American Stasis:

Conflict, Order, and Leadership in Black Political Thought

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the

Department of Political Science at Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island

May 2020

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This dissertation by Ferris Lupino is accepted in its present form

by the department of Political Science as satisfying the

dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Date Dec. 17, 2019

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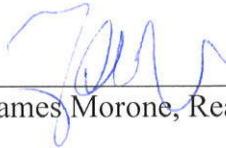

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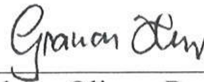

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Curriculum Vitae

Ferris Lupino received his BA in Political Science with departmental honors from the University of Washington (2011), and his MA in Political Science from Brown University (2016). In 2016 he was named a Cogut Institute Graduate Fellow. He has presented at numerous conferences over the course of his graduate studies, including the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the Association for Political Theory (APT). Additionally, he has lectured and led seminars at Brown, including the introduction to political theory, and seminars on democratic theory, theories of race, and ancient political thought.

To my mother, Cathy Lalley,
who teaches me every day how to live more decently within the bonds of division

Acknowledgements

At every stage of this project, I have been amazed and humbled by the generosity and support of so many friends and colleagues, who have made time—often when there was very little to give—to read drafts, send comments, or meet to discuss an idea or offer reassurance. This dissertation owes so much to their work and encouragement, and I hope to repay it by modeling that same generosity. For now, however, I offer these much-deserved acknowledgments.

I'll begin with my first teachers at the University of Washington, who introduced me to political theory: Christine DiStefano, Jamie Mayerfeld, and Naomi Murakawa. Each demonstrated to me how the humanistic study of politics could be rigorous, generous, creative, and moving. I also owe a great debt to Deepa Bhandaru and Tim Deak who fostered my enthusiasm at office hours, helped me to be more thoughtful about my instincts and prejudices, and gave me an honest assessment of what graduate school would entail. Above all, I owe the greatest debt to Chip Turner who advised my senior thesis. Chip met with me weekly for a year, reading and responding to memos at each meeting, brought me into his graduate seminar, and introduced me to the work of Hannah Arendt. I couldn't have asked for a better teacher and mentor. After graduating, Chip coached me on the graduate school application process, and it's not an exaggeration to say I would not have made it to Brown were it not for him. For this, I'm deeply grateful.

At Brown, I found an ideal home to study political theory, and I'm grateful to instructors like Amanda Anderson, Ariella Azoulay, Tony Bogues, Corey Brettschneider, Johanna Hanink, Juliet Hooker, and Melvin Rogers for pushing me to be a better, more well-rounded scholar. I am particularly indebted to Melvin, who has read drafts of each of my chapters and encouraged me to think more broadly about the contributions I make to the field. I am also grateful to the Political Science administrators, Suzanne Brough and Patti Gardner, without whom I would not have survived a year at Brown.

I've more than survived my stay in Providence, and much of that has to do with the incredible feedback and friendship of my peers. In particular, I'd like to thank Michal Ben Noah, Fannie Bialek, Ryan Emenaker, Jeff Feldman, Nick Geiser, Paul Gutierrez, Dennis Hogan, Jennie Ikuta, Gabrielle Jung, Jared Loggins, Kristen Maye, Rachel Meade, Sean Monahan, Shishav Parajuli, Thomas Pringle, Michelle Rada, Michelle Rose, Noga Rotem, Aytug Sasmaz, Aaron Stern, Jan Stockbruegger, and Geoffrey Wildanger. Each of these friends has challenged and supported me and this work is immeasurably better for it. Noga deserves special thanks because, beyond her incredible insights and criticisms, she's been a confidant and collaborator—I'm a better scholar and person for knowing her.

Outside of Brown, I'd like to thank those who have commented on drafts from the project over the years. I'm thankful to Ainsley LeSure, Deborah Nelson, Mark Reinhardt, Christian Sorace, Kam Shapiro, and Joseph Winters. I'm also grateful to the members of the Subversive Theories of the Political workshop for their tremendous feedback: William Callison, Andrés Fabián Henao Castro, Siddhant Issar, Robyn Marasco, Elva Orozca Mendoza, Keidrick Roy, Michael Sawyer, Miriam Tola, and Verónica Zebadúa

Yáñez. Lastly, I'm grateful to my peers at other universities—Sean Butorac, Elliot Mamet, Hari Ramesh, Jacob Roundtree, Naomi Scheinerman, and Nica Siegel—with whom I've shared (and will continue to share) arguments, work, and sympathy.

I owe the greatest debt to my committee, and to Bonnie Honig above all. Bonnie introduced me to the work of Nicole Loraux and encouraged me to think about stasis outside ancient Athens. She has (more than once) gone beyond what one would expect an adviser to do, and her influence is manifest in the project. What's more, she's helped me get closer to becoming the scholar I'd like to be and kept me from becoming the one I thought I needed to. For all this, I'm grateful.

Sharon Krause has been a tremendous support from the beginning. Her seminars on Aristotle gave me my interest in factional conflict and her incisive advice and comments have pushed me to think more deeply with my texts and to write more clearly. Jim Morone has also made me a much stronger writer—his 'ten commandments of writing' (a list that gets longer, with each rehearsal) is, and will always be, taped to my wall. I am thankful for his consistently excellent advice and his reminders that, first and foremost, our work should be interesting. I am also grateful to Graham Oliver for bringing me into the orbit of the Classics department. He's taken me to conferences, read political theory, and kept me honest about classical material, and in doing so, he's made a very distant time and place feel much less foreign.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family, who have given me nothing but love and support as I pursue what must appear to be a strange and priestly profession, and Tayo Falase, whose grace, generosity, and dedication to her craft have been a model for me for these seven years.

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Introduction: Why Stasis?

Some of the classical people here are snobbish about this mess, but it belongs to anyone who can dig it, and I don't mean picking around in ruins, as important as that is.
-Ralph Ellison, *Trading Twelves*

The way we look at conflict—how it is valued, which concepts we decide to use to understand it, and the context we admit as relevant—matters for how we might want to respond, manage, or resolve it. In ancient Greece, there is an identifiable school of thought that held that internal conflict, what they called 'stasis,' was the principle ill against which political life should be organized.[1] The hubris and kin-killing that pervade Aeschylus's *Oresteia* are repeatedly referred to as signs of stasis, and the transformation of the Furies, in the final play, into the Eumenides can be read as a taming of wild justice and the foundation of a more stable order. Thucydides describes stasis along similar lines in his account of Corcyra, where words lose their meaning and justice becomes wild. Plato also opposes stasis to justice in the *Republic* when he argues that justice obtains when every member of the city is of one mind about their particular roles. In all of these accounts, stasis is a *division* that risks violence, akin to disease, and political actors should try to heal the city by making it whole.

[1] To modern ears, stasis connotes stability, as it did (paradoxically) to the Greeks—it is the antonym of *kinesis*. However, the term also referred to instability, deriving from the verb 'to stand' (*histemi*), it came to mean 'to stand apart' and 'to stand apart as a faction' before coming to be the word for faction, sedition, tumult, etc. For discussions of the etymology of *stasis*, see: Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City*, Paula Botteri, "*Stasis*: Le mot grec, la chose romaine," and Esther Rogan, *La* stasis *dans la politique d'Aristote*.

This view is not confined to antiquity. Though the term 'stasis' has fallen out of use (as opposed to 'hegemony' or 'democracy' which bear the trace of their Greek lineage), the concept has been received and commented on throughout the history of political thought. Hobbes, for instance, translated Thucydides into English and rendered stasis as 'sedition.'[2] And the Federalists derived their arguments about faction at least in part from Xenophon's discussions of stasis in the *Hellenica*.[3] References to sedition, faction, tumult, dissension, and even revolution and civil war often refer back to this school's discussions of stasis and might be read as commentary on the concept in that context.

Of course, references to stasis in political theory are not only implicit. Classical scholars and political theorists often echo the view of stasis as a kind of civic disease. Peter Euben, for instance, confirms that Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* is a "useful possession for all time" because the problems of stasis—particularly the problem considered exemplary of it: that of words losing their common meaning—are perennial and even the original occasion for political theory.[4] By taking stasis to be a political problem 'for all time' and gleaning lessons from Thucydides on how to make it less severe, Euben exhibits a sympathy for the argument that stasis is a kind of disease that needs a cure.

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[2] Sedition proves to be an important concept in Hobbes's *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*.
[3] Montesquieu is the clear reference in *Federalist no. 10*, but Montesquieu's discussions of 'internal imperfection' derive in part from his reading of Xenophon. Though the argument to check faction with faction in these accounts differs substantially from the one forwarded by the likes of Plato or Thucydides.
[4] Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken*, 186. I point to Euben only as an example. Many contemporary scholars frame frame the problems concerning conflict and division in classical terms. See, for instance: Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*.

One legacy of this anti-stasis tradition is to treat more unruly forms of contestation with suspicion and to instead champion democratic procedure or common-sense norms for a pluralistic society.[5] We might call this a 'rule of law' approach to conflict, in which shared norms are intended to stabilize meaning (in a way that Thucydides might approve), and the law tames wilder forms of justice (much like the Areopagus does in the *Eumenides*).

A rival view of conflict, however, is suspicious of such calls to order our politics in this way, and views such calls as at least always potentially hegemonic and exclusionary. In this account, though it is possible for some to lose out in political decisions and *not* be alienated from an idea of 'the people'—they continue to view the state as just—others can continuously lose out and, despite formal inclusion, feel alienated from the body politic. If there is such an excluded group, then they experience politics as 'war by other means.' To them, the norms and institutions of the rule of law paradigm may be experienced as stultifying or even a form of 'lawfare'—where law is used as a means to achieve military objectives—that sediments their exclusion. We might call this a 'civil war' account of conflict, in which insurrection may be warranted as a means to either secession or supersession.

In American political thought both of these paradigms have been applied to the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War. One account has it that, during the war and in its aftermath, a wave of founding figures helped to inaugurate a new set of institutions and mores for the American republic. In this view, the event of re-foundation sets into motion a new rule of law, in which the vestiges of the old regime will slowly be

[5] Benjamin Gray makes the relationship between the rule of law and stasis explicit and contends that legal institutions were one of the principle strategies for preventing stasis in ancient Greece.

brought into compliance with new, more just standards.[6] At the same time, a rival view holds that the end of the Civil War was not a refounding because the war, in fact, never really ended; instead, the conflict over which the war was fought was displaced, never resolved, and continues to shape American politics. In this account, even views which complicate the optimistic picture described above (Rogers Smith, for instance, details an ascriptive tradition that perennially foils the US's competing and distinct liberal, egalitarian tradition) fail to appreciate how egalitarian politics for some is premised on the exclusion of others. What's needed, they argue, is separation or revolution.[7]

One strength of this latter view is that it seems to insist on a fuller sense of legitimacy than the former when it doesn't take the authority of the laws for granted. Moreover, by refusing to neatly separate something like Smith's 'liberal tradition' from the 'ascriptive tradition,' the civil war paradigm helps us to consider how both may prioritize order in ways that pathologize stasis. And yet, the view seems to provide little way out. Secession and supersession are both difficult to achieve, especially when elites who defend the status quo are powerful. What's more, the paranoid posture of the civil war frame risks mistaking genuine opportunities for realizing a more decent politics as

[6] I associate this view with a particular reading of Tocqueville (the providential view of democracy), and with Louis Hartz.

[7] We might associate this view with the arguments of black nationalists. Though not an advocate of separatism, Charles Mills approaches the civil war paradigm in *The Racial Contract*: "Both globally and within particular nations, then, white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in nonwhites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further." Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 40.

hopelessly tied to the very institutions that undermine them—depicting such endeavors as a kind of 'wounded attachment.'[8]

As I discuss in the next chapter, some thinkers position our current moment as at an impasse between these two positions—the cruel optimism of the rule of law, on the one hand, or paralysis, on the other. Both seem to be caught up in the logic of Carl Schmitt's 'friend-enemy distinction.' While rule of law theorists seek to convert public enemies into private ones—*polemioi* into *echthroi*—civil war theorists insist on the distinction and the difficulty of altering or transforming the situation.

Yet, Schmitt leaves a third alternative unexplored, one that Nicole Loraux indicates in her studies of Athens. Schmitt derives his distinction, in part, from a reading of Plato on conflict: "Real war for Plato is a war between Hellenes and Barbarians only (those who are 'by nature enemies'), whereas conflicts between Hellenes are discords (*staseis*). The thought expressed here is that a people cannot wage war against itself and a civil war is only a self-laceration…."[9] While Schmitt finds in Plato the either/or of a stable community of friends and foreign, natural enemies, the discussion of stasis developed by Loraux might have suggested to him a third term: factionary (or *stasionte)*.

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[8] By paranoid, I refer to the hermeneutics of suspicion described by Eve Sedgwick in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" where readers anticipate something in the text and seek to expose it. Here, I use 'wounded attachment, in the first sense offered by Wendy Brown: "in its attempt to displace suffering, identity structured by *ressentiment* at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection." Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 70. By the end of the essay, however, Brown considers a 'politicized' identity politics: "Rather than opposing or seeking to transcend identity investments, the replacement—even the admixture—of the language of 'being' with 'wanting' would seek to exploit politically a recovery of the more expansive moments in the genealogy formation…" (Brown, 76). This latter view comes close to what I will call a democratic view of stasis.
[9] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 29.

To be engaged in stasis is neither to make everyone into private enemies nor to separate the people into enemy camps (as in a civil war). It is for Plato something like a mass impropriety, in which people take on roles they ought not, and use words as they should not. While Plato may characterize this as a pathology (or 'self-laceration'), participants in stasis who trouble meaning and act out of line could instead be said to highlight the tensions and paradoxes in a statement like "a people cannot wage war against itself." Factionaries might challenge the contours of 'the people' and call into question the flattening and symmetrization involved in describing stasis as a 'people against itself,' while nevertheless accepting that each is a member of the city.

For Loraux, to think from the perspective of somebody engaged in stasis, rather than from a city that presumes itself to be 'whole,' is to do away with the gloss on dissension favored by the likes of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle which may well be aristocratic. This perspective enables an evaluation of stasis from a more democratic perspective. For democrats, the loss of coherence that accompanies division might not be felt (only) as a kind of disease, but may (also) be welcomed as a process that unsettles established ideas concerning who counts and what it means to be a member of the *polis*. In other words, while an aristocratic view of stasis might present it as a disease, a democratic account might see it as offering a different kind of stability—one that comes from bringing flexibility to laws and institutions that have become too rigid. Loraux calls this stability the 'bond of division.'[10]

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[10] Loraux, *The Divided City*, 93 ff. Loraux illustrates this 'other kind of stability' with a number of classical examples. For instance, she offers this anecdote about Heraclitus from Plutarch: "Asked by his fellow citizens for his opinion on civic harmony (*homonoia*, the very thing that Greek political tradition opposes to *stasis*), Heraclitus, it is said, remained silent even though the episode occurred during an assembly. Instead of answering, he took a cup and mixed water and barley flour, adding some mint to make a mixture that follows the recipe for the *kukeōn* [the drink

The idea of division as a bond departs from the rule of law and civil war paradigms in that both presume that an ordinary state of affairs is grounded in consensus; they only differ on the question of whether or not the laws conduce to a common good. In Loraux's view, which I'll call the 'stasis' account of conflict, political communities are defined instead by their disagreements—the disagreements that any group of people living together might have and that, for or better or worse, structure their lives. Simply because certain outcomes have been decided by whatever procedures or institutions are in place (even the most fair or reasonable) does not mean the disagreement has come to an end. It may be instead that the division is simply repressed or denied. Accordingly, where a rule of law theorist sees a problem—dissension, tumult, or faction—a stasis theorist may see instead frankness about the law's divisiveness.

Taking division to be endemic to communities, civil war theorists' responses to conflict will not seem entirely satisfying either. Establishing a new agreement or taking flight, though potentially very valuable strategies, at best only resolve 'division as a problem' temporarily. For stasis theorists, we cannot hope for a unitary or whole people, and so politics should aim to make responses to division more decent, less repressive. So long as symbiosis and separation are taken as exclusive poles, conflict cannot be managed properly.[11]

Loraux finds evidence for this view of stasis in classical Athens, in tragedy, and in pre-Socratic Ionian philosophers. But just as there are contemporary thinkers who take up

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of the Eleusinian mysteries]; then he drank it and went away without speaking." Loraux, *Divided City*, 109. The implication is that harmony entails stirring things up occasionally.

[11] For alternatives that resist this binary as it pertains to identity, see: Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self" in *The Barbara Johnson Reader*, 183.

the view of stasis-as-disease, I argue here that others might be profitably read as drawing on and enriching the democratic account of stasis.

In the United States, political theorists and historians often read black political thinkers as fitting neatly into the rule of law or civil war paradigms—as advocates for either integration or separatism.[12] There are, however, different degrees to which a program is integrative or separatist. Some thinkers' work is opened up in new ways when we read them in connection with a stasis paradigm. In this project, I look at black political thinkers engaged in classical receptions, or, at least, I argue this is how we should see them. These thinkers offer strategies for navigating division, and when read in classicized terms, these strategies can be understood as elaborating and enriching the idea of stasis as a bond of division.[13] Whereas classical reception, especially since the 19th century has been associated with a politics of assimilation, and its rejection (or re-emplotment along Ethiopian and Afro-centric lines) is tied to black nationalism, to read 20th century black political thinkers through the lens of stasis is to read them as rejecting that binary politically and conceptually.

In the following chapter, I further elaborate the stasis frame of conflict as distinct from the rule of law and civil war paradigms. After outlining Loraux's account of stasis, I

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[12] See, for instance, Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Michael Dawson adds nuance in *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*, but many of the ideologies he outlines can be positioned in one of the two sides.

[13] Cedric Robinson argues in his second preface to *Black Marxism* that stasis is *not* a useful frame for thinking of racial conflict in the United States. "As much as on his own immediate predecessors (Kant, Hegel, etc.), Marx also had drawn on Aristotle for his notions of class and class conflict, the latter most frequently signified by ancient Greek writers as *stasis*" (xxix). He suggests that Marx's use of Aristotle leads to a misapprehension of the nature of slavery, but in reducing stasis to 'class conflict,' Robinson accepts a Marxian gloss on stasis that we might reject. For the Marxist account of stasis in Aristotle, see G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, and for a critique of this account, see Nicole Loraux, "Corcyra 427, Paris 1871."

identify a comparable usage in the work of Tina Campt and bring their analyses to Afro-pessimist thinkers like Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson to re-evaluate their (apparent) commitments to a civil war paradigm.

Having made the case for 21st century black receptions of stasis, I next turn to three thinkers from the 20th century's long Civil Rights Movement who felt bound to the American republic even while living portions of their lives in exile, and who proposed classicized strategies for managing this conflict which situated them as included only insofar as they were excluded (as with metics, women, slaves in Athens).

The second chapter, for instance, investigates the idea of charisma in the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois. I both explore how he develops an account of charisma through classical sources like Platonic concepts and the figure of Moses, and I outline how he attempts to make use of charisma to establish his authority over the black 'nation within a nation.' While some rightly worry about the elitism of Du Bois's account—which posits a strict separation of leaders and those led—I argue that his account of leadership is always dependent on a favorable reception from the masses he aims to lead and that close attention to his rhetorical strategies reveal how that dependence is denied or papered over. The denials and assertions of dependence here are, I argue, instances of a kind of stasis inside the 'nation within a nation.'

After reading Du Bois for what shape black politics should take, I next turn to Ralph Ellison for a discussion of the kind of political strategy best pursued in a context of stasis. Sacrifice is a central theme in Ellison's essays and fiction, and from it, commenters have gleaned a politics of martyrdom in which black actors risk sacrifice to morally transform their white onlookers—this, they say, is nonviolence. While framing

loss as martyrdom is a part of Ellison's strategy, I argue that it does not exhaust it. I follow Patrice Rankine in charting Ellison's references in *Invisble Man* to Odysseus in Polyphemus' cave and argue that Ellison supplements martyrdom with tricksterism or *metis* which aims to either reverse the demanded sacrifice or at least escape to fight another day. Politics that aim at moral transformation are complemented with more cunning and unruly forms actions—actions that are best understood in connection with stasis.

At the end of *Invisible Man*, the hero is isolated, underground, having escaped sacrifice. What will follow is not clear. In the fourth chapter, I turn to James Baldwin to press on us the question of what kinds of associational life in the context of stasis might lessen the need for subterranean escape. In his essays and fiction, Baldwin makes frequent reference to love as a basis for politics. Many commenters, most notably Hannah Arendt, read this as an invocation of *agape* or *caritas* similar to Martin Luther King's uses of the terms. I argue that a stasis perspective highlights an alternative not yet considered: this gloss misreads Baldwin as a Christian thinker with otherworldly concerns. For Baldwin, love is a concern for the improvement of the other, even by means that aren't particularly loving. The cause of this concern is more *erotic* than *agapic*, coming from shared sensual experience rather than given facts about fixed identities. In this way, it shares a great deal with the democratic view of stasis, the agonism of which aims for a worthy partner/antagonist on roughly equal footing.

Finally, I conclude by returning to Du Bois and considering his war of words with Marcus Garvey. Their fight is widely considered a duel between two elitist race men. I re-read it as an instance of democratic stasis, which invites us to highlight their reliance

on (and contention with) charisma, cunning, and love. I conclude that what appears as a fight between two demagogues models a practice of politics within stasis that could still be useful to us today.

One: A New Vocabulary for Conflict
The Rule of Law, Civil War, and Stasis

"So far, cultural analysis has established that the psychosis is so ingrained, the institutions so centralized, that what is needed is total revolution, the armed struggle between the have-nots with their vanguard and the haves with their hirelings or macabre freaks that live through them, civil war between at least these two sections of the population is the only purgative."

-George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye,* 101-102

"we need to invent a language that is not Roman in order to speak of *stasis*. We need a language that can avoid referring to the notion of civil war, which I have used and will continue to use for lack of a better term."

-Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City*, 107

I. Racial Stalemate and the Terms of Division

The gradual formal extension of citizenship to black Americans over the past two centuries has not achieved protection from gratuitous violence nor from persistent inequalities. Because of these failures, scholars of race have reframed Jubilee as marking slavery's transformation or mutation, rather than abolition. Softening any sense of rupture, some of these thinkers—including, but not limited to, Afro-Pessimists—often describe American democracy as at a standstill, racked by a civil war that never really ended. By framing racial conflict as civil war, they offer a compelling explanation for why legal and integrative remedies for division have proved fruitless: the nature of the conflict is such that black Americans live under a permanent state of exception, in which the laws do not apply to them except as tools of oppression.[14]

This is by no means a novel approach to the problem. Black thinkers have drawn

[14] For one account of the racial state of exception, see: Utz McKnight, *Race and the Politics of the Exception*.

on the language of civil war to describe tensions in American society at least as far back as Reconstruction. Afro-Pessimists, in other words, offer a re-elaboration of a fairly standard trope in black American political thought. Ralph Ellison in 1974, for example, comes across as a contemporary Afro-Pessimist when reflecting on the Civil War. “It is my opinion that [the Civil War] is still in the balance, and only our enchantment by the spell of the possible, our endless optimism, has led us to assume that it ever really ended,” he writes. “Instead it would seem that while the military phase of that war ended in 1865, there actually occurred a reversal of Clausewitz’s famous formula through which the Civil War, upper case, continued as *civil* war, lower case, in which that war of arms was replaced by a war of politics, racial and ethnic violence, ritual sacrifice based on race and color, and by economic and judicial repression.” Here, Ellison opposes an optimistic view—where politics and the promise of emancipation began in earnest with the war’s conclusion—to a bleaker but all too credible account where the war and the institution over which it was waged did not come to an end, but instead evolved.

One strength of this more pessimistic account is its attentiveness to the bellicose and antagonistic elements of a supposedly neutral and tamed public sphere. Whereas the optimist may be able to posit a neat break—politics, not war—the civil war frame finds that laws and political action always generate exclusions of one kind or another, which inevitably lead to conflict (politics as war). When laws and institutions suppress these conflicts, they reinforce these exclusions and make them more durable and painful.

At the same time, viewing this conflict through the lens of civil war is not without its own risks. If optimists posit anti-blackness as a bug, and not a feature, of American society, critics of the civil war frame worry that it naturalizes antagonism, conducing

only to melancholic resignation or self-destructive resistance. This worry is confirmed by one reading of Afropessimist thinkers today like Frank Wilderson or Jared Sexton who, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, describe blackness as a form of bare life produced by sovereign power in the West to secure its own authority and legitimacy. The decision to enslave West Africans rather than European vagabonds, they argue, began a cycle of violence that provided the basis for the rights-bearing citizen by producing its foil: the slave.

When taken as elaborating a fixed ontological position produced by a catastrophic event, this account offers little hope to those who oppose sovereign power or who aim to configure it differently. If the potential for political action can only be severely hampered by the state, then actors either mark themselves for exclusion and death by opposing it, or supposing they supplant it, they reproduce the same exclusions that typify sovereign power. For this reason, the Afro-pessimists, as well as some radical democrats, consider the ‘exception’ as the main obstacle to radical change.

If, however, we take this ‘event’ to inaugurate a *process* that ontologizes a position—if, that is, we see exclusion as the product of rituals of sacrifice every day, rather than seeing these rituals as artifacts of an earlier exclusion—the pessimistic account doesn’t lead to the impasse that its critics charge it with. Instead, pessimists demand an attentiveness to the ways practical politics fails to undo this ontologizing process, and to consider the ways resistance may, in fact, reproduce it.

This other account of pessimism becomes more credible when conflict is read in terms of stasis, rather than civil war. While some ancient commenters describe stasis in terms that come close to civil war—it brings about a generalized antagonism and divides

a people into factions that can only be made whole again through some new act of constitution, if at all—Nicole Loraux suggests there is a democratic gloss on stasis that, while still connoting impasse and division, nevertheless held promise as a potential unsettling of old exclusions.

II. Stasis as Disease & Stasis as Bond

The ancient Greek term '*stasis*' refers to a kind of conflict within a political community.[15] As stated above, this conflict has traditionally been interpreted as pathological—when a political community is in stasis, it becomes perverted and ceases to truly be a community. Stasis by this account is a catastrophe. It's in this tradition that Hobbes translates stasis as 'sedition' and Publius takes it up as 'faction.'[16] By these accounts, stasis is to be avoided at all costs, and the best political institutions are those that foster harmony and bridge disagreements into consensus while discouraging dissension.

There is an alternate account, however, which takes division and contention to be features of political life, even welcomes ones. The business of politics produces frictions and tensions, which inevitably lead to disputes of one kind or another. When laws and institutions stifle these conflicts, they risk being inflexible, and this inflexibility, in turn, can make the exclusions that generate these frictions more durable and painful. In framing conflict as the occasion for politics, this second tradition rejects the catastrophic conception of stasis, and its proponents suspect that the calls for unity and harmony that

[15] As opposed to *polemos*, which refers to war with outsiders Plato makes this distinction in *Republic*, 470b.
[16] Faction is revalued in the *Federalist Papers*, where faction can check faction to create a kind of stability.

accompany that conception are attempts at hegemony that impose only a costly stability. Their more permissive stance toward various forms of contestation, by contrast, leads them to find a different kind of stability in stasis. To be sure, this stability comes with its own attendant costs, but they are costs that people situated outside the dominant faction of a community may find less burdensome than the often unacknowledged ones that may be imposed on them by 'consensus' oriented politics.[17]

Moreover, this stance with regard to conflict offers an alternate form of attachment to the city. Rather than grounding belonging in unity and identity, membership in a community is defined by those with whom you have disagreements. By this account, then, stasis is a kind of constitutive bond for political communities—or 'bond of division'—and the Greek city, the *polis*, is defined by those who share in the tensions of stasis.

One implication of this second approach to stasis is that sometimes the rule of law alone will not be adequate for adjudicating claims of wrongdoing. Though the rule of law claims to manage conflict, it may suppress legitimate contestation in the process. This argument runs counter to the view that stasis is catastrophic, which holds that political communities should bury violently contentious passions (or, at least, direct them outward) and manage matters of injustice at home through legal procedure. Instead, the view that frames stasis as a bond suggests that extralegal action can sometimes serve a good political cause by, for instance, managing conflicts that cannot be buried. Stasis,

[17] This interpretation of stasis therefore takes the term to be the antonym both of unity (with the traditional reading) as well as of *kinesis* (in contradiction of that reading). In this way, it should be distinguished from the contemporary understanding of 'stasis,' which is only the antonym of *kinesis*.

then, operates alongside the law without strictly renouncing it or adhering to it, but perhaps altering or affecting our experience of it.

Because from this perspective stasis is not a renunciation of the law, the frame of catastrophe appears misleading. That is not to say, however, that violence is never destructive to political life. Rather, when violence and other extralegal action result in that kind of destruction, it is not stasis we are looking at, but something else—something like civil war.

David Armitage suggests this distinction when he points out that the original Latin term for civil war, *bellum civile*, was 'patterned after' and opposed to the term for civil law, *ius civile*.[18] Civil war occurs when domestic law no longer applies and its operation is met with militant resistance.[19] For Armitage, this opposition is what makes civil war distinctive: "Trumpets and standards were the visible signs, conventional warfare the means, and political control of the commonwealth was the end. All told, these were the peculiar marks of civil war as opposed to mere tumult, dissension, or sedition."[20] Civil war, because of the open and regimented hostility that defines it, signals a break from political life.

III. Greek Stasis and Roman Civil War

Armitage takes care to distinguish stasis from civil war. He contends that stasis is closer to these 'mere' forms of conflict, like tumult and sedition. He makes the

[18] Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 50.
[19] I am thinking of a distinction here that Habermas makes in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) where he writes: "A critically mediated knowledge of laws cannot through reflection alone render the law itself inoperative, but it can render it inapplicable."
[20] Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 57.

distinction, in part, by drawing on the work of Nicole Loraux who argues that in civil war, "the 'vast mutuality' of the Roman city is thought within the substance of war."[21] As with Armitage, so in Loraux, civil war describes a situation in which a formerly orderly and unified community is thrust into the 'substance' of war and becomes marked by antagonism. But by contrast with civil war, stasis does not divide the city in the same way; rather, Loraux says that through 'insurrection' it "introduces into the city a paradoxical unity."[22] She elaborates this distinction elsewhere, in her account of the kinship metaphors used for either type of conflict.

According to Loraux, the Greeks designated stasis as occurring within a common stock (*emphylos*), as 'blood from the same blood' (*haima homaimōn*), and as war in the household (*oikeios polemos*)—each designation connoting *suggeneia*, or shared descent, within a community.[23] *Bellum civile* was likened to familial conflict differently; it was sometimes referred to as *parricidium*, which denotes either the killing of a parent or the treasonous murder of a ruler. Instead of conflict between mutual descendants, then, civil war appears to be between parents and children. Loraux argues that there is a 'political dimension' to the metaphors employed. The Greeks can describe political conflict as *emphylos* because, in Athens, "father and son were made politically equal by sitting next to each other in the assembly of citizens."[24] The metaphors all describe collateral relations because Athenian citizens, *politai*, are related collaterally (that is, from the same stock, but not necessarily in the same line), and can be construed as a kind of generalized fraternity. At the same time, likening internal conflict to patricide might result from the

[21] Loraux, *The Divided City*, 108.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Loraux, "War in the Family," 16.
[24] Loraux, *The Divided City*, 211.

Roman practice of *patria potestas* (rule of the father), in which the male head of the household enjoys rights over his family until his death.

For Loraux, the Roman emphasis on filiation in the political arena conduces to generational antagonism in times of conflict—the children disobey the rule of the father and seek to take his place. Because relations in Athenian democracy are instead framed as collateral, she argues, conflicts do not indicate rupture in the same way: "If citizens are brothers in Greece, they are brothers in *stasis* as well as in the city at peace."[25] The implication is that stasis is a form of conflict that preserves the unity of the community.[26]

Without picking up this specific line of argument, Armitage describes stasis along similar lines. Like Loraux, he identifies the frame of collateral relations as a distinguishing feature of stasis. Armitage explains that the Greek *polis*, "was understood to be unified fundamentally, before politics, and beyond laws, because all its members were descended from the same ancestors. Belonging to the city was thus a hereditary matter, not an acquired status, and so divisions did not need to be defined legally and politically, as they would be at Rome."[27] Armitage contrasts the frame of ethno-genetic ties (which are therefore natural or 'beyond law') in Athens to the legally constructed, artificial relationship between Roman citizens. He argues that because the latter is made, it can be unmade through civil war. Because the Greek *polis* is, by contrast, pre-political, political divisions do not bring the community to an end. This, Armitage claims, "has at

[25] Ibid.
[26] Presumably, some *staseis* did result in supercession. The killing of Hippias and succession of Cleisthenes, for instance, might be regarded as exhibiting the antagonism and rupture that Loraux here attributes to Roman civil war. What interests me here, however, is not so much whether the Greeks and Romans fought in genuinely different types of conflict. Instead my interest is in how these conflicts were interpreted.
[27] Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 45.

least the redeeming feature of implying a community sufficiently well integrated to confront the challenge."[28] In this analysis, Armitage echoes, as indeed did Loraux, the characterization of stasis that Plato makes in the *Menexenus*, in which Socrates describes the Athenian stasis of 403 BCE as coming to a conclusion 'moderately' owing to their shared 'genuine kinship' (*suggeneia*).[29]

This is not to say that stasis could only occur in the ancient Greek city-states[30]—only that kinship was an Athenian explanation for how stasis (ideally) differed in intensity from war (*polemos*). As Armitage notes, the Romans experienced many instances of stasis before suffering civil war in 88 BCE, when Sulla marched on Rome. He cites the Greek historian, Appian, who opens his history of Roman civil wars with the observation that "the plebeians and Senate of Rome were often at strife (*estasiasan*) with each other."[31] For Armitage, Roman contests, including the turmoil surrounding the assassinations of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, counted only as 'mere' stasis. By contrast, he argues that Sulla's attack on Rome with Roman troops for the purposes securing rule—because of the scale, the hostility, and the stakes—must be understood as distinct from the internal conflicts that preceded it.

Above all, what distinguished Sulla's civil war (and all the comparable wars that followed) from stasis was the conflict's relationship to violence. Civil war, as war, is necessarily violent; stasis, by contrast, is not. "*Stasis* for the Greeks remained a state of

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Plato, *Menexenus*, 243e-244a

[30] Note too that not all *poleis* have a conception of shared descent and *suggeneia*. Benjamin Gray, for example, gives the example of Dikaiopolis, the Eretrian colony, which he reads as relating citizens in a way more akin to how Armitage characterizes Rome. See: Gray, *Stasis and Stability*, 50.

[31] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.

mind rather than an act of physical resistance," Armitage says. "It might lead to war, or even arise from war, but it did not in itself entail actual warfare; in this sense, it could mean what we might call a standoff or impasse without actual aggression or combat."[32] Understood as a state of mind, stasis describes a tense atmosphere that, like a contagious disease, infects individuals. The idea of a polis that is sick with division but lacks open hostility, as we will see, may prove useful for thinking through deadlocked racial politics.

One effect of this 'sickness' is that actions and words take on larger significance than they would otherwise. For instance, just prior to the Athenians' expedition to Sicily in 415 BCE, the herms (busts erected around the city for good luck) were vandalized and mutilated. Under ordinary circumstances, this would count as an extraordinarily impious act. On the eve of the expedition, however, and at a time when tensions between oligarchic and democratic factions were high, the vandalism was near to sabotage and understood as evidence of a conspiracy. The oligarchic coup that would come four years later cannot be understood simply as an abrupt outbreak of stasis that punctuates an otherwise orderly political life, but should be seen, from this perspective, as an instance of violence in a stasis that is continuous with the vandalism of 415.[33]

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[32] Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 38. By defining stasis with reference to the internal state of participants, Armitage takes his cue from Jonathan Price, who finds this conception of stasis in Thucydides's account of Corcyra. This approach, he argues, 'solves the problem' of otherwise defining conflicts retrospectively, depending on the outcome. "Thucydides solved the problem," Price argues, "by identifying stasis as a human and societal affliction which can be detected in certain, peculiar forms of action and speech, from which, in turn, thoughts and feelings, the subjects' internal condition, may be extrapolated. This method of definition resembles the identification of a disease by its symptoms, as I hope to have already demonstrated. Thucydides does not define the condition by the entity within which the conflict takes place or by the political relationship of the opponents." Unlike civil war, stasis, for Price, need not take place within a fixed community, or between individuals with a particular 'political relationship.' Price, *Thucydides and Internal War*, 37.

[33] We might consider the recent defacement of monuments to the Confederacy as similarly indicating a tense atmosphere that saturates something like vandalism with larger significance.

Downplaying the evental and ruptural aspects of the oligarchic coup, the stasis frame militates against a reading of such conflicts as purely divisive. Though the coup resulted in mass disenfranchisement and inaugurated a short-lived constitution of 400 oligarchs[34] (an event that looks like a moment of reconstitution), when considered as continuous with the vandalism of the herms, that moment of reconstitution appears as prepared for and undergirded by a series of scandals and conflicts concerning the authority of Athens's democratic institutions and its boundaries of belonging. Stasis, in other words, does not explode an otherwise united community, but instead describes the centripetal process in which these disagreements draw people in to a never wholly settled community, but a community nonetheless—unsettled, fractious, and unified around and by the energy of division. This community-in-conflict model has no necessary relation to violence, and so it runs further counter to the frame of civil war, which sees conflict as catastrophic in political life and which understands violence as dissolving a constituted people into a pre-political multitude.

One effect of viewing conflict through a stasis frame is that the site of sovereignty appears less centralized than the civil war frame would suggest.[35] In civil war, the authority of an established order is threatened by a rival faction's attempt at either supercession or secession, which leads, in effect, to the law's (perhaps temporary) inapplicability or suspension. This version of conflict describes change as occurring necessarily through revolution—a new constitution comes either from seizing the

[34] This implied the disenfranchisement of the two lower castes of the Solonian constitutions, the *thetes* and *zeugitae*, meaning wage workers and small land owners respectively.
[35] For how this relationship between a people and a multitude can describe sovereignty in democratic politics generally, see Frank, *Constituent Moments*, 33-39, and Honig, *Emergency Politics*, 15-16.

apparatus of the state, or building a new separate constitution elsewhere. The stasis frame challenges this account by highlighting the more routine operations of power—not only established power, but also those actions that work to undermine it daily.

This alternate account of conflict, division, and sovereignty holds promise for people who, like Armitage, worry that civil war has come to seem like the sole means of contesting established order or that all contestations of civil order must lead ineluctably to civil war. "We should be cautious," he warns, "about assuming civil war is an inevitable part of our makeup—a feature, not a bug, in the software that makes us human. For that would be to doom us to suffer civil war ad infinitum…."[36] To accept civil war as an essential part of political life, he reasons, is to bleakly accept a cycle of the strong doing what they will while the weak, in turn, do as they must. Armitage's hope is that tracing the history of the concept will help to denaturalize civil war. "It has a history with an identifiable beginning, if not yet a discernible end," he writes. "A historical treatment reveals the contingency of the phenomenon, contradicting those who claim its permanence and durability. It is my aim to show that what humans have invented, they may dismantle; that what intellectual will has enshrined, an equal effort of imaginative determination can dethrone."[37] Charting the development of civil war as a concept and phenomenon, he says, should enable further conceptualization to either supplement or supplant the dominant frame for internal conflict.

[36] Armitage, 11.
[37] Ibid., 11.

IV. Stasis: The Road Not Taken

Given his interest in displacing civil war's dominance as a frame, it's surprising that Armitage does not turn to stasis—instead, he relegates it to the past. For him, there's something in civil war that 'eluded the Greeks,' which also gave it an almost trans-historical quality. "Civil war", he writes, "is one of those indispensable concepts that, once invented, has proved to be surprisingly translatable. It moved from Rome into many major world languages without difficulty and lost none of its accumulated awkward baggage."[38] By contrast, he finds that stasis has less currency today. For Armitage, whatever it is in civil war that isn't captured in stasis has contributed to the former's becoming an 'unassailable idea until the nineteenth century' (when the less bleak frame of revolution began to challenge it).

His reason for passing over stasis, in other words, is methodological. Armitage adopts a 'genealogical' approach to the history of civil war that "fastens on continuities."[39] By considering the ways a term was once used, he argues, we can better reflect on its current meaning. Civil war, because of its continuous use as a term for internal conflict, is well suited to this kind of investigation, but stasis, he argues, is not. Yet while it may be true that the word itself does not today retain its full range of meaning, that doesn't mean that, as a frame for conflict, stasis is inapplicable in our time.[40] A different sort of genealogical approach encourages us to sift through past

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[38] Ibid., 237.
[39] Ibid., 16.
[40] When derivations of 'stasis' are used in English, they generally relate to 'static', drawing from its being the antonym of *kinesis*. Still, though rare, there are some derivations that maintain the original double meaning of the term. In systems theory, for instance, 'metastability' is used to refer to systems that are neither stable nor unstable, but maintain a quasi-stability because of (and not despite) disequilibrium.

concepts and resources to find those whose traces still mark us, even if we have forgotten them.[41] Sometimes such genealogists also resurrect or revalue, as did Nietzsche with old and supposedly lost notions, arguing that they offer valuable frames or vantage points. Moreover, the term *stasis* has lately, in any case, been experiencing something of a revival.

Theorists of internal conflict do increasingly reference stasis implicitly or explicitly.[42] For some, like Agamben, stasis operates as another word for civil war–the two are synonymous. For others, like Foucault, civil war is a plural phenomenon that, at times, follows the logic of the exception, but at other times, is susceptible to popular movements to negate the law, which may put an end to the law's authority, but may also appropriate and renegotiate that authority (the latter being much closer to Loraux's idea of stasis). It is with this understanding of civil war in mind that Foucault writes, contra Hobbes: "Civil war should not be seen as something that dissolves the collective component of the life of individuals and returns them to something like their original individuality."[43] Here, civil war does not collapse society back into a multitude, but instead describes the negotiations of a never wholly settled people.

When established power denies that 'civil war' is the typical form of democratic conflict, any resistance to the law is criminalized. For Foucault, the criminal is a figure understood as having no place in a community: "someone who is irreducible to society, incapable of social adaptation, someone whose relationship with society is one of

[41] For more on how genealogy entails an investigation of the paths not taken, see: Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."
[42] See, for instance: Agamben, *Stasis*: *Civil War as a Political Paradigm,* and Vardoulakis, *Stasis Beyond the State*.
[43] Ibid., 29.

constant aggression, who is foreign to its norms and its values."[44] As a foreigner to the norms and values of society, the criminal licenses extraordinary measures to preserve order. This account of civil war is much closer to the traditional conception offered by Agamben, say, when he describes a 'legal civil war,' in which the state sequesters, banishes, or eliminates categories of people who "cannot be integrated into the political system" through a state of exception.[45] The relationship here between the state and the resister is purely antagonistic.

While Agamben describes this relationship as typical of both stasis and civil war (because he treats them synonymously), Foucault treats it as one frame of civil war.[46] In neither case is stasis something genuinely distinct from its Roman counterpart. In the introduction to his book on stasis, Agamben laments that, though there exists both a 'polemology' and an 'irenology'—a study of war and a study of peace—there is no 'stasiology,' or study of internal conflict.[47] While Agamben's approach is to flesh out the concept of civil war more fully, it's possible also to enrich the conceptual vocabulary for strife by comparing competing concepts. The reason to take up this project of enrichment is that the absence of strife from the repertoire of positive political concepts may hamper democratic theory's efforts to understand how diverse populations can share in political life on more equitable terms.

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[44] Ibid., 35.
[45] Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2.
[46] Agamben treats civil war as roughly equivalent to stasis in *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, because, for him, both operate as a 'state of exception': "Just as in the state of exception, *zōē*, natural life, is included in the juridical-political order through its exclusion, so analogously the *oikos* is politicised and included in the *polis* through the *stasis*." Agamben, *Stasis*, 22.
[47] Ibid., 2.

Though Armitage doesn't consider stasis as a kind of internal conflict that could supplement accounts of civil war (like Agamben's), there are thinkers on race in the United States who currently do perform this kind of 'stasiological' work, employing and comparing these concepts for strife to describe racial conflict in the United States. Since at least the time of the American Civil War, frustrations with the failure of emancipation's promise have prompted commentators to draw primarily on the frame of an ongoing civil war. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois subtitles the penultimate chapter of his *Black Reconstruction*, "How civil war in the South began again—indeed had never ceased."[48] About 25 years later, at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, George Jackson described the conflict between the Black Panther Party and the FBI's COINTELPRO as a civil war for liberation occasioned by the same failures of abolition.[49] And today, this tradition is taken up by many theorists of race today, including the Afro-pessimists, who argue that the use of racialized slavery has structured political communities in the Western hemisphere on the basis of a fundamental antagonism. However, while these theorists employ the term 'civil war,' it is not always clear if they mean it in the catastrophic sense—opposed to the operation and application of law—or in a sense that shifts between the catastrophic and the enduring (as in Foucault).

V. Civil War and Race in American Political Thought

In the case of the Afro-pessimists, the language of a fundamental antagonism gives the impression that 'civil war' takes on the former, catastrophic, definition. These

[48] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 670.
[49] Jackson, *Blood in my Eye*, 103. With COINTELPRO, the FBI illegally monitored and framed Black Nationalist leaders, sending them either to prison or into exile.

theorists draw on the work of black feminists like Hortense Spillers and critical race theorists like Derrick Bell to criticize the notion that there are clear legal remedies to racial inequality. Spillers contends that, "in black culture a narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory," and Bell advocates for a realist approach to the law because black lives and rights "serve as the involuntary sacrifices whose victimization helps point white society and their country in the right direction."[50]

This position is framed as 'pessimistic' because it opposes itself to a racial optimism that is, arguably, characteristic of the rule of law paradigm. Traditionally, proponents of that account have held that anti-black exclusion is a bug, rather than a feature, of American political life. Louis Hartz, for instance, understands racial domination as destined to fade away in the face of a fundamental liberal tradition, and Rogers Smith, opposed to Hartz, nevertheless contends that American inegalitarian and ascriptive traditions are neatly separable from more egalitarian strands.[51] By these accounts, the extension of legal citizenship to disenfranchised groups is adequate to the task of unifying a political community.

Against this more optimistic outlook, the Afro-Pessimists worry that such enthusiasm for unity often offers cover for persistent inequality (critics often read black political organizing of any kind, for instance, as ascriptive, divisive, and potentially

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[50] Spillers et al., '"Whatcha Gonna Do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 306 and Bell, "Racial Realism," 373.

[51] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) and Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For the imbrication of these
supposedly distinct multiple "traditions," see: Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For how Smith's multiple traditions thesis extends, rather than undoes, America exceptionalism, see Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, 119-121.

destabilizing). For Frank Wilderson, these legal remedies may be effective in 'conflicts,' which can be 'posed and solved' by making claims to rights, but they are ineffective in resolving a 'structural antagonism,' which entails an "irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions."[52] He makes this point in his critique of Gramsci, where he counterposes the 'war of position' that upsets a bourgeois hegemony and can liberate *workers* (but not other marginalized subjects) to the 'civil war' against black people that he sees as undergirding the society in which (mere) wars of position can take place.[53]As with Armitage's account of civil war, this 'paradigm of antagonism' is characterized by the breakdown or absence of civil law, which leaves in its place a struggle for either supersession or secession.[54]

The similarity between the civil war frame and theories of racial antagonism is not lost on the pessimists. Both Wilderson and Jared Sexton, for instance, draw on both bodies of literature to offer a friendly critique of Agamben that largely endorses his conception of civil war. Both make a direct comparison between Agamben's *homo sacer*—a figure from his earlier work—and the figure of the slave. For Agamben, sovereign power produces bare life as a means of securing its own legitimacy. He describes this process as a necessary exclusion that results from what he calls (drawing

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[52] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 5.
[53] Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," 226, 237.
[54] Wilderson inverts the worry that instability throws a political community into crisis, associated with the rule of law frame, by arguing that the stability of American civil society "is a state of emergency for Indians and Blacks." For Wilderson, the non-arbitrary character of the law as it applies to Americans who are neither black nor indigenous has its foil (and basis) in the arbitrary application of violence to black Americans (this is, in Orlando Patterson's terms, gratuitous, or naked violence, and is, for him, one of the constituent elements of slavery). See: *Red, White, and Black*, 7, 11. See also: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 18.

on Hobbes) an 'incessant civil war' between the state and this excluded population.[55] Agamben names this excluded person 'homo sacer' after the archaic legal figure who could be killed by anyone without fear of punishment, but could not be sacrificed—someone who was, he argues, totally evacuated of all legal personality. When he describes the world as in a state of 'global civil war'—something that Armitage finds troubling though not altogether false—Agamben argues also that the 'camp' is the "new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet."[56] As internal conflicts become increasingly prevalent, in other words, the techniques of surveillance and control used in camps will be applied to more and more subjects.

Wilderson and Sexton both accept this structure of conflict between state power and excluded people, only disagreeing with Agamben's timeline. As Wilderson puts it: "Agamben is not wrong so much as he is late. Auschwitz is not 'so unprecedented' to one whose frame of reference is the Middle Passage, followed by Native American genocide."[57] Sexton adds that Agamben's work 'does not escape a certain conceptual belatedness' and welcomes efforts to 'provincialize' it.[58] Both see Western colonies and the plantations of the New World as earlier sites of a 'permanent state of exception.'

Wilderson and Sexton see this correction as a necessary intervention because each understands the Middle Passage to be a structuring break in world history. They argue

[55] Here, Agamben suggests that the sovereign authority holds up the prospect of a state of nature as a means of maintaining its legitimacy. This argument recalls William Connolly's reading of Hobbes in *Political Theory and Modernity*: "The state of nature is shock therapy. It helps subjects to get their priorities straight by teaching them what life would be like without sovereignty. It domesticates by eliciting the vicarious fear of violent death in those who have not had to confront it directly. And when one confronts the fear of early and violent death, one becomes willing to regulate oneself and to accept external regulations that will secure life against its dangers" (29).
[56] Agamben, *Stasis*, 1, and *Homo Sacer*, 175.
[57] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 36.
[58] Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes of the Afterlife of Slavery," 32.

that the decision to enslave people from West African ports rather than from Europe's population of vagabonds inaugurated a cycle of gratuitous violence that objectifies people of African descent while ensuring the ability of others to bear rights as citizens.[59] Wilderson calls this argument 'political ontology,' and claims it presents unique challenges for combatting anti-black racism. Whereas laborers, he argues, have some relation of commonality with their employers (their common humanity), "the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity."[60] If the Slave's position were to be unsettled, he contends, it would mean the loss of coherence for the rest of the world, which, in turn, invests the world in maintaining this essential below.

The affinity of the Afro-Pessimist position with Agamben's account of sacrifice and civil war is clear, notwithstanding the former's critique of the latter. Accordingly, it's not difficult to see, on one reading, how bleak are the prospects of political change for these pessimists. Agamben himself, after all, offers little hope to those who oppose sovereign power or who seek its radical revisioning. Either political actors mark themselves for exclusion and extermination by opposing the state with a revolutionary program or, supposing they succeed, they will immediately begin to reproduce the very same processes as the new sovereign power. It is for this reason that Agamben

[59] Wilderson draws on the historian, David Eltis to make this point. In "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation," Eltis argues that it would have less expensive for Dutch and English slavers to draw from their local pool of vagabonds, who were legally enslavable at the time. See: *Red, White, and Black*, 15. The claim about gratuitous violence derives, in part, from the distinction Spillers makes between the conditional violence slaveholders were permitted to employ against vagabonds and the unconditional violence permitted against slaves of African descent in, for instance, the French *Code Noir*. See: Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color*, 210.
[60] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 11.

characterizes the ‘exception’ as “the reef on which the revolutions of our century have been shipwrecked.”[61] Wilderson and Sexton appear to agree with this diagnosis. Owing to this structure, they argue, any political program that does not account for the nature of antagonism is bound to fail. In the case of all three, the adoption of a civil war frame for understanding internal conflict seems to license a certain approach to sovereignty that occludes or rejects the possibility of any kind of meliorism or engagement with the state and its laws.

Wilderson’s account of political ontology, especially, locates the cause of exclusion in the distant past and seems to require an apocalyptic event to bring about political change in the present. This account might lead Wilderson to resist a stasis frame insofar as it takes the distinction between an established people and a disparate multitude as never settled. Such a move might, by Wilderson’s standards, fail to appreciate the nature of what he describes as an antagonism. By describing the distinction as never fully settled, in other words, the stasis frame risks underestimating the durability of exclusion.

Wilderson himself licenses another reading, however, when he gives some reason to suspect that this antagonism is less durable than he at other times claims. Jared Sexton makes this observation, suggesting that Wilderson’s ‘political ontology’ might be read as a rhetorical move: “Political ontology is not a metaphysical notion,” he writes, “because it is the explicit outcome of a politics and thereby available to historic challenge through collective struggle. But it is not simply a description of a political status either, even an oppressed political status, because it functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée* of the premodern, modern, and postmodern eras.”[62] From

[61] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.
[62] Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness,” 36-37.

Sexton's perspective, Wilderson describes a structural position that is produced by a process that begins with the Middle Passage, but that is not tragically fated by it. In this way, the language of a different ontology connotes a particular persistence—one whose stickiness requires extraordinary vigilance. Perhaps we may think of a condition or circumstance that has been ontologized (that is, made remarkably resistant to change), rather than one that is ontological.

Wilderson, for his part, often gives credence to Sexton's interpretation when he evaluates moments of resistance to anti-black racism. In a conversation with Huey Copeland, for instance, concerning the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), Copeland and Wilderson are critical of the museum's 'narrative of progress,' while they consider the ways it might nevertheless provide a space for 'black gathering and engagement.' As Wilderson criticizes the integrationist rhetoric of David Adjaye, the lead architect, Copeland relates that at the opening, he found a space "where all kinds of real talk—articulations that might be at cross-purposes with the stated ambitions of the museum—could take place."[63] Wilderson admits that the possibility of an alternative kind of gathering is, for him, 'encouraging,' but goes on to say that championing that sign is only part of what he and Copeland can and should do: "it's my job and your job as critical theorists to join in with the black joy but also to be the skeptics."[64] Political actions including, perhaps, those that take place in something like what Moten and Harney call an 'undercommons' may work to affect a structural antagonism, but because of the persistent nature of that antagonism, Wilderson

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[63] Copeland and Wilderson, "Red, Black, and Blue," in *Art Forum*, 3.
[64] Ibid.

remains skeptical and vigilant, even in the face of encouraging news. What appears as joyous, after all, maybe turn out to be a kind of false inclusion.[65]

If we take Wilderson's reliance on a model of antagonism as a kind of inoculation against credulity in the promise of progress, change seems less impossible than in Agamben's account of civil war. Furthermore, if we find that civil war as a frame only finds the potential for positive change in secession or supercession, then we might invite Wilderson and others who invoke a structural antagonism or civil war to extend their skepticism to this frame as well. While antagonism may be useful as a way to demonstrate the shortcomings of integrative responses to division (those suggested at by a rule of law frame, for instance), the stasis frame, by conceiving of groups as in bonded division, accepts this critique of integration, without also advancing a model of sovereignty that strips the oppressed of all agency. Stasis, in other words, might hold promise for those who are invested in finding a space for politics in the midst of division.

VI. Campt's Labored Balancing

Tina Campt suggests the use of a stasis frame in her work on photography. Though Campt may not identify as an Afro-Pessimist, she nevertheless eschews an optimistic frame, committing herself instead to a 'grammar of black futurity.'[66] Campt adopts the term stasis in a way comparable to Loraux—as a corrective to those who

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[65] See: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.
[66] Campt's work draws on photography to pose the question of liberation in the future anterior, i.e. What will have had to happen to become free? "Futurity is, for me, not a question of 'hope'—though it is certainly inescapably intertwined with the idea of aspiration. To me it is crucial to think about futurity through a notion of 'tense.' What is the 'tense' of a black feminist future? It is a tense of anteriority a tense relationship to an idea of possibility that is neither innocent nor naïve." Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

equate motion with rebellion or resistance, and stillness with capture and acquiescence. For her stasis is "neither stagnant nor motionless," instead, "it is an effortful equilibrium achieved through a labored balancing of opposing forces and flows."[67] She reads identification photos and family portraits in turn-of-the-century South Africa in terms of stasis, which is to say, rather than reading the photos as instances of capture—as part of a process of colonial taxonomy or through notions of Edwardian respectability—which would imply motionlessness and would locate agency only in resistant action, Campt frames the pose of each subject as *tense*. "What appears to be motionlessness," she writes, "is in fact an effortful placement that never arrives at a true state of stillness." Rather than submission, in other words, Campt considers the 'embodied postures of the subjugated' as 'manifestations of psychic and physical *response*' to the gaze of the settler and ethnographer.[68] These postures, she concludes open the possibility for what she calls 'reassemblage in dispossession,' which is to say it allows her to consider how the quotidian practices of racialized subjects can "redeploy relations of power in unexpected ways, with unintended consequences."[69] Read through stasis, in other words, these photos highlight what she elsewhere calls a 'dwelling practice' in which what may ostensibly appear as acquiescence can, given a certain posture, serve to instead begin to establish a place of inclusion and thwart ontologization.

Though Campt uses stasis to describe the tense poses of photographic subjects—stasis in the body, not in the city—there is a clear affinity between her account and the classical concept for conflict. The family portraits she describes indicate the 'state of

[67] Ibid., 158-159.
[68] Ibid., 50-51. Author's emphasis.
[69] Ibid., 60.

mind' that, for Armitage, typifies the tense atmosphere of a divided city. In this atmosphere, the vandalism of the herms is not simply sacrilegious, and family portraits are not mere mementos. Though the vandalism might have been a warning to those democrats who would expand the franchise further, and the family portraits can be read as a bid for inclusion and a reimagining of what it means to be South African, in either case the act requires of its readers a kind of balanced laboring in turn. Both cases involve the politicization of the mundane in order to challenge a supposed consensus, pulling in onlookers centripetally. Taken as 'dwelling practices,' Campt suggests that moves in stasis take up and trouble objects and symbols that mark belonging—either by identifying with those objects and symbols to make a new claim of belonging, or discrediting them, so that they must be shaped anew. These practices differ from the civil war frame by offering an alternate vision of sovereign power: one that runs through 'dwelling practices' rather than simply constraining and determining them.

Campt's focus is on photography and agency. Democratic theory can go further still. A *stasis* frame that highlights the labored balancing of political actors may hold promise for those who seek a politics that neither insists on integration or assimilation nor relies on exile or accession, or is resigned to them. This is not to say, however, that stasis is always necessarily a better model for internal strife—it is, however, to open the question. As Armitage himself argues, the choice to frame a political concept in terms of civil war implies a certain set of strategies for reconciliation.[70] Similarly, we may say that to draw on the frame of *stasis* might indicate other strategies that are possibly more productive in certain contexts. While there may be times when its best to view conflict

[70] Ibid., 12.

through the lens of the law or of civil war, stasiological work is needed to identify when any given view is most appropriate. It is the wager of this project that racial conflict in the United States is best understood as a kind of stasis.

To test this claim, I turn to three authors whose work has often been framed by philosophers, critics, and theorists as contributing to either a rule of law or civil war paradigm. Each author's ambivalent or shifting identification with the United States is an invitation to think of them as thinkers of stasis. This reading is further licensed by their critical explorations of classical concepts—particularly those that suggest strategies for responding to conflict.

The first of these thinkers, W.E.B. Du Bois, seems to be the least likely to champion stasis. His allusions to Plato and an 'aristocracy of talent' imply a pathological view of conflict. But reading Du Bois in this way presents the question of who is talented as settled and obscures the ways he outlines the political means by which that question is unavoidably contested. In his writing on rhetoric, his discussions of demagogues, and his allusions to Moses and Exodus, he helps to illustrate both how political actors attempt to consolidate rule, and how others might disrupt these efforts.

Two: Genres of Charisma
Demagogues, Leaders, and the Mosaic Theme in W.E.B. Du Bois

"In a novel, he possessed the ability to transform a ruined girl who grew up in a brothel into a heroine, but achieving the same in a sociological study proved nearly impossible. Literature was better able to grapple with the role of chance in human action and to illuminate the possibility and promise of the errant path."

-Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 93

I. Du Bois's Rhetorical Strategies and the Question of Genre

W.E.B. Du Bois commented on the role of leadership in democratic politics throughout his life. Scholarship on his contribution to democratic theory is often divided over the role that charisma plays in his work.[71] Some view charisma as a title to authority that is divorced from the people, which legitimates a paternalistic or custodial form of rule. Others emphasize the importance of spontaneous action—most famously in his retelling of the General Strike—and popular judgment and criticism. Both approaches are applicable to Du Bois's work because both tendencies are present. Yet, either reading strategy brings a risk: to separate them neatly into a polarity may obscure how leaders are themselves always reliant on the people's reception, and how 'action in concert' can always be narrated as being driven by the action of one great individual.[72]

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[71] See: Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903*; Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*; Adolph Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*; Hazel Carby, *Race Men*; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*; Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*; and Melvin Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk."

[72] For how all action in concert only gains coherence after the fact when it is related by a historian or storyteller, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191 and passim.

Rather than take leadership to be the antithesis of democratic politics, I here follow Cedric Robinson and Erica Edwards in considering leadership as something that emerges from a 'charismatic scenario,' and gains substance through practices of story-telling and narration.[73] In this view, the stories we tell about political action affect how we see it, think about it, and, ultimately, how we try to practice politics.

One reason scholars find in Du Bois a particularly vanguardist politics may be, then, that he relies on romantic and Carlylean emplotments in his histories and autobiographical works. My wager is that paying greater attention to those of Du Bois's works that have a weaker authorial voice, or works where the words and deeds of great men are not the emphasis, may complicate the vanguardist picture of his politics.

By framing Du Bois's theory of leadership and genre in terms of charisma, I identify it as a classicized approach to democratic politics. A turn to charisma might seem to bolster the claims by those who charge Du Bois with elitism. A classical education was after all the cost of membership to his 'Talented Tenth.'[74] From his activity in the American Negro Academy at the turn of the century, to his defense of selfless custodianship before the elite Boulé in 1948, Du Bois's classicism seems to have persistently played a role in his vanguardist politics.[75] Indeed, he often characterizes the

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[73] See: Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* and Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership.*

[74] On the importance of classical education and rhetorical training in black colleges and in Du Bois's educational theory, see Kenneth Goings and Eugene O'Connor, "Lessons Learned: The Role of the Classics at Black Colleges and Universities," *The Journal of Negro Education* 79, 2010, 521-531. They argue that Du Bois found a classical education to be crucial for training young men in oratory to defend rights and articulate claims to black and white citizens. For how this view was characteristic of a particular approach to charismatic leadership in the United States at the turn of the century, see Jeremy C. Young, *The Age of Charisma. Leaders, Followers, and Emotions in American Society, 1870-1940*.

[75] Or at least his vanguardist politics dressed itself in classicism.

authority conferred by a classical education in other classicized ways: first, training develops an aristocracy of talent that assumes leadership for the happiness of all, and second, it makes leaders capable of charismatically expressing the gifts and contributions of a folk.[76] Both come together under a third classicization: the deployment of the Exodus story and his invocations of Moses. Du Bois joins a long history of black thinkers who invoke Exodus to advocate for emancipation, and to make sense of life after slavery. When taken with his interest in charisma and talent, the Mosaic theme appears to suggest a people coming up from slavery, in which the older generations are not yet prepared for freedom.[77]

Yet there is more than one way to read or to tell the story of Exodus, and it is not immediately clear that Du Bois offers us one in which the people are unprepared for freedom up until they cross the Jordan river.[78] A different kind of Exodus may be implied in Du Bois's account of 'the people,' for instance. Both Lawrie Balfour and Melvin Rogers, for instance, discuss how his use of rhetoric and his experimentation with genre

[76] The former has been compared to Plato's guardian class, while the latter derives from a reception of St. Paul's techniques for preventing schism.

[77] For an alternate view of Du Bois's classicism—one I hope to contribute to here—see Harriet Fertik and Matthias Hanses, "Above the Veil: Revisiting the Classicism of W.E.B. Du Bois," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 26, 2019, 1-9. For more on the charismatic Moses and other deployments, see: Vincent Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma*. For a cursory look at the history of the Exodus theme in black political thought, see Eddie Glaude, *Exodus!* and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*.

[78] This gloss on Exodus is offered by Robert Gooding-Williams who takes the Mosaic theme to be a sign of Du Bois's aristocratic politics. Gooding-Williams, along with Adolph Reed, offers what I call, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a 'paranoid' reading of Du Bois. Paranoid reading practices, Sedgwick says, are neither 'delusional [nor] simply wrong,' it has strengths and weaknesses—notably it anticipates something (in this case, vanguardism and elitism), and looks to expose it. Reparative readers, by contrast, looks for moments of pleasure in the text and is less anticipatory and more open to surprise (both the shock of horror and the joy of hope). To read reparatively isn't to lose sight of that horror (elitism), but to remain open for those moments where it doesn't predominate. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling*, 123-151.

challenge his readership to unsettle the boundaries of American peoplehood.[79] Beginning with *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois moved away from a dry social-scientific presentation of fact to a more literary style. Du Bois's rhetorical strategy was aimed not simply at moral suasion, but at the level of affect—his aim was to make a typically inured white audience more receptive to his account. Balfour finds in Du Bois's semiautobiographical and biographical texts an attempt to alter and disrupt the reading practices of whites who are prone to evasion. She finds that his biography of John Brown, for instance, cautions against "historical evasions of the forms of bloodshed that have been integral to American democracy."[80] By experimenting with the conventions of biography and autobiography, Du Bois attempts to short circuit white reading strategies for avoiding complicity in the crimes of the past and their afterlife. In these narrative experimentations, we may find material for a different account of Moses.

While an alternate account of Moses and charisma may be recovered in Du Bois's work, it must contend with those moments that are more overtly paternalistic. As Robert Gooding-Williams notes, along with his attack on white prejudices, Du Bois was also prone to derogating certain forms of black life. Uplift often, for him, involved altering black folkways to make them less susceptible to white prejudice.[81] Gooding-Williams takes Du Bois's much-discussed Talented Tenth as emblematic of a commitment to 'political expressivism' that gleans black cultural expressions, refines them, and

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[79] See: Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, and Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk."
[80] Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, 51.
[81] For Du Bois's elitist politics, see: Carby, Reed, James, Gooding-Williams, and Annie Menzel, "'Awful Gladness': The Dual Political Rhetorics of Du Bois's 'Of the Passing of the First-Born.'" Menzel, for instance, notes how many of the very rhetorical strategies in *Souls* that aim at eliciting white sympathy truck in norms that risk pathologizing kinship structures and sexual roles that do not conform to the standards of his time.

represents them to the mass in order to model practices and sensibilities fit for democratic culture.[82]

Critics of Du Bois like Gooding-Williams express a suspicion that, for all his contributions, he championed race leadership by strong, charismatic men who obscure the political activity and claims of women and deviant subjects.[83] And while many admit that Du Bois revises this position on race leadership and the need for charismatic authority to guide the nation within a nation (especially in *Black Reconstruction*), there are still signs of this position in his more mature works. In his 1948 reexamination of "The Talented Tenth," for example, Du Bois argues still emphasizes the "organization of the mass." And, as Balfour notes, *Dusk of Dawn*, makes the case for an elite that still relates to the mass pedagogically.[84] As Du Bois comes to see the value in the agency of the 'mass,' he doesn't abandon fully his vanguardist politics.

At the same time, those who emphasize that Du Bois only progressively and gradually changed his position on the nature and necessity of leadership typically explain the shift by the event of his engagement with Marxism.[85] This version of Du Bois's intellectual development tends to downplay moments in earlier texts (before the 1920s) where he takes the role, thought, and 'strivings' of the mass more seriously. As Rogers notes, there is a call for leadership to be responsive to those 'whose interests are most

[82] Gooding-Williams gets the term 'political expressivism' from Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*. Gooding-Williams concedes that this description of Du Bois's politics is less applicable after *Souls*, but sees it as playing a role even in later work, and importantly, having an effect on the philosophy of race in his wake.
[83] See especially, Carby, *Race Men*, but also James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth* and Edwards, *Charisma*.
[84] Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, 87.
[85] See, for instance, James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, 24-25.

nearly touched' in *Souls*.[86] When we consider these accounts of the people alongside the more critical accounts of his development, Du Bois appears to have always been committed both to a popular politics that takes seriously the claims of the mass and to a more elitist model of leadership that is responsive to the people but justified in standing apart from them as exemplary or representative.

When Gooding-Williams dismisses the democratic moment in *Souls*, he frames it as the expressivist position *overtaking* the concern about fitness to lead, after Du Bois emphasizes the backwardness of the mass. While Gooding-Williams's stress on the pathological in Du Bois makes this interpretive move plausible, I propose instead to hold the two accounts in Du Bois's work in tension. The question of who 'those most nearly touched' consists in is a political question after all, and Du Bois does not (refuses to?) settle the question for us. Rather than read Du Bois as decisively advocating for a possibly-tyrannical aristocracy of race men, or as actually harboring faith in popular politics, I read Du Bois as illustrating a tension in democratic politics between (self-styled) exemplary individuals who attempt to stand apart and cajole a people, and the popular sovereignty of an unruly and never settled people that such individuals seek to harness (and sometimes do).

This tension operates as a kind of stasis, in which aspiring leaders want either to ground their authority in something durable (charisma, the law, tradition, etc.) or to at least give the appearance that their authority does not depend on popular reception. When people find that leadership fails to give expression to their interests and desires, they challenge the standards of authority that leaders rely on. For instance, democratic leaders

[86] Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect," 191.

in ancient Athens, as Josiah Ober relates, had to strike a delicate balance between, on the one hand, justifying their right to stand apart (via what Ober calls in contemporary terms 'elite signaling and interest tracking'), while on the other hand not standing so far apart as to become suspected of conceit or tyrannical designs.[87] The failure to sufficiently please the audience might lead to revolt or tyrannicide.

In his contests with Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, Du Bois betrays an anxiety along these lines when he warns against the dangers of sycophants and demagogues, while insisting all the while that he himself is neither a sycophant nor a demagogue. In *Souls*, for instance, he notes that some of the opposition to Washington is "mere envy; the disappointment of displaced demagogues and the spite of narrow minds," and then takes pains to distance himself from that set.[88] This puts pressure on the idea of a charismatic leadership that simply mesmerizes a mass (either by irrational magnetism or voicing a communal will), since any attempt at leadership relies on an unreliable reception.[89] Despite his avowed confidence that giving expression to the spirit (or souls) of a black 'folk' is sufficient grounds for authority, Du Bois supplements his cultural refinement with critiques, warnings, and appeals. His charisma is not an inborn gift or trait—as some of his appeals to the 'best' might suggest—but, rather, is fought

[87] See: Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*. Ober notes that writers of fifth and fourth century Athens would criticize those leaders who benefited the many at the expense of the elite as demagogues who made appeals to the passions, and he likens the framing of these appeals as 'irrational' to Weber's account of charisma (123-124).
[88] Du Bois, *Souls*, 36.
[89] Gooding-Williams likens Du Bois's political expressivism to Weber's idea of charismatic authority as part of a larger move to attribute to Du Bois a Weberian conception of politics: politics-as-rule (as opposed to action-in-concert). Nahum Chandler and Aldon Morris both give us reasons to resist likening Du Bois's project to Weber's too quickly. See: Chandler, "The Possible Form of an Interlocution," *CR: The New Centennial* 6, 2006, 193-239, and Morris, *The Scholar Denied*.

over and politicized in what we might call, drawing on Erica Edwards, a 'charismatic scenario.'[90] In such a scenario, both the fitness to lead and the identification of who counts as 'those most nearly touched' are contested and negotiated.[91]

I suggest the picture of Du Bois's politics—either the elitism of *Souls* or the popular refusal of *Black Reconstruction*—has as much to do with *genre* as it does with his personal intellectual development. Essays, biographies, and autobiographies all lend themselves to a strong authorial voice—particularly in the case of the latter two genres, where a life may be depicted as representative of some shared experience. Presenting a life as exemplary risks inflating the individual's role in a given action. It also risks obscuring other perspectives on that action. As Barbara Johnson says of the genre: "autobiography consists in the story of the difficulty of conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be."[92] Du Bois's *Souls* can be read along similar lines—the book opens with concern for his peers, the "other black boys," who do not respond to the strife of the veil with contempt, and ends with two men, Crummell and Jones, who don't quite meet the standard—and as a result the reader is left with an image of charismatic masculinity as Du Bois's response to the color line.[93] This is, by and large, Gooding-

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[90] I get the term 'charismatic scenario' from Erica Edwards, who in turn develops it from her reading of Cedric Robinson's *Terms of Order*. Both criticize the Weberian idea of charisma and the ways it has been deployed to study black political action in the United States. For both, charisma is not an essential trait, but something that is always contested. Edwards argues, as I discuss below, that it gains the *appearance* of being an inborn trait because of the ways it is narrated. Despite how, in *Black Marxism*, Robinson critiques the stasis-frame that he attributes to Marx (because he senses in it a class reductionism), his critiques of Plato on the question of stability in *The Terms of Order* invite reading Robinson as advancing an idea of *stasis as bond* along similar lines to Loraux.

[91] For how democratic politics is undecidably caught between 'founding' acts and their popular reception, see Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics*, esp. ch. 1, "Beginnings."

[92] Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," in *The Barbara Johnson Reader*, 189. Author's emphasis.

[93] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 10.

Williams's reading of the quasi-autobiographical work, and he argues convincingly that it promotes an image of politics as rule.[94]

But att the same time, there is evidence that Du Bois himself is sensitive to the dangers of these genres. As Balfour argues, he recognized and resisted the limitations of biographical writing and, to take the emphasis off his own particular life, casts his later work, *Dusk of Dawn*, as the 'autobiography of a race concept.'[95] Balfour sees Du Bois as experimenting in 'critical race autobiography' by introducing dialogues and other devices that undermine his authorial persona. Still, his experiments within the genre do not quite go far enough. Though *Dusk of Dawn* helps us "to understand the means of racial identity," as Balfour says, it is "significantly less helpful in getting us to the point where we can understand the workings of bloc formation that identity politics depends upon."[96] A dialogue between would-be members of the Talented Tenth, for instance, offers a critique of intragroup differentiation by class, but aims to resolve the division by having these exceptional individuals put their energy into uplift and leadership rather than exploitation and disregard.[97]

But Du Bois did not end his generic experimentation with autobiography alone. In addition to his lyrical autobiographical texts, Du Bois wrote histories, sociological studies, essays, polemics, plays, poems, pageants, and novels. If we can read his various experiments in autobiography as attempts to overcome (or at least, complicate) a picture

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[94] *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, especially chapter 3: "Du Bois's Counter-Sublime."
[95] Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, especially Ch. 4, "Practicing Critical Race Autobiography."
[96] Ibid., 87.
[97] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, "The Colored World Within." This point of view is echoed in Du Bois's 1948 address to the Boulé, in which he exhorts his upper-status audience to engage in *selfless* leadership (as opposed to leadership through individual striving, i.e. business), but leadership all the same.

of exemplary politics, then we might consider how these other genres alter the optics of political action. His novels, in particular, seem to hold promise for depicting charisma as something that emerges out of concerted action, rather than from an inborn talent or a gift from god.

The turn to novels is, in part, suggested by Gooding-Williams's alternative to politics-as-rule, which he gleans from Frederick Douglass's battle with Covey, the overseer, as detailed in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Though Douglass's work is an autobiography, that particular episode features a number of players who each have a part in Douglass's eventual victory over Covey. Douglass does not, here, present himself as a heroic exemplar, but instead lays out how the plan to struggle against Covey and its successful execution are both dependent on the doings and sayings of friends and bystanders.[98] By dramatizing what Gooding-Williams calls plantation politics—in which a 'troupe of subversives' collectively 'set aside the status distinction between ruler and ruled'—Douglass brings the dynamics of 'action-in-concert' better into focus.[99] Though Douglass may present himself as the 'instigator' of the troupe's subversions, he does not "command their cabal."[100]

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[98] Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 185 and passim. See also Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, 145 and passim, and Nolan Bennett, *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy*.
[99] Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 184, 187.
[100] Ibid., 187. Gooding-Williams makes the distinction between the leader-as-ruler and leader-as instigator by drawing (313 fn. 86) on Hannah Arendt's account of consent. Arendt writes: "In our context, all that matters is the insight that no man, however strong, can ever accomplish anything, good or bad, without the help of others. What you have here is the notion of an equality which accounts for a 'leader' who is never more than *primus inter pares*, the first among his peers. Those who seem to obey him actually support him and his enterprise…." Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 47. Interestingly, Arendt seems to undermine the neat distinction between rule and action-in-concert here. What I hope to show below is that by looking at different genres "those who seem to obey" maybe be recast as "actually supporting" an individual who makes a claim to leadership and, who may withdraw that support.

In Du Bois's novels, characters are similarly situated in a web of relations that work to enable and hinder political action. Although both of his first two novels are romances that follow the Bildungsroman formula—which brings them perhaps as near to biography as novels can be—Du Bois's heroes are thwarted and altered by popular forces throughout in ways that complicate the image of charismatic authority that Gooding-Williams or Adolph Reed take from Du Bois's other texts.

In the sections that follow, I outline the view of Du Bois as an aristocratic thinker, and complicate it—describing that viewpoint as, in part, an effect of his readers' assumptions about genre. I then turn to two moments from Du Bois's fiction which depict a more tense dynamic between (aspiring) leaders and the (supposedly) led than what is suggested in *Souls* and his other autobiographical works and essays. Finally, I turn to his interactions with another charismatic claimant to the title of 'Moses'—Marcus Garvey—and consider their rivalry in light of the image of politics suggested by the novels. Rather than the Pauline and Weberian idea of charisma as an inborn gift or vocation (akin to Plato's philosopher kings or the paternalistic Moses), this reading of Du Bois suggests that charisma emerges in the contest between those who aspire to rule and those who are led (and those who are excluded by a leader's image of the people). Whereas the former makes use of classics to bolster authority—as proof of good breeding or a title to lead—the latter might re-narrate classical texts and illustrate how their authority is always dependent on and vulnerable to reception (just as leaders are).

II. The Talented Tenth as Charismatic Guardian Class

Robert Gooding-Williams critiques Du Bois for offering an image of politics as rule—in which an elite leads a mass—and obscuring more democratic images of politics. Whereas democratic representations of politics might describe authority as emanating from popular deliberation and criticism, he argues, Du Bois grounds authority in the charisma of a talented few—'the best.' The charisma of these exceptional actors derives first from their membership in the antecedently formed, or given, racial identity since, for Du Bois, each race possesses a 'gift' for the enrichment of world culture.[101] The ability to articulate this gift in a way that both resonates with members of the group and is legible as a gift to outsiders constitutes the second way the talented tenth possess charisma. Together, they contribute to what Gooding-Williams calls 'political expressivism' in which the authority to lead is grounded in the ability to embody and express the ideal of the group.[102]

This is not the only model of authority offered in Du Bois's early writings, but, Gooding-Williams argues, it is the one he ultimately champions. Alongside his political expressivism, Du Bois posits the criticism of others as the basis for legitimate political

[101] Du Bois uses the language of 'the gift' throughout his work. For instance, in *Souls*, the sorrow songs are the "greatest gift" that black Americans have to offer the world (155) and schools provide "the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds" (15). And though he does not mention *charisma* per se (the term was popularized first by Rudolph Sohm, and then Max Weber), he posits a relationship between gifts and soul that follows very closely to the relationship suggested by St. Paul (who originated the term). See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 12, in which different gifts (*charismata*) originate in a shared soul (*pneuma*).

[102] Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 14. Gooding-Williams borrows the term 'political expressivism' from Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 76. He likens this basis for authority to Weber's account of rule and to Plato's account of philosopher-kings (Joy James also makes the connection to Plato, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, 19, 136).

action.[103] In his chapter criticizing Booker T. Washington for the Atlanta Compromise, Du Bois charges that Washington has insulated himself from the criticism of his peers: "the hushing of the criticism of honest opponents is a dangerous thing. It leads some of the best critics to unfortunate silence and paralysis of effort…. Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched,—criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led,—this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society."[104] Whereas political expressivism plausibly entails an expert knowledge of the folk's gifts that is inaccessible to those who are 'led,' this account of criticism suggests that any claim to authority relies on the scrutiny of an audience.

In order to account for this passage, which complicates his portrait of Du Bois as an aristocrat, Gooding-Williams frames the account of criticism as considered only momentarily, and then dismissed. He frames the criterion of democratic criticism as *abandoned* because, he holds, it is irreconcilable with Du Bois's account of good leadership. At the turn of the century, Du Bois argued that the mass required leadership because they were incapable of achieving advancement and combatting prejudice by themselves. In his well-known "Talented Tenth" essay, Du Bois asks: "Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters."[105] And in the following year, in "The Development of a People," Du Bois writes that black leaders must serve as 'priests'

[103] While 'the criticism of others' might be read as jockeying for support and resources between (talented) rivals, Gooding-Williams himself insists that Du Bois has popular participation in mind when he says the criticism is of the leaders 'by those led.' See: Du Bois, *Souls*, 37.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, 45.

and interpret "the civilization of the twentieth century to the minds and hearts of a people who, from sheer necessity, can but dimly comprehend it."[106] If it is true that the people can 'but dimly comprehend' what civilization requires and that uplift always filters 'from the top downward,' Gooding-Williams observes, then tying leaders to the criticism of those led would doom the project of contesting the color line.[107]

Political expressivism, by contrast, only apparently faces the same paradox. Gooding-Williams notes that if leaders are supposed to employ the authentically expressed ideals of the people as tools for uplift, while those people exhibit pathological behavior, then it seems leaders cannot promote progress without undermining their own source of legitimacy. The paradox is resolved, he argues, when Du Bois splits the people into two categories: mass and folk. The mass refers to those backwards many in need of civilization, while the folk describes the people insofar as they're united by a "collectively shared spirit."[108]

This division, Gooding-Williams argues, allows for Du Bois to tie leaders to the people, without making them beholden to popular pressure—and a figure like Alexander Crummell came up short as a leader by failing to give expression to this collectively shared spirit. Though the young Crummell is charismatic and receives a calling to be a priest and to "lead the uncalled out of the house of bondage," his despair in the face of white prejudice causes him to lose sight of the folk.[109] The final chapter of *Souls* serves

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[106] Du Bois, "The Development of a People," 307.
[107] See: Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 54-58.
[108] Ibid., 131. We might read this account of a paradox as something similar to the paradox of politics. If so, then Gooding-Williams sees Du Bois as solving the paradox by splitting a general will (the folk) from the will of all (the mass).
[109] Du Bois, *Souls*, CITE

as a corrective, where Du Bois gives expression to the folk, particularly the suffering of slavery.[110]

Gooding-Williams argues that Du Bois describes this kind of charismatic leadership as early as 1888, when giving a speech on Otto von Bismarck. After giving an account of Bismarck's rise to power and the consolidation of the German state, Du Bois reflects that this life "shows what a man can do if he will," but goes on to warn that "it carries with it a warning lest we sacrifice a lasting good to a temporary advantage; lest we raise a nation and forget the people, become a Bismarck and not a Moses."[111] Moses is a model for emulation, Du Bois says, because, unlike Bismarck, he remembers the people.[112] For Gooding-Williams, this is Du Bois's model for the black elite, they must "remember the people they rule by demonstrating in and through their actions the ethos—again, the traditions, impulses, and strivings—that racially connects them to other members of the Negro nation."[113]

This account of Du Bois's expressivist politics prompts Gooding-Williams (along with Joy James and Adolph Reed) to describe a "Platonic-Du Boisian notion of black politics," in which those who are equipped to guide the mass to uplift lead as custodians

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[110] Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 110 and passim.
[111] Du Bois, "Bismarck."
[112] For 'remembering' as a necessary integrative force in the face of (dangerous) *stasis*, see Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken*, 157 and passim. In Euben's reading of the *Bacchae*, the revolt of the maenads is justified, but goes too far—and so Cadmus performs an important duty when he 're-members' Pentheus (who Euben identifies as a metonym for Thebes itself) in the wake of Agave's violent dismemberment. For Euben, Euripides dramatizes the danger of pushing the boundaries of identity too far and so he recommends to Athens healthy (more tame?) ways slackening the rigidity of membership and identity. For this reason, he casts Cadmus as 'responsible' for re-membering Pentheus, and helping Agave to re-member who she is (a daughter, a Queen, a mother, and not a hunter). In doing so, Euben leaves unopened the possibility that the maenads were capable of generating a stability of their own—although he does recognize them as a 'countercommunity' and not an 'anticommunity.' Taking stasis as a bonded division, rather than simply destructive, I argue, opens this possibility.
[113] Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 53.

for the good of all.[114] Moreover, like Plato, Du Bois also warns that debarring the best from positions of leadership will lead to group rule by demagogues. "By taking away their best equipped teachers and leaders, by slamming the door of opportunity in the faces of their bolder and brighter minds," he asks, "will you make them satisfied with their lot? or will you not transfer their leading from the hands of men taught to think to the hands of untrained demagogues?"[115] If men of training are not in positions of leadership, he suggests, then other leaders who will either pursue a destructive program of revolt or naked self-interest will come to power. If leadership doesn't fall to the best, it will be left to the rest.

Opposed to this aristocratic picture of politics, Gooding-Williams favors a more democratic alternative that he identifies with action-in-concert. Unlike the expressivist model, the democratic model starts from the assumption that the people are fit to guide themselves. Such a politics, he argues questions "modern norms and ideals" rather than takes them as standards of civilization and is open to non-assimilationist politics, including "the politics of revolt and revenge."[116] One can imagine that given these assumptions and orientations, this favored model of politics better appreciates the criticism that Gooding-Williams takes Du Bois to ultimately reject.

But rather than accepting that Du Bois does in fact reject democratic criticism—something he never explicitly states—we might instead read the apparent contradiction in his work as symptomatic of a tension within his thinking. As much as Du Bois may like to establish political authority in something fixed like an antecedently given identity and

[114] Ibid., 213.
[115] Du Bois, *Souls*, 71. For the distrust of demagogues in Ancient Athens, see: M.I. Finley, "Athenian Demagogues."
[116] Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 159.

the expression of its ideals, the inclusion of democratic criticism can be read as an indication of a tacit understanding that one's ability to 'remember the people' cannot be taken for granted, and is always dependent on an audience who may be skeptical of claims to authority, or who might not find that the group ideal expressed convenes with their self-image. Perhaps it is for this reason that Du Bois seems anxious to distance himself from demagoguery in "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington," and to align himself with those who "deprecate the sight of scattered counsels, of internal disagreement."[117] He may be alert to the way his sincere platform for progress might be taken for a self-interested ploy for advancement.[118] Gooding-Williams himself registers this anxiety when he notes the pessimistic tone in the final pages of *Soul*—the book, far from a sanguine assertion of charismatic authority—is, for Gooding-Williams, here a "cry in the wilderness" that relies on its readers to not become a "vain and stillborn enterprise."[119]

Gooding-Williams's distinction between the two images of politics may be overstated, in other words. Rather than read Du Bois as he might like to be read—as part of a cultural elite with the unique ability to unite an antecedently formed folk by refining its culture and expressing its highest ideals—we might recast his expressivism as an attempt at conjuring a folk out of a mass by offering an image of black politics that is

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[117] Du Bois, *Souls*, 41. This deprecation, again, indicates that Du Bois is a critic of discord and stasis, rather than someone who sees the value in instability. At the same time, however, the rhetorical effect of his challenge to Washington is to unsettle a consensus around higher education.

[118] Indeed, in a 1932 speech titled "What is wrong with the N.A.A.C.P.?," Du Bois affirms criticism that the organization, which largely carried out his program set out in *Souls*, was 'composed largely of the better circumstanced' who 'think of the organization as for themselves.'

[119] Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 129, 128.

appealing to enough (though, inevitably, not all) of the people.[120] Importantly, this 'remembering' is by no means automatic. Read in this ways, Du Bois's claims to expertise and his virtuosic lyricism may be strategies of seduction which aim to bolster his image as charismatic (as opposed to merely demagogic, say).

This strategy of seduction is all the more plausible when we recall that, for Gooding-Williams, the charismatic figure that Du Bois champions is modeled on Moses, who "ruled the Israelites, transforming them into a unified nation" and prepared them "for self-rule."[121] This image of Moses as deft liberator conduces to the image of rule that Gooding-Williams attributes to Du Bois, but is not the only possible Moses, and is not evidently the Moses that Du Bois has in mind.[122] To read Moses as uniquely positioned to remember the people might be the reading that we would imagine Moses himself would prefer—where his talent for expression and prophecy are beyond doubt—but we might read Moses's talents as devices used to maintain his authority against rivals and cajole a people who always potentially may make prophecies of their own.[123]

To be sure, Du Bois's allusions to Moses in *Souls* cast him as a charismatic authority. In "Of Our Spiritual Striving," he casts black Americans after emancipation as

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[120] I say 'as he might like to be read' because, despite the democratic criticism model in *Souls*, Du Bois nevertheless aims to present himself as somebody who is able to represent the spirit of the folk better than others. His wager is that his readers will accept his account of authority.
[121] Ibid., 21.
[122] Vincent Lloyd makes the distinction between a messianic Moses in the mold of Charleton Heston and a more democratic Moses who, like Douglass before his encounter with Covey, is reliant on others owing to his 'uncircumcised lips.' See: Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma*. Eddie Glaude, too, discusses the tendency to read deployments of Moses or Exodus as messianism, but suggests that its use need not be understood simply as denoting chosenness or exceptionalism. See: Glaude, *Exodus!*
[123] On popular prophetic power, see Honig, *Emergency Politics*, 108 and passim.

having spent 'forty years of renewal and development,' at times 'wooing false gods,' while seeking after a 'promised land of sweeter beauty.'[124]

This imagery indicates a people in need of the heroic charisma of a Moses, but this picture is enhanced by the semi-autobiographical genre of the work, in which Du Bois details the difficulty in becoming the man that Crummell or the fictional John could not. In works where a single life is presented alongside many others—even in Du Bois's messianic romances, as we shall see—that life appears less representative. Whereas in "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois will declare that "the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," his novels pose the question, "Who decides the exceptional man?"[125]

III. The Scene of Charisma I: Popular Prophecy in *Quest for the Silver Fleece*

As stated above, by representing a life as singular and representative, autobiography and other genres that feature a strong authorial voice enhance the image of certain individuals as uniquely charismatic. Novels, even heroic romances like those written by Du Bois, by virtue of diminishing the authorial voice, present charisma differently—they reveal what Erica Edwards calls the "discursive and performative terrain" of charisma."[126] Instead of presenting it as an inherent talent in the speaker or as the irruption of rationality in the audience, Edwards describes charisma as "a storytelling regime and a set of performative prescriptions, a compact of mythologies that covers over a matrix of liberatory and disciplinary impulses that both compel and contain black

[124] Du Bois, *Souls*, 12.
[125] Du Bois, "Talented Tenth," 33.
[126] Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, 16.

movements for social change."[127] Charisma, in other words, is a script that channels a variety of actors and impulses into familiar roles—and texts that dramatize rather than re-present that script reveal not only the facilitation of movements for social change, but also the accompanying disciplinary impulses and practices of containment.

At a glance, Du Bois's novels do not seem to be prime candidates for demonstrating charisma's terrain. Both *Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928) are romances in which the protagonists begins go into the world, develop their talents, suffer through a moment of doubt and pain (at least once), but deliver some emancipatory promise in the end. In the former, Zora rises out from her life in Elspeth's brothel to eventually buy and run a plantation whose profits fund schools and hospitals for the town's poor. In the latter, Matthew Towns is dejected after being barred from returning to medical school in Manhattan. His anger and pessimism are dissipated, however, after a chance encounter with Princess Kautilya of Bwodpur who hopes to lead 'the darker peoples of the world' against the imperialism of the Western powers. After a number of fateful separations, the two marry and the Princess gives birth to a messianic king who will go on to lead the revolution.

The avowed politics of both novels also do not seem to diverge tremendously from Du Bois's other works. Both Zora and Matthew, by dint of their education and ability, belong to the talented tenth.[128] And both novels suggest the importance of elites to guide the masses. In *Quest for the Silver Fleece*, the planter, Colonel Cresswell demonstrates the power of leaders when he attempts to thwart Zora's plans for

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Though generally a classical education was a prerequisite, some, like Douglass "were self-trained, but yet liberally trained." And in Zora's library, by the end of the novel, we find a copy of Plato's *Republic*. Du Bois, *Quest*, 126.

cooperation and land ownership by aiming squarely at elites. "Even if [the poor whites and blacks] do ally themselves, our way is easy: separate the leaders, the talented, the pushers, of both races from their masses, and through them rule the rest by money."[129] Princess Kautilya affirms the soundness of this strategy when Matthew (once again) grows despondent and pines for a Leninist vanguard. "Whether we will or not, some must rule and do for the people what they are too weak or silly to do for themselves. They must be made to know and feel…. I am afraid that only great strokes of force—clubs, guns, dynamite in the hands of fanatics—that only such Revolution can bring the Day."[130] When Kautilya reassures him, she does not correct his view of the mass. Instead she affirms democracy *as* aristocracy: "your oligarchy as you conceive it is not the antithesis of democracy—it is democracy, if only the selection of the oligarchs is just and true…. Only talent served from the great Reservoir of All Men of All Races, of All Classes, of All Ages, of Both Sexes—this is real Aristocracy, real Democracy—the only path to that great and final Freedom which you so well call Divine Anarchy."[131] Each novel supports the image of politics that Gooding-Williams reads in Du Bois's early works.

Surely, a different type of novel (for instance, a gothic novel that treats the leadership of a charismatic race man as horror rather than romance) would better mark the 'discursive and performative terrain' of charisma.[132] Yet while gothic novels might

[129] Ibid., 125.
[130] Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, 204.
[131] Ibid., 205. This view echoes the custodial view of democracy suggested by some readings of Tocqueville where the excesses of democracy are moderated by the guidance of judges, priests, and lawyers who, together, comprise a kind of aristocratic supplement. See: Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
[132] Erica Edwards argues exactly that in her reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. See: Edwards, "Moses, Monster of the Mountain," in *Charisma*, 77-103.

better dramatize the violence of charisma, the romances nevertheless illustrate the ways in which a leader is subject to popular contestation. Indeed, we may read Du Bois's romances as *gothic* romances in which that popular contestation occurs in response to monstrous leadership.

There is a scene, for example, in *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*, where Zora has purchased a parcel of wilderness from Cresswell and is counting on popular support to convert the swamp into arable land. The task situates Zora as the Mosaic figure, where the conversion of the swamp represents a passage from the (post-emancipation) desert to the 'land of milk and honey.' She visits the church, which she has never attended, to make an appeal to the townspeople. The scene bears many resemblances to the church meeting in "Of the Coming of John," in which John has returned from his studies up north (returning from Midian, as it were) to 'help settle' race problems and open a school.[133] When John is invited to speak before the crowd, the people note that the seven years of education have changed him and sapped him of his warmth. He outlines his plans 'slowly and methodically' (a departure from his formerly warm and familiar self), which causes the people 'to move uneasily in their seats.' He finishes his speech with a call for unity by deriding the people's 'denominational bickering' as unworldly. This causes 'an old bent man,' 'wrinkled and black, with scant gray and tufted hair,' to materialize from the crowd. Grasping a Bible, he bursts into a sermon 'with rude and awful eloquence.'[134] The effect of the speech is the denunciation of John for 'trampling

[133] Du Bois, *Souls*, 148.
[134] Ibid., 149.

on the true Religion.'[135] This denunciation is, for Gooding-Williams, a sign that John has failed to 'remember the people.'

Zora, for her part, is gifted with charisma. When she takes the pulpit she speaks 'simply but clearly,' and lays out a similar plan, though ties it to the 'neglect and suffering of the community.'[136] By the end of the speech, both speaker and audience are worked into a frenzy and two hundred men and women volunteer to help her clear the land. Though she remembers the people, her charismatic authority is undercut in the interceding days as the local preacher—now taking her as a rival—begins denouncing her as a heathen. It seems that the preacher will successfully exploit her uncomely background when, as the churchgoers join in denouncing her a week later, an old man 'with tufted gray hair and wrinkled leathery skin' leads a small band into the church and begins denouncing each and every individual. "He spoke their religious language and spoke it with absolute confidence and authority; and secondly, he seemed to know each one there personally and intimately so that he spoke to no inchoate throng—he spoke to them individually, and they listened awestruck and fearsome."[137] As with the man who denounces John, this prophetic figure speaks the language of the people. But his ability to give expression to what they feel is not owing to a deep familiarity with their identity as a group. Instead, he calls each member out by name and exhorts them to honor their commitments to Zora. "Ye generation of vipers," he shouts, "who kin save you? … Moan, Sister Maxwell, for the backbiting you did today. Yell, Jack Tolliver, you sneaking scamp…."[138] By cataloguing the sins of each congregant, the man recasts

[135] Ibid., 150.
[136] Du Bois, *Quest*, 116.
[137] Ibid., 118.
[138] Ibid., 118.

Zora's background as non-pathological. He is charismatic, for sure, but his charisma is not the kind that remembers the people (as a folk) and refines their ideals in order to 'elevate' them to an external standard of civilization. What he shows is a different form of prophecy from the kind the talented tenth are 'called' to do. He derives a degree of authority by virtue of his rapports with the other congregants, not his ability to sway a mass. Moreover, the anonymity of the figure in both encounters serves to de-exceptionalize. Both John and Zora's bids for charisma are vulnerable to local priests, the audiences mood, and to anyone who feels compelled to speak out.

In this way, Zora represents a version of the Mosaic theme different from the one Gooding-Williams identifies. Whereas Gooding-Williams sees Moses-the-rememberer as a heroic and charismatic leader, Zora (because of her reliance on other prophets, including popular prophets) suggests the Moses with 'uncircumcised lips' who is often ill-equipped for cajoling the people and relies on the assistance of Miriam, Aaron, and God.[139] This version of Moses, as Vincent Lloyd suggests, highlights the processes that undergird a leader's coming to be 'charismatic,' and the precarity of that position once acquired.[140]

IV. The Scene of Charisma II: Monstrous Leadership in *Dark Princess*

The figure of Moses is further complicated in Du Bois's second novel, *Dark Princess*. As stated above, the story of Matthew Towns and his eventual marriage to Princess Kautilya adheres rather closely to the model of charismatic leadership laid out in

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[139] Exodus 6:12, And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?
[140] Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma*, chapter 1. For a related argument about Moses, see: Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father*.

Souls. Like the young Du Bois who holds 'in contempt' those beyond the veil and strives to 'wrest' prizes from them, Matthew is an exceptional student, who earns top prizes for his talents.[141] And like Crummell who faces a stinging lack of sympathy and a frustrating roadblock in his career, Matthew is expelled from school because of his race. He then flees to Berlin, falling into what Du Bois might call a "silent hatred of the pale world" and a "mocking distrust of everything white."[142] Unlike his counterpart, Crummell, Matthew is saved from losing his calling, however, when he first meets the Princess and is introduced to the vanguardist Council of the Darker World.

The Council is working to bring about a new post-imperial aristocracy of talent, but excludes Africa and the diaspora from its ranks, which prompts Matthew to ask: "And suppose we found that ability and talent and art is not entirely or even mainly among the reigning aristocrats of Asia and Europe, but buried among millions of men down in the great sodden masses of all men and even in Black Africa?"[143] Matthew accepts the conceit that an aristocracy of talent is best, and that artistic production is a sign of that talent, but presses on the Platonic point that that aristocracy might come from any level of society. The Egyptian representative (Pharaoh?) then protests that the common people have never produced art of any consequence. As a response, Matthew begins to sing: "He threw back his head and closed his eyes, and with the movement he heard again the Great Song. He saw his father in the old log church by the river, leading the moaning singers in the Great Song of Emancipation."[144] He remembers his people—unlike Crummell or John—and sings a sorrow song: "Go Down, Moses," appropriately

[141] Du Bois, *Souls*, 10.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, 18.
[144] Ibid., 19.

enough. The effect is instantaneous: "A chorus of approval poured out, led by the Egyptian."[145] In this first section of the novel, the drama of *Souls* is replayed, with Matthew taking the part of the charismatic Moses.

But *Dark Princess* extends the arc of *Souls*. Whereas the latter offers a solution to the puzzle of being both black and American, the former, through the Council of the Darker World, suggests liberation requires an internationalist program. As a result, Matthew faces more frustrations that replay the rejection at his medical school—first as a striking Pullman porter, then as a Chicago politician, and finally digging subway tunnels—and each time he is saved by the Princess's return. Kautilya helps him to remember a 'Vision' of a broader alliance that makes revolution possible. In the final section she recasts this alliance with a classicized strategy of her own. While visiting with Matthew's mother, Kautilya comes to see her as 'Kali, the Black One; wife of Siva, Mother of the World!"[146] By casting Matthew's mother as a kind of All-Mother, she can posit an originary kinship that binds them antecedently and grounds the alliance. This figural kinship is then literalized when Kautilya gives birth to their son who is christened by the grandmother as 'a leader of his people and a lover of his God' and is lauded amidst fanfare by nearby choral voices, 'Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!'[147] For this reason, we can read *Dark Princess* as continuing to press for the charismatic

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid., 159.
[147] Ibid., 222, 223. Despite the messianic hybridity of the novel's conclusion, Juliet Hooker cautions against reading *Dark Princess* as a work that romanticizes 'mixture as the solution to racism. See, Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas*, 117. For Hooker, is not a call for literal hybridity, but rather, 'to envision creative forms of black internationalism' joins with decolonial struggles across the globe (143). Such internationalism, as suggested by Kautilya's comparison of democracy and aristocracy, is not *prima facie* a break from Du Bois's elitism. For Matthew's mother as an 'All-Mother,' see Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Interracial Romance and Black Internationalism," in *Next to the Color Line*, 112.

messianism via exceptional leadership that Gooding-Williams attributes to Du Bois's earlier writings.

In the third section of the novel, however, a different gloss on Exodus is suggested. Prior to Matthew's reuniting with Kautilya, he enters Chicago politics. Perhaps jaded by his failure to organize the Pullman porter strike, Matthew joins the political machine of Sammy Scott, the man who helps to release him from prison. His participation in politics is not aimed at liberation, but mere comfort. "He gave up all thought of a career, of leadership, of greatly or essentially changing the world. He would protect himself from hurt. He would be of enough use to others to insure this. He must have money—not wealth—but enough to support himself in simple comfort."[148] Matthew's loss of passion and shrinking of ambition is matched by descriptions of Chicago as grey and cold. The entire section reads as social realism, in stark contrast with the romance of his work with Kautilya.

Although Matthew has diminished ambition, he eventually agrees to pursue a place of leadership, first in the Illinois state legislature, and then in Washington as a congressman. He does so at the behest of Sara Andrews, the secretary of Sammy Scott and the mastermind of Matthew's release from prison, whom he also asks for marriage. Readers have noted the way in which Du Bois frames Sara as a foil for Kautilya. Like Chicago, she is portrayed in black, white, and gray: "She was not beautiful, but she gave an impression of cleanliness, order, cold, clean hardness, and unusual efficiency. She wore a black crêpe dress, with crisp white organdie collar and cuffs, chiffon hose, and short-trimmed hair. Altogether she was a trifle disconcerting to look at."[149] This

[148] Ibid., 93.
[149] Ibid., 81.

description dovetails with those of Kautilya, who is warm and passionate. For this reason, the coupling of Sara and Matthew helps to pave the way for his eventual reunion with the Princess. "In order for the internationalist interracialism that dynamizes this novel to flower," Alys Eve Weinbaum suggests, "for the Princess to emerge as Matthew's 'proper' match—the non-reproductive, frigid, and whitened body of Sara Andrews must first be uncoupled from Matthew's."[150] Du Bois portays her, in other words, as a kind of corpse bride, and the marriage as kind of 'hell' or horror.

Most commenters on Sara endorse Du Bois's representation. Roderick Ferguson, for instance, says Sara is a striver who will use Matthew "to advance her plans of power"—she represents 'liberal governmentality' and uses marriage as a tool that "gives legitimacy to black middle-class efforts to assimilate into liberal democracy." Accordingly, Sara serves to 'neutralize' Matthew's 'insurrectionary desires.'[151] Similarly, Claudia Tate reads Sara as embroiling Matthew in 'political corruption,' from which Kautilya 'rescues' him in the end.[152] Both readings closely map onto Matthew's own narration of events. When he finally meets Kautilya just prior to his nomination, she cries, "I came to save your soul from hell." "Too late," Matthew replies, "I have sold it to the Devil."[153] Matthew's identification of Sara with the devil recalls Du Bois's charge of 'Mammonism' among the black urban elite who are seduced away from the self-sacrifice needed for the liberation of the black masses. Sara is a deft political manipulator—it takes considerable skill for her to wrangle the support that ultimately wins for Matthew the nomination—but her pursuit of political power is a means to prestige, and unlike the

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[150] Weinbaum, *Next to the Color Line*, 110.
[151] Ferguson, *Next to the Color Line*, 138.
[152] Tate, *Next to the Color Line*, 172.
[153] Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, 151.

porters' strike (or Zora's church meeting), Sara's politicking suggests that, as Kenneth Warren says, "the electoral process can create the façade of representatives."[154]

While there's no denying that Sara draws Matthew in to a politics that thumbs its nose at the people, Sara is not an entirely unsympathetic character. Perhaps because of Du Bois's constant re-telling of her supposedly diabolical attributes—a portrayal that Weinbaum describes as 'unrelenting'—Sara is one of the more interesting characters in the novel.[155] Moreover, the constant derision she faces at the hands of both Matthew and the narrator indicates that it may be Matthew, and not Sara, who is the monster in their marriage. This is further suggested by the fact that she made an agreement with Matthew to climb, whereas Matthew breaks their deal in two ways: he attempts to thwart his own ascent (which is also hers), and he tries to remove her from politics and confine her to the home. For Matthew, the marriage is an escape and an attempt to stifle something inside of him. "Marriage was normal," he thinks to himself, "Marriage stopped secret longings and open revolt. It solved the woman problem once and for all. Once married, he would be safe, settled, quiet; with all the furies at rest, calm, satisfied."[156] This is not so much

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[154] Kenneth Warren, "An Inevitable Drift? Oligarchy, Du Bois, and the Politics of Race between the Wars," 165.
[155] Kenneth Warren, Arnold Rampersad, and Keith Byerman all note Sara's complexity, which distinguishes her from Kautilya who serves more as a *deus ex machina*. Warren, for instance, finds that "Sara is more fully rendered than Kautilya. It is as if by removing sexuality, idealism, and even the conventional goals of domesticity from his representational palette, Du Bois was obliged to render a character who was almost nothing more than political calculation." Warren, "An Inevitable Drift?," 165. See also, Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 213 and passim, and Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, Art, and Self in the Work of W.E.B. Du Bois*, chapter 6.
[156] Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, 101. While Ferguson reads the careerism underlying the partnership as Matthew's flight from 'radical governmentality,' I emphasize how Matthew aims to bury his 'furies' in rustic domesticity.

Sara seducing Matthew away from revolutionary politics, as Matthew using Sara as retreat.[157]

Sara, for her part, is not out to 'solve the woman problem' for Matthew. After he proposes, she explains: "I've been fighting the thing men call love all my life, and I don't see much in it. I don't think you are the loving kind—and that suits me."[158] Sara comes off as passionless to Matthew, but that may be because she knows what his 'passion' might amount to. The tension is dramatized as their elegant apartment is nearing completion. Matthew had demanded a hearth 'with real logs.' "He was a little ashamed to confess how much he wanted it," Du Bois writes, "It was a sort of obsession. As long as he could remember, burning wood meant home to him. Sara said a fireplace was both dirty and dangerous. She had an electric log put it. Matthew hated that log with perfect hatred."[159] Time and again, Matthew insists on adopting symbols of rustic domesticity—which he ultimately finds with Kautilya in his mother's cabin—all of which Sara eschews.

As Sara's rebuffs grow increasingly frequent, he becomes more resentful of her hand in politics. Though he had agreed to try for the legislature with her, he begins to chastise her for taking the lead. When she promises a set of interests that he would support favorable legislation if elected, he asks, "How dared you?" Sara is surprised: "Dared? I thought you expected me to conduct your campaign? I promised them your

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[157] We might cast this retreat within the Exodus stories as one of Moses's many frustrations and retreats from his role. Rather than the heroic emancipator, Matthew is here the Moses of *Exodus* 4:13, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else." Just as Moses wanted to stay with Zipporah in Midian, Matthew hopes that he can make a Midian out of Chicago and a Zipporah out of Sara.
[158] Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, 101-102.
[159] Ibid., 104.

vote, and they paid a lot for it."[160] Matthew is indignant only in part because of the graft—he had already assented to this, after all—he is also resentful of the control Sara wields. After conceding that he had committed himself to a career of (hopefully honest) graft, he demands control of their finances—which Sara had been investing—again, she refuses.

Matthew frames this descent into city politics as selling his soul and hindering a possible charismatic politics of liberation. When read as the monster of his own marriage plot, however, we might take his marrying Sara as a seeking after control in the wake of his failed leadership of the strike. Sara offers him a kind of leadership, but it's not the glorious leadership he's looking for. Matthew wants control—of his home, of his finances, and of his constituencies—but all turn out to require compromise, finesse, and communication. These are all strategies that Weberian charisma claims to transcend and, to the would-be hero of a romance, they might be experienced as horror—vampiric or diabolical. But in the absence of these strategies, Matthew must deny his reliance on the public for efficacy, either by fleeing to a (domestic) space where he hopes to have more sway or by joining with vanguardists like the Council of Darker Worlds. In either case, he looks to extricate himself from the charismatic scenario—from the labor of facing those who might oppose his leadership.

And so Matthew plans his escape. Although he "was surrendering to Sara and the Devil," he begins to take money from her, to "save and hide and hoard and some day walk away and leave everything."[161] Fortunately for Matthew, he does not have to scheme for long, because Kautilya comes to expedite his departure. After being caught in

[160] Ibid., 113.
[161] Ibid., 141.

embrace, the two move out from his study to the dinner party that is meant to be his nomination and Matthew declares, "The cause that was dead is alive again; the love that I lost is found!"[162] Matthew then leaves to rejoin the work of the Council of Darker Worlds—an organization that, notably, operates through a virtual, less transactional, form of representation.[163]

In his flight from Sara, Matthew can pursue a politics that is more radical, but also one that is more beautiful. The problem with his role as a politician was that it was ugly, he says. Matthew owns that he never really had "moral revolt," but rather "esthetic disquiet."[164] Whereas striving toward a goal gave him a spark of life, he viewed city politics as dreary, permitting him only to passively serve various interests as a cipher. But where Matthew only sees two options—beautiful struggle or laborious organizing—we might note a third, suggested by Zora in *Quest*: leadership that attends to the scene of charisma and its popular prophecy.

Taken simply as romance, *Dark Princess* doesn't seem to put this third option on offer; Matthew is rescued by Kautilya, and their son will help to usher in an oligarchy of talent and will lead as Matthew aspired to lead. When we read the marriage as gothic, however, that rescue is recast as both a turn to perhaps more revolutionary politics, but also a flight from the ordinary work of politics which is, from the perspective of aspirant leaders, a tedious and nettlesome impediment. In representing the marriage plot gothically—Sara as devil and Matthew as monster—Du Bois's novel shows the ways

[162] Ibid., 152.
[163] Sara is less fortunate. The section ends with her asking Sammy, "Haven't I been decent? Haven't I fought off you beasts and made me a living and a home with my own hands?" Ibid., 154.
[164] Ibid., 108.

leaders can work to insulate themselves from the people on whom they depend, and because of this insulation, to narrate popular demands as petulance or terror rather than a sign of readiness to lead in turn, say.

Taken together, *Quest for the Silver Fleece* and *Dark Princess* represent charismatic authority in a different light. One that has promise, but comes with a warning. By dramatizing the process by which leaders come into being, their dependence on a popular reception and popular prophecy, and their temptations to cast themselves as beyond these processes, Du Bois offers a gloss on Exodus that differs from the one Gooding-Williams finds in *Souls* and is less Platonist and Weberian. This account stresses how 'action in concert' can lead to actors who claim custodianship or aspire to become stewards, and perhaps helps to prepare us for those narrations and impulses.[165]

V. Conclusion: Race Men Re-viewed

By reading Du Bois reparatively—as offering an account of charisma's dependence on popular reception, but also on its tendency to renounce or suppress that dependence—we might re-evaluate his own leadership and those moments where he might be accused of demagoguery, or at least assuming charismatic authority. In his war of words with Marcus Garvey, for instance, we may be tempted to see only a rivalry between two charismatic race men who mesmerize crowds and, in the process, displace a more popular contest about black politics, its shape, and direction.

[165] It also leaves open the possibility of a popular politics that we find in *Black Reconstruction* (another of Du Bois's Exodus stories, albeit in yet another genre). There too, in his chapters on "The General Strike" and "The Coming of the Lord," Du Bois lays out a wandering people who are ready for freedom and the process by which they are recast as in need of guidance.

Garvey is often read as a paradigmatic charismatic leader. He is well known for his pageantry and stirring speeches that attracted hundreds of thousands of followers in just a few short years. Just as Du Bois cast himself as a kind of Moses who remembers (and cajoles, and sometimes resents) his people, Garvey too was cast as a 'Black Moses,' especially because of his Black Star Line ships, which promised a crossing (across the Atlantic) to a would-be pan-African land of milk and honey.

Throughout the 1920s, Du Bois and Garvey exchanged slander and harsh words. Du Bois described Garvey as 'ugly,' uneducated, and a charlatan. "Garvey had no thorough education," he wrote, "and a very hazy idea of the technic of civilization."[166] One sign of this lack of technique was Garvey's 'error' in "assuming that because oppression had retarded a group, the mere removal of the injustice will at a bound restore the group to full power."[167] Du Bois criticized Garvey, in other words, for missing the role of guidance and stewardship. Garvey responded in kind by casting the charge of ugliness as a product of self-hatred, and castigated Du Bois for his elitism. "You have been to Berlin, Harvard and Fisk," Garvey apostrophized, "you are educated and you have the 'technique of civilization.'"[168]

After the financial failure of the Black Star Line, Du Bois framed Garvey as someone whose popularity was owed primarily to the influx of immigrants from the West Indies, and who failed to capture the imagination of black people in the United States. At the end of the attack on Garvey, he praises those Americans who "did not slander or silence or ignore him," but instead, tested him and found him wanting: "the more his

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[166] Du Bois, "Back to Africa," in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, 266, 267.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Marcus Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 118.

flamboyant promises were carefully compared with his results, the sooner the utter futility of his program was revealed."[169] In this way, Du Bois offers a kind of post mortem on Garvey (who nevertheless remained in the country for another four years), and congratulates the readers who have rejected Garvey in favor of Du Bois for making a wise and considered choice.

We might imagine that Du Bois wants his readers to think of Garvey as relegated to the past. Like Matthew who cast his work in Chicago as something from which he escaped, Du Bois frames Garvey as something the people have overcome. This is more rhetorical than true. Just three years later, E. Franklin Frazier would observe that "The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has fought uncompromisingly for equality for the Negro, has never secured, except locally and occasionally, the support of the masses."[170] Perhaps the success of Garvey's UNIA throughout the 1920s in organizing at the grass roots level, and perhaps too Garvey's accusations of elitism, may have compelled the NAACP to make a more concerted effort at appealing to the masses. By 1932, Du Bois had tempered his haughty rhetoric and, in an address to the NAACP, announced "we have got to come to the place where we clearly realize this organization is to be used for the advantage of the great masses of the people and that the great masses of the people are the ones who are going in the long run to have the voice."[171]

Du Bois might later claim that this point of view came about after reading Marx and studying the problems of economic organization. But his various re-tellings of the

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[169] Du Bois, "Back to Africa," 273.
[170] Quoted in Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 161.
[171] Du Bois, "What is wrong with the N.A.A.C.P.?," 3.

Exodus motif prompt us to consider how his encounter with Garvey may have played a role, and they further prompt us to consider how Garvey ascended, in part because of a people who did not feel 'remembered' by Du Bois (his technique of civilization notwithstanding), and who hungered for other prophets. For critics like Gooding-Williams, this should be good news, because in the place of a leader who 'remembers,' we find one who is led.

If the paranoid reading finds that Du Bois is a Platonist whose invocation of the Talented Tenth indicates a fear of stasis, the reparative reading on offer here shows that the leader and the led are inescapably in a stasis (as the bond of division), and that framing dissension as destructive can be a tactic for leaders to transcend (or repress) that bond. His use of classical materials, on this account, is not a device to authorize rule, but rather helps to negotiate between the two positions within that bond.

Du Bois illustrates the importance of how group identity and the dynamics of leadership are narrated. As we've seen in his accounts of black politics, leaders may tend to work to hide their dependence on a public, but rival demagogues and popular prophets may always potentially reveal that dependence and the negotiations and labors they entail. Yet when we consider politics across the color line, the potential for demagoguery or popular prophecy to disrupt narratives may be less assured. In the 'nation within a nation,' there is a particular kind of rule, which does not wield the means of violence (or, at least, not to the extent that a state does). When ideas about the contours of group identity are backed by the force of law, it alters the scene of charisma.

Du Bois encountered the problem of white disregard and responded to it with rhetoric, by shifting from dry social science to more poetic style. For when even the stasis

view of charisma—the charismatic scenario—is not enough, I turn to Ralph Ellison, who aims to give an account of agency and strategies for disrupting national narratives and troubling the boundaries of national identity even from a position of exclusion—what he calls ‘invisibility.’

Three: The Martyr and the Trickster
Ralph Ellison's Repertoire of Agency

"And this particularly explains something new which has come into the picture; that is, a determination by the Negro no longer to be the scapegoat, no longer to pay, to be sacrificed to—the inadequacies of other Americans. We want to socialize the cost."
Ralph Ellison in Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 339

"… I now recognized my invisibility. So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag."
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 508

I. Introduction

Under conditions of domination and oppression, people find themselves unable to exercise political agency with as much efficacy as their less-dominated peers. When various forms of inequality conduce to political inequality, the means of reversing that inequity become severely restricted. Political theorists concerned with this dilemma often turn to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as offering a clear elaboration and condemnation of the problem in the metaphor of invisibility. Ellison casts invisibility as a tragic bind in which black action is received by white audiences in distorted ways.

While some critics emphasize the depth of the problem that invisibility presents—the protagonist's efforts at struggling against his condition ultimately get him holed up underground and, though he intends to leave, he remains skeptical about this ability to succeed the next time around—others read the novel along with Ellison's essays on race to elaborate his condemnation of invisibility and the strategies he endorses for combatting it. These strategies often take the form of a reaffirmation of the nonviolent practices exercised by activists during the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. By risking

harm to affirm the founding, universalist principles of the United States, black activists can heighten the contradiction between white onlookers' commitment to those same principles on the one hand and their more ascriptive and exclusive commitments on the other.

This strategy is not without its risks, however. As Juliet Hooker and others have noted, this politics of exemplarity constitutes a kind of martyr strategy that exposes black actors to meaningless violence with no guarantee that the sacrifice will be worthwhile. Instead, it may even make that violence available for cooptation into a narrative of progress. What's more, by casting martyrdom as exemplary, these arguments may perhaps inadvertently cast other, more unruly political actions as illegitimate because they don't conduce to trust.

While Ellison clearly advocates something like a politics of martyrdom in his work, he does not condemn the actions of black actors that do not conduce to trust between or within groups. Instead, he demonstrates in *Invisible Man* and in his criticism how a more conspiratorial or trickster style of politics is often needed to supplement martyrdom in stasis-like conflicts. By working to escape or even reverse the violence of white supremacy, trickster strategies offer another means of working toward political equality that is less dependent on a specific reception by often hostile onlookers.

This repertoire of agency that Ellison elaborates becomes most clear when we attend to his classicism. Ellison's allusions to Homer's *Odyssey* throughout *Invisible Man* indicate how the heroic trait of cunning or *metis* can help to escape a tragic bind and return to (or construct) a home in a hostile world—one characterized by the bond of division.

II. Ellison's Tragic Emplotments: Sacrifice, Democracy, Agency

Ralph Ellison casts racial conflict in tragic terms, and he does so mainly in two ways. The first highlights how white supremacy confines and restricts black agency. Jim Crow, he writes, imposes a 'tight framework' on black Americans in which acquiescence and resistance to rule both carry steep costs.[172] Somewhat relatedly, he frames white supremacy also as motivated by a reaction to the tragic aspect of democratic life. Because democracy in a diverse and plural society cannot represent the will of all without remainder, he writes, "there is something inescapably tragic about the cost of achieving our democratic ideals."[173] Though white Americans may generally be aware of this cost, they keep it "segregated to the rear of [their] minds," and seek to insulate themselves from it with anti-black practices and institutions.[174] In other words, the denial of one tragic situation leads to the imposition of another.

Ellison describes this imposition in terms of ritual sacrifice and rites of initiation. He observes that, in the United States, stereotyping, romanticizing the past, and lynching, among other practices, all operate according to a sacrificial logic—bringing unity to a community at the expense of a victim. He writes that the 'anthropological meaning of lynching' was "a blood-rite that ended in the death of a scapegoat whose obliteration was

[172] Ellison, "Notes on *Invisible Man*," *Collected Essays*, 344.
[173] Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks" in *Going to the Territory*, 104. For an account of this dilemma in Ellison, see Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 41, 103. I discuss Allen's reading of Ellison in detail below.
[174] Ibid. In the original quotation, Ellison says that, in America, "*we* keep such tragic awareness segregated to the rear of our minds" (emphasis added). I've changed the pronoun to the third person because I read this 'we' as conciliatory and rhetorical. That blacks, for Ellison, possess a greater 'tragic awareness' is suggested throughout his work. See, for instance, Warren, *Who Speaks*, 342: "Such people learn more about the real nature of that society, more about the true nature of its values than those who can afford to take their own place in society for granted."

seen as necessary to the restoration of social order."[175] By delineating the boundaries of an in-group, these 'Southern rituals of race' function to give a sense of one's identity, rights, and standing across the color line. In the case of stereotyping and romanticizing, these rituals also mark attempts at masking the underlying violence of the rituals.

Invisible Man, Ellison's first novel, dramatizes these violent rituals and their relation to tragedy. In his early notes, Ellison describes the titular character as "a man born into a tragic irrational situation who attempts to respond to it as though it were completely logical."[176] From his reflections on his childhood and his time at college to his work with the Brotherhood, the hero gradually discovers any 'logical' response—either playing his role and getting taken advantage of, or deviating from it and facing harsh consequences—leads to a victimage of one sort or another.

In the beginning of the story, for instance, the hero has given a speech at his graduation in which he showed that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress."[177] This is not a principle he believes in, as he notes, rather he offers it because 'it worked'—he is playing a part. As a reward for his speech, which is praised by 'the most lily-white men of the town' (*IM* 16), he is invited to deliver it again at a banquet attended by the town's leading white citizens and, while there, to participate as well in the famous battle royal fight.[178] As part of the night's entertainment, the hero, along with nine other young men, is equipped with boxing gloves and blindfolded. The citizens jeer

[175] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," in *Going to the Territory*, 177.
[176] Ellison, "Notes on *Invisible Man*," *Collected Essays*, 344.
[177] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 17. Hereafter *IM*.
[178] In an address to students at West Point, Ellison remarked: "No one ever told me that the 'battle royal' was a rite, but I came to see that it was. It was a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority." Ellison, "On Initiation Rites and Power," in *Going to the Territory*, 49.

and police the fighters, who face off in a clumsy, bloody contest. Money is offered as a prize to all the fighters, but it is set on an electrified carpet as one final humiliation. After the whole violent process, the hero is permitted to give his speech. With blood in his mouth, he shouts his words to a largely indifferent crowd until he (perhaps unintentionally) misspeaks. Where he means to say 'social responsibility,' he utters 'social equality'—a phrase he'd often heard "denounced in newspaper editorials (*IM* 31). His mistake quiets the room, until the men's laughter is replaced with 'hostile phrases.' One man threatens: "Say that slowly, son!" And the hero offers a correction: "Social responsibility, sir" (*IM* 31). This gesture diffuses the tension in the room, and he is rewarded, in the end, with a leather briefcase and a scholarship to the state college.

The fact this event takes place immediately after the hero's graduation ceremony emphasizes how this is a rite of initiation. The lesson seems to be that, whether he sticks to his script or deviates from it, the ultimate result is the same: he will be forced into a role. The reward appears all the more pyrrhic when he dreams that night that the true contents of the briefcase include a letter instructing its reader to keep the hero running. Over the course of the story, he comes to understand this dilemma in terms of invisibility.

As an invisible man, he cannot be seen (not as a fellow, at least), and though the condition is 'rather wearing on the nerves' and can drive you to 'strike out with your fists' and to curse and swear 'to make them recognize you,' he notes that these efforts are 'seldom successful' (*IM* 3-4). Invisibility has little to do with how one acts because it is imposed indiscriminately. As the hero notes: "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through

their physical eyes upon reality" (*IM* 1). Ellison's narrator here frames rituals of white racial superiority as a kind of disregard that confines the agency of black Americans and the vision of whites. Given this dilemma, the hero forecasts catastrophe, warning that this 'foolishness'—leaving no outlet for black action—may, in the end, 'cause us tragic trouble' (*IM* 14).

Any disputes about the significance of sacrifice in Ellison's work typically hinge on the way commenters interpret invisibility. For instance, this premonition of catastrophe suggests for some that invisibility is an almost totally debilitating condition. As the hero comes to appreciate the nature of sacrifice and the social death that results, he quits his public life and moves underground. "I'm an invisible man," he says, "and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact. What else could I have done?" The condition of invisibility seems here to militate against the possibility of action in concert against his condition.

For this reason, Ellison's more pessimistic readers can take the novel as a gradual elaboration of the tragic hold brought on by sacrificial rituals. Michael Sawyer, for instance, understands Ellison's 'invisibility' as the product of a 'tragic logic' that begins with the constitutional exclusion of black people—who Madison, in *Federalist 54*, declares are always both human and property, and therefore, never fully human—and this logic, he continues, is re-enacted in everyday sacrifices.[179] The strength of this reading comes from the ways that power and influence repeatedly take precedence over

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[179] Sawyer, "Sacrifice" in *Political Concepts* (3). For a similar account, see Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, 173. Patterson and Sawyer respectively anticipate and draw on Giorgio Agamben's early work on *homo sacer* in their arguments about sacrifice and its relationship to a foundational, constitutive exclusion. The associated is implied as well in Derrick Bell's invocations of scapegoats and Frank Wilderson's image of the 'sacrificial lamb.'

democratic principles. When the narrator stumbles into a union meeting on his first day working at Liberty Paints, his 'brothers' in labor accuse him of being a 'fink' and a spy. And while the chairman of the meeting aims to defend the hero—"We're a democratic union here…"—his protests hold little sway over the other workers: "Never mind, git rid of the fink!" (*IM* 220).

The workers' suspicion and their unwillingness to respect democratic processes demonstrate the limits to the hero's agency. While the workers' identification with democracy and its procedures should afford him at least an initially receptive audience, he faces instead an immediately hostile crowd. This hostility gives credence to Sawyer's claim that the position of invisibility marks an exclusion from ordinary politics. Quoting Rancière, he argues that politics is marked by "the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contraries," but that sacrifice excludes even from a position within this dynamic.[180] Whereas the workers are organizing against their bosses and managers, the narrator finds himself outside this contrary.[181]

Yet despite the apparent exclusion from politics in such scenes, and despite the narrator's claim, in the end, that he writes because he finds himself 'without the possibility of action' (*IM* 579), other critics find that Ellison elaborates the potential for agency within the tragic bind of invisibility.[182] These critics emphasize, with the hero,

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[180] Sawyer, "Sacrifice," citing Rancière, *Dissensus*, 29.
[181] For a similar argument to Sawyer's, see Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225-40.
[182] Lucas Morel, for instance, writes: "Put simply, the novel is about freedom, which Ellison depicts in a counter-intuitive way. Instead of showing freedom as the untrammeled exercise of human will, he offers episode upon episode where the narrator encounters Negro Americans who deal with racial discrimination on their own terms. Ellison seems to overwhelm the reader with the lack of control, choice, or responsibility of black characters in the ostensibly white world that is America, only to show the careful reader how in the midst of overwhelming environmental pressures—sociologists, take note!—the Negro American can still exercise freedom." Morel,

that 'it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen' (*IM* 3). They also point to the novel's form as evidence against bleaker readings. Many critics have shown the ways that *Invisible Man* repudiates the naturalism of Richard Wright and, to a lesser extent, Theodore Dreiser.[183] Against 'narrow naturalism,' which he claims leads only to 'final and unrelieved despair,' Ellison argued that the modernist novel, with its emphasis on complexity rather than determinism, better captured 'America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom.'[184] Ellison also drew formally on a jazz idiom, which he opposed to naturalism because it was 'an art of individual assertion within and against the group.'[185] The indeterminacy of complexity and improvisation both hint at how invisibility can be, at times, 'advantageous' and not simply debilitating.

Those who read Ellison as offering a vision of agency within confinement find further proof in the grandfather's riddle, which frames the novel. On his deathbed, the grandfather says to the protagonist's father: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (*IM* 16).[186] These words haunt the hero throughout the

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"Ralph Ellison's American Democratic Individualism," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 72.

[183] For how Ellison parodies Wright 'through repetition and difference,' see: Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 106.

[184] Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," *Shadow and Act*, 104.

[185] Ellison, "The Charlie Christian Story," *Shadow and Act*, 234.

[186] On how the grandfather's advice frames the novel through the metaphor of war, see Trimmer, "The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," 46-50.

novel as he puzzles over the meaning of the paradoxical advice. In the epilogue, while reflecting on the hypocrisy of the Brotherhood, he seems finally to have learned how to agree to death and destruction. “Could he have meant,” he wonders, “hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence” (*IM* 574). Though describing one’s life as a war in which the aim is to bust the opponent wide open seems more conducive to a bleaker reading of the novel—one suggested, perhaps, by the civil war paradigm—this resolution to affirm ‘the principle on which the country was built’ indicates some commitments aside from the military aims of secession or supercession. [187]

To ‘affirm the principle’ seems to offer a way out of invisibility by insisting on greater sincerity from white Americans—but what precise form does this insisting take? For Danielle Allen, it involves a kind of martyrdom, in which the victims of America’s race rituals expose the hypocrisy of white Americans through a heightening of contradictions. The grandfather’s tactic of ‘agreement,’ she writes, is a call “to overemphasize the fundamentally healthy elements of the citizenship of subordination—the ability to agree, to sacrifice, to bear burdens in order to force contradictions in the citizenship of the dominated, until this citizenship caves in upon the rottenness of its inherent ills.”[188] Allen wagers that modeling democratic ideals (the citizenship of subordination) can bring the conflicting motives that lead to sacrificial rites into stark

[187] This is the interpretation of the grandfather’s riddle that is most favored by theorists today. See for instance: Albrecht, “Saying Yes and Saying No,” 59; Eddy, *The Rites of Identity*, 155; Seaton, “Affirming the Principle,” in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 26-27; Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 113; and Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 71.
[188] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 116.

relief and bring about a reckoning with what is 'inescapably tragic' about those ideals. In other words, a better appreciation of one tragic situation can lead to the dissolution of another.

There is support for this interpretation further in the epilogue, when the narrator speculates that his grandfather had meant that black Americans bring a tragic awareness to American society. "Was it that we of all," he asks, "we most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed … because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others…" (*IM* 574). This understanding of what it takes to live in the world seems to confer to blacks a social responsibility to hold American people and institutions to the universalist principles of the Declaration.

Though this ultimate interpretation offers some hope at the novel's end, the martyr strategy is not without risk. The dilemma of invisibility threatens martyrdom with a poor reception—it may be ignored or perhaps coopted. Initially, the narrator had decided to record his experiences in order to 'throw [his] anger into the world's face,' but the process of writing has dampened his rage and he finds that 'the old fascination with playing a role returns, and [he's] drawn upward again' (*IM* 579). The hopefulness implied by going upward is tempered somewhat when reframed as an old impulse to play a role. Given what playing a role has meant throughout the novel, the narrator's attitude comes off as more ambivalent than assured. After all, as Sawyer notes, invisibility threatens the intelligibility of affirmations, and the invisible man's 'ability to bear burdens' might be received as the proper state of affairs.[189] But supposing that martyrdom

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[189] See Sawyer, "Sacrifice": "…there is no possibility of Sacrifice for the subject who is included only in exclusion."

can find a receptive audience, the sacrifice faces the further risk of recuperation, where rituals of romanticization frame needless suffering as part of a meaningful development (toward constitutional perfection, say).[190] The hero may be ready to act, but he is also mindful of the ways his best laid plans can go—and have gone—awry. Martyrdom may have some success breaking out of tragic dilemmas, but it cannot be relied on in every instance.

I now turn to Danielle Allen for a fuller account of the martyr strategy, its advantages, and disadvantages. A better sense of the limitations to this strategy for addressing invisibility, can give an indication of what other, supplemental strategies are needed to better 'affirm the principle.'

II. Allen's Politics of Martyrdom

Danielle Allen takes from Ellison's invocation of tragedy the idea that democracy always requires sacrifice of some kind. "Of all the rituals relevant to democracy," she writes, "sacrifice is preeminent. No democratic citizen, adult or child, escapes the necessity of losing out at some point in a public decision."[191] Sacrifice and loss are inescapably bound up with democracy. And, by equating sacrifice with 'losing out,' Allen here recasts the tragic limitations of democratic life in economized language in which a group's necessary losses can and must be compensated. Since sacrifice is a necessary feature of democratic life, she distinguishes scapegoating, which is not repaid in kind, from a healthier sort of sacrifice that involves sharing the burden of loss equitably and socializing the costs.

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[190] For more on the politics of martyrdom, see: Honig, *Antigone Interrupted*, 50.
[191] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 28.

These two forms of sacrifice correspond to two competing modes of representing a democratic people—oneness and wholeness. Oneness, which she likens to the Greek idea of *homonoia* (being of one mind), cannot tolerate what Ellison calls 'diversity within unity.'[192] "The effort to make the people 'one,'" Allen explains, "cultivates in the citizenry a desire for homogeneity, for that is the aspiration taught to citizens by the meaning of the word 'one,' itself."[193] If aspirations and habits of citizenship develop out of the metaphor a people uses to describe itself, then oneness, with its emphasis on unity and purity, may prompt scapegoating. Wholeness, by contrast, connotes for Allen something that is "uninjured, sound, healthy, and complete," while (or, perhaps, *because*) not homogeneous.[194] Such a community, Allen holds, "might cultivate an aspiration to the coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body."[195] Accordingly, it would come with its own set of healthier habits.

What distinguishes habits of wholeness from habits of oneness—what makes them 'healthy'—she argues, is that they nurture trust and militate against resentment. Since loss is a necessary feature of democratic life, it is liable to lead to ill will, which, in turn, undermines democracy: "Disappointment and resentment, the aftereffects of loss, deplete the reservoirs of trust needed to sustain democratic life."[196] Whereas the sorts of citizenly habits associated with oneness do not require trust, the habits of a society that aspires to be whole must "help citizens deal with the conflict between their politically

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[192] Recall the story in fn. 10 that Loraux relates about Heraclitus describing *homonoia* by shaking a jar vigorously. As with Loraux, Allen seems to be concerned with accounts of unity that depend on plurality (rather than repress it or merely tolerate it).
[193] Ibid., 17.
[194] Ibid. We might say that 'wholeness' gestures to a more decent response to the bond of division than what oneness entails.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid., 47.

inspired desires for total agency and the frustrating reality of their experience" without resorting to a scapegoat.[197] If certain activities cannot help to develop patterns of trust and reciprocity, in other words, they are not conducive to a democracy characterized as whole.[198]

Allen turns to *Invisible Man* because she finds that the novel helps to "develop criteria for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate forms of sacrifice" and to describe precisely which habits help citizens to "generate enough trust among themselves to manage sacrifice."[199] As noted above, she finds that the narrator discovers these healthier habits as he puzzles over his grandfather's dying words. He learns from the battle royal, for instance, not simply that the rituals of race demand he play a specific role, but also that, by shifting his speech from 'equality' to 'responsibility,' he has the power to defuse tension. "He discovers," Allen argues, "that those who are dominated and peaceable in any political order should be seen as philanthropists, agents in this regard, toward those who dominate them." [200]And when he nearly cuts a man's throat in the prologue after being insulted, he learns he can be a taker of sacrifices: "He too desires to sacrifice others; the sinister side of democracy lives in his own heart."[201] To put each episode in the grandfather's language: he first gives a 'yes' that expresses a 'yes,' and then a 'no' which expresses 'no.' Both lessons are flawed, she notes; the first makes citizenship

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[197] Ibid., 21.
[198] This is an argument similar to the one she makes in Chapter 7 in *World of Prometheus* in her discussion of anger and pity. Elsewhere, Allen explicates the connection she draws between *Invisible Man* and the *Oresteia*, when she refers to Ras as a fury, whereas the narrator goes underground and transforms his anger into a healthier attitude.
[199] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 29.
[200] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 105.
[201] Ibid., 107.

overly “acquiescent,” the latter leads to “violence and hatred.”[202] Moreover, she argues these lessons pertain “only to the dominated” and that “a solution of the riddle that can combine agreement with destruction will come only when the Invisible Man theorizes forms of citizenship that can belong to everyone—the former dominators as well as the formerly dominated.”[203] It is important that the ‘forms of citizenship’ that build reciprocal trust ‘belong to everyone,’ she argues, because everyone experiences loss in democracy. The issue is to ensure that everyone experiences that loss equitably.

This is her final lesson from *Invisible Man*. For sacrifice to be ‘legitimate’—promoting trust and stability, rather than resentment and tension—it must meet three criteria: 1) the sacrifice must be made ‘voluntarily and knowingly’, 2) all parties must agree to ‘honor the voluntary sacrifice’, and 3) the weak must be ‘in an equal position to request sacrifice from others.’[204] It follows then that loss that is inflicted or endured unknowingly, without consent, or without assuring future reciprocity—scapegoating, in essence—is not legitimate.

On the basis of these criteria, Allen proposes her politics of martyrdom. The martyr strategy offers a way of marking a violence that might otherwise get buried or overlooked (as if invisible) without causing resentment. For Allen, the famous photos of Elizabeth Eckford outside of Central High in Little Rock exemplify this strategy. As Eckford walks beside a potentially violent mob, seemingly calm, she allows her opponents to “expend their full force” and, as a result, “force[s] witnesses to the spectacle to make a choice about whether to embrace or disavow violence.”[205] Allen’s hope is that

[202] Ibid., 108.
[203] Ibid., 108-109.
[204] Ibid., 110.
[205] Ibid., 115.

making a spectacle of the crowd's anger will heighten the contradiction between professed democratic ideals and racist beliefs. "That way," she writes, "leads to cultural self-contradictions and so, in the ideal, to political transformation."[206]

Allen grounds this gloss on Little Rock, in part, on some remarks that Ellison made in an interview with Robert Penn Warren. In his critique of Hannah Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock," he argues that she didn't understand the "ideal of sacrifice."[207] This ideal involves a "rite of initiation" in which teens like Eckford learn about the losses they will have to accept in a hostile world.[208] It also, Allen argues, models an exemplary way of coming to terms with loss. Eckford was demonstrating the ideal by "illustrating ideas about how a democratic community might organize itself," and her parents "were providing rich lessons in citizenship by revealing the sacrifices citizens make for each other."[209] Martyrdom thus provides a way to make of scapegoating rituals something more beneficent.[210] This philanthropic aspect of sacrifice seems affirmed by Ellison too, when he notes in the interview: "We learned about forbearance and forgiveness in that same school, and about hope too. So today we sacrifice, as we sacrificed yesterday, *the pleasure of personal retaliation in the interest of the common good*."[211] Hope, forbearance, and forgiveness all can be resources for generating trust and

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[206] Ibid., 115.
[207] Warren, *Who Speaks*, 343.
[208] Ibid., 343.
[209] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 30.
[210] Allen notes that it is 'perverse' to pose peaceable actions as 'philanthropy' (Ibid., 106). She likens it to the narrator's overly 'acquiescent' lesson mentioned above. When these peaceable actions are aimed at 'political transformation,' however, she reads them as gifts (Ibid., 36) and lessons (Ibid., 30). For the language of beneficence, see: Allen, "Ralph Ellison on the Tragi-comedy of Citizenship," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 50.
[211] Cited in Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 29. Allen's emphasis. See also: Warren, *Who Speaks,* 342.

reciprocity—together, Allen hopes they will nurture the conviction that loss should be honored, and the faith that it will be.

There is, however, a danger to this martyr strategy. The 'political transformation' it aims to bring about is not assured and comes at a steep cost. It also risks being taken up and re-narrated in a way that situates senseless violence within a narrative of progress. Together, these barriers may undermine the efficacy of martyrdom to make change. Juliet Hooker suggests this risk in her critique of Allen. "Allen's transmutation of blacks' peaceful acquiescence to the perpetual losses of a racial polity into acts of exemplary citizenship," she argues, "ironically fails to challenge the disproportionate distribution of loss, and might instead serve to perpetuate it."[212] Hooker contends that Allen's recourse to martyrdom rests on three unfounded assumptions: 1) that the black activism of the civil rights era is best understood as peaceful and resolute quiescence, 2) that such a strategy is effective in "bringing about transformations in the ethical orientations of dominant groups," and 3) that protestors like Eckford understood their actions as peaceable and trust-building.[213] By framing the civil rights movement as primarily 'peaceful and resolute quiescence' that was effective in 'bringing about transformations' and building trust, Allen risks making martyrdom into an exemplary form of citizenship. While martyrdom is meant to elevate whites toward greater sincerity, it may work also to circumscribe the repertoire of actions available to black protestors.

Rather than read Eckford's cool demeanor as an attempt at building trust for the 'common good' of Little Rock, Hooker's critique suggests we consider it in other

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[212] Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics," 452.
[213] Ibid., 450. If we view the conflict through the lens of stasis, in which words and deeds have no common meaning (as in Corcyra), then we might expect the actions of protestors to be mis-interpreted, for trust-building to be taken as aggression.

terms—as a way of managing violence or an act of solidarity, say. In fact, Eckford herself gives credence to this latter reading. In a 2018 interview with the BBC, she was asked if she had ever felt sacrificed to a 'bigger movement.' She counters: "It was a self-sacrifice, a self-sacrifice. I had to make a decision every day that I was going to go back into that hellhole. I knew what I would be facing after a while. But one of the Little Rock 9 was a girl who had a hole in her heart, years and years before open-heart surgery was available. In fact she didn't have a surgery until after she had graduated college and she was in a crisis. So, umm, how could I leave her behind?"[214] Remaining at Central High was a costly decision for Eckford. Though she frames the decision as a sacrifice, it was a sacrifice less motivated by the virtues of facing loss than by her solidarity with a fellow student.

This version of 'the ideal of sacrifice' that gives less privilege to how it models loss and generates trust can be gleaned from Ellison as well. Before mentioning Arendt in his conversation with Warren, Ellison describes moments where he had to exhibit a similarly cool demeanor: "There have been situations where in facing hostile whites I had to determine not what *they* thought was at issue, because in any case they were bent upon violence, but what *I* wanted it to be. 'This guy wants me to fight, most likely he wants an excuse to kill me—what do I have to gain? And am I going to let *him* impose his values upon my life?'"[215] Forgiveness and forbearance, in this light, are not reducible to a show of good faith, granted in the hope of later reciprocity; they are a tactic for managing violence. When the young Ellison sacrifices the 'pleasure of personal retaliation,' it is not

[214] "Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock 9," *HARDtalk*, 5 Mar 2018: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csvpss
[215] Warren, *Who Speaks*, 342. Ellison's emphasis.

(or not simply) for the common goods of stability and reciprocity—he does so also because it reduces the threat of retaliation to himself and his community. Ellison's 'ideal of sacrifice,' in this light, refers to managing the dilemmas of sacrifice and invisibility. He refers to the trials like those faced by Eckford as rites of initiation where one is "required to master the inner tensions created by [one's] racial situation."[216] "It's a harsh requirement," he adds, "but if [one] fails this basic test, [their] life will be even harsher."[217] As Ellison sees it, the teens at Little Rock perform the rite so that they may—as he says of the grandfather—"know the nature of [their] oppressor's weakness."[218] The lessons learned will equip them with the skill and knowledge to manage later trials. These lessons may lead them to work at building trust, but they also may not, or they may not lead exclusively that way. Though duplicity and cunning may do harm to trust, both may be needed, in stasis, when power is out of balance and when other forms of action are at risk of cooptation.[219]

Allen, for her part, does see the value in supplementing the more harmonious politics she proposes. When considering the grandfather's description of himself as a 'spy in the enemy's country' and his bellicose injunction to 'agree 'em to death and destruction,' she worries that a "commitment to brotherhood seems to militate against espionage or duplicity," but ultimately resolves that this depends on "the geography of

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[216] Ibid., 344.
[217] Ibid., 344.
[218] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, 55.
[219] This is not to say that Ellison is opposed to building trust—to the contrary—but he is skeptical about the capacity of such practices to sustain themselves without supplement. As Amanda Anderson explains: "… there is within the conceptual economy of *Invisible Man* an engagement with certain principles of liberalism, notably deliberative debate, democratic procedure, and the grounding principle of sincerity in speech and action. These liberal principles are affirmed in their negation, by their failure to sustain themselves against the pervasive forces of aggression, violence, and deception." Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 124-125.

the enemy's country" and the 'health' of the public sphere.[220] Subversive activity may be needed when relations are characterized by sacrifice and invisibility. Allen seems to license a more conspiratorial politics here, where she proposes a "characteristic trickster strategy."[221] She also hints at the value of a trickster's tactics in her earlier work on Ellison, in which she considers the narrator's "taunting laughter" as a strategy for managing loss. Whereas a sufferer may elicit sympathy from an audience, laughter and irony "teach forms of imagination" that can enable "further political action."[222] It is not difficult to imagine that this 'taunting laughter,' may not help to generate trust.

Yet despite these gestures at cunning tactics, Allen ultimately restricts them with her criteria for reciprocity. The trickster strategy, for instance, cannot risk harming oppressors, who she casts as not "comprehensively diseased," and so it must work to redeem them by rousing them morally. The trickster must "kill the segregationist within any given citizen off," she argues, adopting the grandfather's combative language, "in order to allow that citizen to be reborn as a full democrat."[223] Tricksterism in this way turns into martyrdom and its economism. Similarly, the comic orientation to loss cannot issue from "shrill" anger, but must "generate a transition away from anger… to a language that can integrate standpoints."[224] In both cases, wile is used only to inspire

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[220] Ibid., 114-115.
[221] Ibid., 115.
[222] Allen, "Ralph Ellison on the Tragi-comic of Citizenship," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 50-51.
[223] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 115.
[224] Allen, "Ralph Ellison on the Tragi-comic of Citizenship," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 51. For the role of angry humor in the black political thought, see: Glenda Carpio, *Laughter Fit to Kill* and Terrence T. Tucker, *Furiously Funny*. Both note a tradition of black writers and humorists who tell jokes that heighten rather than relieve tension.

greater sympathy. But a trickster strategy need not work to halt sacrifice in this way—it may also work to avoid or reverse sacrifice.

III. Ellison's Tricksters

Ellison himself authorizes this turn to a trickster figure. He gives an account of a trickster strategy for evading sacrifice in his essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," as a response to a different gloss on tricksterism advanced by his friend Stanley Hyman. For Hyman, the trickster is inextricably bound up with minstrel performance, which, he argues, parodies familiar, racist stereotypes. "The comic point of the act is that the performer is not really this subhuman grotesque," he writes, "but a person of intelligence and skill, in other words, a performer."[225] *Invisible Man* apparently puts this parody on full display: "on investigation every important character turns out to be engaged in some facet of the smart-man-playing-dumb routine."[226]

In his essay, Ellison criticizes Hyman both for equating the trickster with the minstrel performer and for identifying such performances with his novel's characters. Whereas blackface functions as a kind of ritual sacrifice that promotes invisibility, real tricksterism, he says, disrupts social order. Quoting Karl Kerenyi, Ellison argues that the function of the trickster is "to add disorder to order and to make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted."[227] By this standard, Hyman's smart-man-playing-dumb routine represents no

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[225] Hyman, *The Promised End*, 297.
[226] Ibid., 299.
[227] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, 51. See also Kerenyi's essay in Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, 185. To 'make whole' by adding 'disorder to order' calls to mind the democratic view of stasis, in which unruly politics can bring a different kind of stability by unsettling inflexible laws and hierarchies.

tricksterism at all, or at least a tricksterism that has been adjusted to "the contours of 'white' symbolic needs."[228] Such routines represent precisely the sort of sacrifice that call for creative forms of reversal or refusal that a trickster strategy entails.

Ellison makes this point when discussing the grandfather's advice. The grandfather is no more like a minstrel actor, he writes, "than was Ulysses in Polyphemus' cave. Nor is he so much a 'smart-man-playing-dumb' as a weak man who knows the nature of his oppressor's weakness."[229] By linking the grandfather to Odysseus—the wily hero who struggles against supernatural forces to get home—he highlights the need for cunning (*metis* in Greek) in an overdetermined and antagonistic world. Unlike Hyman's trickster, Odysseus's aim is to reverse his fate. And though he suffers many trials, his suffering is not that of a martyr either; instead he waits for the opportune moment to act out a plan.[230]

This turn to Odysseus is not incidental—as the classicist, Patrice Rankine, notes, the 'Ulysses theme' pervades Ellison's work. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator is repeatedly cast as Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops (like his grandfather). One effect of this recurring allusion is to suggest a model for how the narrator might "live with [his] head in the lion's mouth" (*IM*, 16). While in the monster's cave, Odysseus is trapped. Though he and his fellows are out of the Cyclops's reach, they cannot exit the cave without risking death because their opponent has blocked the entrance and only opens the cave to

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[228] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, 50.
[229] Ibid., 55.
[230] Bernard Williams explores the relationship between Odysseus's 'enduring' (*polutlas*) and 'resourcefulness' (*metis*) in *Shame and Necessity*, 38-39: "The suffering of his heart is the suffering that Odysseus has to undergo when he cannot, for reasons of prudence, do what he would very much like to do and has good reason to do. Suffering is the cost of waiting until he can do what intelligence requires…." Compare this enduring to Ellison's sacrifice of 'the pleasure of personal retaliation' and the grandfather's command to 'keep up the good fight.'

allow his sheep out to pasture. As more of his men are captured and eaten, Odysseus hatches a scheme to blind Polyphemus. Taking advantage of his opponent's particularity, he pokes out the ogre's one eye. The Cyclops, now blinded, cannot detect Odysseus and his men as they escape, hidden beneath the sheep. As Rankine notes, Ellison plays on this "drunken ogre motif" to describe the "cannibalistic excess" of American society and its relative myopia, both as sources of harm, but also as possible vulnerabilities to be exploited.[231]

Ogre imagery first appears during the initial rite of sacrifice: the battle royal. At the outset, Ellison portrays the town dignitaries as gluttonous and violent. As they lustily jeer at a dancer before the fight begins, the narrator observes "a certain merchant who followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling" (*IM*, 20). This voraciousness carries over to the fight, as the onlookers command the fighters to tear each other "limb from limb" (*IM*, 21). From here on, the narrator finds himself confined to situations where antagonists greedily demand sacrifice.

The connection of the demand for sacrifice to the Cyclops becomes clearer still after the narrator joins the Brotherhood. In his first encounter with Brother Jack, as he's being recruited, the hero gets a sense of the organization's myopia when Jack chastises him: "Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!" (*IM*, 292). This blindness to color is literalized after Todd Clifton's funeral when Jack announces that he has no interest in listening to the people of Harlem and their demand for a response, only in giving orders. "Our job is not to *ask* them what they think," he says, "but to *tell* them!" (*IM*, 473). To this, the hero asks if it would be better if they dropped the pretext of

[231] Rankine, *Ulysses in Black*, 133, 135

fraternity and suggests that Jack must instead be "the great white father" (*IM*, 473). With this last provocation, a false "buttermilk white eye" erupts from Jack's face, and with "Cyclopean irritation" he lectures the narrator on the need to "accept discipline" and make "sacrifice" (*IM*, 474, 475). Jack may be 'Cyclopean' because he is now with only one eye, or perhaps because he's been blinded by the provocation. The fact that the narrator begins to appreciate his invisibility at this same moment—"He doesn't even see me" (*IM*, 475)—suggests the latter.

This newfound appreciation for his invisibility marks a pivotal turn for the narrator where he begins to explore the ways it may be both enabling and disabling. Like Odysseus in the cave, he can make use of his opponent's blindness to escape or even reverse the intended sacrifice. He hints at this revelation, in characteristic trickster style, with a joke. After Jack says he sincerely hopes it never comes to pass that the narrator has to lose an eye, he responds: "If it should, maybe you'll recommend me to your occulist, […] then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not" (*IM*, 477). Rather than accuse Jack again of not seeing what he ought to see, he insinuates Jack's blindness with riddle-like speech.[232] The joke makes Jack uneasy, he first looks 'oddly' at the hero, then attempts to laugh it off and to take the narrator's playfulness as a sign of fraternity. Yet, perhaps recognizing some anger in the joke, he goes on to admonish the narrator: "One last thing… Watch that temper, that's discipline, too. Learn to demolish your brotherly opponents with ideas, with polemical skill. The other is for our enemies. Save it for

[232] Just earlier in a stream of consciousness occasioned by Jack's demand for sacrifice, the hero wonders: "He said you'd learn so you're learning, so he saw it all the time. He's a riddler, shouldn't we show him?" (*IM*, 476). In this moment where he ceases to see the Brotherhood as brotherly, he comes to see the excluding language of his comrades as a kind of riddling that he can return in kind. "Nail him! The short-changing dialectical deacon…" (*IM*, 476).

them" (*IM*, 477). Jack senses the anger in the joke and tries to limit the narrator to a clear, deliberative mode of speech—something that can build trust rather than heighten enmity.[233] The narrator does not heed this advice, but, sensing how invisibility may help combat his ogre-foe, continues instead to experiment with tricksterism.[234]

One of Jack's last orders is to visit with Hambro, the chief theoretician of the Brotherhood, to receive instructions on their new plan. Though the narrator thinks "after tonight, I wouldn't ever look the same, or feel the same," he heads to Hambro "for whatever it was worth" (*IM*, 478). On the way, he is spotted by his rival organizer, the militant Ras, who sends two cronies after him. He's able to elude them, but only temporarily, so he gets the idea to hide behind a pair of sunglasses. With this disguise, he enhances his invisibility and, with the addition of a wide-brimmed hat, is taken by all passers-by—including Ras, and a friend, Brother Maceo—for the hipster, B.P. Rinehart. In the process, he discovers that Rinehart has shifting and conflicting roles. He is, among other things, both a hustler and a reverend. The narrator is bewildered and enchanted by Rinehart's ability to slip between these roles: "His world was possibility and he knew it," he relates. "He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of

[233] One effect of Jack's advice that a temper is improper between friends is that he sharpens the friend-enemy distinction (either you act correctly, or you are an enemy). The tricksterism that the narrator opts for softens this distinction; there can be divisive actions within a bond.
[234] Jack finishes his advice by stating: "I speak to you of what I have learned and I'm a great deal older than you. Good night" (*IM*, 478). The narrator will reverse these words in the epilogue, when he asserts that "we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others" (574). Limiting the speech of 'your brotherly opponents' may not be what's needed 'to live in the world with others.' Note that this contradicts Allen who similarly identifies rueful doublespeak with hostility and frames it as inimical to friendship: "A speaker must try to bring an element of predictability to the unstable world of human relations; he must tackle negative emotions like anger and resentment and try to convert them to goodwill." *Talking to Strangers*, 143.

fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home." (*IM*, 498).[235] Though his conflicting identities may make Rinehart a charlatan, they also illustrate to the narrator the ways in which an order he took to be fixed could be seen as 'without boundaries,' not unlike Kerenyi's characterization of the trickster who 'introduces disorder to order.'[236]

With Rinehart's lesson in mind, the narrator finally meets with Hambro, who reiterates that the people of Harlem no longer fit in the Brotherhood's 'larger plan': "It's unfortunate, Brother, but your members will have to be sacrificed" (*IM*, 501). Danielle Allen rightly notes that this scene marks a development in the narrator's perspective on what would count as a legitimate sacrifice, and that his criteria lead him to break with the Brotherhood. He asks, "But shouldn't sacrifice be made willingly by those who know what they are doing?" (*IM*, 502). Fair sacrifice requires consent—it should be made, not taken—but Hambro disagrees: "it's impossible *not* to take advantage of the people" (*IM*, 504).[237] His retort gives the lie to the party's commitment to brotherhood and the narrator has no reason to remain with the group. As Allen puts it, "With the exposure of Hambro's hypocrisy, the always unnamable, hard to understand, brotherhood becomes

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[235] If Rinehart offers a way to be 'at home in' the 'seething, hot world of fluidity,' and the narrator is a kind of Odysseus, we might read him as offering lessons for 'returning home' (*nostos* in Greek). This is further suggested by Ellison when he notes that "the P. [in Rinehart's initials] is for 'Proteus.'" See Ellison, Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow & Act*, 56. Proteus is a Greek river-God known for taking on many shapes. He plays a role in the *Odyssey* (4.412) where he assists a different wayward Greek return home. Menelaus captures the god despite his shape-shifting in order to learn which god has becalmed him on the island of Pharos.
[236] Ellison says explicitly that Rinehart teaches the narrator this lesson about cunning: "Rhinehart's [sic] role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather's cryptic advice to his own situation." See Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow & Act*, 57.
[237] While Hambro indicates here the realism of the civil war theorists—decisions by leaders always produce losers who are taken advantage of—this insight leads him to justify a kind of *modus vivendi* politics that limits the scope of what people should ask for on account of this fact. As we shall see, the protagonists tricksterism indicates another kind of realism.

substanceless."[238] Without some show of reciprocity, the hero has little reason to trust the Brotherhood.

And yet, though he seeks after "practices of reciprocity that democratize sacrifice and develop 'something like brotherhood' into a real feature of citizenship," he does not resolve at this moment to allow his opponents to "expend their full force" and thus "force contradictions."[239] Because he knows that Hambro is prepared to take advantage of him, what reason does he have to heed Jack's advice and 'demolish [his] brotherly opponents with ideas'? He has learned from the protean Rinehart that different circumstances may require taking on different roles. Rather than modeling a better form of sacrifice, he first resolves to escape it and to halt the exchange: "Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only *they* were the ones who benefited. And now we start the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop?" (*IM*, 505). Realizing that sacrifices have only served to render him invisible, the narrator now determines to test the repertoire of actions from within the tragic hold. "I'd explore it," he says, "rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag." (*IM*, 508). Evoking the grandfather's advice, he aims to exploit his opponents' weakness 'like Ulysses in Polyphemus' cave.'

It is true that, in the wake of the riot that erupts later that night, the hero revises his trickster strategy. By going along with the Brotherhood's policy of inaction, he feels he has failed his community. "My grandfather had been wrong about yessing them to death and destruction," he reflects, "or else things had changed too much since his day" (*IM*, 564). But while he's critical of this particular attempt at tricksterism, he doesn't

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[238] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 111-112.
[239] Ibid., 112, 115, 116.

repudiate the strategy broadly. That particular 'yes' ultimately assented to the Brotherhood, when he hoped it would backfire. He remains open, however, to "saying the 'yes' which accomplishes the expressive 'no.'"[240] Even as he sets out his commitment to 'affirm the principle on which the country was built,' he notes that this will be achieved by introducing disorder to order. "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket," he says, "it's definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it—or imagination" (*IM*, 576). Affirming the principle, in other words, need not set limits on what set of actions anybody takes up. Conspiratorial and guileful actions may disrupt dynamics that conduce to sacrifice and invisibility and help set the stage for less destructive forms of sacrifice down the road. These actions seem choiceworthy because, opposed to martyrdom, they don't depend on the sacrifice of a victim.

IV. The Eviction Scene

One episode in *Invisible Man* makes clear how this Odyssean *metis* can be preferable to the reciprocal and trust-minded actions that Allen finds endorsed in the novel. Just before the he encounters the Brotherhood for the first time, the narrator sees a crowd gathering as a cop and two trustees (who are collectively referred to as 'Laws') evict Mr. and Mrs. Provo, an elderly couple, pushing all their worldly belongings onto the street.[241] After looking over the contents of the apartment, the narrator is revolted by the

[240] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow & Act*, 57.
[241] The lengthy examination of these worldly objects serves to shake the narrator, temporarily at least, from the illusion that his 'tragic irrational situation' is, in fact, 'completely logical.' The everyday, household objects paint a picture of life in the wake of emancipation—the joys and the horrors.

scene: “a bitter spurt of gall filled my mouth and splattered the old folk’s possessions” (*IM*, 273). At this moment, Mrs. Provo attempts to rush past the Laws and is struck back by the officer, incensing the crowd. Fearful of “what the sight of violence might release in [him],” he reaches for “all the shock-absorbing phrases” he had learned and addresses the crowd (*IM*, 275). “We’re a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people,” he shouts (*IM*, 275).[242] Initially, the crowd resists his exhortation—“Yeah, but we mad now” (*IM*, 275). In the back and forth that follows, as he works to hold the crowd’s interest, his message turns from cautioning restraint, to pleading on behalf of Provo’s request, to calling for the furniture to be moved back indoors. All the while, he continues to assert that they are a ‘law-abiding people,’ but the meaning of that phrase shifts in the exchange. As the Laws continue to resist the woman’s request to pray, the narrator begins to emphasize the length of the Provos’ suffering the law (or waiting for its fair operation): “Eighty-seven years and look at all he’s accumulated in eighty-seven years, strewn in the snow like chicken guts, and we’re a law-abiding, slow-to-anger bunch of folks turning the other cheek every day in the week” (*IM*, 277).[243] With that frame, the crowd’s anger is contextualized and justified and they rush the officer. With the Law subdued, they reverse the eviction, invoking a city ordinance for cleared sidewalks.

Allen notes that the beating of the officer, the subsequent reversed eviction, and finally the calling of a riot squad all might have been avoided if the officer had responded to the narrator’s intermediate proposal to let Mrs. Provo back to pray: “How about it, Mr.

[242] That line recalls *Psalm 103:8*, “The Lord *is* merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” ‘Slow to anger’ is rendered *makrothumos* in Greek, which can mean patient and slow to avenge wrongs. When Ellison juxtaposes this phrase with ‘law-abiding,’ abiding takes on the more archaic sense of ‘remaining waiting for’ or even ‘withstanding’ (as in ‘I cannot abide this much longer.’). As we will see, the hero exploits this ambiguity.
[243] Note that the image of strewn chicken guts likens this eviction to a ritual sacrifice.

Law? Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus?" (*IM*, 279). Had the officer given in to this request, it may have led to a better outcome. "If the officers in the eviction scene had desired to prove themselves trustworthy, or had understood that cultivating trust would make their own jobs easier in the future," she argues, "they would have let the old woman into the house to pray. The modicum of trust implied by this gesture might at a later point have facilitated a more substantive political discussion between police and residents."[244] What grew to become a counter-legal action on the part of the mob (albeit, a failed one), may have been better for all parties had the officer worked to build trust. What prevented him from doing so? "I don't want to do this," he says to the crowd, "I *have* to do it. They sent me up here to do it. If it was left to me, you could stay here till hell freezes over…" (*IM*, 270). In light of that professed reluctance, his decision to not make even a slight concession calls into question his sympathy. Perhaps he suspected that Provo was playing the trickster, that she would not leave if given the chance to re-enter. Or perhaps he worried that her prayer alone could make his job harder, that it would signal one last claim to home—a claim the eviction seeks to undermine—which would render the law, if not inoperable, then at least menaced and inapplicable.[245] His job may not have become easier had he conceded.

There is reason, moreover, to imagine that the crowd would not be satisfied with only fifteen minutes of prayer. Even if the Invisible Man did not initially hope for a confrontation—he was both 'repelled and fascinated' by the prospect—others in the crowd did. What's more, they would have reason to believe in the success of their

[244] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 171.

[245] The politics of claiming home are foregrounded in this chapter when the narrator first comes upon the scene. "You mean they're putting them out of their apartment?" he asks, "They can do that up *here*?" To which one onlooker responds, "Man, where *you* from?"

opposition. Randi Storch, for instance, relates that the practice of moving furniture back into buildings and restoring utilities, effectively thwarting evictions, was a common practice in Chicago's Black neighborhoods in the 1930s.[246] Such practices were deliberately *unruly*, rather than aiming at cultivating trust. Their aim was to make the jobs of police officers more difficult, and not easier. They introduced disorder into order in an attempt to make the bond of division less burdensome—perhaps for the sake of wholeness and against oneness.

At the end of *Talking to Strangers*, Allen expresses her desire for the abolition of the University of Chicago's private police force in those same neighborhoods: "In my utopia universities would have no police."[247] Her hope is that the University's police force should do its work so well that "it should help generate trust that might of itself diminish the need for policing."[248] Greater trust and dialogue between administrators and local citizens may also result in the repeal of eminent domain laws, which contribute to evictions in the area. These laws, she contends, "distribute power so unevenly as to make trust impossible."[249] Here, Allen strikes on a dilemma: this community needs citizenly habits of trust and reciprocity in order to undo laws that distribute power in such a way that trust is impossible. Certainly, the project of normalizing good citizenly habits is an important step in addressing this dilemma—it might help to put weight on the public's conscience, for instance. Also crucial, however, are courageous and cunning tactics that aren't as concerned with developing reciprocity and learning to manage loss as they are

[246] Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928-1935*, 113.
[247] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 181.
[248] Ibid., 183.
[249] Ibid., 183.

with countering power. Such tactics will be needed for both the inauguration and maintenance of good citizenly practices.

V. Conclusion

In his work on democracy and sacrifice, Ralph Ellison indicates how sacrificial rites aren't entirely overdetermined; they work to sediment an order, but their performance always risks undoing that order as well. Danielle Allen rightly sees in this the possibility for a more decent way of life, in which sacrifices are performed differently. The hope is that they may be made reciprocally, and that trust between citizens helps to ensure that no group is victimized continuously. Quoting Ellison, she suggests that citizens will have to become "their idea of what a free people should be" if the society is to become whole, and not one.[250] Elizabeth Eckford embodies this mission for Allen because she knew that "democratic citizens embody their political norms in their interactions with one another in public spaces."[251] To become what a free people should be—to 'affirm the principle'—Allen suggests, requires us to dispense with habits of sacrifice that one has no intention of honoring because they undermine trust.

Yet, in dismissing conspiratorial political skills as a feature only of a corrupt regime, Allen sets limits to the repertoire of agency available to people who find themselves in the tragic confinement that Ellison calls invisibility.[252] Imposing these limits may work to undermine the eventual achievement of the kinds of habits that Allen

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[250] Ibid., 23, citing Ellison, *Juneteenth*, 356.
[251] Ibid., 23.
[252] I use the language of conspiracy here to evoke the kind of politics that James Martel describes in *Textual Conspiracies*. Both aim for a kind of 'consciously Machiavellian' politics that aims to supplant power, while operating at the same time in an environment that puts strong limits on individual agency. See for instance: Martel, *Textual Conspiracies*, 20.

finds desirable. In order for what Ellison calls 'antagonistic cooperation' to obtain, in other words, there may need to be a degree of antagonizing.[253]

Put otherwise, the argument that Ellison only champions an exemplary form of citizenship is vulnerable to a realist critique. The limited range of actions sanctioned by martyrdom—which aims at moral ends by moral means—constitutes what Bernard Williams calls a 'political moralism' that privileges moral considerations over political ones. In circumstances where a group is "radically disadvantaged," Williams argues, that group should not be subject to the standards of a more legitimate order.[254]

Ellison supplements his moralism through his classicism. As Patrice Rankine suggests, the Ulysses theme in *Invisible Man* indicates a kind of tricksterism that works to disorder racial hierarchy.[255] When likened to Odysseus, it becomes clear how the narrator makes use throughout the novel of cunning and political art to escape and reverse sacrifice in an attempt to become at home in an otherwise hostile world.

As with Du Bois, his invocation of ancient texts is not a bid for membership by taking part in a (Western) tradition. Instead, both potentially trouble the identity of the group that claims those texts as its tradition by showing how contingently authority and

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[253] Antagonistic cooperation refers to the dialogic riffing characteristic of jazz ensembles or of the dynamic between a critical audience and a performer. It is, for Ellison, a healthy counter-model for democracy against those who favor consensus. See Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *Going to the Territory*, 7 and 26. See also Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 118.

[254] Williams, "Realism and Moralism," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, 2, 4.

[255] There is nothing necessary about the relationship between classicism and realism, of course. In fact, Rankine extends the Ulysses theme to consider the narrator as a kind of Dionysian figure. Insofar as Dionysus refers to the god in Euripides' *Bacchae*, he remains a cunning trickster. Like Odysseus, Dionysus takes advantage of his opponent, Pentheus, by playing tricks on his eyes and reversing a sacrifice that was initially directed at him. Rankine extends this further, however, by likening him also to the figure of Zagreus Dionysus, which refers to the myth in which the titans kidnap, sacrifice, and consume the god in his infancy. His victimization and subsequent reconstitution by Zeus is taken by many to signal a form of political constitution—via martyrdom.

membership are constructed. While reframing charisma as a scenario highlights how a leader's (or the law's) authority depends on popular support, Ellison's tricksterism suggests strategies for actors when that authority is alienated enough from groups to render them effectively invisible.

These strategies for living with your head in the lion's mouth refuse the sacrifices that constitute disregard and exclusion and help to reduce suffering under the law. Sometimes this takes the form of flight, as when the protagonist of *Invisible Man* escapes the riot and moves underground where he can write and make plans. At other times, as we have seen, this means not just surviving but trying to bring about a better, more durable state of affairs. We see the latter in the eviction scene when the neighbors refused the Provo's eviction, and perhaps as well in Elizabeth Eckford's decision to stay with her peer with a hole in her heart. In both cases, their actions were unruly (from a certain perspective), but were not for the sake of immediate survival—to the contrary, they invited danger.

What distinguishes strategies of escape from strategies of change or reversal is that the latter are performed with the support of others. Tricksterism helps to find a space for action in the midst of generalized disregard, but it alone does not provide resources for how, within that space, a community of peers might be built (like Douglass and his troupe) for contesting the terms of division. For that, I turn now to James Baldwin and his account of love.

Four: Love is a Stranger
Grace, Gratitude, and Love of the World in Arendt and Baldwin

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.
-James Baldwin

I. Love's Place in Politics

If fear is an affect that Lessing could 'save' by 'stripping it of its escapist aspect' and by making it suitable for greater involvement in the world, as Arendt relates, then perhaps the same operation may be performed on love.[256] However, while love also has an escapist aspect that might be stripped away, Arendt often states in no uncertain terms that love has no place in politics—as she tells James Baldwin, the idea of it frightens her. Throughout his essay, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin offers up a politics of love when he attempts to establish an understanding of equality through appeals to common, sensual experiences: watching the sun rise, tasting fish or well made bread, weeping, or watching a child grow. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt had described two possible reactions to such basic human experiences. The first, following Augustine, she calls the 'grace of love'. Grace seeks to ground a universal love in common, given factors of human existence. In achieving this universality, however, it gives up discernment; with universal love comes unconditional forgiveness, for example. For this reason, Arendt dismisses grace as a stranger to politics. The second kind of reaction she considers, however, is gratitude. Gratitude, in contrast to grace, moves us to participate in the building of the world out of love for what is held in common. Like fear, then, when love

[256] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 6.

orients us to the shared in-between that, for Arendt, typifies public life, it is an affect that has its place in politics.

Arendt's professed fear of love in politics is striking because of those (rare) moments throughout her work when she speaks of love in more positive terms. Presumably, in this case, much of this fear comes from anxieties about the social realm's encroachment on political life. After all, James Baldwin expresses deep dissatisfaction with political responses to racial inequality in the United States. Arendt's letter, then, appears to give credence to standard interpretations of each thinker: Arendt defends the political from any invasion of the private (perhaps to the point of not allowing much to be political at all), and Baldwin is an anti-institutionalist who sees intimacy, and not law, as the only way to address racial strife. One seems to insist on formal politics, while the other flies from it.

A stasis reading troubles both interpretations. Arendt's critique of love-as-grace is a plausible basis for her criticism of Baldwin, but turning to gratitude as a form of love (love for the world) helps to demonstrate how Arendt and Baldwin presuppose and require each other in their theorizations of the relationship between law and mores. This latter version of love fits with an account of friendship as 'making the world more human with others' that Arendt draws from her study of Lessing. Both Arendt and Baldwin share a preference for this form of relation. Perhaps it is the fact that Baldwin considers some recourse to something like grace in order to make such a relation work that frightens Arendt—not because he is wrong, but because he may be right.

II. Love as Grace

In 1962, Hannah Arendt wrote a letter to James Baldwin responding to his recently published essay, *The Fire Next Time*, in which he aims to 'end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." To do this, he argues, we must "like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others."[257] While Arendt described the essay in her letter, as 'a political event of a very high order,' she objects to Baldwin's 'gospel of love'. She writes: "What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy."[258] We can trace Arendt's worries about mixing love and politics as far back as her dissertation on love and St. Augustine. What is striking about this reaction is not the aim of her critique, then, but how the essay affected her: she was frightened. Those familiar with Arendt's work, in other words, will not be surprised by her strong opposition to Baldwin's political use of love, though "fright" is not an affect to which she usually confesses.

For Arendt, love removes us from the concerns of the world. As she puts it in *The Human Condition*: "Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces."[259] Love has no place in politics because it takes us out of the world—'by reason of its passion,' it 'destroys the in-between which relates us to and

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[257] James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time" in *Collected Essays*, 346.
[258] Hannah Arendt "The Meaning of Love in Politics: A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin."
[259] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.

separates us from others'—and in the process it alters how we relate to one another.[260] The deeds and worldly activities of others are of no consequence to the lover (*what* somebody is, as opposed to *who* they are). Instead, the lover, who "says with Augustine, '*Volo ut sis* (I want you to be),' without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation," is concerned only with that element of the beloved that is prior to the world, that is, the beloved's 'mere given existence'.[261] Here, love takes on the form of grace in which love "is extended to [the beloved] as a creature and not what he could be on his own."[262]

Throughout *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin offers up a *politics* of love that at least resembles this conceptualization of grace. He makes the connection between the two explicit when describing how love can deepen the consciousness of the 'white man' and release him from 'the tyranny of his mirror': "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of *grace*—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."[263] By this state of grace, Baldwin means for his white man "to consent, in effect, to become black himself."[264] That is to say that we can understand this love (a 'state of being') as a recognition, through 'quest' and 'daring', of a *common* existence with his black fellows.

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[260] Ibid., 242.
[261] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301.
[262] Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 90.
[263] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time", 341. Emphasis added.
[264] Ibid., 341.

Baldwin does not ground equality in American laws and institutions or in Christian values, but instead in this common (mere) existence: "It is very hard to believe that those men and women, raising their children, eating their greens, crying their curses, weeping their tears, singing their songs, making their love, as the sun rose, as the sun set, were in any way inferior to the white men and women who crept over to share these splendors after the sun went down."[265] What makes this recourse to our given, common characteristics troubling, for Arendt, is that the specificity of some other diminishes in importance—everyone is deserving of love because the sun shines on everyone the same and, to love everybody is, effectively, to love nobody. It's not immediately clear, in other words, how Baldwin's state of grace is up to the task of releasing anyone from the "tyranny of the mirror."

Like Baldwin, Arendt is concerned with something like this tyrannical mirror. She highlights the danger of the narcissism of a totally private life in her portrait of Rahel Varnhagen who held that "'you are never more actually with a person than when you think of him in his absence and imagine what you will say to him,' and—it might be added—when he is cheated of any chance to reply and you yourself are free of any risk of being rejected."[266] Yet, without 'any risk of being rejected' it is hard to imagine what would mark any 'state of being' as 'daring'. This lack of any concern for the other as anything more than mere presence, Arendt tells us, poses a danger for Varnhagen: "other

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[265] Ibid., 344. In this light, Baldwin comes to resemble Heinrich Heine, as Arendt describes him in her essay "The Jew as Pariah: a Hidden Tradition": "The bare fact that the sun shines on all alike affords him daily proof that all men are essentially equal. In the presence of such universal things as the sun, music, trees, and children… the petty dispensations of men which create and maintain inequality must needs appear ridiculous." See: Hannah Arendt. "The Jew As Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," 103.

[266] Arendt, Hannah. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, 22.

people were never the ‘mirror images which reflected her inner self’—a specific, unalterable inner self—whose existence could help maker her ‘inner self more distinct’ (Goethe).”[267] The presence of equals has the capacity to challenge, affect, and condition a speaker and, in the process, reveal facts about that speaker’s ‘inner self’ (facts that are not always flattering). The tyranny of the mirror, then, inhibits one of the chief benefits of *action*. Disclosure requires the presence of peers, others who are more than mere presence.

Arendt makes a similar point in a letter to Gershom Scholem. In the letter, Arendt describes the need for some third term that relates and mediates between people when she criticizes the idea of *Ahabath Israel*, or “love of the Jewish people”. She recounts to Scholem a conversation with an Israeli socialist who claimed to not believe in God, but who instead ‘believes in the Jewish people.’ To this, she would have liked to reply (had she not then been speechless): “the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and *love* towards Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come out of that?”[268] Love for a people here is comparable to Baldwin’s ‘tyranny of the mirror.’ Love loses its meaning when there is no thing that provides a scene of relation for those people—that thing once was God. The benefit of some space for mediation is that it can bring people together without collapsing them into one another in the way that love (or narcissism) does: “as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like

[267] Ibid., 23.
[268] Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem: An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt” in *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, 207. Emphasis added.

every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."[269] By contrast, without some object that functions as God once did by Arendt's account, where the grace of love is the only means of relating to others, those others become undifferentiated in a certain sense. That is to say that grace puts such emphasis on common given experience that it "is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions."[270] All that matters to the lover, in such an instance, are traits of others that existed prior to their having acted into the world—their capacity for joy, their living under the same sun, etc. It is with this in mind that Arendt warns: "Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others."[271]

The problem, then, with this attitude of grace is that, insofar as it is antipolitical, unworldly, and concerned only with mere existence—"that which is mysteriously given us by birth"— it is incapable of producing the very thing Baldwin looks to it to provide or underwrite: equality.[272] Grace is granted both to the citizen within a political community, as well as to "the human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions and part of his destiny a consistent whole."[273] If stasis describes a bond between those who quarrel, grace is a universal bond.

As a result, the granting of grace is less capable of constituting a new community between the citizens and their excluded counterparts—if such a constitution is to occur at

[269] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
[270] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.
[271] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.
[272] Arendt, *Origins*, 301.
[273] Ibid., 301.

all, it must be achieved through politics. As Arendt explains: "Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights."[274] Such a guarantee might be possible given the presence of some constructed, mediating object (or world) to which we can contribute. Arendt's fear is that, with only a reliance on common, mere existence, as she takes Baldwin to be advocating, the hope for some place or status will always be dependent on "the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy."[275]

III. A Politics of Gratitude

Baldwin would no doubt accept that these 'unpredictable hazards' are inadequate guarantors of equal status. Nevertheless, he had good reason to be skeptical of the claim that legal or institutional equality could be much better. By 1963, *Brown v. Board* had been in effect for nearly a decade, and in that time, Baldwin had grown pessimistic about the prospects for legal action to bring about a better state of affairs. When *The Fire Next Time*, was published, Baldwin had begun to understand civil rights legislation as merely gestural and as 'tokenism': "For hard example, white Americans congratulate themselves on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the schools; they suppose, in spite of the mountain of evidence that has since accumulated to the contrary, that this was proof of a change of heart—or, as they like to say, progress."[276] Against the narrative

[274] Ibid., 301.
[275] Ibid., 301.
[276] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time", 336.

of a ‘change of heart’, Baldwin sees concessions necessitated by Cold War politics. These concessions were only made, he argues, ‘in order to stay on top.’[277] By his account, love is needed if law is to meaningfully confer equal status: “Had it been a matter of love or justice, the 1954 decision would surely have occurred sooner; were it not for the realities of power in this difficult era, it might very well not have occurred yet.”[278]

In this light, the disagreement between Baldwin and Arendt may be understood as a recapitulation of Rousseau’s paradox of politics wherein democracies require good laws to make good mores and, in turn, good mores to make good laws. In the context of white supremacy, Baldwin offers a strong challenge to the idea that there can be no place for those common things. While it may be true that love in a certain sense denotes some permanent affective position that thwarts any real involvement in human affairs, there may be another, healthier side of love that, while still lacking proper mediation, consists only in a temporary withdrawal from the world—one that even affects political action.

Though Baldwin’s ‘gospel of love’ frightened Arendt, there are good Arendtian reasons for embracing this second form of love. Grace may have no place in politics, but elsewhere throughout Arendt’s work, she hints at the political importance of love of a different sort: love of the world. In fact, Arendt told Karl Jaspers in 1955 that: “Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theories ‘Amor Mundi.’”[279] So, while Arendt rejects the way Baldwin deploys grace for political ends, she sees it as politically important to consider ‘that which is mysteriously given us by birth’ with *gratitude*. From

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[277] Ibid., 336.
[278] Ibid., 336.
[279] Quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, xxiv.

Arendt's perspective, in other words, there is a place for grace, but what Baldwin hopes it will provide is better sought by love in this other dimension.

In the concluding paragraphs in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt warns that "the first disastrous result of man's coming of age is that modern man has come to resent everything given, even his own existence—to resent the very fact that he is not the creator of the universe and himself."[280] This result is disastrous because it leads 'modern man' to proclaim "that everything is permitted" and to believe "secretly that everything is possible."[281] In other words, the development of resentment fits neatly in Arendt's history of totalitarianism.[282] As an antidote to this modern nihilism, Arendt prescribes gratitude in those given things that exist prior to our acting into the world: "The alternative to this resentment, which is the psychological basis of contemporary nihilism, would be a fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariably given us, such as life itself, the existence of man and the world."[283] Gratitude therefore has the same point of departure as grace, but leads in a different direction; whereas grace turns the fact of mere existence into an attitude of aloofness, gratitude works inward and gives a sense of responsibility for the world. As Arendt puts it: "Generally speaking, such gratitude expects nothing except—in the words of Faulkner—one's 'own one anonymous chance to perform something passionate and brave and

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[280] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 438. For more on these passages from the 1st edition, see: John Wolfe Ackerman's "The Memory of Politics: Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, and the Possibility of Encounter," in *Concentrationary Memories*.
[281] Ibid., 438.
[282] See, for instance, the passage on those Imperialist adventurers with 'hollow souls': "The more gifted were walking incarnations of resentment like the German Carl Peters (possibly the model for Kurtz), who openly admitted that he 'was fed up with being counted among the pariahs and wanted to belong to a master race.'" Arendt, *Origins*, 189.
[283] Ibid., 438.

austere not just in but into man's enduring chronicle… in gratitude for the gift of [one's] time in it.'"[284] In other words, while grace smiles benevolently on those with and those without a place in the world alike, gratitude implies an indebtedness that can be repaid only with a contribution of one's own to the human artifice.[285]

With this other approach to the basic given things in life, we can revisit Baldwin's essay to see in what ways the state of grace he advocates can be understood differently from how Arendt seems to receive it. It is true, after all that he writes of men and women *creating* something together. At the end of his essay, recall that Baldwin writes that we must "like lovers, insist on, *or create*, the consciousness of the others."[286] While 'creating consciousness' does not sound like acting into the world, it could be a part of world-building if it has at its foundation a "consciously planned beginning of history" or "consciously planned new polity" that "will eventually be able to reintegrate those who in ever-increasing numbers are being expelled from humanity and severed from human condition."[287] Though Baldwin never speaks about consciously constructing a new polity, he does suggest that, if it is to achieve real racial equality, the American republic will need to risk fundamental changes: "One can give nothing whatever without giving

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[284] Ibid., 438. For further reading on the relationship between Faulkner, Arendt, and gratitude, see Patchen Markell, "Anonymous Glory."

[285] Gratitude finds a rough corollary in Arendt's treatment of Bernard Lazare in "The Jew as Pariah". In detailing his outlook, she writes: "Every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented. For insofar as a man is more than a mere creature of nature, more than a mere product of Divine creativity, insofar will he be called to account for the things which men do to men in the world which they themselves condition." Arendt. "The Jew As Pariah: a Hidden Tradition", 109. This sentiment is echoed in the first edition of *Origins*: "[The variety of mankind] are frightening precisely because of the essential equality of rights of all men and our consequent responsibility for all deeds and misdeeds committed by people different from ourselves." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1st ed., 439.

[286] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time", 346. Emphasis added.

[287] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1st ed., 439.

oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving."[288] To this end, he does offer a sort of equipment for facilitating the loving, creative (and risky) relations he advocates.

In order to affect one another, he argues, relations must be premised on a sort of sensuality, and he gives the example of breaking bread: "To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread."[289] In this instance, breaking bread, insofar as it is 'rejoicing in the force of life', could be understood as an 'effort' that comes from gratitude. To be sure Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, makes it clear that bread is a product of labor, and eating with company is, for her, simply indicative of a large joint household (and therefore apolitical): "the original joint household would seem to be indicated by the very word 'company' (com- panis) … [and] such phrases as "men who eat one bread,' 'men who have one bread and one wine.'"[290] Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that breaking bread can be more than simply confined to the private realm; bread can serve as more than mere sustenance. Consider, for example, the Eucharist or the showbread of a tabernacle (*leḥem ha-panim*, literally "the bread of faces") or a Babylonian temple before even then. Bread breaking as a ritual serves at least two purposes: on the one hand, it creates a bond between God and the world, and, on the other hand, it adds, in its way to the human artifice.[291] Outside the Judeo-Christian

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[288] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time", 336.
[289] Ibid., 311.
[290] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 35.
[291] Bread breaking is a symbol of hospitality and signals the suspension, but not the dissolution, of friend-enemy relations in the Greek and Jewish traditions, too. Against the idea of the *polis* as a political unit 'sufficiently well integrated to confront the challenge' of political division, as Armitage suggests (p. 18 above), these commensal practices suggest communal ties are the product of rituals that, like sacrifice, always have a risk of failure.

context, the Ancient Greeks considered the common mess to be an important political institution and the practice of meting out equal portions at the mess or at a sacrifice was meant to teach citizens lessons about sortition and isonomy. As Nicole Loraux argues: “To eat equal portions means to produce and to reproduce political equality; in the communal meal arises the isonomic figure of the city.”[292] Habits and rituals (that is, repetitive, shared, seemingly unpolitical activities) such as changing and eating the showbread, or sharing a cow, tie us more closely to the world, since “habit has already yielded to the temptation of turning the world into one defined by those who love it.”[293]

While Baldwin does not ultimately seek to establish a new polity or create some ritual for building common-sense, he nevertheless would pass the test set by Arendt (and Faulkner) of one who meets resentment with gratitude. That is, though he may write of grace, he practices gratitude. Just like Arendt and Faulkner’s grateful heroes, Baldwin perceives the need for action: “Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise.”[294] Baldwin takes this responsibility seriously. He does not leave it to the common things of the world to free whites from the tyranny of the mirror. Instead he disputes the reality of that mirror and urges toward ‘quest and daring and growth.’

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[292] Nicole Loraux, “La Cité comme cuisine et comme partage.”
[293] Arendt, *Origins*, 1st ed., 438. For more on how shared meals blend public and private, see Albert Hirschman, “Melding the Public and Private Spheres: Taking Commensality Seriously” in *Crossing Boundaries*.
[294] Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time”, 349.

IV. Love for the World

This image of Baldwin converges in interesting ways with Arendt's characterization of Lessing in *Men in Dark Times*. Specifically, Baldwin appears now as someone who, like Lessing, wanted to 'humanize the world with discourse.'[295] It is clear from her letter that Arendt is not convinced of this. In the essay on Lessing, Arendt contrasts Lessing's development of a political commitment to friendship with Rousseau's project of fraternité. Arendt's critique of brotherhood matches her misgivings about Baldwin's gospel of love. In fact, much of her letter to Baldwin appears to have been citations from this essay. The humanity of brotherhood is an attraction to a comforting 'warmth of human relations' in dark times, but this 'humanity of the insulted and injured has never yet survived the hour of liberation by so much as a minute.'[296] Though it's true that Baldwin evokes these warm human relations and, throughout his work, uses the language of brotherhood to make claims on white Americans, it's a mischaracterization to consider him a successor to Rousseau's fraternité. This is because that sort of politics leads to a withdrawal from the world and, consequently, a withdrawal from disputes and conflicts with others. As Arendt puts it: "We have seen what a powerful need men have, in such [dark] times, to move closer to one another, to seek in the warmth of intimacy the substitute for that light and illumination which only the public realm can cast. But this means that they avoid disputes and try as far as possible to deal only with people with whom they cannot come into conflict."[297]

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[295] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 30.
[296] Ibid., 13, 16. Compare to: "All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes."
[297] Ibid., 30.

Baldwin's love, insofar as it is opposed to breaking with the 'tyranny of the mirror' is opposed to this (grace-like) love of brotherhood. For this reason, Baldwin better approximates the model of Lessing, whose politics of friendship aims at making way for discourse. Lessing, like Baldwin, made a point of associating with others in a way that was risky and challenging: "he, who was polemical to the point of contentiousness, could no more endure loneliness than the excessive closeness of a brotherliness that obliterated all distinctions."[298]

We see an example of this non-brotherly friendship when Baldwin visits Elijah Muhammad. At dinner, Muhammad made the case for black separatism and exceptionalism. In response, Baldwin attempted to justify the love he had for a few white friends: "I certainly had no evidence to give them that would outweigh Elijah's authority or the evidence of their own lives or the reality of the streets outside. Yes, I knew two or three people, white, whom I would trust with my life, and I knew a few others, white, who were struggling as hard as they knew how, and with great effort and sweat and risk, to make the world more human. But how could I say this?"[299] Against Muhammad's claims to superiority, Baldwin might invoke brotherly love and grace. Lisa Beard argues that he does just this when he describes his friends as 'people' first, and as 'white' only afterward.[300] While that universalizing language is present, Beard elides the way that these friends have marked themselves as 'friends', either by earning Baldwin's trust or attempting to 'make the world more human' through 'great effort and sweat and risk.'

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[298] Ibid., 30.
[299] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 328.
[300] Lisa Beard, "'Flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone': James Baldwin's Racial Politics of Boundness, *Contemporary Political Theory*. January 2016.

The description of the latter group especially calls to mind those who, through friendship and love, struggle to overcome self-deceit (which is to say, the tyranny of the mirror).

Arendt gives a similar account of this privileged form of friendship in *Men in Dark Times* when she considers the friendship of a German and a Jew under the conditions of the Third Reich. It would hardly be human, she argues, for the two to have defended their friendship saying: "Are we not both human beings?"[301] If, however, the friendship succeeded in 'purity', which is to say, 'without false guilt complexes on the one side and false complexes of superiority or inferiority on the other,' then ' a bit of humanness in a world become inhuman had been achieved."[302]

V. Friendship in the Divide

The affinities between Baldwin and Lessing are illustrative of the fact that Arendt and Baldwin hold a number of aims in common. The two are committed to making a type of friendship possible that is contrasted both with camaraderie in creature comforts and with universalistic love—that is, a friendship that makes the world more human. Both thinkers hope for similar effects from this type of relation. In a more human world, people cease to deceive themselves. The Germans who 'act as though the years from 1933 to 1945 never existed,' will come to 'know precisely what it [the past] was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring.'[303] And the white Americans who 'are perpetually defending themselves against charges' which one has not made may 'face their history.'[304]Given the proximity

[301] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 23.
[302] Ibid., 23.
[303] Ibid., 19, 20.
[304] Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 722.

of their goals, it is remarkable that Arendt would be frightened of Baldwin's characterization of love. What this suggests—and perhaps what Arendt really found frightening—was that those mere, common facts of the world may ultimately have a role to play in politics after all.

These facts can act as the objects around which we quarrel and, with love, sweat, and risk, potentially around which we form genuine friendships. Such relationships can be the basis of conspiratorial politics, and the source of new forms of charisma. As such, they are indispensable for making life in stasis less bitter and more human.

Conclusion: Stasis Revisited

For those interested in racial politics in the United States, it often seems our only choices in thinking about how to negotiate the conflict are civility and the rule of law on the one hand, and flight or combat on the other. I am drawn to stasis because it grants the centrality of conflict in racial politics, while also calling attention to other options between or beyond this binary. By tracing receptions of stasis in black political thinkers from the long civil rights movement and its aftermath, I have endeavored to outline a concept for conflict that moves on from debates between rule of law and civil war conceptions in a generative way. To do so, I've reframed these oppositional perspectives in light of their similarities. Both find value in unity and consensus and see the state as the primary means for either making that unity possible or inhibiting it. I've counterposed these perspectives to a view of conflict that both traces the evasions that consensus relies on and that identifies alternative sites for negotiating identity alongside the state (but not necessarily against or in spite of it). The value of this move has been to highlight where division gets taken up as a kind of disease, and to re-evaluate it as a sign of health.[305]

The rule of law pathologizes conflict. it frames deviance as criminality or puts strict rules on contestation and protest in an effort to contain what it sees as its excesses. These rules that are meant to stabilize an identity are themselves divisive, but this

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[305] For the history of stasis as a disease, see Kostas Kalimtzis, *Aristotle on Political Enmity and Disease: An Inquiry into Stasis*..

division is denied and explained away. The civil war frame exposes this denial and re-casts the community as divided, but aspires to a genuine unity through new laws or flight to a space where new laws can be established. The hope in either case is that new rules will rid the new community of division once and for all.

By accepting division as an ordinary feature of political life and seeking to respond to it decently, without trying to eliminate it, the democratic view of stasis developed here opposes these other two perspectives. At the same time, however, we might also note that, on some level, the stasis view combines these perspectives, or tries to hold them together simultaneously. Very often, political thinkers express a commitment to some kind of national project at one moment, and then position themselves outside of that project (now diseased because divisive) moments later. Martin Delaney, for instance, was an early black nationalist who advocated emigration to Africa or Latin America and resisted black abolitionist collaboration with Harriet Beecher Stowe.[306] His aim was liberation by whatever means. We can trace a similar attitude—and the tensions and split allegiances that result—in other black political thinkers. They are present in Du Bois, Ellison, and Baldwin as I have shown here.

Some commentators explain these contradictory impulses by periodizing them. Michael Dawson, for instance, in his breakdown of black ideologies in the United States describes a 'disillusioned liberalism' that serves as a kind of waystation between liberal egalitarianism and 'other ideological positions such as nationalism, Marxism, feminism,

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[306] In a letter to Frederick Douglass, he writes "Now, I simply wish to say, that we have always fallen into great errors in efforts of this kind, going to others than the *intelligent* and *experienced* among *ourselves*; and in all due respect and deference to Mrs. Stowe, I beg leave to say, that she *knows nothing about us*, "the Free Colored people of the United States," neither does any other white person—and, consequently, can contrive no successful scheme for our elevation; it must be done by ourselves. *Frederick Douglass'* Paper, 1 April 1853.

and occasionally conservatism.'[307] We might see Du Bois as on this trajectory as he leaves the NAACP to organize with communists, and Baldwin is cast similarly as becoming more pessimistic after 1968. While there are benefits to charting developments in these thinkers' work, periodizing also obscures the tensions that sit uneasily together when interpreters resolve contradictions by deciding if an argument is more integrationist or separatist, more optimistic or pessimistic.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin each have been interpreted in these terms, but the readings offered here attempt to refuse the choice. Charisma is not a naked justification of rule, nor is it a more proper kind of performance than demagoguery; and sacrifice isn't simply a citizenly ethic, nor is it a process by which political action, for some, becomes utterly futile. To conceptualize them in this way depends, to an extent, on a pathological view of conflict in which political contests between citizens and their excluded counterparts are stabilized by proper conduct (good charisma and mutual sacrifice) or abandoned altogether (to an exceptional leader or in anti-political sociality). Even love, as we have seen, falls under this rubric: it can be an indiscriminate basis for human rights, or an exclusive warmth of intimacy that oppressed people crave in dark times. The former might be 'optimistic' about the prospect of bridging divisions, while the latter is less so, but both eschew a more combative idea of love—one that is more discriminatory, less warm, but perhaps more valuable (politically, at least) as a result.

Rather than decide between integrationist and separatist commitments, we might ask why both tendencies are often present in the same works. Perhaps the tension is so

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[307] Michael Dawson, *Black Visions*, 18.

persistent because both perspectives are correct. The state can be a vehicle for emancipation and is the instrument of oppression. The law, which is meant to exert a kind of unifying, centripetal force through equal recognition nevertheless also exerts a centrifugal force as it alienates those it disadvantages (or who might not find it suits them tomorrow). At the same time, the divisions that result from the law's often alien and alienating character, particularly when they result in ontologized minority groups, have an almost irresistible centripetal quality of their own. They imbue even the most mundane objects and events with tremendous significance, politicizing them and making them sites for something like law-making, or even insurgency. Taken together, these forces make us the bond of division.

In this way, the stasis view helps to move beyond the rule of law/civil war binary. IT does so by proposing a new set of organizing considerations—sorting theories of conflict into categories: those that take it to be destabilizing and those that see in it a different kind of stability.[308] This new binary highlights the virtues of instability for people who have been excluded from full participation in ordinary political contests. By contrast, insisting on a neat separation between the two obscures commonalities and tensions.

This becomes clear when we return to the contests between Du Bois and Garvey at the beginning of the 1920s. Both 'race men' were engaged in a war of words—each vying for support with a distinct idea of what shape black politics in the United States ought to take. Both were responding to a stasis in the United States—what Du Bois would frame as the endeavor to be both black and American without contradiction—but

[308] In chapter 1, I compared this to the concept of metastability.

both were engaged in a kind of stasis between leaders and those led as well. As we will see, the pressures and stakes of the one could have a conditioning effect on the other.

At the beginning of the decade, the NAACP was pursuing a set of legal strategies against white supremacy. In addition to seeking national anti-lynching legislation, the organization began to pursue legal defense for upstanding black citizens pursuing voting rights and fighting segregated housing. One effect of these strategies was to concentrate decision-making power in the national office. Reflecting in 1932 on centralization in the NAACP, Du Bois would remark that it was necessary, but created problems. "We suffer from the weakness of all autocracy," he wrote, which is to say that leadership was stultified by its insularity.[309] To remedy this, he suggested giving more autonomy to local branches in the hope that dues-paying members will have a greater say in guiding policy.

But Du Bois was less amenable to criticism in 1920, when the NAACP came under attack from Garvey and the UNIA for its elitism. Garvey charged that the leadership of the 'Talented Tenth'—who worked alongside whites—had led to policies that overwhelmingly benefitted black Americans of only a certain standing and failed to get at the root of anti-blackness. Instead, he favored building black enterprise and facilitating emigration to Liberia; both of which he hoped to promote with his failed shipping company, the Black Star Line. In addition to these specific policies, Garvey's Afrocentrism challenged white standards of taste and beauty. When juxtaposed with the (sometimes) pathological view of the black masses espoused by Du Bois and members of the Talented Tenth, Garvey's critiques of the NAACP were all the more compelling.

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[309] Du Bois, "What is wrong with the N.A.A.C.P.?" 18 May 1932.

This presented a problem for Du Bois. Membership in the NAACP had peaked in 1919 at around 90,000, and the 1920s would see a decline in membership, not recovering until the 1940s. By contrast, the UNIA, at its peak in the early 20s, would claim four million members worldwide, its newspaper had 200,000 subscribers, and it amassed tremendous capital for the Black Star Line. From a certain point of view, it would seem that the 'aristocracy of talent' that Du Bois had defended, after having shown some promise around the time of WWI, was coming under pressure from the demagogue he had prophesied in *Souls*.[310]

The charge of demagoguery fits Garvey well. He both served as a conduit for popular energy and spent lavishly but unwisely; though by all accounts his pageantry was unmatched, his Black Star Line was a commercial failure. But rather than chastise black Americans for getting led astray by a charlatan—as his views on demagoguery suggest he might have—Du Bois instead attempted to frame Garvey's failings as a sign of their collective nobility. In a 1923 article, titled 'Back to Africa,' Du Bois argues that Garvey fails to appreciate the value of the Talented Tenth for two reasons. First, he argues that Garvey lacks the education and 'technic of civilization' necessary to fully appreciate the task at hand. Second, he argues that, in lieu of this fuller understanding, Garvey misreads the color line in the United States in West Indian terms. By this, he means that Garvey's suspicions about whites in the NAACP and about colorism in its ranks are artifacts of prejudices that are more prevalent in Jamaica—to insist on them in a country where the

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[310] Against Washington's focus on vocational training, Du Bois warned that teachers were needed to guide action and furnish leaders: "By taking away their best equipped teachers and leaders, by slamming the door of opportunity in the faces of their bolder and brighter minds, will you make them satisfied with their lot? or will you not rather transfer their leading from the hands of men taught to think to the hands of untrained demagogues?" Du Bois, *Souls*, 71.

one drop rule defined racial categories, he charged, was in “the poorest possible taste.”[311] Du Bois grounds Garvey’s inaptitude for leadership in his lack of education and his being a foreigner (invoking a certain nativism)—both make Garvey naïve, he says.

By relating these two qualities, he can then dismiss the importance of Garvey’s following by describing the UNIA as mainly composed of enthusiastic immigrants from the Caribbean, whom he casts as peasants sharing in Garvey’s prejudices.[312] Moreover, by distancing black Americans from the UNIA, Du Bois invites his readers to join him in his judgments by painting a flattering picture in which they have already done so. Just as the public turned on Washington, he claims, so too have they scrutinized Garvey and found him wanting. “It is no ordinary tribute to American Negro poise and common sense, and ability to choose and reject leadership,” he says, “that neither of these programs has been able to hold them.”[313] This account of Garvey’s rejection is more wishful thinking than fact, since Garvey’s popularity had suffered only somewhat in the cities, while membership was still high, and the UNIA drew most of its members, not from immigrants, but from rural black southerners.[314]

While Du Bois framed Garvey and his support as an external threat to racial progress in the US by claiming the ‘technic of civilization’ not only for a Talented Tenth, but for black Americans generally, Garvey responded with standards of authenticity of his own. In his almost immediate response, Garvey objected to Du Bois’s attacks on his lack of education and asked how much better could his rival’s education have been if he

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[311] Du Bois, “Marcus Garvey,” 268.
[312] The move also allows him to offer an explanation for the charge of colorism, without deigning to respond to it.
[313] Ibid., 274.
[314] See: Mary Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, chapter 1.

cannot develop an organization as large as the UNIA. This critique of elitism, however, is bound up with charges of self-hatred. In the article, Garvey's emphasis shifts from colorism in the NAACP to accusations of collaboration with white supremacists—intimating Du Bois is a traitor to his race.[315] Like Du Bois', Garvey's goal is to stabilize support. Garvey does it by calling into question the support of well-to-do and lighter skinned blacks (from the US and abroad).

As I suggested at the end of chapter 2, this exchange between Du Bois and Garvey opens a space for a more popular and contestatory politics than is suggested by the closures implied by each attack. (Who can really understand the American color line? Who is authentically black?). This is a useful challenge to readings that would simply dismiss someone like Garvey as a foolish at best (and potentially dangerous) charismatic strong man—overlooking the democratic potential in his populism. But to celebrate the democratic potential in this war of words should not lead us to overly romanticize their contest. Struggling against one another, they open a space for those who would have had less agency otherwise, but it's not a space of unlimited potential. For instance, both figures' commitments entail a reliance on the patriarchal household—for Du Bois it is a vehicle of civilization, and for Garvey, it guarantees the preservation of the race. This shared commitment surfaces again when the drama is replayed in the 60s, when Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are engaged in their own war of words—both presenting women as in need of protection and possessing an innate virtue owing to their

[315] He was perhaps motivated to make this claim after himself getting roundly criticized for meeting with the head of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922.

femininity.[316] In both cases, the tumult that, from a stasis perspective, should undo the alienating power of the law, reaffirms an exclusion.

This is not to say that, in lieu of these contests, turning to the law or some other more stabilizing force would be preferable, but to admit that the terms in which struggles are waged can themselves generate exclusions and impasses—stasis that is all rest, no motion. This is perhaps why federalism, which aims to harness the vitality of contestation, can result in moribund politics.

The fact that tumultuous politics can be empowering for some while leaving others sidelined does not undermine what is useful in a stasis perspective; rather it highlights how the centripetal force that binds us in conflict does not work automatically. Conditions for activating that force may be more favorable for some than for others—still, these conditions are never overdetermined. As an examination of Du Bois's strategies for narration suggests, who is sidelined, to a significant extent, is determined by how politics gets narrated. When Zora Neale Hurston parodied masculine accounts of the Mosaic theme in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, she (cunningly) undermined the romantic narratives of both Du Bois and Garvey. We might also find that a space for cunning and conspiratorial politics is opened when King defends a nonviolence that Malcolm X attacks as emasculating.[317]

The wile involved in reframing these narratives and in contesting exclusion shows the limitations of leaders' claims to offering group-expression or to promoting agapic

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[316] The comparisons between the two duos are perhaps somewhat overdrawn, but it is significant that King embodies the kind of Christian leadership that Du Bois called for, while Malcolm X traces his politics, in part, to his childhood, when his father set up UNIA divisions in the Midwest.

[317] This is the argument that Shatema Threadcraft and Brandon Terry make in "Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice" in *To Shape a New World*, 205-235.

love that is extended equally and unconditionally. Against such claims, a stasis view recommends alternate practices for bringing people together—practices that I find in Baldwin's account of love, but that were already implied in Elizabeth Eckford's commitment to stay with her peers (which, though it may have a transformative effect, is not the same as a professed commitment to a nation). Such practices are anchored in principles of equality, but they are alert to the way antagonisms condition the shape our politics must take in the here and now.

To dwell on these antagonisms and the inevitability of division—which is to say, to adopt the lens of stasis—is not to romanticize conflict for its own sake, nor to temper the scope of political aspiration. Rather, adopting this frame means taking stock of the political dilemmas we face and responding to them today in order to make possible a more decent politics tomorrow.

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