part 2. We can state the questions as such: Can the account of our cognitive-affective capacity for transformation suggested by the previous chapters find support in the normative foundation of American life? Is there a way of understanding the norms of legitimacy and justification central to American political life as supporting the plasticity of the self as suggested by the appeals of many of these thinkers? How to effect a transformation in the citizenry’s cognitive-affective capacities to bring the life of African Americans into proper view? These questions are of utmost importance because by the end of chapter 3, a disagreement opens between Delany’s forceful rejection of the idea that the American polity is susceptible to transformation in the 1850s and Douglass’s (and others’) faith in the opposite claim.

Chapter 4 begins to answer these questions by turning to the idea of the people central to American political discourse—the people in its descriptive and aspirational modes. The chapter also addresses a concern that emerges with this account of the people—the way the aspirational account leaves black people open to abuse—by revisiting the debate between Delany and Douglass in the 1850s over emigration. I treat accounts of the people as a means for thinking about ethical and political transformation. But I do so by recovering and using Thomas Jefferson as a proxy for a

general way of thinking in which the idea of the people is tied to openness—an idea internal to early American revolutionary discourse. Instability sits at the core of the idea of the people central to popular sovereignty. As we will see, this undermines determinant descriptions of the people, both the version found in Jefferson’s unsavory moments and the version found in Delany’s writings of the 1850s.

The chapter also takes up a critical issue, one that remains with us today. In orienting African Americans to a future that may never arrive, they may unwittingly become reconciled to their condition as they long for a future-not-yet. Returning to Delany and Douglass, but now with the insights of Anna Julia Cooper’s seminal text of 1892, *A Voice from the South*, the chapter maintains that this problem denotes the uncertainty that defines political life and necessitates faith. On this account of the people, faith becomes an intrinsic feature of democratic life.

Chapter 5 revolves around a series of questions that think through the process by which the people are called to a higher vision of themselves in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. How should we read Ida B. Wells’s rich and detailed journalistic narrations of lynching? How should we understand the deployment of lynching photographs by the NAACP? How should we interpret Billie Holiday’s powerful and culturally significant protest song “Strange Fruit” and explicit performances of it throughout her career?

The chapter explores the horror of lynching events (as described or photographed) as part of a politics of reeducation. Just as lynching events and photographs tied white participants together in a community organized around norms and practices that involved policing and brutalizing black Americans, antilynching activists see the same photographs as a visible testimony to the moral depravity of white Americans that might galvanize the black community and shame the polity into a new, higher mode of living. The chapter maintains that Wells, the NAACP, and Holiday presuppose the people as an unsettled category and understand the image (in fact or imagined) as part of calling a people into existence.

The first part of the chapter begins with a stylized account of the relationship between aesthetics and democracy as distilled from Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*. In that work we see the centrality of aesthetics and the power of the image in political society, and Whitman’s attempt to make the viewer perceptually sensitive to the equal standing of persons. With the idea of the aspirational people on the one side and the account of democratic aesthetics on the other, we discover our angle of vision for understanding Wells, the NAACP, and Holiday. Recasting lynching as a

story about the horrific features of American life functions to generate not attraction but horror and revulsion. This occurs in both Wells's detailed depictions of lynching and the NAACP's antilynching campaign and the use of lynching photographs. Wells, the NAACP, and Holiday aim to make the reader, listener, and viewer perceptually sensitive to black pain, thus creating a new ethical economy that endows African Americans with a standing otherwise flagrantly denied by lynching.

Chapter 6 continues the themes of the previous chapter with a discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric in W.E.B. Du Bois's political philosophy. This is the first of two interpretative engagements with Du Bois. I ask the reader to follow me from Du Bois's seminal 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art" and the debates about the role of art in responding to racial inequality during the Harlem Renaissance to his 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. I maintain that what he says in his 1926 essay is a formalization of an approach already at work in 1903. In this chapter, rhetoric functions less as a stylized description as used in part 1. It now involves technical elements that align Du Bois with the classical accounts of eloquence. It seems important to stress this difference if only to foreground Du Bois's education in rhetoric and deployment of its techniques in his writing.

The chapter aims to show that he aestheticizes politics as an instrument of cultural transformation—what I refer to as Du Bois's defense of positive propaganda. Aestheticizing politics functions as a way of training the senses to be perceptive to the whole environment in which one is located, thus cutting against the one-sided and stereotypical views of black people in circulation. By focusing on the idea of training the senses, I will also suggest that the supposed divide between Du Bois and other key figures of the Harlem Renaissance, principally among them Alain Locke, is not as wide as often thought. For both, the aesthetic character of politics becomes the means for combating white supremacy—that is, a means for helping one's counterparts imagine a vision of themselves not yet. I insist that Du Bois sees aesthetics and rhetoric as tools of political power.

Chapter 7 turns directly to *The Souls of Black Folk* and offers an interpretation of three of its chapters—"Of Our Spiritual Strivings," "Of the Meaning of Progress," and "Of Alexander Crummell"—as a model for reading the entire work. On my reading, attending to the first of these chapters brings into sharper relief the book's central problem—namely, the problem of frustrated and unrealized souls. For Du Bois, the soul functions as the seat of aspiration, and reading the soul in this way enables a discussion of the emotional and ethical dimensions of the self that aspire for objects

in this world, the realization of which exceeds the abilities of the self. This at once points inward to character and self-description necessary to realizing the soul's aims and outwardly to the importance of a community of support to create the conditions to aspire with the possibility of success. The first of these is fundamentally about black people's relationship to themselves amid white supremacy. The second is about white Americans' role and complicity in domination.

To the first, Du Bois offers his reader models through which black Americans might relate to themselves in healthier ways than provided by the broader culture of disregard. Here, one thinks of Josie Dowell in "Of the Meaning of Progress" but especially Crummell in the chapter "Of Alexander Crummell." To the second, Du Bois invites his white reader to journey through the tragedy of black lives. This journeying is a way of seeing the whole of the environment, the result of which is to bind blacks and whites together as part of a shared quest for self-development, while awakening white Americans to their role in frustrating that pursuit in the lives of black people. Together, Du Bois seeks to stimulate sympathy and shame as part of a praxis of transformation.

The conclusion raises a final, critical issue given the United States' history of racial disregard and thirst for absolution. How can the American polity remain committed to the progressive character of aspirational politics in matters of racial justice without simultaneously seeing development as redeeming the moral and political sin of white supremacy and black domination? I treat this as a problem that runs through the public philosophical narrative of the United States' moral and political development—America's specific quest for what Dewey called certainty. In this case, certainty of racial progress and certainty of racial redemption that informs the polity's self-description—that defines the American Creed. This common quest—progress-as-entailing-redemption—ironically undermines the capacity of Americans to remain responsive to the ongoing problem of racial disregard while absolving them of responsibility for its continual role in shaping the structures of social and political life.

Something must be said in response and it is the goal of the conclusion to do so. There I offer a careful reading of James Baldwin's reflections on American democracy. The chapter uses his writings to stage a confrontation between the mythos of American redemption that shapes the postwar landscape and the persistence of racial disregard. The first is captured in the quest to secure equality that we see in Gunnar Myrdal's modern racial liberalism that involves minimizing the centrality of white supremacy to America's self-understanding, while the second is expressed in the demand

that the nation reckon with its racial past as the basis for addressing the persistence of disregard. I ask: What does it mean to remain committed to the aspirational view of the American polity amid the history of black pain? What does it mean to live with the horror of one's past without succumbing to an ill-formed perfectionism of postwar liberalism?

Baldwin's answer is that we must abandon our quest to measure progress based on its success in achieving redemption from the sins of white supremacy and racial domination. The reason is that the deed of white supremacy and racial domination, for him, is irrevocable and the polity bears the imprimatur of its horror. This theme functions in Baldwin as a means for articulating what I call critical responsiveness—that is, a form of agency that resists being merely the reproduction of the past, that aims to take control over the development of one's character, but that acknowledges that the motivation for development often follows from constitutive failures. Critical responsiveness keeps alive our capacity to properly listen, see, and feel—all of the senses the previous thinkers have emphasized in their attempts to transform the polity. Baldwin thus offers us an epistemic and ethical orientation, forcing us to be on constant alert for the dangers posed to freedom and equal regard. He offers us an appropriate posture toward the American polity as a condition of democratic citizenship.

In those final moments, we will encounter an important observation. Our positive responses to dismantling white supremacy only make sense because we remember (recollect) the nation's constant attraction to racial disregard. This leads to an unsettling, but generative, conclusion: black Americans must always look on their white counterparts with suspicion and white Americans must always look on their antiracist activities and those of the country with doubt. With this we do not overcome the ever-present danger of racial disregard, but we may just confound its workings.

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