Authoring Otherwise: Ambivalence and Imagination in African American Democratic Thought

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Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Acknowledgments 5

Introduction: Authoring Otherwise 6

1. Assembling Reception: Anna Julia Cooper's Politics of Democratic Openness 32

2. James Weldon Johnson's Democracy Rag 58

3. Writing Human and Revolution in W.E.B. Du Bois's Dark Princess 87

Conclusion 113

Bibliography 120

Abstract

This dissertation concerns the work of democrats in undemocratic times, tracing an understudied strand of African American democratic thought through the impasse of the Jim Crow era. As political theorists in recent years have sought to move beyond a "liberal consensus" picture of American political development, they have often approached African American political thought through the framework of a politics of recognition, emphasizing the ways thinkers in this broad tradition have imagined, and strove toward, some future democratic community with presently-racist white citizens. I argue that African American democratic thought during times of impasse cannot be reduced to this pursuit, which ignores the often deeply, and generatively, *ambivalent* theorizing in this tradition about the prospects of democratic community with Jim Crow whites, as well as deep uncertainties as to what terms of association might characterize it. In the absence of recognition, I argue, Black thinkers pursued a multifaceted strategy of "opacity," characterized by efforts to render uncertain white visions of Blackness and the terms of racial hierarchy in part constructed through that imaginary. By rendering perceptions across the color line opaque, they opened room for imagining new terms of relation in the (ambivalent) present, which could not be reduced to aspirations of some future democratic community. In tracing this history, I focus on the works of Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). My readings span the years 1892 to 1928, and engage the segregated New Woman movement of the late 19th century, the dominative listening practices of whites during the ragtime era, and the capitalist and colonial threats to (aesthetic and political) self-determination during the Harlem Renaissance. I center on three key themes, each of them rendered in various ways opaque: the meanings of "assembly" in Cooper's *A Voice from the South* and Wells' pamphlet *Southern Horrors*, both published in 1892; Johnson's politics of "fugitivity" in his 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and later writings on music; and W.E.B. Du Bois' anticolonial, epistolary refiguring of the "human" in his 1928 *Dark Princess: A Romance*.

Their thought offers broader lessons for the fate of democratic thought amid exclusion and domination, as well as conceptual resources for a contemporary impasse in American politics defined in many respects by Jim Crow's echoes.

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Introduction:

Authoring Otherwise

The narrator of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, authors his recollections in the aftermath of the betrayal of his democratic hopes. He dwells in the realization that he was all along made invisible to his white would-be comrades by a "peculiar disposition of the eyes," refusing to see him as, among other things, an equal member of their political community (3).[1] He writes, literally, from the underground: in "a building strictly rented to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (6), and he finds there a place of refuge—from the white-led democratic movement of which he was a part (the "Brotherhood") which sought to sacrifice Black interests for collective gain; and from Black political nationalists who think him a traitor and reject his multiracial democratic commitments. Between these two poles, he describes his time underground as a "hibernation," "a covert preparation for a more overt action" toward, perhaps, a democratic future (13). The novel is in part a meditation on this interval, an indeterminate period between Reconstruction's democratic promise (the birthdate, perhaps, of the room he now lives in) and before the arrival of a democracy in which all "become one, and yet many" (577). But what politics is left for the "invisible" democrat without political community? Far from a mere prelude to a more spectacular, transformative moment—the "overt action" he predicts upon his departure—the narrator points in this passage to an often-overlooked, but generative tradition of democratic ambivalence: working in the space between a democratic community which is not yet, and the demands of freedom in its absence.

Ellison's thoughts can be read as a commentary on broader intellectual currents among African American authors and activists of the Jim Crow period, between Reconstruction's democratic moment and the mass mobilizations of the Civil Rights movement (Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published the same year *Brown v. Board* began arguments at the Supreme

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[1] All in-text citations in this chapter refer to *Invisible Man* unless otherwise indicated.

Court). This was an era of impasse, in many ways, of the "waiting" Anna Julia Cooper sardonically described in 1892 and which Martin Luther King, Jr. rejected from a Birmingham jail in 1963. Drawing on Ellison, Danielle Allen (2005) describes a Jim Crow regime of "invisible citizenship," relations of racial domination which negate the interests of African Americans while also denying the role of their sacrifice in structuring a shared social and political world. And in order to maintain a fictive consistency between this denial and their supposedly democratic moral and political commitments, Ellison elsewhere argues, white citizens employ a racist imaginary which precludes civic equality in the first place (Ellison 2011a, 28).

African American democratic thought throughout the period engaged this impasse, contributing to what Cornel West calls Black "traditions of response" to white "challenges to self-definition and self-determination" (West 1982, 71). These traditions have involved, respectively, efforts to "define who and what one is" against harmful white images of Blackness (West 1982, 22) and, often in light of that self-definition, to reconstruct American democratic community—namely, by dismantling existing, white supremacist visions of "the people" and imagining forms of association that could characterize a more equal public life.[2] Often implicit in this formulation of "response" are two distinct moments: an effort of self-definition and self-determination within an undemocratic present, and what Melvin Rogers (2012), in his reading of W.E.B. Du Bois' aesthetic politics calls an "aspirational" politics of peoplehood which might characterize some future democratic community. The latter has received far more attention from democratic theorists, but in what follows, I argue in conversation with Ellison for the importance of recognizing the former as a site of democratic theorizing.

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[2] Here and in what follows, I use the terms democratic "community" and "peoplehood" more or less interchangeably to indicate a self-authorizing, world-making, collective agent. I have opted to include this language of community in order to indicate a broader meaning than is often assigned to ideas of peoplehood, the latter of which is often bound to discussions of constitution-making. As will become clear in the next section, I proceed from the assumption that the world-making power of the people is closely intertwined with its authorizing power, even as they are often separated in the literature. Rodrigo Cordero (2019) offers a nice overview of, and interesting responses to, this problem.

Rejecting an older (although still common) "liberal consensus" in interpreting American democratic politics and thought, in recent years readers from multiple disciplines and theoretical perspectives have studied the ways intellectuals and movements at the margins contest and reconstruct prevailing, dominative formations of democratic community (e.g. Allen 2004, Balfour 2011, Beltran 2010, Frank 2010, Marshall 2012, Morone 1998, Rogers 2012 and 2014, Wald 1995, introduction and chapter 3, Zamalin 2015). These accounts join a broader "aesthetic turn" in political theory, which has likewise rejected familiar liberal frameworks (in this case, of public reason), exploring democratic community's construction as an intersubjective, world-making process (see generally Kompridis 2014). Exclusion and domination, in the latter perspective, are in part constituted by what is/not shared, how subjects shape each others' perceptions or are prevented from doing so (Ferguson 2012). Returning to Allen, "invisibility" has meant both a particular, dominative relation between white and black subjects, as well as narratives of what constitutes the broader collective agent those relations express. White visions of democratic community gain their coherence from their deployment of an objectified, what Toni Morrison (1993) calls an "Africanist" presence, through which they construct their identity as Americans and the world they inhabit. But "the people" is a flexible entity which only persists through its iteration; because no one representation is ever identical to the dynamic, plural people as a whole, narratives of peoplehood are always haunted by their contestability (Frank 2010, 3, Wald 1995, 10; Bhabha 1994, ch. 8). Readers of the history of African American democratic thought, then, have emphasized the de- and reconstructing narratives of political peoplehood, insurgent rearticulations of democratic community which enact their own authority, "taking" a place in society they were denied (Honig 2001, 8).

But the Invisible Man's reflections do not, arguably, take place in a moment of the people's reconstruction nor, until the novel's closing scene, in the key of the aspirational appeal. The stage Ellison has chosen is that of a present, uncertain, subterranean space of reflection. The Invisible Man lives in a "border" land, he tells his readers, within a building which has

forgotten its foundation, yet containing the brightest room in the city. Rather than imagining a future recognition, he in fact recounts his path to affirming his invisibility, writing in the book's opening pages that he "did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (7). With his democratic hopes violently rejected, the narrator is also in a position to reject the white-dominated political community which refuses to see him.[3] Although by the end of *Invisible Man* the narrator affirms, as does Ellison throughout his career, the prospects of a future, multiracial democracy, the politics of invisibility cannot be reduced to that aspiration. Invisibility rather merges with what Daphne Brooks (2006) in her history of African American performance calls "opacity," the efforts of self-realization which take place in the absence of recognition, and are not (yet) understandable within the terms of an existing racial regime.

In what follows, I distinguish this more ambivalent, uncertain orientation toward democratic community from more familiar histories of traditions of response in African American democratic thought. In centering their attention on the aspirational character of these works, theorists and historians tend to miss the present-oriented character of this thought, and risk under-theorizing what in fact amounts, as Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best note, to the "master trope of black political discourse": "the interval between the no longer and the not yet, between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance" (Hartman and Best 2005, 3).

The thought and writings of three authors in particular shape my account: Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). The works I study span the years 1892 to 1928, from Cooper's involvement in debates over the segregated, late 19th century New Woman movement in her collection of essays, *A Voice from the South*; to Johnson's interventions into debates over race and ragtime in the first decades of the twentieth century, centering on his 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; to Du Bois's contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and efforts to imagine a future international,

[3] What Moten and Harney call a "refusal of what was has been refused" (Moten and Harney 2013, 96).

anticolonial movement in his novel *Dark Princess*. All three were enormously influential thinkers and activists, and they share extensive institutional and intertextual relationships. But beyond this, Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois each thought deeply on the possibilities of aesthetic expression as a means of shaping democratic community, and in different ways, understood writing as a site of politics in its own right complementing their more formal, organizational work. Their works are all the more interesting because they each carried a commitment to engaging across the color line alongside a productive ambivalence about its possibilities. Their doubts about such engagement in the present, and the ways they understood their task as democrats amid oppression, offers a powerful reconceptualization of a democratic politics of response.

Reading Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois' Jim Crow-era works remains relevant for a moment which has seen the resurgence of the term to describe contemporary racial politics: phrases like "Jim Crow 2.0," the "Second Nadir," "James Crow" and, most famously, Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," signal the challenges of backlash and impasse after the Civil Rights movement's legal reforms, sometimes through new practices, but often (especially in the realm of voting rights) through the very same which preceded the landmark legislation of 1964/5. While there are intense debates today about the possibility of democracy in light of this damning continuity, the imaginative resources the history I engage offers requires readers to maintain something like what Gloria Anzaldua calls a "tolerance for ambiguity." Tracing the ambivalent themes of Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois requires the reader to resist an impulse not only to reduce their works to a means to some future politics, but also to ignore the seemingly contradictory democratic facets of their writings in favor of their more pessimistic elements. Ambivalence as I understand it is just that: an uncertain *double* orientation to democratic community rather than a claim as to its enduring, even foundational character.

Stephen Marshall wrote of an unresolved tension in James Baldwin's thought between possibility and despair, calling in his powerful 2012 reflections on the murder of Trayvon Martin

for theorists to proceed from Baldwin's "ambivalence" to a critical engagement with the "political afterlife of slavery" (Marshall 2012). Since then, several political theorists have considered the meaning of ambivalence for questions of race and democratic theory, with a particular emphasis on the politics of mourning (e.g. Menzel 2019, McIvor 2016, Snyder 2018). Although I do not extensively engage the politics of mourning here, it is nevertheless true the "ambivalence" these authors explore is largely, I think, compatible with my effort to trace these concerns as part of a broader tradition in African American democratic thought. David McIvor, for instance, takes a psychoanalytic perspective on the concept, and describes a productive tension between "agonistic" and idealized "consensualist" visions of mourning. These contrasting approaches define the mourner's relation to political community: either "selective forgetting in the name of social cohesion" or "the insistence on remembrance in the name of social contestation" (McIvor 2016, 12). In my conclusion, I will return to these themes through the work of Claudia Rankine.

My discussion begins by engaging Rogers' key concept of an "aspirational" politics of peoplehood. I place that work in conversation with the Black feminist and educator Anna Julia Cooper's important 1892 collection, *A Voice from the South*, revealing problems a politics of democratic ambivalence can answer. On the one hand, Cooper's writing contains, as did Ellison's decades later, in fact two contradictory characterizations of her audience: a receptive group with democratic sympathies who might be persuaded by her appeal; and an unreasoning audience seemingly incapable, in the present, of being shifted in any way. Only the first, she seems to suggest, is the possible target of the appeals Rogers reads in Du Bois. Second, and proceeding from this problem, sole attention to the aspirational character of democratic appeals threatens to miss their present-oriented democratic possibilities. In section II, I return to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as well as his early essays, to imagine what ambivalence might mean in light of Cooper's critiques. Finally, in section III, I consider the relationship between invisibility and Daphne Brooks' concept of "opacity." Authors in this tradition, like (as I argue) Ellison's

narrator, answer misrecognition with a politics of writing that frustrates its terms, authoring "opaque" scenes that refuse definition even as they invite the improvisation of new meanings.

I.

Efforts to counter harmful white representation are an enduring concern of African American political and cultural thought, as Henry Louis Gates writes, "probably since that dreadful day in 1619 when the first boatload of us disembarked in Virginia" (Gates 1988, 131). The fall of Reconstruction in 1876, which had facilitated imperfect but more equal elections and political representation, was accompanied both by the rise of Jim Crow and, conversely, a dramatic growth in African American literary production (Gates 1988, 131; Hale 1998, ch. 1). Throughout this period, a politics of cultural production at times stood in for the lost democratic possibilities of formal representation (see Iton 2008).[4] Intellectuals and movements offered counter-narrations of nation, deforming white-authored visions of race, and constructing self-determined public and counterpublic identities (see Baker 2013, 56-7; Gates 1985, 11; Singh 2004, 60-66). Among other things, the task before them concerned reshaping the terms of association across the color line when there existed "almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other" (Du Bois 1997, 70).

Projects of representation and counter-narration concerned a diverse host of African American intellectuals, organizations, and ideologies, from African American feminists and clubwomen like Anna Julia Cooper and F.E.W. Harper, to Booker T. Washington's assimilationist politics, to Marcus Garvey's renaissance nationalism. Late 19th and early 20th century movements offered contrasting articulations of the "New Negro," a figure in contrast both to the "Old" subject of slavery as well as the white visions of blackness which served to perpetuate racial domination after emancipation (Gaines 1996, 69; Gates 1988, 143; Ross 2013,

[4] This focus on aesthetic production is not specific to the Jim Crow period. See Iton 2008.

152). During this period, aesthetic work became a means, for many authors and artists, of redefining an identity divided by what Du Bois called the "double consciousness" of understanding oneself as both African and (a white-defined) American; and securing through self-determining expression the acknowledgment of equal humanity from a hostile white audience (see e.g. Lebron 2017, 46, and chapter 2 generally; Wald 1995, ch. 3). The most famous formulation of the foregoing is Alain Locke's 1925 introductory essay to the *The New Negro*, a collection of essays, stories, and poems he edited and which serves as a defining statement of the Harlem Renaissance. Seizing an affirmative, creative self-determination of black identity, he argued, would reformulate harmful, disempowering self-understandings inherited from slavery, as well as achieve a form of "cultural recognition" from the white public (Locke 2014, 15). Locke's use of the term "recognition" should not, on the other hand, be taken to suggest an uncritical pursuit of white approval or inclusion within an unjust system. Authors found in aesthetic work the possibility of renarrating race and nation (e.g. Wald 1995, ch. 3), and shaping white self-perception and civic habits in light of their disclosure.

While the rhetorical aspects of these appeals have demanded more attention from democratic theorists (e.g. Allen 2004, Bennett 2016, Marshall 2011, Menzel 2019), authors also found tensions between the rhetorical necessity of meeting audiences "where they are" and their freedom as writers. For those thinkers who sought to craft visions of democratic community across the color line, the politics contained two contradictory moments: that concerning a present, hostile, and segregated public which refuses democratic appeals; and that of what Melvin Rogers (2012) calls an "aspirational," future public animated by democratic citizenship, which *would* accept the present appeals, but is nowhere to be found. While they often characterize the same texts, I want to suggest that overemphasis on the rhetorical tasks of bringing about an aspirational peoplehood can miss other, crucial interpretive possibilities, and ultimately, key contributions of African American democratic thought to the politics of ambivalence and impasse. Briefly, I want to turn to Rogers' recent reading of Du Bois' rhetorical

strategies in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which offers what I take to be the most compelling version of the interpretive project I am describing.

Rogers reads Du Bois' 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* as a democratic, rhetorical project, written to redescribe the present order of peoplehood defining American citizenship, articulating the world of what Ranciere dubs the "part that has no part," and to assert what he calls an "aspirational account" of a more democratic community across the color line. Du Bois' rhetoric is meant to reshape white readers' perceptions and self-understandings, arriving at "a common horizon for author and reader from which shared emotional judgments regarding racial inequality might be reached" (Rogers 2012, 189). *Souls* does so in an ethical and a political sense, corresponding to African Americans' unequal "*political standing* as a rights-bearing member of the polity"; and (2) the "*ethical life* of the community" which refuses to acknowledge black lives (Rogers 2012, 192). Du Bois writes to establish "shared judgments" on the latter by disclosing the "inner lives" made invisible by the Veil of the color line: his rhetorical appeal invites feelings of sympathy for the strivings of African Americans, in particular the exemplars Du Bois depicts—Josie, John Jones, and Alexander Crummell, among others—as well as shame for the horrific moral, democratic failings of which white Americans and their institutions are guilty (Rogers 2012, 199). Between their sympathy and shame, these shared judgments are meant to move readers toward an expanded view of the people in line with a future, at this point aspirational, vision (Rogers 2012, 198-201).

Although he notes that Du Bois is "sensitive to a view of the artist whose vision of beauty stands above and is unconditioned by the truth of public atrocities," Rogers reads *Souls* primarily as a "vehicle for persuasion" (Rogers 2012, 195). The aspirational citizen will be part of a just "we," no longer what Mills (2014) describes as an herrenvolk democracy but a democratic community in which, as Du Bois famously writes, it is "possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (qtd. in Rogers 2012, 192). As Jason Frank and others

have noted, such "constituent moments" resemble a kind of rupture, creating, in their performance, the very terms of their comprehensibility, where such claims to shared community were not accepted or understood prior (Frank 2010, 8). Similarly, the reader's reception of present racial injustice in *Souls* is meant to enact the sort of subjectivity which should characterize citizens in its democratic, aspirational vision. In sum, readers develop a sympathetic understanding, at some level at least, of the "inner lives" made invisible behind the veil; feel genuine shame for the democratic failings which have harmed the latter; and in fact share a common political horizon with Du Bois which, if I correctly understand Rogers' reading, includes their desire for *Souls*' aspirational vision.

One of the interesting implications of this reading is that Du Bois writes in effect to two different audiences across the color line: the present readers of the descriptive account, who express harmful visions of black identity, participate in often violent relations of domination, and whose own identity hinges on each; and the citizen who is not only persuadable, but—at some point in reading—in fact *persuaded*: the sympathizing citizen with sincere democratic faith, who reads (for instance) Crummell's story with feelings of sympathy and shame. While the former is certainly implied by Du Bois' rhetorical project, the ultimate judges of the work, if his appeal is successful, are those who come to share a "common horizon." Rogers does not ignore the inevitable uncertainty any such claim faces, but he characterizes it as a democratic "*leap of faith*" on Du Bois' part (my emphasis, Rogers 2012, 202).

To be sure, Rogers is getting at an important facet of Du Bois' democratic politics in writing, which is, he rightly notes, fairly explicit in his 1926 "Criteria of Negro Art" (although it is worth asking whether the latter can fully account for his 1903 work). But is something lost in reading *Souls* through its aspirational possibilities, and not the difficulties bridged, perhaps overlooked, through the aforementioned language of a leap of faith? Are there costs to his rhetorical appeal? In the latter case, can Du Bois know in advance that the "common horizon" he crafts will mean the same thing to his black and white readers, as well as the various ideological

divisions within each group? And what does that common understanding consist of in the several moments, most notably the text's musical moments, which exceed writing's capacity to represent?

Reading African American traditions of response through this lens, of the formation of alternative visions of black identity and democratic community specifically toward the constitution of some union across the color line, can also miss a profound ambiguity—in productive tension, in fact, with these aspirational moments—which characterizes their accounts. The juncture between description and the deferred promise of democracy is also a site of uncertainty, reluctance, even dread. In her reflections on Du Bois' elegy for the passing of his infant son, for instance, Annie Menzel contrasts Rogers' picture with what she calls a "legacy of black maternal ambivalence under enslavement" in works by Harriet Jacobs and Du Bois' contemporary Mary Church Terrell (Menzel 2019, 45). While he reflects on the inspiration he finds in his son's gaze which knows no racial categories,[5] the elegy then describes his tortured reaction to his son's passing: an "awful gladness," both grief and a "a painfully educated anticipation of violence that defies assimilability across the color-line." Menzel argues that whereas "the chapter's normalizing rhetoric emphasizes the convergences between Du Bois's experiences and affects and the white reader's own, this passage reveals the abyss at which that shared horizon stops— or, at least, where it requires a far more arduous exercise of political imagination" (Menzel 2019, 44).

The ambivalence Menzel reads in Du Bois' chapter reflects a broader facet of African American democratic traditions of response. Attention to democratic ambivalence addresses three gaps in readings of that response through the lens of constituent politics. First, an aspirational politics of peoplehood cannot fully explain the meaning of expression within the context of an audience not yet persuaded, or not yet cultivated in the democratic habits Rogers

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[5] He also reflects on his son's features—olive skin, golden hair, blue and brown eyes—as the promise of a future "hybridity," an observation Menzel notes has also been interpreted as a problematic colorism (Menzel 2019, 42-3).

(and Du Bois) has in mind. If Du Bois' effort is a "leap of faith," it is because he cannot ignore the preexisting and persisting character of his audience. Anna Julia Cooper reflects on this limitation when she argues that the "Southern white man['s]" reception is often overdetermined by "fear of Negro political domination" and "the future horror of being lost as a race." These delusions make him violent and "monomaniacal" to the point that, "In the face of this feeling he would not admit he was convinced of the axioms of Geometry." Cooper writes this *alongside* her aspirational appeals to reform these same citizens "by the careful and cautious injection of cold facts and by the presentation of well selected object lessons…" (Cooper 1998, 156). Later, she compares the white citizen to

> the poor sea-sick wretch who, even on land after the voyage, is nauseated by the sight of clear spring water. In vain you show the unreason of the feeling. This, you explain, is a different time, a different place, a different stage of progress in the circulation of waters. That was salt, this is fresh, and so on. You might as well be presenting syllogisms to Aetna….And so your rhetoric cannot annihilate the association of ideas. He feels; *you know*. But he will outgrow his feeling,—and you are content to wait" (Cooper 1998, 163).

In each of these passages, Cooper expresses skepticism as to the possibilities of appealing to white readers in the present, even as she also maintains a belief in the possibility, even inevitability, of their understanding in the future. That faith cannot determine the conditions of writing *now*, in which she has to confront white citizens seeking to maintain a citizenship of domination and invisibility.

The break between these two moments yields the complex position she expresses in the opening lines of her 1892 *A Voice from the South*. Writing anonymously and representatively as "A Black Woman of the South," she describes the Black Woman as simultaneously a "mute and voiceless note" in "the clash and clatter of our American Conflict," while *also* describing her own work of representation as that "little Voice which *has been added* to the already full chorus" (my emphasis, Cooper 1998, 51). I take this apparent contradiction to describe, in fact, the

predicament of writing for Cooper and the other authors in the tradition I trace. Her metaphor of voice and silence map onto Allen's politics of sovereignty and invisibility: her democratic act in writing is a priori uncounted insofar as it proceeds from one denied standing within a present, Jim Crow system of law and custom. The (future) political aesthetic possibilities of her work which "has been added" alternate with the (present) dominative order facing *Voice*'s voice.

Cooper's ambivalence points toward a second facet of the politics I trace. At times, a focus on the rhetorical, political aesthetic dimensions of African American democratic thought risks overemphasizing its democratic, freedom-*enabling* character over the important question of what was free and democratic for these authors about writing itself. This is an understandable focus, of course: first, because the former is so often an explicit aim of the authors and works political theorists study; and second, because part of what makes these works "democratic" is their rhetorical engagement with readers on both sides of the color line. In this sense, the political aesthetic appeal simply *is* the democratic character of their writings, whatever other qualities their works may have. This interpretation becomes problematic when it flattens the democratic meanings of writing itself, equating them with its consequences. Writing becomes a stage on the road to some *other* politics, and/or it functions as a vehicle for appeals which, simply for reasons of historical circumstance, have been delivered in writing.

But as I suggest in the next sections, expression can be a source of democratic freedom even in democracy's absence. African American authors throughout this period turned to writing amid other activities of direct engagement; their works at times eschew the terms of legibility, certainly to their white readers but also to some black readers, constructing undetermined and indeterminate spaces of representation which nevertheless still *talk*. These aporetic appeals do not create the sorts of democratic habits or egalitarian concern which occupy most democratic theorists, but they are engagements which simultaneously refuse to iterate white fictions on the one hand, or to offer something which might be warped through their interpretive practices on the other.

Finally, a third, by now familiar, tension surrounding rearticulations of democratic community concerns the injustice of its present basis. I referenced earlier what Morrison terms the "Africanist presence" in American literature: the construction of blackness in the white imagination has served as a means of "talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (Morrison 2007, 7). White authors narrated self and nation through and against this Africanist presence, which as Cooper noted, was always a form of self-disclosure parading as observation (Cooper 1998, 155). Saidiya Hartman argues that American liberal individuality finds its basis in the property of personhood and in persons as property, and "[i]f white independence, freedom, and equality were purchased with slave labor, then what possibilities or opportunities exist for the black captive vessel of white ideality?" (Hartman 1997, 62).[6] Hartman's influential critique calls to question hopes of a shift in the beliefs and habits of white citizens, including the appeals to sympathy and shame, for instance, which Rogers reads in Du Bois. For Hartman, such claims are vulnerable to the white audience's existing possessive orientation toward blackness. The "projection of oneself into another" entailed in the perspective-taking in which Rogers finds promise can also reproduce the very relations of power Du Bois's rhetorical strategy seeks to dismantle. This is because the white reader has only extended feeling toward the experiences of black persons by displacing the latter in the act of imagining. While this may be true of perspective-taking generally, the stakes of this displacement are shaped by the existing relations of domination it reperforms (Hartman 1997, 19).

None of which is to say such appeals are impossible. Rather, it is to highlight the dilemmas and uncertainties pervading the act of writing as something free and, perhaps, democratic in a period that is not. A double commitment to expressive freedom in the present and(/or) as a means to democratic union in the future meets, on the other hand, the dangers

[6] Stephen Marshall (2012) also helpfully draws a connection between Morrison's discussion and Hartman.

and difficulties of association with whites in the future who refuse to reform in the present. The interpretive task is to attend to the ways democratic thought is torn between two moments, precluding, I think, any clear-cut appeal to feeling or principle.

II.

Ellison's democratic ambivalence gains its fullest expression in his discussion of the Invisible Man's involvement with, and eventual betrayal by, the "Brotherhood," an organization which broadly stands in for American democracy in the novel.[7] *Invisible Man* is written as a memoir, beginning with the narrator's expulsion from a southern college for a misadventure with a white trustee, to various efforts to find work in New York, where he becomes the Harlem representative for a social democratic organization called the Brotherhood, and finally to what he calls his "hibernation" underground, where he authors his recollections. His association with the organization begins when, walking in Harlem, he comes across the forceful eviction of an elderly couple and a crowd of Black residents defending them. Their possessions strewn on the sidewalk reveal to him a collective history, from the husband's free papers to a newspaper clipping of Marcus Garvey's deportation, and he is moved to speak before the crowd on their behalf. Impressed by his oratory and effect on those assembled, a recruiter from the Brotherhood pursues him, and offers to place him as their representative and lead organizer of their Harlem chapter. He is at first reluctant, but finally joins with the democratic hope that "At least here was a chance to speak" (308).

The Brotherhood is, ostensibly, committed to a future, multiracial democracy, and the Invisible Man's complicated hopes for his role in the organization reflect that vision. Early in his time with the organization, he reflects that

> Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which, if one lived long enough and worked hard enough, could lead to

[7] While the Brotherhood is at times taken as some version of the American Communist Party with which he was at one point associated, Ellison later rejected this equation. See 2011c, 279.

> the highest possible rewards. Here was a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of thow the country, the world, really operated (355).

Yet the Brotherhood's apparent commitment to a democratic future is realized largely at his and his constituents' expense. "Everywhere I've turned," he later explains, "somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only *they* were the ones who benefited" (505). At the same time as they seem to struggle for a democratic future, the democracy they put into practice is one that sacrifices the interests, and even the lives, of Black citizens, culminating in his eventual realization that the Brotherhood intends in fact to *worsen* conditions in Harlem in order to accelerate its discontent.

It is his time in the Brotherhood which makes the narrator recognize his invisibility. Upon joining, the organization's leadership erases his identity: they choose a new name for him, and force him to move out of Harlem, closer to downtown (309). More than this, they consistently speak of him in terms of his "use" for advancing a history he does not seem to determine, based on its white executive committee's mysterious calculations of the collective good. He often finds his work in the Brotherhood requires him to ignore his own judgment, and he is repeatedly criticized for what the organization's leadership perceives as his divisive attention to race. As a result, he describes after an early speech that his words on behalf of the organization feel like "the expression of someone else" (353). While he becomes a Brother, his comrades only accept his fraternity to the extent to which he differentiates himself from his Black identity and the community he represents. His community's history, interests, and the identities he shares with them, are repeatedly disavowed as threatening to the organization's solidarity. The Brotherhood member who recruits the narrator explains this philosophy early on, telling him that the old couple he witnessed being evicted can't be the focus of his organizing efforts: "they're already dead, defunct. History has passed them by....like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit" (291). Later on, he is told to keep hidden a

chain link gifted by an older Black member, Brother Tarp, from his nineteen years in a chain gang, in case it might "dramatize our differences" (392).

The narrator's participation in democratic "Brotherhood" is therefore contingent on the erasure of his, and his community's, specific claims, while the Brotherhood actively builds its democratic hopes upon the latter's sacrifice. Allen argues that the basis of this "invisible citizenship" is a denial of reciprocity, and therefore an absence of trust: sacrifice is demanded of Black citizens absent their consent, acknowledgment of their sacrifice, or equality of sacrifice in the long term (Allen 2004, 110). The Jim Crow racial polity relied on domination, not exclusion, in fact requiring a citizenship of sacrifice and "acquiescence" on the part of Black Americans. The narrator's recognition of his invisible citizenship, amid his realization of the Brotherhood's betrayal, leads him to leave the organization and, pursued by a group of white men during a clash in Harlem, to escape into the underground from which he writes.

But as I noted earlier, the Invisible Man's flight is not total, even underground. He cannot affirm the Brotherhood's ideas of democratic progress which render him a means, and he has refused to sacrifice further as an "invisible citizen"; but neither, as he notes, does he accept the separation championed by his Black nationalist opponent, "Ras the Exhorter" (Ras, *race, raza*). What he is left with is an indeterminate present, what he calls a "hibernation," "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). *Invisible Man* is, as Ellison later said, "a memoir written from underground," and it is through that "act of writing and thinking" that the narrator can eventually emerge from his hole (Ellison 2011c, 178-9). In other words, before he can affirm, as he finally does in the book's Epilogue, an aspirational democratic vision, he needs to dwell, as Moten emphasizes, "in the break." And as he notes in the novel's often-quoted Prologue, that dwelling is perhaps first and foremost a means of affirming the possibilities of his invisibility. Where the Brotherhood had previously spoken of its efforts to move "history" forward, he now finds invisibility gives him

> a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat....Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around (8; see Weheliye 2005, 75ff.)

The narrator authors his reflections within the space of that break. Living in the brightest room of New York, wired with 1,369 light bulbs, he "illuminate[s] the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa" (13). Light, or truth, "confirms my reality, gives birth to my form" (6). His pursuit of the truth of his condition is also, literally, a self-authoring: he authors his memoirs within this interval, which he understands as a creative act akin to (or even, exactly like) "mak[ing] music of invisibility" (14).

By the novel's Epilogue, the Invisible Man prepares to "shake off the old skin and come up for breath," to leave his hole (580). He has committed himself to "action," although still invisible, and as Allen notes, he has formulated a democratic theory of what just sacrifice *could* mean in a society characterized by reciprocity (Allen 2004, 105-7). But the dwelling which leads to those conclusions is no simple means to an end. In Ellison's famous 1964 exchange with the critic Irving Howe, he objects to an evaluation of his novel, and by extension the narrator's reflections, in terms of its utility for political struggle. Here he writes, "If *Invisible Man* is even 'apparently' free from 'the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country'"—one of Howe's criticisms—"it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal" (Ellison 2011b, 137). The narrator's effort, like Ellison's own, is akin to what Houston Baker, Jr. calls a "blues translation," a means of "absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience"—perhaps the truth the Invisible Man achieves in his bright room— "into formal expressive instances that bear only the trace of origins, refusing to be pinned down to any final, dualistic significance" (Baker Jr., 1984, 8). He implicitly differentiates his reflections from the "action" they may, eventually,

bring about. In the interval, they are a means of reconstructing experience and identity *in light of* his invisibility and not, as might be possible at some future time, a rhetorical appeal to shape his audience or seek recognition.

III.

In section II, I read Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a work about democratic ambivalence. While ambivalence offers an important complement to histories of African American democratic thought focused on democratic community's reconstruction, I want to explore further what exactly a *politics* of democratic ambivalence might entail. The acts of self-realization I discussed in the previous section take place in the shadow of existing white fictions of Blackness, what Cooper called the "great [white] American fact, the *one objective reality*" of the white world (Cooper 1998, 136). If ambivalence, for Ellison, stems in some way from the invisible citizenship he diagnoses, he is also attentive to the ways it poses the possibility of authoring something new. Writing is, in fact, the task the Invisible Man is engaged in from the time readers meet him until his departure. In what follows, I consider these themes in conversation with Brooks' concept of "opacity" in 19th century African American performance in order to understand how democratic ambivalence might have meaning for political action across the color line. Namely, opacity refuses familiar performances of race which render the narrator invisible; it invites recognition of the reader's finitude by revealing that what they thought was transparency was, in fact, invisibility; and it opens space for creative reflection in light of those frustrated meanings.

The Invisible Man writes, "Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos…or imagination" (576). "Chaos" is a recurring theme in Ellison's work. As he suggested a year after his novel's publication, it refers to the "unorganized, irrational forces of American life" (2011a, 41), a kind of anomie which white Americans bracket by creating myths of race. No small part of this stems, he suggests, from the fundamental violation of American democratic principles by the US's racial hierarchy. A Black "mask of humanity," which becomes

a "national art" in the minstrel tradition, maintains that fictive consistency of white self-understandings. "Thus on the moral level I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds" (Ellison 2011a, 28). Whether or not one accepts Ellison's claim that white Americans as a whole have such democratic commitments to begin with, the breaking down of these justifying fictions nevertheless signals a radical change in perception: the citizenship, labor, sexuality, religion, and so on, which had been defined both through and against images of blackness, changes as understandings of the latter change. At the same time, the explosion of white fictions makes room for identity's affirmation as well as otherwise formulations *of* that identity, the "imagination" the Invisible Man pairs with chaos.

Daphne Brooks' concept of "opacity" offers resources for thinking about what such imagination might entail. In her study of black performance in the 19th and early 20th centuries, she writes of performers' "opaque" acts,

> dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and rehistoricizing of the flesh. Dense and spectacular, the opaque performances of marginalized cultural figures call attention to the skill of the performer who, through gestures and speech as well as material props and visual technologies, is able to confound and disrupt conventional constructions of the racialized and gendered body. In what we may refer to as a "spectacular opacity," this cultural phenomenon emerges at varying times as a product of the performer's will, at other times as a visual obstacle erupting as a result of the hostile spectator's epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender representations. From either standpoint, spectacular opacities contest the "dominative imposition of transparency" systemically willed on to black figures (Brooks 2006, 8).

Because white audiences' understanding of black performance, what made it legible to them, was thoroughly shaped by a dehumanizing minstrel imaginary, efforts to transcend those meanings often meant performing new, aporetic gestures and representations. In doing so, Brooks notes that Black performers not only confounded audiences' expectations, but also the dominative relation which demanded the performer's "transparency." "Opaque" performances, for Brooks, both resisted the static, "representational timelessness" of the white, minstrel imaginary projected onto performers, and opened up possibilities for other sorts of meanings in the illegible space outside of it (Brooks 2006, 6). The "spectacular opacity" of these performances interrupts the white frames of "fungibility" Hartman describes; they open up undetermined and indeterminate imaginative possibilities.

In this sense, the "chaos or imagination" Ellison describes can be read to refer to a complex relationship between invisibility and opacity. The Invisible Man's efforts at self-realization take place in the context of his invisibility, and so are not contingent on white recognition. At the same time, because invisibility is based on white fictions, violating those fictions renders his efforts "opaque" to the public above ground, including potentially to his former Black comrades in the Brotherhood and his seeming opponents who follow Ras the Exhorter; his hole is hidden from (although not necessarily invisible to) everyone, and he notes that it is not in Harlem where he had once lived and organized, but in a "border area."

To take one example: Du Bois' *Dark Princess* moves from a realist, indeed almost social scientific, writing to, in its final part, a romantic epistolary style. While the former offered a meticulous examination of black politics through its protagonist's eyes, the novel's shift from realism to his mushy love letters abandons this precision. The exchange of love letters, in the classic epistolary novel, builds toward an uncertain future, some new relation between letter-writers which, for whatever reason, is necessarily deferred. In Du Bois's novel, this convention offers space to meditate on uncertain forms of democratic relation, culminating, in the novel's end, with the beginning of anticolonial revolution. The future for the reader,

however, never arrives: the novel ends in a sense before the true culmination of what the letters had built toward, offering only the imaginative possibility of what follows them.

While the opaque might alter readers' perceptions, it does so by engaging them in the *limits* of their ability to map onto writing familiar meanings and images. Opacity is a refusal to iterate that fantasy, and in doing so, I want to suggest, it opens an improvisational space between author and reader. Toni Morrison suggests that "Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds," but "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (Morrison 1993, xii). Reading is participatory, and as Morrison explores throughout *Playing in the Dark*, they create collective, contested imaginaries of national and racial identity. But the same might be true of efforts which produce what is illegible, turning what Ellison might call a "ritual" of whiteness' affirmation into a more uncertain, frustrated effort. Morrison herself exemplifies this practice, George Shulman argues, as she writes "to create a space apart—a linguistic and cultural space, not a different place—for the part that has no part," in which unspoken or disavowed stories might be told (Shulman 2008, 183).

Rather than a bridge between audiences' preconceptions and authors' aspirational visions—a rhetorical practice of meeting audiences where they are—writing might figure a "break" in which neither the preconceptions assigned to Black citizens nor even the authors' own aspirational visions entirely hold. When the participation Morrison describes meets Brooks' opacity, there is an intersection of the dispossessive and the improvisational. Opaque, aporetic moments in writing, that is, simultaneously refuse to iterate the harmful meanings and relations demanded by white audiences, and invite the uncertain, improvisational work of imagining otherwise: improvisations of identity and relation, contingent on the stage the author has constructed. These scenes, I want to say, are significant both because they may inspire in the

reader some new vision, and also because they refuse the "tyranny of stillness" Brooks describes (Brooks 2006, 6). The reader participates in constructing what is unwritten but newly possible.

In *Invisible Man*'s Prologue, opacity takes the form of his "descent" into the notes of Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" The narrator describes an episode which occurred after he "asked for a cigarette [and] some jokers gave me a reefer." When he returns underground, he smokes and listens to Armstrong's music. He finds himself "hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths" (9). Hearing and seeing blur, to use Moten's (2017) language, in his telling, he tells his readers that he in fact plans a deeper such blurring once he obtains five phonograph players which might sound at once so that he can "*feel*" the music "with [his] whole body" (emphasis original, 8). As he descends deeper into this vision, he witnesses a series of seeming contradictions which hold at once. A preacher and his audience affirm that "black is…an' black ain't," "Black will git you…an' black won't," it "will make you…or black will un-make you" (9-10). He hears moaning and laughter, and unfamiliar, blurred expressions of love and hate. Finally, he finds himself uncertain what freedom means, and in asking, he is chased into consciousness. For Moten, the multiple forms of sense perception represented in this passage, and we might add, the multiple meanings of important moral and political concepts, function as an ensemble through which new meanings can be improvised. "The mark of invisibility" is in fact "a visible, racial mark; invisibility has visibility at its heart." But through this ensemble, "Ellison phonographs this problematic paradox, bringing the noise to in/visibility….The prologue would set the specifically musical conditions for a possible redetermination of the ocular-ethical metaphysics of race and the materiality of the structure and effects of that metaphysics" (Moten 2003, 68).

This ensemble offers no final meaning to the relation of its parts. Rather, it has a plurality of meanings which the reader might improvise, even as, carrying Moten's metaphor a bit further, the Invisible Man's meaning remains opaque and forecloses no particular

arrangement. Phrases like "black is...an' black ain't" work in the mode of "opinion," in its Greek meaning of "what 'both is and is not', is uncertain, questionable, and in question" (Frank 2018, 10). In an important sense, writing's opaque, improvisational possibilities stem in fact from its inability to offer the full scope of the arrangement Moten has in mind: it is a visual medium that relies on the reader to imagine what it cannot represent. As Jill Frank notes, mimetic representation does not tell the whole truth of what it depicts; rather, it "orients the seeing I to what does not appear." In doing so, such representations "make apparent our *inability* to see what is invisible[!] while inviting us to look harder, more slowly, and again" (Frank 2018, 39). While Frank is thinking here of how representation can lead to the reader's independent reason as part of democracy, we might also consider the reader's recognition of their finitude before, or in the Invisible Man's case before and after, democracy.

IV.

In the following chapters, I will explore three specific themes in conversation with the overarching concerns which, as I argued in this chapter, tie together a distinct history of African American democratic thought: assembly, fugitivity, and natality.

In chapter 1, I turn to Anna Julia Cooper's politics of assembly in her 1892 *A Voice from the South* in conversation with the journalist Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, published the same year. I focus on her response to the subjection and exclusion of Black women from the late-19th century New Woman movement, in response to which Cooper formulates an alternative ideal of democratic citizenship animated by a spirit of receptivity. While Cooper recognizes the unlikelihood of her white interlocutors adopting this ethos, she in fact employs it in her rendering of an assembly of Black and white women throughout *Voice*. Employing what Brittney Cooper calls "embodied writing," Cooper assembles named and unnamed women into her writing. I compare this practice to Wells' practice of assembling lynching accounts from white newspapers in *Southern Horrors*. Both authors resituate their

voices in relation to these assemblies. Yet while Wells' pamphlet is compatible with her early advocacy for emigration, self-help, and self-defense, I turn to Judith Butler's recent work on assembly to suggest the ways Cooper's embodied writing instead depicts a sort of bodily co-presence, and inviting the imagination of new arrangements among its members.

While Cooper imagines in *Voice* of new arrangements in which her "voiceless note" might be heard, James Weldon Johnson seeks to reconfigure *existing* relationships between listeners and performers. In Chapter 2, I consider the interplay of music, writing, and democratic possibility in James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel. Engaging early 20th-century debates over the place of ragtime and spirituals in the Jim Crow public, Johnson curates and incorporates into his writing the songs and sounds of the turn of the century "soundscape" through the novel's musical performances. Importantly, I argue, is the fugitive character of those performances as they appear, or do not, in his writing. Johnson offers simultaneously a critique of dominative white practices of listening in the ragtime era, and he responds to those forms of reception by writing opaque scenes of musical performance unavailable to his readers. While the narrator, navigating relations on both sides of the color line, promises his readers an opportunity to view the "inner life of the Negro in America," his account of that world in fact arrives largely by way of improvised musical performances he finds himself unable to quite record. The paper's final section explores how controversies over race and ragtime shaped Johnson's theory of writing as a "syncopating" political aesthetics, mobilizing ragtime's controversial rhythmic stresses and elisions, alternating in his novel as the opaque performances just mentioned and what Jacqueline Goldsby calls the "terrible real" of white violence.

Johnson and Cooper both maintained a democratic hope in the possibility of a future solidarity of Black and white Americans. In chapter 3, I depart from a democratic ambivalence centered on the American nation-state to that of what Du Bois called the "global Black Belt," the relations between colonized peoples from African Americans in the US to anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia. I read Du Bois' 1928 *Dark Princess: A Romance* alongside his

influential 1926 essay, “Criteria of Negro Art” to trace Du Bois’ thoughts on colonial concepts of “the human” and its reconstruction for a new world. Du Bois simultaneously conceived of writing, and the epistolary form in particular, as a means of compelling the recognition of black humanity from white audiences, and as a tool to disrupt and reconstruct the very political and epistemological order through which they would confer “human” recognition in the first place.

I conclude with some broad invitations for further theorizing on the implications of the foregoing for contemporary democratic theory and, turning to Claudia Rankine’s 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric*, what a language of ambivalence might mean in a moment of unprecedented mobilization for racial justice.

1.

Assembling Reception: Anna Julia Cooper's Politics of Democratic Openness

Anna Julia Cooper writes at the outset of her 1892 collection of essays, *A Voice from the South*,

> In the clash and clatter of our American Conflict, it has been said that the South remains Silent. Like the Sphinx she inspires vociferous disputation, but herself takes little part in the noisy controversy. One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman (51).

Cooper describes at the dawn of Jim Crow a simultaneous refusal (whether emanating from ignorance or bad faith) to attend to the beliefs, interests, and experiences of Black Americans broadly, and the unjust exclusion of Black women's testimony in particular. Black expression is for Cooper at once a "muffled" and "jarring chord"—a source of disruptive truths, yet ignored or interpreted in disempowering ways by white citizens; and the voices of black *women* in particular, she writes, while no less "jarring" to the US racial regime, are not only "muffled" but silenced. Cooper's book is typically understood as an effort to depart from this condition: in writing representatively as "A Black Woman of the South," she struggles toward a more democratic future in which "truth from *each* standpoint be presented at the bar" (emphasis original). But it is equally true to say that she situates her writing within the broader condition she critiques. Her representative pen name suggests that when she describes the condition of the Black Woman's voice, she is also speaking of her own; and while it might be tempting to read *Voice* simply as a rupture in this respect, she in fact at times refers to her book in the *past tense*,

as a voice which "*has* been added to the already full chorus" (my emphasis, 51).[8] In doing so, she invites readers to explore what democratic meanings her work might have in the absence of a democratic community to receive them—what it means to sing a "voiceless note."

Members of democratic communities shape their perceptions of a world in common intersubjectively, sharing their plural perspectives to craft and contest accounts of "the people" and the reality in which it operates (Ferguson 2012). As Cooper understood, such sharing depends on citizens' receptive openness to speech, which opens or forecloses what is (allowed to be) seen and heard in public, or at other times, what is acknowledged *as* seen or heard. In her extensive discussions of the role of Black women in the turn of the century women's movement, she anticipates the work of democratic theorists who have, in recent years, explored how inequality is maintained in part by a closedness on the part of the powerful to divergent realities, norms, and interests (e.g. Bickford 1996 ch. 4, Dobson 2014, Tully 2016, Young 1997), limiting both the imagination of new forms of political relation (Coles 2016, Connolly 1995, Kompridis 2011), and the acknowledgment of the heretofore disavowed obligations of entangled lives (Beausoleil 2017, Butler 2004 and 2015, Havercroft and Owen 2016, Kompridis 2011, Schiff 2014). In such cases, it is often argued, "[t]he problem is not one of speaking truth to power, but of getting the powerful to listen" (Dobson 2014, 92). Put differently, democratic community requires the cultivation of certain practices of listening between its members if each is to have an equal role in shaping a world in common.

I noted in the previous chapter that democratic theorists tend to understand appeals to democratic community in the future or aspirational tense, leaving aside the ambivalence toward political community in the unjust present. Similarly, discussions of receptivity tend to jump between diagnoses of the negative effects of its absence on the one hand, and various means of cultivating it as a civic practice on the other. Certainly, *A Voice from the South* contains striking instances of each, as I note in what follows. Yet between these points sits what I take to be an

[8] All in-text citations in this chapter are from Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1998) unless otherwise stated.

enduring and ultimately more difficult question: what good is voice to deaf and determined ears? Even as she imagines a hoped-for receptive democracy in which "every agony has a voice," Cooper also emphasizes the power of a *present* receptivity practiced from her standpoint as a Black woman. From this critical perspective, she assembles an array of voices on both sides of the color line, employing what Brittney Cooper calls a practice of "embodied writing" to stage encounters otherwise disallowed. Even as racist and patriarchal exclusions preclude her part in the metaphorical "assembly" of the sovereign, democratic "people," Cooper's writing is nevertheless an insurgent assembl*ing* in which, first, the receptive "outsider within" contests the unchallenged perceptions of her opponents; and in doing so, second, invites consideration of the collective, undetermined character of that assembling as arranged by A Black Woman of the South, what she refers to, strikingly, as a collective improvisation.

Born in slavery to a Black mother and a white slaveholder in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina, Cooper was an important feminist activist, educator, and academic until her death in 1964. Her thought is the subject of only two book-length monographs (Baker-Fletcher 1994 and May 2007), but she has attracted increased attention from theorists over the past fifteen years as a crucial figure in the history of Black feminist thought, and has been the subject of special issues of *Philosophia Africana* (2004), *Hypatia* (2009), and *African American Review* (2009).[9] She was a vocal critic of the exclusion of Black women from the nascent women's suffrage movement, and played a key role in the formation of the Black women's club movement culminating in the founding of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. She came to serve as the principal of the famous M Street (later Dunbar) High School in Washington D.C., a prestigious school for Black students,[10] and eventual head of Frelinghuysen University.[11] Her 1892 *A Voice from the South*, her writings in journals like the NAACP's *Crisis*, and her

[9] Moody-Turner 2019 offers, among other things, a helpful review of recent Cooper scholarship.
[10] Her ouster by allies of Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" in 1906, until her return in 1910, is an interesting story of the shifting politics of black leadership at the turn of the 20th century. See Lemert's 1998 introduction and Giddings 1984.
[11] She may have also served as the only woman member of the American Negro Academy.

important 1925 Sorbonne dissertation on the relation of France's slavery in Saint-Domingue to its revolutionary understandings of republican freedom and democracy (see May 2007, ch. 4), offer understudied but crucial contributions to democratic theory and its history.[12]

Cooper wrote the chapters of *Voice*, some of them originally presented as speeches, in the post-Reconstruction rise of Jim Crow. Importantly for Cooper, this was also a period of both the proliferation of women's suffrage, temperance, and club organizations, broadly described as the "New Woman" movement; and the rapid growth of Black religious, economic, and civic organizations. While I focus on the former in this chapter, in both cases, *Voice* argues for the increased presence and authority of Black women, who are "confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and [are] as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (112-13). Accordingly, her book is organized through two dominant metaphors. The first half of *Voice*'s essays, titled "Soprano Obligato," refers to the standpoint of Black women as a distinct, if unrecognized, part of a "relational whole" (White 2009): of the Black and New Woman counterpublics, as well as a broader national body politic. While soprano is a quality of voice often (traditionally) sung by women, "obligato" refers in music to "a part which is subordinate to the principal melody, but nevertheless essential to the completeness of a composition and not to be omitted" (OED). *Voice*'s second half is titled "Tutti ad Libitum." It too is a musical term, in this case meaning that "the part given to a particular instrument or instruments is optional" (OED). I take the latter to involve less Cooper's effort to disclose a standpoint her readers ought to be receptive *to*, so much as the uncertain collective meaning of the voices she authors into *Voice*'s pages.[13] Each requires an author who is already receptive, allowing her to assemble readers and public personalities in ways which not only recontextualize Cooper's own expression

[12] As others have observed, Cooper also served as an important (although uncredited) inspiration and interlocutor for W.E.B. Du Bois, influencing in important ways his *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Damnation of Women" (which includes an extended, uncited quote from Cooper's *Voice*) and *Black Reconstruction* (see Staton-Taiwo 2004).

[13] I should note that this writing is not confined to the second half—I am suggesting it keeps with its broad themes, which concern among other things, questions of peoplehood.

but, furthermore, hold collective meaning as assemblies capable of as yet undefined arrangements.

In section I, I offer a brief account of Cooper's discussion of whites' closed reception, which Cooper explores extensively in her critique of the white leadership of the turn of the century women's suffrage, temperance, and club movement in her essay, "Woman versus the Indian." That critique offers context for her account of the possibilities of a women's movement animated by democratic qualities of receptivity, which I note in several ways anticipates contemporary uses of the concept. But I will ultimately suggest that a narrow reading of Cooper's aspirational vision of receptivity can't account for the ways she places her *own* writing in the context of the closedness she critiques.

Drawing on the work of Cooper's contemporary readers Elizabeth Alexander and Brittney Cooper, in section II I consider the ways Cooper reframes her voice through a practice of writing both her own body as well as those of personalities and readers on both sides of the color line into *Voice*. Implicitly emphasizing her own receptive understanding as an "outsider within," in her writing she assembles those embodied voices into a political context within which her voice might "sound," authoring a democratic space for the free and authoritative expression of her "soprano obligato" (Collins 1986).

In section III, I compare this practice with Ida B. Wells' *Southern Horrors*, a pamphlet published the same year as *Voice*. Wells, too, practices a form of assembly, but as I argue, hers is a work of truth-telling which contrasts with *Voice* in its democratic implications. Her work highlights the difficulties of Cooper's vision of the women's movement as a democratic force, exposing in particular the tension between *Voice*'s performative and rhetorical elements.

I conclude by considering the themes of the book's second half, "Tutti ad Libitum." In conversation with the recent work of Judith Butler, I depart from frameworks of assembly as a performance of "peoplehood" to consider the ways Cooper's writing instead reveals a politics of ambivalence, uncertainty, and ultimately possibility.

I.

Cooper's essay "Woman versus the Indian," included in *Voice*, was originally presented as a response to an 1891 speech of the same name by the white suffrage activist Anna Shaw.[14] That speech, later recalled in Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper's 1902 history of the suffrage movement, concerned an 1890 amendment campaign in South Dakota, the result of which was that suffrage for Native Americans gained more votes than suffrage for white women (even as both failed). Shaw stated, in a speech the authors described as "brimming and bubbling over with wit, satire and pathos," how "Indians in blankets and moccasins were received in the state convention with the greatest courtesy, and Susan B. Anthony and other eminent women were barely tolerated" (Anthony and Harper 1902, 182). At the heart of Shaw's complaint is a suggestion that "the Indian's" political rights are less legitimate than white women's. More than this, she seems to suggest that their voices are not legible in the same way as white voices, as she decries them "engaged in their ghost dances" while "the white women were going up and down the state pleading for the rights of *citizens*" (ibid., 182, emphasis mine). Cooper's extended response to Shaw and the white leaders of the women's suffrage movement is a critique of the broader exclusionary and dominative citizenship characterizing not only Shaw's remarks, but the stunted possibilities of the movement as a whole. As I note in what follows, this response offers some of Cooper's most extensive remarks on the role of receptivity in democratic community. At the same time, it offers a useful contrast to her more ambivalent remarks elsewhere as to the possibility of white citizens' conforming *to* such an ideal.

Like her contemporaries Frances Harper and Mary Church Terrell, Cooper understood the turn of the century women's movement as a transformative source of democratic potential, even as she recognized in its dominative refusal to recognize Black women troubling continuities with a broader regime of racial patriarchy. Fannie Barrier Williams (1903) recounts in her

[14] Trisha Franzen offers a useful study of Shaw's political thought, including her debate with Cooper. See Franzen 2014, and ch. 4 in particular.

history of the NACW (see Williams 1903, 216-226)[15] that, in attempting to forge links with white women activists in pursuit of suffrage, temperance, and other aims, Black women often found themselves excluded or subordinated, vilified, and the subject of racist compromises with white constituencies who, as Cooper sardonically puts it, couldn't imagine union with "these people who were once [their] slaves" (101). At the same time as these organizations offered a public platform for women in the post-war period, they denied Black women the same opportunities for presence and expression in their organizing, and refused to receive Black expression with the same respect and openness afforded white voices; even when the white public "has not exactly said to its dogs 's-s-sik him!,'" she writes, it "has at least engaged to be looking in another direction or studying the rivers on Mars" (93).

As a standpoint theorist avant la lettre, Cooper maintains that truth can only be ascertained through the persistent dissonance of contrasting voices. She writes that truth is "as incapable as infinite space, of being encompassed and confined by one age or nation, sect or country—much less by one little creature's finite brain" (193).[16] Denial of Black women's participation in a public of women results in white citizens who, as she writes of white authors, lack the "art of 'thinking one's self imaginatively into the experiences of others'" which "is impossible to acquire…without a background and a substratum of sympathetic knowledge" (139). More broadly, she writes that "American art, American science, American literature can never be founded in truth, the universal beauty; can never learn to speak a language intelligible in all climes and for all ages, till this paralyzing grip of caste prejudice is loosened from its vitals" (104). The essay begins, for instance, with the story of a women's club's (called "Wimodaughsis"—Wives, Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters) denial of typing classes to a Black woman. The club's secretary, she writes, "had not calculated that there were any wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, except white ones," and "is filled with grief and horror that any person of

[15] See Brittney Cooper's (2017) *Beyond Respectability* for a concise overview of this movement, and a discussion of Williams's essay (which is where I first encountered it).

[16] On Cooper's standpoint theory, see Baker-Fletcher 1994 and May 2007, 2009b.

Negro extraction should aspire to learn type-writing or languages or to enjoy any other advantages offered" there (88). Her choice of example is significant, and mirrored in a later example of a Black woman painter denied admission to an art school: both applicants are denied opportunities for expression, and are therefore also instances of thwarted reception.

In no small part is the "silence" which structures Black women's public life for Cooper also a denial of norms of respect and bodily security accorded white bourgeois women. Their exclusion from women's organizations is, in this respect, continuous with a broader ascription of Black women from a racialized notion of womanhood, along with attendant norms accorded to white women's bodies, as Hortense Spillers (1987) writes. Among many other examples, running through the center of her essay is her description of traveling by train as a black woman, an experience of disrespect and refusal "unknown to many and indescribable to all" (92-3). She faces an aggressive conductor who—here again policing participation in a public—"growls out at me over the *paper I am reading*" and threatens her unless she changes cars (my emphasis, 95). Drawing implicitly on an incident Wells suffered in 1884, she further describes the experience of other Black women who "have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured" (93; see May 2007, 155).

At the same time, Cooper offers an account of the value and possibilities of receptivity which might characterize a future public. She anticipates key conversations in contemporary democratic theory in her contention that democratic politics presupposes some sort of "openness" across difference, from banal differences of interest or opinion to broader ontological rifts, that facilitates the sort of intersubjectivity which shapes citizens and shared (emergent) public worlds (e.g. Bickford 1996, ch. 3, Ferguson 2012). Romand Coles claims for instance that a "radical receptivity" across differences is a necessary precondition for democratic possibility (Coles 2016, 34): a perceptive orientation toward others, including bodies whose humanity many are conditioned to misrecognize; and an openness to shifts in what may otherwise seem like immutable aspects of social life (Coles 2016, 48-9; see also Kompridis 2011,

264[17]). To truly "sound," voices are also reliant on receptive listeners who work to interpret expressions which disclose another standpoint (e.g. Beausoleil 2017, 294; Dobson 2014, 25; Tully 2016; Young 1997, 356ff.).[18] Cooper's account therefore seems to entail what Emily Beausoleil calls a "dispositional ethics" which might constitute a more respectful, open, and ultimately democratic ethics of reception (Beausoleil 2017, 292).

Her model is Shakespeare, whose works emerged from an "all-embracing sympathy, that infinite receptivity of his, and native, all-comprehending appreciation, which proved a key to unlock and open every soul that came within his radius." Because truth and beauty are produced through a receptivity toward experiences beyond the artist or intellectual's standpoint, the latter is dependent on others' expression for their own. She therefore writes of Shakespeare's plays as in some sense a collective feat, the assembling of other voices—and "*he received as much as he gave*" (emphasis original, 104).

By extension, she suggests, this receptivity also entails what contemporary theorists understand as an ethic of "responsiveness" (e.g. Schiff 2014, 34; see also Beausoleil 2017, Connolly 1995, Kompridis 2011).[19] Maximal receptivity can also mean receptivity to pain and injustice. Cooper envisions a multiracial movement of women whose interest "is every interest that has lacked an interpreter and a defender...every agony that has been dumb—every wrong that needs a voice" (107; see also May 2004, 88).

If I have read Cooper's thought a little too neatly within the terms of contemporary theory, it is in any case to demonstrate the distinctiveness of her account in what follows. It is important to distinguish between the present public of Cooper's address and the

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[17] He continues: "If our pre-reflective stance of receptivity is an ontological condition of intelligibility in general, and if it is necessarily a *selective* stance,whereby unjustly, unjustifiably we are more receptive to some things, some persons, some concerns, more than to others, it is the task of our reflective stance of receptivity to attune ourselves to the selectivity of our reception, and to understand how this came to be so" (Kompridis 2011, 264).

[18] And, at times, in forms which do not fit with hegemonic concepts of reasonable speech (Young 2002, ch. 2).

[19] The concept is closely related to Cavell's idea of "acknowledgment," and used by Schiff in that context. See also Havercroft and Owen 2016, Markell 2003, and Shulman 2011.

already-disrupted or already-persuaded citizens of the future democratic community in whose name she speaks. As she wrote in an editorial titled "Mistaken Identity,"

> Democracy…is meat admittedly too strong for this generation. Our ideals have jumped way ahead of the procession and are demanding the impossible. Christianity and democracy, as abstractions, are too sublimated for modern thinking to get a grip on them. While they are being interpreted by the theologians and reasoned out by the philosophers, the barbarians of today will have brained the teacher and burned down the school house (Cooper, undated).

Even in *Voice*, alongside her praise of the promise of the 19th century women's movement, she nevertheless elsewhere describes the present white citizen as a "monomaniac," to whom "argument is almost supersensible" (156). At times, their closedness makes engaging them fruitless: not only are white citizens—and presumably white readers—unreasonable, they also make efforts to preclude the possibility of a dissensus being articulated in the first place. Here, she does not discount the possibility of transformation; in fact, she is hopeful, and there are rhetorical aspects of her writing which are meant to persuade her readers to adopt this sort of citizenship, a point emphasized in recent readings of her work (Bailey 2004, 64ff., Logan 1999, ch. 5, May 2009, 27-33). Rather, she describes the particular conditions of reception under which she writes *at present*, conditions she describes as silence, wherein her own identity is constructed for the white public without her voice, and the circulating representations of blackness are, as she remarks of the poet Maurice Thompson's "The Voodoo Prophecy," merely "a revelation of the white man" which has, "unconsciously it may be, laid bare his own soul" (155). Her pessimism as to the possibilities of democracy in the near term is therefore due not only to the fact that her voice is not recognized, but because the very forces which deny her recognition are also not suitable democratic partners.

Cooper's ambivalence between her aspirational vision and present pessimism reveals an important shortcoming of contemporary theories of receptivity. Centering the possibility of

democratic community on the hoped-for transformation of white citizens may in fact constrain interpretations of what democratic politics the marginalized already practice, in the absence, and independent of, that transformation. It does so because it centers *agency* on those same citizens who already declare themselves sovereign: to cultivate an openness they are not "open" to, and to engage in communication with reciprocity even as their present understanding of "the people" is defined by its lack. As a political program of broadening consciousness, such a focus on rhetoric and persuasion is often warranted. I don't doubt, for instance, the democratic possibility that narrative can offer in disclosing the particulars of standpoints beyond the reader's own, cultivating—albeit problematically—knowledge, affect, and identification toward lives otherwise invisible to the reader (Schiff 2014, ch. 5; see also Nussbaum 1997 and Young 2002, 71-77). And Clarissa Rile Hayward has described a program of "disruptive" politics of civil disobedience aimed at throwing the realities of racial injustice into a public sphere which would otherwise obscure or ignore them (Hayward 2017, 405-7). But Cooper writes without a faith in the *present* motivations of the already-enfranchised. Her appeals to an "aspirational" peoplehood (see Rogers 2012, 192) characterized by an ethic of receptivity and responsiveness sits alongside her recognition of the democratic deficits of her readers. Attending to her politics, then, requires understanding not only the aspirational appeals, but also the ways she finds freedom as a democrat in the present.

II.

Voice's task is in large part one of innovation in democracy's absence. If Cooper could not assume in her audience the receptivity she idealizes as a facet of democratic citizenship, she nevertheless employed it as a facet of her own writing. As I note in what follows, receptivity becomes for Cooper a means of recontextualizing her voice as a Black woman, a "bod[y] impolitic" denied standing in the women's movement. She does so by staging new scenes of

expression and reception in her writing, assembling a range of both unnamed and prominent white and Black public figures as interlocutors, and performing the citizenship she is denied.

Cooper's use of the term "voice" is not a metaphor for just any sort of expression.[20] I read voice in *Voice* to indicate something like what Brittney Cooper calls "embodied writing," a means of "textual activism" wherein "race women [like Cooper] assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak" (B. Cooper 2017, 6). As she argues, writing for Cooper and her contemporaries like Fannie Barrier Williams and Frances Harper, was an extension of a broader role of the era's race women as, in Williams' words, "educator[s] of public opinion" about black womanhood, fighting for the legitimacy of black women as public actors (Williams, qtd. in B. Cooper 2017, 18). Certainly, this is part of the effort symbolized earlier by her use of the term "Soprano Obligato": writing semi-anonymously (her name appears in the copyright) as "A Black Woman of the South," she makes her body present in the dissonant "chorus" of American public life. But Cooper does so also by authoring that chorus otherwise, assembling a dissonance in which her voice can sound.

Embodied writing asserts a relation, and in Cooper's case, does so where relations have been denied. The white womanhood Cooper critiques denies what Carole White calls the "relational whole" of the social (and natural) world: the mutual dependence of all for understanding and realizing themselves and the world they share. For instance, she elsewhere argues that without women's standpoint,

> The world has had to limp along with the wobbling gait and one-sided hesitancy of a man with one eye. Suddenly the bandage is removed from the other eye and the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it (Cooper quoted in White 2009, 91).

[20] I thank Maurice Wallace for this observation.

Something similar, for Cooper, can be said of the women's movement which subverts its democratic potential by drawing the color line. This, as I understand it, is the sense in which embodied writing renders Black women "legible as civically knowable persons" (B. Cooper 2017, 44); the "legibility" involved is only possible as voices in a relation that is otherwise than the present regime of silence and domination. Brittney Cooper contrasts this effort with the frequent necessity of "dissemblance" in public space, a strategic silence in order to preserve bodily security. Writing herself into *Voice* places Cooper, both as an individual and as the broader figure of "A Black Woman of the South," into the insurgent assembly she constructs as an agonistic participant. Elizabeth Alexander describes how Cooper, in placing her body in the text, seeks to represent an un- or insufficiently-recognized subject, an "African-American woman of letters" heretofore illegible or disallowed (1995, 338). In this sense, it is in the context of her assembling that Cooper declares, as Alexander writes, "'I am here' in a hostile environment," where the "I" is defined through the text's disclosure (1995, 343). The opposition between writing and dissemblance gains coherency in part through the distinction of dissembling and *assembling*.

In *Voice*, Cooper is the curator of a host of materials in the form of embodied Black and white voices. Here, the receptivity which she idealizes gains force in her writing as the assembling of her own sentiments alongside a range of what Robert Stepto (1991) might term the "eclectic" voices subject to her control. Some of these are eclectic materials in Stepto's original sense, consisting of long passages of quoted material; but more often, the outside voices in Cooper's writing are her own approximation of their views, feelings, and presentations of self. While Cooper critiques white authors who lack "a background and a substratum of sympathetic knowledge" necessary for "The art of 'thinking one's self imaginatively into the experience of others'" (139), she does implicitly claim that authority through her representation of bodies and experiences across the color line. Not only is receptivity asymmetric, but Cooper's own receptivity entails a sufficient understanding of the "souls of white folk," as Du Bois would later

write, to pursue a sort of counter-receptive assembling for her own purposes that is not available to her white readers.

From this standpoint, which she does not claim to be hers alone but that of "A Black Woman of the South," she stages dialogues with a host of named and unnamed personalities. In the beginning of "Woman versus the Indian," she refers to Susan B. Anthony who, along with Anna Shaw, the essay seems to engage implicitly throughout. Distinguishing the latter from Wimodaughsis' bigoted secretary, she wryly remarks that Anthony and Shaw "are evidently too noble to be held in thrall by the provincialisms of women who seem never to have breathed the atmosphere beyond the confines of their grandfather's plantations," a claim she spends much of the essay contradicting (89). Throughout *Voice*, Cooper also invokes what Alexander refers to as a "paper community of like-minded (and diverse-minded, as she points out) women thinkers, both to support her very existence as well as to keep her company in her difficult enterprise," including Frances Harper, Hallie Q. Brown, Fannie Jackson Coppin, and Charlotte Forten Grimké (Alexander 1995, 350). In this latter sense, she places herself within an intellectual and artistic tradition of Black race women which would coalesce four years later in the foundation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and its own intellectual tradition (B. Cooper 2017; see also Carby 1987, ch. 5; Giddings 1984). This is a distinction which alters the shape of the assembly in which she places herself, a counterpublic of Black men and women (as readers and specific personalities she invokes), and her interlocutors across the color line.

Many of her most vivid visual and affective descriptions are of unnamed figures who stand in for the diverse standpoints of an anonymous public of readers and listeners. In her discussion of the role women play in shaping public sentiments, she draws their embodied voices in descriptions of a "lightest whisper," shifts in "pencilled brows," "delicate intimation[s]…quick as electricity," the "tune set by the head singer, sung through all keys and registers, with all qualities of tone" (90-1), "atmospheric odors" and "practiced hand[s]" (93). After Cooper makes a plea for a unity of purpose for all women, she notes that the "'*all*' will

inevitably stick in the throat of the [white] Southern woman….[i]t is too bitter a pill with black people in it" (97). In response, she describes both her own and other Black women's unreciprocated democratic work: "The Black Woman has tried to understand the Southern woman's difficulties; to put herself in her place, and to be as fair, as charitable, and as free from prejudice in judging her antipathies, as she would have others in regard to her own" (97). She transforms southern whites collectively into the figure of a young girl who has "pouted and sulked and cried" in the face of abolition (99); and as I mentioned previously, as a white male "monomaniac" with "excited nerves" who must be "brought to see, by the careful and cautious injection of cold facts and…well selected object lessons" to cure his misplaced fear of "black supremacy" (156).

In doing so, Cooper simultaneously asserts a relation which has been denied by describing the thoughts, feelings, aspirations, and multifaceted presence of both Black personalities as well as her unwilling interlocutors; and she equally claims authority over interpretation of her own experience within that context. Her assembling is *part* of her representative self-disclosure: social context shapes speech's meaning, as well as the relational identities of speaker and listener. Cooper's assembling declares her as a citizen shaping a world in common, even as her citizenship and the voice which expresses it is elsewhere denied. "There is an old proverb," she writes: "'The devil is always painted *black*—by white painters.' And what is needed perhaps, to reverse the picture of the lordly man slaying the lion, is for the lion to turn painter (159). Her portrait is therefore declarative, not simply persuasive. It is itself, as William Andrews writes of Douglass' writing, "an act of self-liberation": "Instead of existing as the theme of the text, that which the slave narrative is *about*, freedom becomes the crucial property and quality *of* a text—not just *what* it refers to, but *how* it signifies" (Andrews 1986, 104, emphasis original).

III.

Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases, a pamphlet released the same year as *Voice*, seeks to address the causes of lynching against prevalent white justifications. Like *Voice*, I read a counter-receptive writing in Wells which similarly involves reassembling a host of eclectic materials toward disruptive ends. Each author diagnoses the familiar problem of a lacking "openness" to black disclosure, and each responds in part by inverting its expected priority, as a tool of writing at the margins. They have indeed "made room" for the voices of standpoints not their own, and they have done so with a responsiveness to suffering. At the same time, the democratic possibilities of Wells' assembling differ from Cooper's in ways that reflect their contrasting political projects on display at the World's Fair the next year, where Wells "was in the Haitian pavilion protesting the virtual exclusion of Afro-Americans from the exposition" (Carby 1987, 3-4) while Cooper presented within the fair's fraught, racially-divided World's Congress of Representative Women. Wells' pamphlet ends with an appeal to black emigration, self-help, and self-defense. Hers is not a project of offering another vision of democratic citizenship, or rewriting the public in which dissent might occur, but a project of fugitive truth-telling.

Wells wrote *Southern Horrors* in the aftermath of the lynching of three Black men outside of Memphis, the owners of a grocery store competing with a white grocer who had previously maintained a monopoly in the area. One of the black proprietors, Thomas Moss, was a close friend of Wells. The lynching occurred after Moss and his compatriots defended their store from a mob of white men, including plain-clothes deputies, led by their white competitor, William Barrett (who had previously entered their store and assaulted another of the lynching's victims, Calvin McDowell). The Curve lynching, as it came to be called, generated national headlines and a mass exodus of African Americans from Memphis. At the time the editor of a Black Memphis paper called the *Free Speech*, Wells authored a brief response to an editorial appearing in the *Memphis Commercial* a week before, the latter of which sought to justify the practice of lynching in the wake of the Curve—against expected criticism from the North

following the atrocity—by arguing for its necessity in the face of Black men's supposed sexual violence toward white women (Giddings 2008, 206). Before leaving for New York to meet T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the influential black newspaper, the *New York Age*, Wells replied:

> Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women" (these words were reprinted in *Southern Horrors*; see 2014, 60).

White Memphians violently responded to Wells's editorial, destroying the *Free Speech*'s operations and driving out Wells's business partner, J. L. Fleming. Threats of yet another lynching—encouraged by local white newspapers—kept Wells in exile in New York. A month later, she published an editorial in the *New York Age*, titled "The Truth about Lynching," which became the text for *Southern Horrors* published later that year.

The pamphlet is meant to demystify the act and history of lynching, so often publicly justified as a response to black men's "violation" of white women's "honor" (Wells 2014, 62). This was the dominant justification put forward by white civil society, a false "chivalry" concealing its real causes. Black Americans were vilified in these spaces as "a race of rapists and desperadoes" bent on, as one newspaper put it, "singl[ing] out white people as [their] victims" (qtd. in 2014, 74). She describes her pamphlet as "an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done though the heavens fall" (2014, 58); and, in doing so, those facts might offer a "defense for the Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs" (2014, 62). Crucially, Wells discloses this "array of facts" in part by assembling accounts from white newspapers and testimonies, from which she compiles statistics, and records the language papers use to justify white violence. As she later wrote in another anti-lynching pamphlet, her 1895 *A Red Record*, "*Out of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned*" (my

emphasis, Wells 2014c, 229). The white-authored accounts and statistics she quotes act as a kind of unwanted authorizing on the part of the white public: while they reject and try to violently suppress Wells' truth-telling, here their opposition is to their own voices which have been assembled otherwise. Wells curates these "eclectic materials" in *Southern Horrors* (and even more so in *A Red Record*) to make them conform to her needs; their authorizing power is ironically deployed, included to illustrate the bad faith of the press, religious authorities, public officials, and everyday white citizens (see also Goldsby 2006, 48).

While Cooper interpolates whites into a multiracial assembly, Wells writes from a place of exile, first in New York, then in England on a press tour after her 1892 publication, and finally in the Haitian exhibition at the World's Fair. She does not seek, and likely *could* not seek, democratic community in common with Southern whites. As far as Wells was concerned, the Southern white public was "particeps criminalis, accomplices, accessories before and after the fact" (2014, 78). While Wells does gesture, in the pamphlet's preface, to an effort to persuade white readers and to "arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless," she elsewhere, as I noted, states that "*Nobody*" in the South truly believed the justifications *already* given, justifications contradicted by the reporting in white newspapers and by the common knowledge of Southern citizens (2014, 58; 60, emphasis mine). Southern white men "are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend. The utterances of the leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the *class*"; after all, as Wells notes, the frequent assaults by white men of black women were not the subject of such mob violence, and in fact went unpunished (2014, 67, emphasis original).

Her effort in assembling these facts is a means of contesting the opinion of Black Americans who had accepted white myths of the victims' criminality; and of offering a public defense of victims before Northern and foreign opinion. Her aspirational vision, contrasting with Cooper's and articulated in the final section of *Southern Horrors* titled "Self Help," calls for a strengthened and self-determining Black counterpublic. Wells appeals to her black readers to

bolster institutions involved in precisely the sort of truth-telling her pamphlet engages in, along with other measures like economic boycotts of white businesses and her call for "a Winchester rifle…[to] have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give" (80; see also Giddings 2008, ch. 7). Earlier in 1892, Wells had also defended, in a response to Fortune, the decision of some African Americans to emigrate to Liberia, and in the aftermath of the Curve lynching, she gave qualified support to emigration measures from Memphis to the west. She approvingly quotes a letter which reads that "It is far better to die *trying* to live than drag along at such an uncertain rate, raising children under such restrictive and oppressive conditions" (2014b, 51, emphasis original).

Wells' truth-telling, too, might be interpreted as fugitive in three senses: it requires Wells to leave Memphis where *Free Speech* is met with violence; it recognizes that this violence originates in white efforts to suppress virtually any sort of Black economic, political, and bodily autonomy, requiring self-determination and a refusal of cooperation with white business and local white authority; and it advocates emigration. Cooper's practice is in some ways the opposite: interpolating her readers into a common space in which to voice a dissensus prerequisite to some future democratic association. The democratic failings of white southerners and their public preclude in the *present* a democratic association for both authors; but Wells emphasizes in particular the material, vital stakes of this fact. Her assembling of white voices is not the creation of a space of uncertain voice and reception, but a damning claim as to the murderous, invidious whiteness which precludes that possibility.

Cooper of course recognizes violence toward Black men and women as a key way racial hierarchy is practiced and policed; but her democratic ideal of a union with white *women* does not clearly tie them to the violence of white men (see Carby 1987, 114-115). Wells' critique of Women's Christian Temperance Union president Frances Willard describes how white women leadership of repeated lynching's public justifications and sought to appease southern public opinion at the expense of multiracial solidarity (Wells 2014c, 293). Indeed, this latter strategy

was shared by Anthony and Stanton from the early years of Reconstruction on (see Davis 2008, ch. 6). The "fear of losing caste" Cooper describes as at the forefront of the minds of her white women interlocutors was often preserved in alliance with white men who "used their ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to politically oppress the black male" (Carby 1987, 115).

Wells' more consistently oppositional assembling, then, exposes sacrifices Cooper makes in her own. Some critics have maintained, for instance, that Cooper appeals to an exclusive, Victorian vision of "true womanhood" in her arguments for a shared constituency across the color line. This may have been a necessary rhetorical move to establish shared moral terms between herself and her white interlocutors, including extending to Black women bodily respect and security, the "protective circle that 'true womanhood' seemed to mandate" (Bailey 2004, 65; see also Logan 1999, ch. 5, Baker-Fletcher 1994, 124). May has argued that Cooper's emphasis on Black women's domestic roles reflects her appeal to the preconceptions of her readers, which she in any case violates in practice through her public efforts (May 2004, 82; see also B. Cooper 2017, 15-16). It is hard to ignore, on the other hand, Cooper's persistent suspicion of working-class politics—albeit in an era of extensive racial exclusion in trade unions—and she often, as Kevin Gaines notes, "viewed the confrontations between capital and labor as evidence of foreign subversion" by immigrant workers (Gaines 1996, 145). Similarly, there are times when Cooper proposes shared concepts of women's freedom and moral status by comparing patriarchy in the "West" to an orientalized vision of China and "the Turk" (see Jun 2011, ch. 2).

IV.

While it is likely that not all of Cooper's antidemocratic remarks were rhetorical, the dissonance in *Voice* between competing claims points toward another facet of her democratic politics. Cathryn Bailey (2004) describes a frustrating opacity in *Voice*: "at least partly because so many of Cooper's writings were written with her audience so sharply in mind, it is often

difficult to get a sense of when Cooper is speaking from her own most deeply held convictions" (Bailey 2004, 70). While Bailey traces this opacity to Cooper's numerous rhetorical appeals, it is likely also the result of her work's multivocality. In what remains, I want to suggest that the opacity Bailey identifies also serves a democratic purpose in *Voice*. What at first appears as contradiction can also be interpreted, I want to suggest, as a certain indeterminacy as to the ultimate meaning of the multiracial women's solidarity she advocates; that indeterminacy can be read as a sort of openness in contrast to the racist overdetermination of the movement as conceived by her opponents. If *Voice*'s rhetorical dimensions seem to obscure at times her own message, it might be helpful to turn from Cooper's "Soprano Obligato" to her other metaphor for voice, the collective, improvisational "Tutti ad Libitum."

In her recent work, Judith Butler offers a compelling picture of the politics of assembly at moments of impasse, of corporeal, collective self-representation of those silenced by the neoliberal state. Assembly, Butler argues, is a way of "lay[ing] claim to rights when one has none" (Butler 2015, 57). The assembled, whose bodies and voices are thought unsuited for the power of speaking and appearing in public space, as members of the body politic, as "[their] *own sovereign*," as Cooper writes, inaugurate their "right to appear" as those previously-unauthorized bodies. One enters public space subject to norms regulating self-presentation (or its proscription), who can appear and speak and how, but with that subjection is also the possibility of deviating from those norms or performing identity otherwise, in ways heretofore illegible (e.g. Butler 2015, 34-35). This appearing, she notes, entails that one appears *to* someone, and there is a mutual vulnerability when people are together insofar as no one individual controls the reception or perception of their bodies (Butler 2015, 76-77). Recalling White's idea of the relational whole, this assembling creates another context, changing the meanings of the various embodied voices as it changes their context and subject of address.

This appearing *in common* is also a collective performance. Collectively, the assembly speaks, in a sense, before any particular demand is made. The context created through a mutual

appearing and perceiving in shared space constitutes an assembling in which identities can be performed otherwise; and those particular performances when co-present add up to a collective performance indicative, as in Zuccotti Park, Gezi Park, and Tahrir Square, of a popular will. She refers not to "a single identical will…but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies whose action and whose inaction demand a different future. Together they exercise the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law and that can never fully be codified into law" (Butler 2015, 75). Following Jason Frank's (2010) notion of "constituent moments," Butler understands assemblies as contestable performances of "the people," a self-authorizing collective which dissents from the "constituted" power of the state. Such performances are never final or incontestable; they produce representations *of* "the people" which give way to still others ad infinitum.

Cooper's chapter "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of A Race", originally an 1886 speech presented before a group of Black Episcopalian clergy, might be read through this lens. She contests the sole right of Black men to claim representation of African Americans as a group, famously writing, "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (63). In this respect, her effort is indeed to represent a popular will of the constituency assembled, without on the other hand declaring a final definition as to that will.

But what sort of collective performance does Cooper draw in chapters like "Woman versus the Indian"? What I described in section II does not constitute an "assembly" in the traditional, democratic sense, but something more like its use in certain techniques and aesthetics of art and literature, such as Joseph Cornell's boxes or William S. Burroughs' cut-ups (Brown 2020, 271 and 265, respectively). The collective meaning of these constructions' parts is indeterminate, subject to a range of contrasting visions. Similarly, Cooper's work does not admit of any definite basis for democratic community in the present, but instead stages an uncertain

relation among the conflicting parts she assembles. Her opening lines to *Voice* gesture toward a chaos of unresolved meanings, a "clash and clatter of our American Conflict" in which the south remains collectively opaque, a mysterious "Sphinx" inspiring "vociferous disputation" but admitting no answer. Even as she argues for the necessity of the Black Woman's voice, she does not, on the other hand, suggest that this "mute and voiceless note" will entirely resolve this dissonance (51). She writes within that impasse, and describes her voice as a series of "broken utterances," her receptivity—"Delicately sensitive at every pore to social atmospheric conditions"—offering a "clearer vision and a truer pulse-beat in studying our Nation's Problem" (52).[21]

Cooper's *Voice* joins a broader tradition of "multivocality" in the works of Black women authors, as Mae Henderson suggests, an interrogation of the complexity of their identity's relation to, and at times entanglement with, difference. These works have an "interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity" (Henderson 1989, 3). As I read in section II, an array of voices, some of them dissonant, structure the scene in which Cooper discloses her own. But the bodies she interpolates into her writing are also more than the contrary discourses she seeks to "disrupt" and "revise": they appear, she arranges them, and they have meaning, as Butler maintains, as such.

Richard Iton writes of mid-twentieth century artists like Paul Robeson, who in addition to blurring the racialized boundaries separating "legitimate" political expression from Black art, also

> disrupted..the enforcement of other norms that have been rendered as conventional wisdoms with regard to appropriate performances of class status, gender, and sexuality, as the boundary transgressor or space traitor takes things to places they do not belong,

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[21] White offers an interesting, contrasting reading of this passage, which highlighted for me some of the above themes; see White 2004, 84-5.

> carrying materials and sentiments that are quotidian in one arena into contexts where they become unavoidably surplus and intrinsically provocative (Iton 2008, 32).

The "space of appearance" of the embodied voices in Cooper's writing generates a "surplus" of meanings beyond the boundaries of Jim Crow and the Jim Crow'd women's counterpublic. The dissonant elements her contemporary critics differently seek to resolve might otherwise be understood in two complementary ways. First, her assembly is dissonant in a descriptive sense. She offers no present basis for democratic community among women because her work describes from the standpoint of Black women a conflict disavowed by white activists who understand their womanhood through the terms of a "binary opposition" which excludes them (Spillers 1987, 66). When Cooper does deploy the first-person plural, it is from an intersectional position denied by her readers, a flexible "we" subject invoked throughout the text: "we" Black Americans (61-2), "we" women (90), "we" westerners (74), among others, but most of all a presumptive "we" of author and reader, "we" who explore this argument, who engage—albeit through different roles—in this meaning-making. These unities are just as often contradicted, as when Cooper compares her earlier experience traveling by train with that of a group of "American girls," who are implied white; or when she abruptly transitions from speaking of "we" author and reader to a "*you*" who must answer for what is heretofore disavowed.

And second, this "surplus" might be read to act as a productive aporia. I mentioned in section I that an attunement to unrealized and perhaps disruptive possibility is itself a facet of receptivity for contemporary theorists. The contestation she writes into *Voice* is in some sense an effort to disclose a relation between the assembled whose interaction is otherwise precluded. As in assemblage art, it is the variable relation among parts arranged in the same space that signals its multiple interpretive possibilities. As bodies who speak, moreover—bodies in action—Cooper is also disclosing something which can't fully fit in her writing. They are between themselves a stage which exists in the reader's imagination, on which new actions might occur. In this respect, it is not always clear to me that Cooper is positing some specific possibility—as in

the aspirational account I describe in section I—so much as a set of relationships disavowed as "social equality" by her interlocutors but which invite imagination of new, undisclosed combinations of experience, expression, belief and interest.

Conclusion

African American political thinkers have long recognized the asymmetrical character of their own silence or invisibility. Du Bois writes in "The Souls of White Folk,"

> Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know…And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human. (Du Bois 2004, 21).

This asymmetry is simultaneously a facet of the "silence" Cooper describes, as well as the possibility of critical insight of the "outsider within." Democratic possibility arises through an active openness to plurality, but that openness needs to be reciprocal if it is to function as a basis for democratic community, and the powerful maintain their position through an often willing blindness or obfuscation. Cooper's *Voice* is remarkable in part because she deploys this asymmetry as a facet of her authorship, assembling in writing relations violently denied in intercorporeal public space. Her work is a contribution to a broader, understudied democratic politics of impasse. Returning to Jim Crow era thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper, readers can find

resources for thinking democratic possibility in undemocratic times—an insurgent, anti-racist politics in a moment with deep connections and continuities to Cooper's own.

2.

James Weldon Johnson's Democracy Rag

In his 1925 *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson, writing with his brother Rosamond, quotes at length the white music critic H.E. Kriebiehl's recollections of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition's "Dahomey Village":

> The players showed the most remarkable rhythmical sense and skill that ever came under my notice....The fundamental effect was a combination of double and triple time, the former kept by the singers, the latter by the drummers, but it is impossible to convey the idea of the wealth of detail achieved by the drummers by means of exchange of the rhythms, syncopation of both simultaneously, and dynamic devices. Only by making a score of the music could this be done. I attempted to make such a score by enlisting the help of the late John C. Fillmore, experienced in Indian music, but we were thwarted by the players who, evidently divining our purpose when we took out our notebooks, mischievously changed their manner of playing as soon as we touched pencil to paper.... (Johnson and Johnson, 2002, 18).

Recorded here is an encounter which resists recording. Kriebiehl's account contains vague details about the general sort of performance he witnessed, but the music itself escapes the "representational timelessness" of his hoped-for transcription (Brooks 2006, 6). Perhaps it even escapes the constraints of the Exposition's imagination of Africa symbolized by the "Dahomey Village." What the passage instead reveals is a sort of struggle between the possessive listener-turned-writer, and the performers, playing for an exhibit in the racially segregated "White City," who share something with, while safeguarding it from capture by, their audience.

Throughout his career as an author, NAACP Executive Secretary, and ragtime composer with his brother Rosamond Johnson and the performer Bob Cole, Johnson explored this delicate interval as two sides of a *democratic* tension, articulated most forcefully in his 1912 novel *The*

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. A democrat writing amid Jim Crow segregation, Johnson saw in art, and music in particular, a possible bridge on which to engage the white world. But he recognized that such appeals also faced what Joel Olson (2002) calls a "participation-inclusion dilemma" in relation to audiences across the color line: efforts to achieve a robust and inclusive multiracial democracy had to contend with the latter's commitment to racial hierarchy, and that commitment often defined the terms of performance and its reception. As I read Johnson's writings, and the *Autobiography* in particular, I am struck by the ways this tension, between fugitive performance and democratic appeal, is in fact generative. In what follows, I argue the *Autobiography* offers in key respects an aesthetic, democratic politics: an appeal to white audiences "not yet ready for democracy" (Johnson, undated note); but one shaped by the fugitive freedom of Black musical performances his novel engages.

Johnson offers what I take to be neither (only) a hopeful effort at reconstructing democratic community, nor (only) a fugitive rejection of its unjust terms. In this sense, his account parallels Anna Julia Cooper's in chapter 1: each confront misrecognition, or what Ellison calls (or is at least one facet of) invisibility, by authoring relations across the color line otherwise. In doing so, they present aspirational visions of democracy, but neither author attempts (only) to interpolate their white readers as members of a present shared democratic community. Instead, they render that relation opaque. But Johnson departs from Cooper in the aims of that opacity, as well as its form. Whereas Cooper's *Voice* was a means of turning from "silence" to an assembly in which the Black woman's "voiceless note" might sound, Johnson, as I argue below, tries to render opaque existing relationships between Black performers and dominative white listeners. Where Cooper's assembling departs from silence to draw new, indeterminate relationships beyond the hierarchies and exclusions of the turn of the century women's movement, fugitivity works in Johnson's writing to render music uncertain and

dynamic, distinguishing performers' freedom from both the expectations of the novel's listeners as well as its readers.

Political theorists in recent years have sought to grapple with historical and present anti-blackness as a constitutive constraint on democratic possibility. Familiar dynamics of democratic history-making, the cycles of "the people's" continual, contested reconstitution through collective action, are troubled by their persistent, implicit premise of racial exclusion and domination (Hesse 2011). At the same time, theorists have turned to the history of the Black Atlantic to understand forms of freedom "between slavery and [familiar concepts of] freedom" thought and practiced by the marginalized themselves, a focal point of which has been the theory and practice of fugitivity (Roberts 2015, 4; see generally Aslam et al. 2019; Hesse 2014). The historical and continuing basis of white collective sovereignty on racial domination troubles any easy identity of fugitivity with democracy in the context of "racial polities" like the US. Sheldon Wolin (1994) influentially theorized democratic politics as a fugitive, episodic act, in contrast to the static, ossified power of institutions, law, and the representatives who claim to speak in the demos' name. Wolin probes less the constitution of the demos itself, nor the kinds of relations of power which might shape it, so much as its distinction from static order as a dynamic, spontaneous expression of collective voice. But as Juliet Hooker argues, the thought and practice of the Black fugitive tradition has probed precisely this question, and has entailed "a rejection of the strategy of seeking inclusion into existing racial states due to pessimism about their ability to be reorganized on bases other than white supremacy" (Hooker 2015, 691). Frederick Douglass's thought, for instance, shifted in important ways between two often conflicting orientations: a "[d]emocratic hope [which] recognizes democracy's impermanent, contingent, and imperiled character but nevertheless remains committed to the struggle to perfect it," and a "black fugitive hope [which] seeks to enable black freedom while maintaining distance from slavery's afterlife and white supremacy because the polity is not easily reconstituted on more racially egalitarian grounds" (Hooker 2015, 698).

These inquiries also reflect on recent work highlighting the foundational character of race to Western concepts of the political in general, and US democracy in particular. Christina Sharpe, for instance, argues that "The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, *necessary*; it is the ground we walk on" (Sharpe 2016, 15; emphasis mine). Modern life is lived "in the wake" of the slave ship's trail, or what Du Bois called the "present-past" of slavery. Sharpe recasts freedom as forms of what she calls "wake work": negotiations of an inescapable historical structure, "imagin[ing] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property" (Sharpe 2016, 18; see also Sexton 2011). Some democratic theorists respond to this rejection of the political as such by seeking to preserve the critical insight fugitive thought and practice offer while also understanding the latter as a possible source of democratic "renewal" (Aslam et al. 2019). As George Shulman (forthcoming) notes in his commentary on Fred Moten's thought, rejections of the political as it is presently and historically constituted open space not only for the cultivation of other, "antepolitical" visions of freedom (as Moten has it), but also for a much deeper reconstruction of what democracy *could* mean, shaped by the acknowledgment of this impasse.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a fictionalized autobiography, published anonymously in its first edition by Sherman, French and Co., which traces the journeys of its "ex-colored" narrator back and forth across the Jim Crow color line. The narrator's African American mother had been the "sewing girl" of his absent father's white, aristocratic Georgian family. A child with "ivory" skin and dark hair (12),[22] he lives a white childhood until a schoolteacher reveals his identity during class. The narrator's transitions in life largely follow, as Cristina L. Ruotolo (2015) notes, his shifting musical preoccupations: from his mother's improvised performances of hymns and songs from her past; his fascination with the ragtime scene of New York City's Tenderloin district, where he becomes an accomplished ragtime

[22] Unless indicated otherwise, in-text citations are to the 1912 edition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

pianist; his experiences of spirituals at a religious revival in rural Georgia; and finally, back to New York, where he decides to renounce "the African blood in [his] veins" (106) and plays Chopin at the piano with his "lily" white wife. While the novel opens with a specifically democratic appeal to engage audiences beyond the "veil"[23] of the color line, Johnson's writing in fact navigates a complex interval of, as I will suggest, expression as flight and as appeal.

I do not argue Johnson resolves the dichotomy with which Douglass struggled before him. Rather, I understand him as a promising interlocutor in these discussions in part because his writings pursue the intersection of democracy and fugitive freedom specifically as a political *aesthetic* question. As I will explore further in section I in conversation with Lia Haro and Romand Coles (2019), there is a difference between fugitive democratic visions which assert a *new* political community apart from that which they flee, and visions which find a politics within, but not (or not yet) beyond their refusal of the terms of its present constitution. Ideas of democratic fugitivity in the former case tend, like Wolin's classic discussion, to posit an outside or insurgent collective subject. Flight's democratic character in these instances depends on a "flight toward," as Haro and Coles put it, a democracy elsewhere constrained.

But Johnson's predicament is that of a democrat working through a refusal of political community's present terms, for whom, as his narrator learns, there is no "elsewhere" so long as he is committed to an American multiracial democratic project. His attention to African American art and music, which continued into his career with the NAACP, reflects what Richard Iton (2008) describes as the movement of Black politics into the realm of culture when avenues of formal politics are closed and one cannot affirm the existing terms of "the people's" formation, yet "[o]pting out…is not a viable—or available—response" (Iton 2008, 15). As I read him, Johnson departs from Wolin's ideal of the explosion of a unified, collective voice, rejecting a shared sovereignty with racist whites in the present; and he does so while embracing a

[23] As a number of critics have noted, Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* is implicitly referenced—often parodically—throughout the novel. See Fabi, 2001; see also Baker 1973, 437; Goellnicht 1996, 19; Smith 1987, 58; Stepto 1991, 344.

democractic aesthetic politics defined, in a sense, by that refusal.[24] If the present task of democratic theorists thinking about the Black fugitive tradition is to think democratically while preserving the latter's insights, it is crucial to theorize the democratic possibilities of thought which rejects the available terms of political community without transcending them. Political thinkers throughout the period Johnson wrote did not only, in various ways, engage fugitivity as a theme; their writings were themselves shaped by their fugitive elements. One might consider in this regard Ida B. Wells' use of a pseudonym (Iola) in her journalism, much of it written from exile; or Du Bois' characterization of *Souls*' chapters as "fugitive pieces," a description Lawrie Balfour argues points to the "experimental approach" of his essays, as well as the unfinished and impermanent nature of the democracy he struggled toward (Balfour 2011, 18-19). Indeed, Kevin Young understands this shaping as a much broader facet of African American art, what he calls the "black art of escape" often prerequisite to imagining new worlds (Young 2012, 19).

Section I offers a discussion of the turn of the century historical and political context in which Johnson theorized music as a democratic practice. Here, I suggest how Johnson understood aesthetic expression, and especially the rise of ragtime as popular, commercial music, as a national, political stage for Black artists during Jim Crow. Turning to the *Autobiography,* I suggest that this aesthetic politics is qualified by the possessive orientation Johnson depicts in white practices of musical reception. The following two sections explore the aesthetics which results from that tension.

In section II, I read the *Autobiography*'s musical scenes in conversation with the work of Fred Moten to offer an account of sound's fugitive presence in writing. In particular, the *Autobiography*'s improvised musical performances highlight what Moten (2017) might call writing's "enabling disability" in representing music, giving the latter a fugitive quality, a free(r) expression which evades the sorts of capture his novel depicts. At the same time, I read the

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[24] He remained firmly committed to an aspirational, multiracial democracy, even understanding the mass exodus of African Americans from the South in the 1920s through the lens of its possibilities for democratic freedom in the South (Johnson 2004, 650-1). Which is not to deny his praise of such marronage in Haiti, with which Roberts is concerned. See Johnson's (2004) "Self-Determining Haiti."

distance between the narrator's written recollection and the sounds of his mother's parlor, the ragtime club in New York, and the "big meeting" revival in rural Georgia, as moments of a freer imagination, rather than a simple absence.

I conclude in section III with a reading of this mis- or non-translation in conversation with turn of the century panic over syncopated rhythms and their supposed moral and psychological effects. I consider what it would mean to characterize Johnson writing as a kind of "rag," a syncopated writing which does not only incorporate and interpolate but is also shaped by sound, offering a disruptive challenge to (particularly its white) readers even as it seeks to transcend the tyranny of white reception. While in section I, I try to distance my reading of Johnson's thought from visions of fugitive democracy which presuppose democratic community, here I try to think of how my reading of the *Autobiography*'s fugitivity is compatible with Johnson's political aesthetics. If the travels of Johnson's narrator make appeals, like Wolin's, to the "people's" voice unlikely, neither does his vision reflect certain contemporary rejections of the political as such.

I. Sounding Democracy

The *Autobiography*'s "Publisher's Preface," authored by Johnson himself, promises to bridge an epistemological divide hindering the formation of a demos across the color-line. Through the narrator's story, himself made fugitive by the color line across which he travels, the book "shows in a dispassionate, though sympathetic, manner conditions as they actually exist between the whites and blacks to-day." And echoing W.E.B. Du Bois' metaphor in *The Souls of Black Folk* written ten years prior, he writes that "[i]n these pages it is as though a veil had been drawn aside: the reader is given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the 'freemasonry,' as it were, of the race." In doing so, he also hopes to offer a mirror to the white reader, writing ironically that it "is curiously interesting and even vitally important to know what are the thoughts of ten millions of them concerning the people among whom they

live" (3). In addition to *Souls*, the democratic aims of this statement recall the conventions of African American autobiography as grounded in the assertion of the narrator's representative identity and experience (Smith 1987, 46; Gates 1985, 11; for an analysis of these themes in Johnson's novel, see Goellnicht 1996). If the United States was separated into multiple lifeworlds by the color line, the *Autobiography* appears to be an appeal, in part, to white audiences, and perhaps an assertion, for (or on behalf of) Black audiences, of a particular representative claim the success of which rests on its authenticity, hence Johnson's insistence, in its first edition, that he remain anonymous and the novel be marketed as autobiography.[25]

In this section, I consider these aims in light of the *Autobiography*'s vivid, complicating accounts of white reception at the turn of the century. I read Johnson's novel to reflect a resulting ambivalence which shapes, ultimately, the role of the novel in his democratic theory and, as I will suggest, distinguishes his vision of democratic community from the more affirmative picture in contemporary fugitive democratic theory.

In crafting the *Autobiography* as a sort of epistemological bridge, Johnson anticipates what he would later call an "art approach" to racial politics: the idea that, while other avenues of communication are closed by Jim Crow domination and exclusion, art was "the plane on which all men are more willing to meet and stand with us" (Johnson, 1924). "The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced," and "nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art" (Johnson 1922, vii). Johnson's democratic appeal in the *Autobiography* rests in particular on his disclosure of African American music, principally spirituals and ragtime, and what he regarded as its central role in constituting identity. Like Du Bois, Johnson saw in spirituals a

[25] While some critics have read this statement as parodic, it is also true that Johnson published his work anonymously, and wished readers to think it a genuine autobiography. As he wrote to his publisher, one aim in writing the book was to offer "a composite and proportionate representation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups, showing their relations with each other and to the whites," the latter of whom might "be interested in knowing the opinion concerning themselves held by ten million people living among them" (Johnson, letter to Sherman French & Co. 2014 [1912], 223).

source of African American self-recognition, "the beginning of an entirely new phase of race consciousness" (Johnson 2002a, 49) as well as the possibility of white recognition through what he understood as their universal appeal and sympathy-inspiring character. Ragtime's status as a "popular" music gave it a slightly different significance: Johnson praised ragtime as America's "national" musical language, a shared "medium" by which African American artists were co-defining a national identity (Johnson 1922, x, xv).

But these democratic appeals are complicated by his sober depiction of whites' dominative habits. Indeed, his praise of art as a possible site of democratic possibility appears, at times, almost as a useful redescription of what art *might* be. For instance, even as Johnson elsewhere describes ragtime as *already* a sort of national language (Johnson 1922, xv), its popularity does not thereby preclude the necessity of his advocating its *possible* role in the struggle for recognition. This is because, as Johnson shows most viscerally in his novel, while ragtime gained popularity and offered a potential platform for Black expression, the dominative practices of white listeners and capital blunted its democratic possibility. The growth of the US commercial music industry, a rise with which Johnson Brothers and Cole's musical success coincided, was deeply shaped by white appetite for minstrel songs, what Johnson characterized as "the play of razors, with gastronomical delights of chicken, pork chops and watermelon, and with the experiences of red-hot 'mammas' and their never too faithful 'papas'" (Johnson 2004 [1933], 299; Ellison 1995, 48; see also Berlin 1980, 33-38, Floyd 1995, ch. 3, and Ruotolo 2015, 415-16).[26] When not excluded altogether, what Louis Chude-Sokei (2006) calls a "social contract" of blackface mediated black artists' participation in this burgeoning industry, as they were forced to take on the sonic and visual form of white imagination as a condition of their expression (see also Brackett 2016, 84; Ruotolo 2015, 415).[27] If, as Noelle Morrissette

[26] Efforts to market toward black audiences would not gain speed until the rise of the "race record," with Mamie Smith's 1920 hit "Crazy Blues" (see Brackett 2016, ch. 3; and Suisman 2009, ch. 7).
[27] White composers also often stole their compositions from black artists, and the compositions of the latter (including Johnson Brothers and Cole) were marketed with the images of popular white faces. Johnson describes the former in the *Autobiography*, p. 54.

convincingly argues, the *Autobiography* is in part an effort to instill in the "white reading public" a "sonic literacy," an "ability to recognize, reveal, and value black culture and appreciate and cement its bond to American culture" (Morrissette 2013, 44), the relations of power defining performance and reception also shaped that effort. Ragtime may have become a "national art," but so too, as Ralph Ellison noted, was the minstrel (see Ellison 1995, 48).

The *Autobiography* contains Johnson's most vivid descriptions of white consumers' dominative habits, illustrated by the narrator's complex relationship with his white patron, known only as the "millionaire." After gaining some renown as a ragtime pianist in New York City, the narrator begins working for the latter as his personal musician. Early descriptions stress his possessiveness: his "stipulation" in hiring the narrator is that "I should not play any engagements such as I had filled for him" for anyone else, "except by his instructions" (64). The narrator plays for his parties, or is "[o]ccasionally…'loaned' [] to some of his friends" (64), or at other times he plays for the millionaire alone, treated as what Bruce Barnhart calls a sort of "human phonograph" who performs at command, and often late into the night (Barnhart 2006, 559). Here, capture of the narrator himself is linked to the capture of his expressive agency: the patron sits with closed eyes, as if to deny the performer's presence, and the only words he speaks are commands "to play this or that"; "I soon learned that my task was not to [b]e considered finished until he got up from his chair and said, 'That will do'" (64). At times, "this man sitting there so mysteriously silent, almost hid in a cloud of heavy-scented smoke, filled me with a sort of unearthly terror. He seemed to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion" (64).

The millionaire's parlor echoes an earlier scene in which the narrator is asked to play Chopin for his absent white father; and both anticipate his flight into a white life in New York, where he again plays Chopin with his white wife. The aforementioned metaphor of the "human phonograph" usefully connects these moments to scenes of written recording in the novel, from the efforts of his boyhood music teacher to "pin[him] down to the notes" (8), to his depiction of

white musicians scribbling down what they can of Black musicians' work in the ragtime club, and finally to his doomed effort to transcribe and translate spirituals into white, classical forms. Implicit in these moments is a critical reflection on a longue durée, racialized distinction between writing, as a supposedly white, western form of expression, and the perceptual, affect-laden music and orality (Ruotolo 2015, 420). More broadly, at stake in these scenes is a relation of domination, wherein the narrator's expression is reduced to the performance of another's desire. Johnson depicts something akin to what Fred Moten calls the "phonographic mise-en-scène of subjection" (Moten 2017, 128), the reduction of improvised music to something static and legible, a "noun" in Nathaniel Mackey's sense of an "erasure of black inventiveness by white appropriation," which "obscures or 'disappears' the 'verb' it rips off, black agency, black authority, black invention" (Mackey 1992, 52).

By contrast, the other musical performances by the novel's Black characters are improvised or played "by ear": without written score or the commands of a white listener. The narrator's earliest musical experiences are those of his mother, singing or playing hymns and, on other nights, "old southern songs," performances in which she was "freer, because she played them by ear." Soon, he offers his own improvisations, moved "often [to] interrupt and annoy her by chiming in with strange harmonies" (7). The Big Meeting too is a scene of (collective) improvisation, led by a traveling performer who "could improvise at the moment new lines to fit the occasion" (93). Johnson places these scenes in fugitive spaces, within and apart from the broader Jim Crow society his narrator seeks to explain. The ragtime club is invisible from the street, hidden in a building with darkened windows, above a chop suey restaurant. The Big Meeting, on the other hand, is made up of multiple congregations traveling, some by foot, to "some centrally located church for a series of meetings lasting a week" (90).

As I will elaborate in the next section, this conflict between recording and improvisation ultimately complicates the aims of the Publisher's Preface. As Valerie Smith has argued, unlike the "slave narrators [who] link their sense of humanity to the capacity for resistance and to the

ability to describe their development of identity," Johnson's narrator is instead aporetic, abandoning his Black identity by the end of the novel, and living with the regret of having "sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (110; Smith 1987, 46 and Karem 2017). Critics note the narrator's uncertain relation to his racial identities, as perhaps a sort of antihero or "failed race man" (Andrade 2006, 258; see also Baker 1973, 442; Fabi 2001, ch. 4; Stepto 1991, ch. 4). Part of this uncertainty, in fact, results from a failed transcription of the improvisations the narrator celebrates, the latter admitting of only a hazy representation in his writing. Echoing accounts of African American music as expressive of collective experience and group identity—parallels to *Souls* are, again, apparent in this regard—he hopes to find in ragtime and spirituals the potential to "voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro," albeit, in his case, "in classical form" (77). His closeness to African American culture and identity is primarily determined by his experiences with this music, while his life as a white man in New York City takes Chopin as its soundtrack. Yet those same performances are not, cannot be, transcribed in his account. The most moving passages of the book, from his mother's music to the ragtime club to the curiously named "Singing Johnson's" performances of spirituals at the Big Meeting, depict improvised, unwritten works. What results is a generative collision: the democratic aims of the Publisher's Preface, with its promise to bridge an epistemological divide between "two worlds"; and the uncertain, unwriteable music *out of which* that very bridge is to be constructed.

The foregoing points toward an important, often unnoted distinction in democratic theory. One way of approaching the intersection of fugitivity and democracy centers, like Wolin's influential essay, on democracy as collective self-determination. In their fascinating study of border communities of the Underground Railroad, for instance, Lia Haro and Romand Coles describe the possibilities of democratic fugitivity as a (re)constructive "flight to" rather than "from," a kind of insurgent, fugitive democratic founding in border communities of those who "made their home on slavery's doorstep" (Griffler, qtd. in Haro and Coles 2019, 655). Towns and

cities along the borders of free states, and between the US and Canada, became "sanctuary communities," growing with the success of former bondspeople who chose to stay and aid abolitionist efforts for others. They suggest a "creative oscillation" between practices of "flight" and "sanctuary" through which communities constructed a form of democratic "community autonomy" apart from a broader racist "white democracy" (Haro and Coles 2019, 650). This ideal of often insurgent, fugitive democracy as a form of political community-making also arguably characterizes Roberts' (2015) aforementioned discussion of the founding of Haiti as an act of marronage, as well as Douglass's remarks on Black republics like Nicaragua and the Mosquito Coast (Hooker 2015).

But there is a useful difference between the insurgent democracy of these self-determining border communities, and what Haro and Coles later describe as the "flagrantly public" displays by abolitionists in New York and Boston, whose actions included aiding fugitives in broad daylight, authoring newspaper accounts of escape and sanctuary, and acts of collective defense. These efforts, they argue, "did not merely happen *in* public," but rather "formed and transformed *publicness itself* as the womb of sanctuary moved outward in strange ways that magnified and modulated capacities for political birthing and natality" (Haro and Coles 2019, 661-2).[28]

The distinction I am drawing, and which I will explore in the following sections, concerns a different political relationship to the community from which one flees, and correspondingly, demands a different account of what that flight entails. In the first scenario Haro and Coles describe, flight's destination is democracy because the latter's boundaries concern the growth of border communities with their own collective will, ethics, and enforcement. Freedom and democratic community coincide, and they share semi-autonomous spaces. But the Publisher's Preface to the *Autobiography*, like the "art approach" he articulated later, does not rely on the possibility of a present, or even an insurgent, democratic community. This is not to say Johnson

[28] The authors also mention a third facet of fugitive democracy in this case, a "fruitful dynamic oscillation" between formal and informal political practices (Haro and Coles 2019, 665).

disregards that possibility, especially within the turn of the century Black counterpublic, or his support, as he argued in his essay "Self-Determining Haiti," for self-determining Black democracies outside the US. Rather, the role of aesthetics in Johnson's democratic thought is in part to engage a multiracial public of readers and listeners while finding means to do so freely. This politics is closer to what Daphne Brooks (2006) refers to as Henry "Box" Brown's "escapology," his efforts across media to challenge the terms of his experience and self-representation, creating spectacular public performances which nevertheless contained "opaque" elements unavailable to his audience. Such performances frustrated the generic expectation of "translucence" in African American autobiography (Brooks 2006, 74; see also Hesse 2014, 307). And in doing so, they broadened the bounds of the "sayable," representations "lacking in referentiality because they are routinely prohibited by the conventions or rules of what can be formulated in a particular discourse" (Hesse 2014, 290). Writing and music were the intersection at which Johnson found this possibility.

II. Writing Rag

The narrator's parlor performances stand in stark contrast to the musical scenes which bookend them: the Tenderloin ragtime club and the rural "Big Meeting" revival. If the former represents a kind of dispossessive, white colonization of black performance in the *Autobiography*, these latter scenes function as otherwise spaces of a free(r) musical expression. My interest here is not to explore, in a detailed way, the kind of music which would result from that freedom. Rather, it is in how Johnson's novel constructs spaces of an expression which is free insofar as it is indeterminate, never final—spaces of improvisation *within* writing, the text itself serving as a stage of performance. I wrote in the previous section that written music, as a non-improvisational, determined script, seems often to function as freedom's opposite in the *Autobiography* (Ruotolo 2015, 420): from the efforts of his boyhood music teacher to "pin[him] down to the notes" (8), to his doomed effort to transcribe and translate spirituals into white,

classical forms. But I argue here that it is also writing's *failure*, it's "enabling disability" in translating sound, which shapes the *Autobiography*'s fugitive politics.

In depicting the ragtime and spirituals in the *Autobiography*, Johnson writes several improvised performances, some of them unnamed, and others departures from popular or folk songs readers may have been familiar with. Noelle Morrissette notes, for instance, that the narrator's ragged version of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" recalls existing ragtime variations of that work popularized by Axel Christiansen, and used even earlier by "Bert Williams and Will Marion Cook for their 1906 show *Abyssinia*" (2017, 200-1). But the "ragging" itself, the improvised syncopations to that song, are not available to the reader in the same way as (what Johnson called) the "tone picture" of the "March" down the aisle would likely be. Interestingly, the narrator's recollection of his own experiences of listening mirror this sense of a music which eludes capture. This is most evident, as I will suggest later, when he tries to record folk songs in rural Georgia. But it is also a general, multifaceted condition of music throughout the novel. To take only one example, Johnson notably sets the Tenderloin district ragtime club and the "Big Meeting" religious revival in rural Georgia within and apart from the world the narrator experiences as a white man: the former hidden in a building with darkened windows, above a Chinese restaurant; the latter moving from church to church, and made up of multiple traveling congregations. The spaces themselves seem temporary or improvised, surrounded by but distinct from the places where he "passes," mirroring the unexpected performances they house, and acting as stages of musical self-determination.

There is an aporetic quality to music's presence in writing, arising from a tension between its sonic materiality and writing as a visual-dominant medium. Here I follow Fred Moten, who understands aesthetics, in so many ways, as always synaesthetic, containing something which exceeds a given medium of expression. Moten is attentive to what he calls the "beautiful distance between sound and the writing of sound," which he understands as a kind of indeterminate, improvisational space. Cecil Taylor's performance in his poem-album

Chinampas, for instance, is an improvised reading, performed with musical ensemble. The way he reads, including whispers and words dropped, pauses, and shifts "from word to growl" (Moten 2003, 42), are improvisations of a poem which, in turn, cannot be transcribed without in some way reducing that ensemble. But that reduction of a poem's performance into writing, or live music onto the phonograph record, is not the end of the story. Reading and listening, listening and vision, vision and smell, and so on, seem to evoke one another. This is why Moten says of the opening scenes of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which descend between the beats of a phonograph playing Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do (To Be So Black and So Blue?)," that "you can't really read this novel. That's why it calls for and tries to open a new analytic way of listening and reading, an improvisation attuned to the ensemble of work's organization and production, the ensemble of the politico-economic structure in which it is produced and the ensemble of the senses from which it springs and with it stimulates" (Moten 2003, 67).

In describing the ensemble character of expression, Moten indicates an indeterminacy which endlessly defers a work's finality; it is always something more than the sounds, words, images, and so on, which appear to compose it. He therefore critiques Adorno's celebration of a "structural listening" made possible by the phonograph, a way of listening which approaches reading literature. Adorno describes "a familiarity which is hardly afforded by the ritual of performance. Such records allow themselves to be possessed just as previously one possessed art-prints" (Adorno quoted in Moten 2017, 127). Like (perhaps uncharitably) the patron with his eyes closed, Adorno finds the "spectacle of the performing body" to "degrade[] music with the visual" (128), desiring instead a form of listening which is more akin to the act of reading. But that desire, he finds, is thwarted by what he also discerns as the bodies invoked by the music he hears, especially when "the self to which the gramophone refers" is not "identical with its sound," as he says is the case of women's voices, which "require[] the physical appearance of the body that carries it" (Adorno, qtd. in Moten 2017, 125-6).

Sensations leak between media in uncertain ways. Readers hear sound, sound is part of the imaginative process of reading; but that sound is often indeterminate: the reader's sounding (whether mental or aloud) is an interpretation of, and does not exhaust, its textual presence. Because these sounds are partly unhearable to the reader, they stand in, at times, as a kind of indeterminate departure from the possessive white control and minstrel imaginary Johnson grappled with. Sound's poor recording in writing, its lo- to no-fidelity, allows the representation of performances without fixity. Although it is unclear whether Johnson himself conceptualized authoring performance this way, he did write of a racialized distance between writing and music. For Johnson, in fact, the performance of some music, and the spirituals in particular, seems to *require* a sense of what lies beyond the notes. This, he writes, accounts for the failure of white artists to play the spirituals: "Of course, they play the notes correctly, but any American can at once detect that there is something lacking. The trouble is, they play the notes too correctly, and *do not play what is not written down*" (my emphasis, Johnson 2002, 28).

Sound's textual presence grows stranger, less decipherable, as the novel's improvised performances veer further from any legible foundation in the era's soundscape. How do you write about a song without a name, or an improvised departure played in response to the sounds and passions of a room? These performances appear in half-heard tones as the reader imagines Johnson's musical scenes; but they are not sheet music, they are never defined, even to the narrator himself. For his part, the (fictional) author's task is to express something lost: sounds which once defined his experience, even his identity, but refused fixity then as they do now. The novel ends with a lament for his lost (mother/'s) songs and a natality once possible through that music; but the failure of that presentation offers its own possibility.

That the musical performances of the novel are indeterminate does not mean they are disembedded from history or musical tradition (on this point see also Moten 2003, 64). The various musicians in the story who play with an improvisatory freedom, "by ear," still work within a narrative which binds that performance to, recalling Sharpe's metaphor, the "wake," the

violent currents of slavery's present-past. The novel's spirituals and rags might be said to take history as the ground upon which their improvised departures are possible, and in so doing, it also shifts the status of the sounds Johnson's novel interpolates from the broader commercial soundscape, wresting them as captured sounds without history and reframing them as historical sounds without capture.[29]

Johnson's own musical works consciously navigated between history and innovation. His co-authored musical with Rosamond, "The Evolution of Ragtime," for instance, drew a historical narrative of musical styles from African traditions to ragtime's contemporary popularity, and his later writings on music stress a temporal entanglement of African diasporic music that recalls Du Bois's famous statement on the Sorrow Songs (see Johnson 1922 and 2002 [1925]). Johnson's writings follow a historical relation in African American music, as Samuel Floyd writes, between memory and form, "where the 'memory' drives the music and the music drives memory" (1995, 8; see also Baraka 2002 [1963], x). He quotes clarinetist Sidney Bechet:

> A musicianer could be playing it in New Orleans, or Chicago, or New York….in London, in Tunis, in Paris, in Germany….But no matter where it's played, you gotta hear it starting way behind you. There's the drum beating from Congo Square and there's the song starting in a field just over the trees. The good musicianer, he's playing *with* it, and he's playing *after* it….
>
> It's the remembering song. There's so much to remember (emphasis original, 1995, qtd. 9).

That relation to history acted also as a site of self-definition against the (a)historical narrations of the minstrel conventions and the "carry-me-backs" of white fantasies of the antebellum (Floyd 1995, 60), as well as the claims of white critics that the spirituals and ragtime had white

[29] In taking memory and African American folk traditions as a ground of innovation, the Autobiography follows a broader orientation of African American literary modernism, of which it is an early example; see Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1989).

origins (see Johnson 1925). It takes as its point of departure a recentered African American memory and tradition which serves as a new ground of improvised transcendence.

As the narrator's mother sings her "old southern songs," she discloses a history he as a child has only started to learn; yet the songs remain meaningful to him, and in trying to imitate her improvisations he finds himself unable to "keep the tears which formed in my eyes from rolling down my cheeks" (17).[30] Later, he describes a similar dynamic in ragtime. The improvised performances at the crowded Tenderloin club take place in a backroom. But before the narrator gets there, he and his companions pass through a front room "literally covered with photographs or lithographs of every colored man in America who had ever 'done anything'" (55). That spatial contiguity stands in for a temporal one, of the historical present-past upon which is improvised some future arrangement (see Stepto 1991, 123 ff.) In each of these scenes, music is played in and upon an imaginary derived from shared histories, traditions, and conditions, producing something new, and in stark contrast to the almost autonomic performances in the millionaire's parlor. Between the received and the improvised, or the improvised upon the received, is a musical freedom Johnson discloses continually throughout the *Autobiography*. And it retains its potency *as* an account of freedom precisely through its non-finality, the undisclosed character of its products, within the text.

The narrator's traveling between these scenes, and back and forth across the color line, displays divergent orientations to this freedom and, importantly, to writing. They are perhaps most interestingly displayed in the novel's ninth and tenth chapters, which detail his departure from Europe (and his patron) to the rural south on his doomed musical project. This trajectory begins when, playing before a white audience in Berlin, a "big be-spectacled, bushy-headed man rushed over, and, shoving me out of the chair, exclaimed, 'Get up! Get up!" and proceeded to play his ragtime song "through every known musical form" (74). While the narrator had been ragging the classics for his patron, this stranger had "taken ragtime and made it classic" (74).

[30] "Sometimes at the end or in the midst of a composition…I would jump from the piano, and throw myself sobbing into my mother's arms" (17).

The German's violence is consistent with the patron's: an extractive relationship to ragtime, the performance of which is molded to the demands of the white self. But instead of rejecting this intrusion, he adopts the German's vision, committing to a new project of translating the themes of the spirituals and ragtime into a white-legible form.[31]

He travels to rural Georgia, hoping at first to "catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state," and overjoyed by the "mine of material" he hopes to find there (90). As Robert Stepto notes, his approach "seeks neither communion nor succor" with those he encounters; "he comes not to embrace but to extract" (1991, 119; see also Ruotolo 2015, 423). In fact, he not only extracts, but abstracts, describing the need to leave that place in order to compose something classical out of the folk sounds he records (90). This is, in part, due to his anticipated future audience: the narrator expresses a desire for the fame he might receive through his transcription and translation; yet that fame also seems to entail his participation in a broader, racist public which demands those sounds be abstracted from any trace of the historical and present "black belt" from which they originate. He must, in recording, leaving, and translating, make the sounds he experiences as static as possible, to deprive them of the unexpected possibilities of their living performance.

But something shifts when he attends a "big meeting" religious revival, an event at which multiple congregations travel to "some centrally located church for a series of meetings lasting a week," coming "making the trip, according to their financial status, in buggies drawn by sleek, fleet-footed mules, in ox-teams, or on foot" (90). His initial plans are, at least in the space of the performance, disrupted; the "material" is clearly out of the miner's control. This latter scene offers Johnson's fullest exposition of the vision of expressive freedom the narrator never attains but hears, writes but fails to entirely translate.

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[31] Readers debate the political meaning of this "translation," which can certainly be read as a conservative endeavor to disembed the music from African American musical traditions (see Barnhart 2006; Goellnicht 1996; Stepto 1991; Washington 2002. But see also Morrissette 2013).

Recalling the revival, he describes the performance of "Singing Johnson," a "small, dark-brown, one-eyed man, with a clear, strong, high-pitched voice, a leader of singing and a maker of songs, a man who could improvise at the moment lines to fit the occasion" (93). As Johnson later writes, he is also based on a performer from the author's childhood (bearing the same name), who "was not a fixture in any one congregation or community, but went from one church to another, singing his way." Johnson notes that he "can recall that his periodical visits caused a flutter of excitement….These visits always meant the hearing and learning of something new. I recollect how the congregation would hang on his voice for a new song—new, at least to them" (2002 [1925], 22). The narrator presents the latter's performance as an improvised collaboration with the congregation, an art of "*memory and ingenuity*," knowing the "leading lines" to spirituals but also, constantly, creating "new words and melodies and new lines for old songs" (my emphasis, 93-94). The pairing of memory and improvisation is not simply a description of Singing Johnson's function in the event; he is not just a receptacle of memory, a "human phonograph," to again use Barnhart's (2006) phrase. Rather, the singer's task is to improvise with memory as his material, in dialogue with the many congregations which arrive for the big meeting. He must "know[] just what hymn to sing and when to sing it," and even when to "'sing down' a long-winded, or uninteresting speaker" (93). These performances of the spirituals, as Johnson later emphasizes, are efforts of *collective* improvisation, always in flux according to the artist(s) singing them and the context of their singing (2002 [1925], 21). Singing Johnson's lines are answered by the congregations' repetition of each song's refrains, their voices a gendered counterpoint of "the women singing the soprano and a transposed tenor, the men with high voices singing the melody, and those with low voices, a thundering bass" (94). Their answers are "a sound like the roll of the sea, producing a most curious effect" which the narrator is unable to describe (93).

Not only do Singing Johnson and the congregation improvise in song. The event itself is described as a kind of improvised, ephemeral thing, a collection of congregations brought

together by any means of travel, from several counties. It is a space apart from daily life, a few days out of the year in which one is both literally and figuratively transported in collective worship. The unpredictable makeup of that collective, as well as the specificity and unreproducibility of its coming together, characterize it as an improvised space of possibility. This is not the “normal” worship of one’s own congregation, of familiar faces and voices; it is the unanticipated confluence of strangers, led by a traveler who seems to belong to no congregation in particular.

As remembered refrains of the music through which “the slave spoke to the world” (Du Bois 1997, [1903], 189) are answered by the “roll of the sea,” the many singers give voice to a being in the wake, but it is more than an acknowledgment of that wake-being. It is a departure within it, a “break” in the waves which simultaneously expresses them while altering, for a moment, their predictable physics. Collective performance becomes a means of transcendence for the parishioners, extending from and within a historical condition and longing continuous with that of the songs’ earliest singers. It joins with other moments of such improvised performance and transcendence in the novel, from his mother’s singing to ragtime at the club: each of these spaces exist in the narrative as sites of uncertain performance which seize the narrator and remain unavailable to the reader, in which he cannot describe the “elusive undertone” of the music, a “note…which is not heard with the ears,” the effect of a performance which moves listener and performer—Singing Johnson, too, is described as “transported and utterly oblivious to his surroundings”—in unexpected, untranslatable ways.

The scene contrasts with the phonograph playing in the white, bourgeois living room—or, for that matter, the millionaire’s parlor. Although each playing of a recording differs by its context and hearing (Weheliye 2005, 32-33), Johnson has in some sense sought to “record” a sound which transcends its transcription. What he offers is a textual trace of sound’s possibility, a possibility which exists so long as his various sites of performance keep sounding. (This, perhaps, explains the conspicuous absence of phonographs in the novel). The reader reads

in the break between word and sound, recording and improvisation. The various songs which Johnson does name—"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Steal Away," as well as the host of ragtime songs to which he alludes—perhaps offer some basis for the reader's imagining, but they are also modified by the aporetic scenes Johnson paints. Johnson's novel, in this case, is a means of restaging those sounds, offering emancipatory possibilities not always available outside the text. But there is a second relationship Johnson explores between writing and sound, a way writing is shaped by sound, reflecting the political context of ragtime as well as ragtime's form. This second aspect of writing's relation to sound, what I call a kind of "rag writing," plays an important role in Johnson's emerging political aesthetics.

III. Rag Writing

There is an undated short story, written in pencil on brittle sheets in Johnson's archive, titled "A Ragtime Author." It details the success of a ragtime musician from his childhood musical prowess, supported by his mother's labor, up to the moment he is asked to sell his songs to a publisher of sheet music. He is a "ragtime author," in the sense that he has transcribed his music and, selling his compositions to a publisher, his works will be encountered primarily as writing and not the live musical performance with which the story begins. His choice of the word "author," rather than "composer," seems to invite consideration of the influence ragtime music, a genre defined by its syncopated rhythms, might bear on writing more broadly. The generatively "failed" translations I describe in section II may suggest that Johnson himself is involved in a sort of "rag writing," structured, like ragtime, by syncopative breaks in its structure. I want to suggest in what follows that what I take to be the novel's democratic aesthetics depend on the fugitive breaks described in section II. The scenes of flight Johnson stages *from* white reception also become an integral part of his democratic appeal, however qualified. In doing so, I suggest, Johnson's democratic aesthetics in fact *relies on* his novel's implicit, and elsewhere explicit, rejection of democratic community with Jim Crow whites.

As I noted in section I, by the 1920s, Johnson began to articulate ragtime and the spirituals as part of a broader political aesthetics, what he called in a 1924 address an "art approach to the race question" (Johnson, 1924; see Brooks 2017; Edwards 2003, 46 ff.). Johnson's musical career had largely passed with the beginning of his diplomatic post in 1906 and his later positions with the NAACP, but musical themes continued to animate his writing, in his influential "prefaces" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), both volumes of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (Johnson and Johnson 2002), authored with his brother Rosamond, *Black Manhattan*, and, in 1927, the second edition of the *Autobiography*. The political salience of music intersected at this moment with his skepticism, shared by Du Bois in the same period (Du Bois 2011, e.g. 304), of the promise of rational argument to shift the psychological and affective bases of Jim Crow. Aesthetic production, rather, "demonstrate[s]" what whites would not accept in the "abstract"—namely, that "the Negro possesses intellect, that he has high ideals, that his soul is sensitive to the most delicate nuances of spiritual reactions…" (Johnson, 1924). Art demands a recognition whites are not otherwise willing to grant: as "creature" as well as "creator," not a "neutral mass" to be ignored but an active force in shaping life in common and national "greatness" from which a new respect can emerge (Johnson, 1936).

While the term "syncope" refers, in music, to "pauses and elisions of stress," unexpected changes in rhythm, in the ragtime debates at the turn of the century, this musical definition of syncope merged with a second, physiological definition: the listener's "loss of consciousness" (Morissette 2013, 13). Critics claimed that syncopation created an opening for a "transference" between performer and listener, "a pause in the body, or an elision of sounds, in which *something else* could enter in" (Morrissette 2013, 49, my emphasis).[32] The politics of syncope intersected with white Jim Crow fears of black sexuality, a loss of white bodily control to black performers (see Morrissette 2013, 51). Johnson gestures toward these fears in the *Autobiography*, both in his references to white women's syncopated reception in New York's

[32] A debate very much continuous with white claims equating black public empowerment with the threat of sexual violation, what Johnson called "the sexual factor" in racial prejudice.

Tenderloin district, as well as in his descriptions of the millionaire patron's desire (see Somerville 2000, 188ff.)[33] Katherine Biers describes perceptions of "the specter of a mimesis that can take place…between bodies, and even erupt within them, in defiance of their owners' conscious control" and presents a striking quote from a German visitor, who recounts finding his body as that of "a balking horse, which it is absolutely impossible to master" (Biers 2006, 105).

White panic over "syncope fever" revealed a possibility beyond the "sympathetic" function which Du Bois, and later Johnson, ascribed to reception of African American spirituals. It meant that music could disrupt, in some way, audiences who oppress. Music "sounds" race, it marks the boundaries of groups and expresses identity, from its thematic occupations to the genres and sounds taken as sites of difference and belonging (Radano and Bohlman 2000).[34] Habitual ways of thinking, modes of performing race and of perceiving, perhaps, the performer and the themes of his/her musical disclosure, stop here, if only for a moment. Johnson depicts this phenomenon as a series of disruptive moments scattered throughout the novel. His narrator describes the experience of transport in listening, writing how ragtime music "demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head" (53). He remarks that while playing for a group of white guests, the "the whole company *involuntarily* and *unconsciously* did an impromptu cake-walk," a dance originally invented as a parody of white dance forms (my emphasis, 63). His millionaire patron, while in other ways the picture of an unmoved listener, nevertheless often appears to the narrator unconscious as he plays for him, only moving to "light a fresh cigarette" (64). Pleasure intersects here with the music's syncopation, as Moten describes. The "little death" of the listener—symbolized by the image of the closed eyes and the lit cigarette—is both a departure leaving one lost and an erotic

[33] See also Catherine Clément (1994, 1; and Moten 2003, 165), who notes that syncope has often been characterized as a condition affecting women's bodies in particular.
[34] Radano and Bohlman describe the ways music and race are co-constitutive, the former "participat[ing] in many of the aesthetic and discursive constructions of race," and the latter "provid[ing] one of the necessary elements in the construction of music" (Radano and Bohlman 2000, 8).

participation in some beginning (Moten 2003, 165). The narrator, too, on his fateful trip to Georgia, intent on "min[ing]" the local material, is disrupted at the big meeting. He does not speak, in that scene, of taking notes, and his air of detachment is broken. Even at the end of his account, years after the revival, it is as if the notes he did make still sound to or at him, to disturb his performance of whiteness, making his loss evident to him. They are writings which will not stay still, which will not stay in the box he means to forget them in.

The elisions which stand in for the *Autobiography*'s improvised performances are *themselves* powerful, suggestive syncopations in the text's rhythm. Maybe art is a space apart, for Johnson, not so much because it is another realm of activity, but an *arresting* activity. "One emerges from the syncope with a memory, as if one had been on a trip," writes Moten. "One comes back from somewhere and it seems to rupture or arrest all previous itineraries" (Moten 2003, 165). Beats are missing, even as Johnson fills in the reactions of the narrator and the listeners around him. They are missing even as Johnson strives to reveal aspects of the present-past some of his readers would disavow. Strikingly, they are missing despite the horrible detail with which Johnson describes violence in the novel, the very violence those performances, as the voice of slavery and its afterlives, tell. While in section II I described these textual/musical performances as insurgent spaces apart from the racist relations of power structuring the turn of the century soundscape, they are also opaque spaces which *confront* their readers, and play a part in the novel's political aesthetics: white readers who approach music through the possessive uprooting described in section I encounter something which refuses their possession; it escapes their capture even as it plays through the history Johnson would have them acknowledge.

At the same time as these performances refuse possession, they are also *dis*possessive. Beats elided or muted emphasize what is stressed. Soon after Singing Johnson's performance, Johnson's narrator describes another set of sounds: "hurrying footsteps," the "murmur of voices, then the gallop of a horse, then of another and another," and finally a rumor overheard: "murder! rape!" (96). After the big meeting, which has lasted an indeterminate length of time

(somewhere between an evening and a week), the narrator begins describing time more precisely,[35] the sounds beginning "just before dark," and crowds assembling "At the first suggestion of daylight" (96-7), while the victim is brought to town "Before noon" (97). The crowd's location by the train station indicates the regimentation of time, the crowd waiting for the victim's scheduled arrival. This violence, an everyday cruelty advertised in newspapers and committed before families and children, contrasts with the big meeting which precedes it. Here, too, participants come from all over, but affirming an identity based on the very violence which the spirituals of the scene before sought to grapple with. The novel's climax paradoxically highlights the manifest normalcy of this cruelty, arriving at its scheduled time. But at the same time as the narrator writes that "I shall always hear" his cries (97-8), he chooses to turn from them, to understand his "whitened…soul" somehow distinct from that violence which directly led to his decision to live as a white man (104). Here those omnipresent sounds form the soundtrack, along with Chopin, of the narrator's "ordinary" life as an "ordinarily successful white man" in New York. They are the twin foundations of his everyday: a violence he and the reader know, and a dissonant claim of forgetting to the tune of the Chopin he now plays.[36]

That emphasis, Jacqueline Goldsby (2006) notes, is the "terrible real" structuring the novel. Lynching in the *Autobiography* and, she notes, in Jim Crow modernity more broadly, delineates the "real" from the endlessly reproducible, the death that is not repeatable; yet which is simultaneously, she notes, itself reproduced, both in lynching's ubiquity and in its metonymic relation to other forms of violence in the novel. Here the horrors with which the novel ends, which in fact serve, as she notes, as the background to the narrator's telling, confront whiteness and its pretended innocence. The numerous moments of violence and pain which anticipate the lynching mark the "real" as synonymous with that pain: his claim at the outset that he is

[35] See Barnhart 2006, 564 for a discussion of the racial character of time in the *Autobiography*.
[36] This dichotomy is perhaps contained in the Chopin he chooses: as Morrissette (2013) notes. Chopin's nocturne "builds its structure from contrasting musical styles." Here "two voices or more, rather than one, defined the structure, with one of the voices designated as a woman's" (60): not only that of his wife, I note, but perhaps his mother's.

"playing with fire"; the feeling of his skin burning from his mother's scrubbing; and she, gazing into the fire, looking somewhere he can't yet discern (Goldsby 2006, 206). The narrator's telling of these scenes offer the very history white authority would suppress: it is a telling which, in fact, makes explicit the violent foundation of whiteness as well as the self-deception entailed in its bad faith disavowal of that origin.

The novel's ending rag stresses the possibility in the African American music it depicts, and contrasts it with a whiteness devoid of the value the narrator seeks. His whiteness is that of a tenement landlord; navigating a social milieu with none of the worth he ascribed, for instance, to the club or the cigar-rollers earlier in the novel; his sickly, "lily" white wife for whom he was "willing and ready to undergo any humiliation" having passed away (108). Next to those like his childhood friend "Shiny" or Booker T. Washington (Johnson was, at this time, a State Department appointee due in part to Washington's influence), who each serve as examples in the novel of those who have devoted their lives as "race men," he feels "small and selfish," perhaps without, like them, the "eternal principles of right on their side." He is simply, he notes, "an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money" (110). Rather, he suspects he has "chosen the lesser part" in choosing his whiteness, and only maintains it for his children's sake. But his "fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent," continue to haunt him. The memories and possibility contained in those manuscripts are absent in his description, but in that absence the reader finds far more value than in the white world he describes, as the latter laments: "I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (110).

The sonic relations of domination I described in section I are, in a sense, reversed through Johnson's narrative. The transcendence gained through musical performance escapes the reader, while the character of an evasive whiteness is etched as a violence the realness of which sticks to both the reader and the narrator's ironic declarations of a newfound white

innocence. Whiteness is the only thing in the novel which does *not* shift, which is *not* transcended. In describing his authorship as an act of "playing with fire," the narrator has in fact painted white readers with it; the novel is not a voyeuristic jaunt into black counterpublic life, but an autobiography which gains democratic meaning in its last act.

Conclusion

The foregoing offers one reading of the relationship between fugitivity and democracy, explored through sound and writing, in Johnson's work. As I suggested at the outset, Johnson's navigation between a democratic faith and a white public "not yet ready for democracy" offers an ambivalence which might serve as a frame for reading the history of African American democratic thought broadly. This ambivalence is not only thematic, but aesthetic, affecting the form of political thought as much as its concepts and concerns. Johnson's persistent attention to music—if anything increasing throughout his years contributing to the legal and protest work of the NAACP—suggests something which complicates, for instance, a choice between democracy's hopeful revision or fugitive rejection. Johnson's writing suggests to me instead that the shape of democratic thought itself might be shaped by rejection, his democratic hopes in ensemble (as Moten might have it) with a disruptive, but immanent, music.

3.

Writing Human and Revolution in W.E.B. Du Bois's Dark Princess

Some people envisage revolution chiefly as a matter of blood and guns and the more visible methods of force. But that, after all, is merely the temporary and outward manifestation. Real revolution is within. That comes before or after the explosion-is a matter of long suffering and deprivation, the death of courage and the bitter triumph of despair. This is the inevitable prelude to decisive and enormous change, and that is the thing that is on us now.

W.E.B. Du Bois (quoted in Robinson, 2000)

The politics I trace in Cooper and Johnson's writings centers on disrupting prevailing understandings of political community in conversation with a public of American readers on both sides of the color line. It is an ambivalent politics, because they could neither completely reject in the long term, nor accept in the present, political community with white Americans. But the site of that ambivalent politics, negotiations of American peoplehood, perhaps also limited the (however undetermined) democratic horizons of their projects. Barnor Hesse (2011), for instance, has argued that the Western idea of "the political" itself has, and often continues to be, based hegemonically on the distinction of white, potential political actors and the colonized non-political subjects. Thinking about democratic ambivalence on a broader, anticolonial stage reveals how thinkers of this tradition understood democratic possibility in relation to Asian and African independence struggles and their international connections. In this chapter, I turn from this figure of the American people to a broader, and ultimately more radical site of democratic community in the 1920s writings of W.E.B. Du Bois. Throughout this period, and perhaps most explicitly in his 1928 *Dark Princess*, Du Bois increasingly theorized democratic community on the order of an international working class, and in particular, the anticolonial "Darker World"

(19).[37] While his later works would offer a more developed expression of his international and Marxist politics, *Dark Princess* remains valuable in its emphasis on a key facet of his new democratic vision: namely, his efforts to disrupt a white, colonial concept of the "human," and to imagine an anticolonial politics founded on its reconstruction. As I will argue, *Dark Princess* speaks to themes of democratic ambivalence in its efforts to navigate between a democratic union premised on a future human subject, citizens of what he calls the "global Black Belt," and his protagonist's present struggles within a world which denies his humanity.

Dark Princess is Du Bois's second novel, and follows the journey of Matthew Towns, a medical student, pullman porter, Chicago politician, and later revolutionary and husband to Kautilya, the Princess of Bwodpur, and father of Madhu, her heir. It remained Du Bois's favorite of his written works, and reflects key themes of his thought at a moment of intellectual transformation (e.g. Du Bois 1940, 304-6). Among other things, the novel bears the mark of his evolving socialist politics, as well as an internationalist, anti-colonial stance (e.g. Cooppan 2007; Hooker 2017; Rampersad 1976, 205-6); it is his contribution to the Harlem Renaissance he helped shepherd as editor of *Crisis* (Rampersad 1976, ch. 9), reflecting the political aesthetics he famously declares in his 1926 "Criteria of Negro Art"; and it is a celebration of the erotic and rejection of a certain form of respectability politics which would constrain it (e.g. Elam and Taylor, 2007; Ramersad 1976; Tate 1998). Despite its theoretical and biographical significance, it has never enjoyed positive reception as a novel. The critic and philosopher Alain Locke's remark in a letter to Langston Hughes seems representative: "Tonight I have to do *Dark Princess* for *[the New York Herald Tribune] Books*. God help me" (qtd. in Tate 1995, xxiv). Early audiences expected a clear political message, a protest novel from "Du Bois the polemicist; Du Bois the unyielding proponent for the advancement of the race" (Tate 1998, 52); but *Dark Princess*'s depiction of Matthew Towns's aesthetic and erotic journey did not serve those aims in an obvious way. Claudia Tate, for instance, critiques the novel's romantic quest, which she

[37] Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text citations in this chapter refer to *Dark Princess*.

argues remains "overly personalized," rather than "sublimated (or subsumed) within social activism" (Tate 1998, 80)—a romance pursued at the expense of political, emancipatory themes.

Tate's criticism, as well as that of the novel's early readers, is well-founded (but see Hooker's 2017 discussion, ch. 3). In declaring his love for Kautilya, Matthew leaves his influential political position and his efforts to offer his black constituents badly-needed congressional representation, while Kautilya gives up her leadership of the radical Box-Makers Union. But I want to suggest a different politics *Dark Princess* articulates in its turn to romance. *Dark Princess*, in its discussions of the erotic, aesthetics, and above all the mushy love letters Matthew and Kautilya send one another toward the novel's end, in fact challenges something which underlies the more explicitly political themes Du Bois's audiences may have expected, and indeed still do.

As in previous chapters, I read Du Bois' task in *Dark Princess* through the lens of ambivalence. His protagonist's vision of democratic connections tying the global "Black Belt" of the colonized world requires a radical departure from the world constituted by a capitalist, colonial, racial hierarchy. His relationships with anticolonial allies in Asia and North Africa discount the "ability, qualifications, and real possibilities of the black race"—an instance of what Du Bois calls the "color line within the color line" (21-22)—while the success he finds as an American politician only makes him realize society's moral and aesthetic shortcomings. While the previous sections of *Dark Princess* are at times almost sociological, its final part marks a romantic turn. As Juliet Hooker writes, "Du Bois's turn to fiction allowed him to take imaginative leaps beyond existing realities and to engage in a more expansive politics of the possible" (Hooker 120-1; see also Rampersad 1976, 215). Already in his short story "The Comet," he imagined the end of the world as the possible—albeit thwarted—context of a romance across the American color line (Du Bois 2004). In *Dark Princess,* he imagines what connections are possible within existing, unjust structures. Matthew's epistolary exchanges with Kautilya rescue him from his seemingly fruitless struggles within US politics; their letters become a way of

bridging a temporal and geographic distance between the modern world Matthew critiques and an insurgent union of the global "Black Belt" to come. In this section, Du Bois uses the conventions of the epistolary novel to imagine his protagonists' intimate construction of that connection, their exchanges building up to an eventual, revolutionary unity in the form of their child, Madhu, whose messianic birth connects the global Black Belt between Matthew's Virginia and Kautilya's India.

I turn to a discussion of the "human" in Du Bois with a reliance on Sylvia Wynter's—by way of Frantz Fanon—discussion of its "sociogenic" facets, comprising the aesthetic, moral, and political ideas by which humans are defined and subjected to racial hierarchies. Doing so allows me to approach the ways Du Bois used this language both to describe an international regime of racialized "humanness" throughout this period and, as he does in his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," of art's possibilities for compelling the recognition of Blackness as human. In "Criteria," Du Bois argued that a just recognition of Black Americans could not rest on the present terms of white moral, aesthetic, or epistemic standards. As his politics turned increasingly international, however, Du Bois also linked the reconstruction of these terms to a broader question of anticolonial struggle. Lisa Lowe notes that "...as modern liberalism defined the 'human' and universalized its attributes to European man, it simultaneously differentiated populations in the colonies as less than human" (Lowe 2015, 6). Importantly for Du Bois' task in *Dark Princess*, she also notes that this differentiation created new "intimacies," new connections, between colonized groups, and so the possibility of new sources of solidarity. Through Matthew and Kautilya's letters, Du Bois imagines how those connections might refashion the aesthetic, moral, and ultimately political character of an anticolonial world.

In section I, I explore the role of the human in Du Bois's political aesthetics, focusing on his "Criteria of Negro Art." Here, Du Bois ties the disruptive, world-making role he assigns black art to a new recognition made possible by that disruption. By "compell[ing] recognition" of black Americans "as human," Du Bois simultaneously asserts the need for a new mode of living, a new

"sociogeny" articulated at its margins. Section II explores the critique Du Bois levels at the "coloniality of being" (Wynter, 2003) through his protagonist, Matthew Towns. Matthew's political struggle in *Dark Princess* concerns his pursuit of erotic and aesthetic cultivation. Envisioning a world in which that fulfillment is possible, Matthew finds himself constantly at odds with the "ugliness" and "unsuitable" nature of politics and labor in 1920s Chicago. Here, Du Bois joins the erotic and the aesthetic as two connected components of a future "Beauty" finally attained in Matthew's romance with Kautilya. Matthew's pursuit of aesthetic pleasure, just as much as his desire for Kautilya, are restricted by white authority as well as the politics of respectability exercised by some parts of the black bourgeoisie. Building a new world means indicting both the sexual politics and aesthetics of the present, and engaging in practices of pleasure and cultivation which go against its norms. Finally, in section III I explore the epistolary medium by which this new sociogeny is expressed. Du Bois's turn to the epistolary form in part four of *Dark Princess* provides an important extension of his thoughts in "Criteria." Matthew and Kautilya's letter-writing is a means of affirming what Lisa Lowe calls the "intimacies" empire creates between subjected groups, while transforming that intimacy toward the imagination of what Du Bois calls the global "Black Belt." Letter writing appears in *Dark Princess*, I argue, as a potentially democratic space of international, counterpublic world- and self-making.

I.

Du Bois's 1926 article for the *Crisis*, "Criteria of Negro Art," was originally a speech before the NAACP honoring the historian Carter G. Woodson. The article is often cited for its insight that all Black art ought to (and perhaps, cannot but) serve a propagandistic function in the pursuit of political emancipation. Propaganda, in this case, refers not to manipulation or falsehood, but to the efforts of artists "who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world" (Du Bois 1986a, 1001). Du Bois' politics of artistic expression as

"propaganda," then, goes beyond Johnson's framework of appeals across the color line explored in chapter 2: while he maintains that "until the art of the black folk compells [sic] recognition they will not be rated as *human*" (my emphasis, Du Bois 1986a, 1002), he also seems to suggest that such recognition requires a radical reconstruction which departs from a present, racialized concept of humanity underpinning Jim Crow in the US and colonialism abroad.

Asking what art could have to do with the life and death efforts of the NAACP, Du Bois answers that it has the capacity to transcend the present terms of struggle; beyond the "valleys" and "foothills" where, "so long as you are climbing, the direction,—north, south, east, or west,—is of less importance," it offers visions of "whither you are going and what you really want" (Du Bois 1986a, 993). These visions are not only pleasurable, but also inseparable from ideas of "Truth" and "Goodness" lacking in the present: the artist's freedom is "bounded," in fact, by truth which "is the highest handmaid of imagination," and goodness which remains "the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest" (Du Bois 1986, 1000). And he suggests all three of these elements are missing from the society in which he and the NAACP work. He asks his audience,

> If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;--what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices? Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and

flamboyant but a vision of *what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world*" (Du Bois 1986a, 994, my emphasis).

Du Bois urges Black artists to turn toward the possibilities of beauty inspired by accounts of Black life unconstrained by white visions of Blackness or, on the other hand, the "young and slowly growing black public" animated by standards of respectability in an effort to refute the former. At the same time, he argues that it is the task of the Black public to "build yourselves up into that wide judgment, that catholicity of temper which is going to enable the artist to have his widest chance for freedom." This means, he writes, confronting the standards of respectability which they have developed in reaction, in particular, to white ideas of Black sexuality (Du Bois 1986a, 1001).

The search for beauty holds the promise, then, of both a critique of the aesthetic, moral, and epistemic foundations of the present and, in its place, a struggle (as Du Bois indeed describes his own writing) for "gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (Du Bois 1986a, 1000; see Elam and Taylor 2007, 215). To be sure, Du Bois' primary concern in this speech is the situation of African Americans and US democracy. But he often frames his discussion much more broadly, referring to places and experiences beyond the US. He tells his audience that he remembers "four beautiful things": "The Cathedral at Cologne…a village of the Veys in West Africa…the Venus of Milo" and "a single phrase of music in the Southern South." He tells his audience that Beauty's "variety is infinite," "the world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly." This, he writes, is a "well-nigh *universal* failing," but "the Negro Youth" "bears this mighty prophecy on its breast, with a new realization of itself, with new determination for all mankind" (my emphasis, Du Bois 1986b, 995). His present remarks on beauty's infinite variation recalls his claim in *Darkwater*, published six years prior, that "Infinite is human nature. We make it finite by choking back the mass of men, by attempting to speak for others, to interpret and act for them, and we end by acting for ourselves and using the world as our private property" (Du Bois 2004,

109). In "Criteria," and as I will argue, in *Dark Princess*, Matthew and Kautilya's search for beauty ends with the birth of new relations across the colonized world denied standing under the human's current terms.

As I noted, I am using the language of the human in a particular sense, following Wynter's discussions of its "sociogenic" dimension. That is, Du Bois is concerned not only with the prevailing biological categorization of raced bodies; rather, he is concerned with what it means to live a human life, how colonialism and slavery have constructed regimes of truth, goodness, and beauty which serve to render deviations inhuman and unintelligible. Wynter (2003) describes the process, over the "racial longue durée" from the renaissance to the present, by which a particular raced, sexed, economic, cultural, and geographic concept of the human came to be "overrepresented" as a meaning of that concept. To be "human" according to the dictates of imperialist racial capitalism is to be, among other identities, white, male, and bourgeois, what Wynter calls "Man."[38] Deviations from that intersection are regulated as "not-quite-humans and nonhumans" (Weheliye 2014, 3) and subjected to relations of domination under a resulting hierarchical subordination to those subjects accorded power and obligation. Groups subjected by colonization and slavery, on the other hand, were painted with terms designating "Man's" opposites: at various times, as godless, evil, lacking beauty or reason (see also Lowe 2015, 7).

Those denied such recognition under its present terms are, Du Bois seems to suggest, in a special position to cultivate other possibilities. Here I understand Du Bois' argument similarly to Hortense Spillers' (1987) account of Black womanhood: that there is "*insurgent*" possibility to be found in the identity which has been excluded from normative white, bourgeois concepts of womanhood or, in this case, humanness (Spillers 1987, 80).[39] In *Dark Princess*, Du Bois hopes

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[38] Technically, this is a second iteration of humanness, what she calls "Man2." In this paper, however, I will only refer to the human's modern hegemonic variant. I should also note that I follow Weheliye (2014) in drawing a relation between Spillers and Wynter here.
[39] Here I am drawing (by way of George Shulman) implicitly, as I did explicitly in chapter 2, on Fred Moten's use of Spillers' insights, who finds possibility in the "refusal of what has been refused" (qtd. in Shulman, who draws this connection; see forthcoming, 8).

to find in that exclusion the possible solidarity of the colonized, “Darker World” (19). This is in part the product of Du Bois’ engagement with Asian anticolonial politics in the years preceding his novel’s publication. The Indian nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai read drafts of *Dark Princess*, and the anticolonial council Matthew meets in Berlin is based on an actual association of Indian “Communist-influenced exiles” residing there (Mullen and Watson 2005, 14). Already in *Darkwater*, Du Bois theorized Afro-Asian spiritual and colonial connections, and as Bill Mullen notes, Du Bois wrote in the context of the Comintern’s debates over the status of African American nationhood alongside anticolonial nationalist movements, theorized in *Dark Princess* through the romance of Matthew and Kautilya (Mullen 2003, 228-30).

It is worth outlining the novel’s complicated plot, which begins, in a part titled “The Exile,” with a medical school dean's refusal to allow Matthew to enroll for an obstetrics course, objecting to the idea of black students treating white women patients—an exclusion which mirrors his son’s revolutionary birth at the end of the novel (12). His earlier Hampton education instilled a faith in “desert and hard work” against prejudice, and his disappointment causes him to leave America, unsure of where to turn. He makes his way to Germany, and at a Berlin cafe, he defends a woman from the advances of an aggressive white American tourist. She turns out to be Kautilya, princess of the fictional Indian state of Bwodpur, with whom he falls immediately in love. Kautilya’s interest in Matthew, on the other hand, is at first not romantic but political. She introduces Matthew to a “committee of darker peoples,” leaders from countries spanning Africa and Asia who are planning revolt against “the present white hegemony” and the color line it maintains (24). Her council lacks a representative of African Americans, and some in this group doubt the capacity of “the Negro race both in Africa and in America,” despite a unity of interests, to share in the revolutionary project (21). Matthew here confronts what Du Bois calls “the color line within the color line.”

But Kautilya, persuaded by Matthew, sends him back to the US as an observer of a black nationalist group asking the council’s support. Part two, “The Pullman Porter,” follows

Matthew's eventual collaboration with the group, led by a man named Perigua, who bears a broad resemblance to Du Bois's political rival Marcus Garvey, deported the year prior to *Dark Princess*' publication. Matthew sends reports back to Kautilya on Perigua's lack of success, all the while working as a Pullman porter between Atlanta, New York, and Chicago. After his friend is lynched based on the false accusations of a white passenger (while the train is carrying a large group of Klansmen to a convention in Chicago), Matthew agrees to go on a suicide mission with Perigua, hoping to derail the train off a bridge on its way back to the south. He has a change of heart, however, when the princess intervenes, and goes to jail for his part in the plot.

In the third part, "The Chicago Politician," Matthew gains a pardon orchestrated by an ambitious black Chicago machine boss named Sammy Scott and his assistant, Sara Andrews. Upon his release, he too soon becomes a Chicago politician under their direction. The chapter, as Dohra Ahmad (2002) notes, is written in a realist vein, describing a world of political (and moral) compromise, corruption, and the largely white-controlled Chicago political machine. He and Sara marry, and she plots his ascension to Congress. During this period, Matthew grows disillusioned; the spiritual death he experiences in prison (125) is never repaired as a politician; he faces aesthetic deprivation in a Chicago he describes as "gray" and "ugly"; and his marriage to Sara remains sexually unfulfilling (perhaps unconsummated). He fills an apartment full of beautiful things which remind him of Kautilya. Sara plans a dinner which will solidify the coalition behind Matthew's run for Congress, made up of representatives of capital, trade unions, women's clubs, and of course the local machine. Excluded, however, is the more radical, communist (or other times described as "Bolshevik") labor contingent, which appears to arrive unexpectedly. When Matthew agrees to meet them, he instead finds only Kautilya, who has become the president of one such union. They embrace, and are discovered by Sara. Fleeing both Sara and his political career, Matthew and Kautilya spend the next several weeks engaged in erotic and aesthetic pleasure, before Kautilya departs for Matthew's mother's home in the fictional Prince James County, Virginia.

The final part, "The Maharajah of Bwodpur," details Matthew and Kautilya's separation, their letters to one another, and their reunion. Matthew works as a tunnel digger and, later, at a meat-packing plant, while Kautilya lives and labors with his mother. Much of this chapter is epistolary, composed of long letters sent back and forth between the two. After several months, Kautilya abruptly summons him to Virginia, revealing their son, Mahdu, heir to her throne, and they are married in a ceremony composed of rituals from Matthew's and Kautilya's respective cultures. Among other titles, Madhu gains that of "Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds" (310).

II.

The medical school dean's refusal to enroll Matthew and his fellow black medical students in an obstetrics course, shouting an epithet and claiming that no "white women patients" would want black doctors "delivering their babies" (4), sets up a contrast, at the book's end, with the delivery of Matthew and Kautilya's child. If Matthew is excluded from the process by which white humans are physically reproduced, he is nevertheless, by virtue of that exclusion, a part of the process by which *the human* is reproduced in this scene. His rebellion against that structure begins as he throws "his certificates, his marks and commendations straight into the drawn white face of the Dean" and "give[s] away his books and instruments" (4-5). The novel's subsequent narrative, and especially its third and final parts, are composed largely of Matthew's faltering rejection of this sociogeny and the construction of a way of life which does not yet exist but might arise from its margins.

After Sammy and Sara help pardon Matthew from prison, they employ him as part of Sammy's ward machine.[40] Working for Sammy and Sara, he makes few of his own decisions, and the two of them view their relationship to him as one of ownership: in gaining his pardon,

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[40] An early indication of the oppressive character of the system Matthew finds himself in is the partnership of the Klan in granting Matthew's pardon, as a public gesture toward the man who had saved so many of its members by stopping Perigua's plot.

"[t]hey had bought him and paid for him" (126). Sammy's business, Matthew soon finds, lacks, or perhaps contains an ambivalent, moral character. Politics is simply a means of attaining money and personal power, while making minor improvements in the lives of constituents; it is, Matthew notes, "neither good nor bad. It was good *and* bad" (my emphasis, 128). At the same time as Sammy earns money from prostitution, gambling, and bootlegging, he also helps congregations with their debts and works toward the future election of a black Congressman in his district (preferably himself). Matthew's own work, eventually as a state representative, similarly forces him to make moral compromises, doing what he can on the margins to aid progressive causes while still appealing to major donors.

But if Matthew understands this system, in the beginning, as an acceptable moral compromise, his aesthetic judgment soon reveals its failings. His life in Chicago fills him with what Du Bois calls an "esthetic disquiet." Chicago's aesthetic is the same as his prison cell: gray, cold, and bare. The courthouse in which he is tried is a "mighty, gray stone structure" with cold, "soiled" rooms. The judge himself has a "grave, gray face" and Matthew wears a gray suit to his trial (100-1). Sammy's office is no different: a building with a "dingy gray wooden door," "a linoleum rug that did not completely cover the soft wood floor; its splinters pulling away so as to avoid the covering of dark red paint" as well as "[s]ash curtains of dingy white held up with rods" (112). After the pardon, Du Bois describes the ward Matthew works as "old, dirty, crowded—with staggering buildings….The streets were obstructed with bad paving, ashes, and garbage" (127). Even Matthew's apartment is composed of "bare, cold, and dirty rooms. He could not for the life of him remember how people kept things clean. It was extraordinary how dirt accumulated" (128).

As Dohra Ahmad notes, the racially exclusive, capitalist present of Chicago and the anticolonial, socialist future of India and Prince James County are each defined by a "representative female figure" (2002, 776): Sara, who strives for recognition as a black woman within the confines of Man, and Matthew's mother and Kautilya, who together represent a past

Black Americans might draw from and a future of international anticolonial solidarity. Sara seeks money and power over erotic or aesthetic pleasure, obtaining what goods she can within the bounds of respectability and the white authorities who largely control her political fortunes. Like the rest of Chicago, she is described in tones of gray (she has "intelligent, straight gray eyes" and dresses in color schemes of gray, black, and white; 111). She has no interest in the music, painting, or literature that interests Matthew, and her books are purely for decoration. Her home, before they are married, is "machine-made" and "wax-neat and in perfect order" (137), and she later rejects Matthew's attempt to add colorful art to their home.

Before their marriage, Du Bois describes Sara's appreciation for the "communal and social value of virginity" and "respectability," commitments which seem to continue after the marriage ceremony (114). It is unclear whether their marriage is ever consummated, but their relationship is certainly not one of sexual passion. When Matthew proposes to her, he and Sara speak primarily of their partnership as one of mutual advantage. She remarks, "I don't think you are the loving kind—and that suits me. But I do think enlightened self-interest calls us to be partners" (138). The two never take their honeymoon, and when Matthew attempts to kiss her on their wedding day, she warns him to "Be careful of the veil" (144). Here, as in *Souls*' "Of the Wings of Atalanta," the veil becomes simultaneously a metaphor for the color line and the commercial society Du Bois critiques (see Marshall 2011, ch. 3).

Just as Matthew had felt, in Berlin, that he could be treated as "a man—or rather…[not] less than a man" if he dressed in bourgeois fashion, Sara views money and political influence as a means of gaining some level of social esteem from a world which would deny her respect. She is, Du Bois notes, "in no sense evil," and her pursuit of "wealth and position" stems from her "pleasure in having people look with envious eyes upon what she had and did." This orientation stems from the pain of having her humanity unrecognized: her pursuits are "her answer to the world's taunts, jibes, and discriminations. She was always unconsciously showing off, and her nerves quivered if what she did was not noticed" (200). In her pursuit of these things, she

deprives herself of the sources of pleasure which do not stem from that world's recognition—especially, in contrast to Kautilya, aesthetic and erotic pursuits. As she says when Matthew proposes, "I've been fighting the thing men call love all my life, and I don't see much in it" (138).

At the same time, as Du Bois reveals in the last pages of "The Chicago Politician," the respect she earns through class signifiers and her position within Chicago's machine politics is desperately precarious. When the guests see Matthew and Kautilya embrace at the dinner to mark his candidacy, her guests immediately turn not only on Sara, but on Black Americans as a whole. The president of the Woman's City Club exclaims, "These Negroes!...They are simply impossible! *I have known it all along*, but I had begun to hope." Contrary to Sara's careful maintenance of the norms of respectability, the president describes an "ineradicable immorality." The Republican boss, meanwhile, gloats that the "unpleasant possibility" of "send[ing] a Negro to Congress" is now "indefinitely postponed" (emphasis mine, 211).

Matthew, for his part, feels an internal rebellion against the life within which he finds himself. In order to participate in it, he must do so "deliberately and with his eyes closed" (126). Even as he disavows the commitments he had made as part of the council in Berlin, he nevertheless feels a "stirring...in the half-conscious depths of his soul" in the form of Kautilya, a longing which moves him to consciousness of his bad faith.

> The dream, the woman, was back in his soul. The vision of world work was surging and he must kill it, stifle it now....He was awakening. He could feel the pricking of life in his thought, his conscience, his body. He was struggling against the return of that old ache—the sense of that void....If he could once fill that void, he could glimpse another life—beauty, music, books, leisure; a home that was refuge and comfort... (136).

Matthew finds himself dissatisfied with the life which deprives him of love and beauty. The struggle he feels in his soul, as a ward boss and later as a state congressman, is a "revolt...against things unsuitable, ill adjusted, and in bad taste; the illogical lack of fundamental harmony; the unnecessary dirt and waste—the ugliness of it all..." (147). Du Bois's description of Matthew's

desire is strikingly ambiguous between sexual desire and aesthetic pleasure; it is a bodily sensation associated both with his longing for Kautilya and his desire for the aesthetic experiences of "music, books, leisure."

For a time, he hopes he can simply use the money he has gained through his political work to buy himself beauty. Seeking escape from the home he shares with Sara, he dwells in the apartment he has kept from before his marriage, a space mostly used to store colorful objects Sara will not have in the house. He fills it with things that mark a departure from his life outside: a Turkish rug with "dark, soft, warm coloring," alongside "the dusky gold of its Chinese mate"; a Matisse, a copy of a "wild, unintelligible, intriguing" Picasso; an armchair that "put its old worn arms so sympathetically about him"; with music and books. Having "surrender[ed] to Sara and the Devil" by campaigning for office, he plans this apartment as a space to "counteract the ugliness" of the campaign (193-4). Later, Matthew will realize that his aesthetic appreciation of each of these objects was also an attempt to fulfill his erotic longing for Kautilya: he later tells her that these objects "mean you. They meant you unconsciously before I knew that I should ever see you again. The Chinese rug was the splendid coloring of your skin; the Matisse was the flame of your high spirit; the music was your voice" (263).

But this pursuit is entirely mediated by money and the moral compromises Matthew must sustain to gain it. While early on in the chapter he had characterized the work of the political machine and the capitalist system with which it operates in lock-step as essentially morally ambiguous, he now understands it differently. As he begins to create his retreat from the world in his little apartment, he realizes the unacceptable moral cost of that respite. In order to gain his Republican nomination, Matthew has been persuaded into forming a coalition with "big business" (190) and moderate and "aristocratic" (trades) labor. He promises each contrary things, at the expense of the interests of his black constituents and more radical labor unions (191). This lying, and this betrayal of his constituents, dissatisfies him even as it guarantees his electoral victory; it "left him no shred of self-respect" (199). "He was paying a price for power

and money. A great, a terrible price. He was lying, cheating, stealing. He was fooling these poor, driven slaves of industry." He has "sold his soul…for beauty," but, as he began to realize earlier in the chapter, that sale, too, has a cost. Money "might cost ugliness, writhing, dirty discomfort of soul and thought" (149). He has come to realize, by the end of the chapter, that the pursuit of beauty through the system of racial capitalism is self-defeating. Matthew is left without escape: beauty costs money, but money costs beauty.

Crucially, Kautilya's appearance at the end of "The Chicago Politician" ruptures, rather than resolves, this contradiction. Toward the end of that section, Du Bois reveals that, in her absence, Kautilya has become the head of a socialist labor union. Hosting a dinner for their coalition of business interests, political machine figures, moderate labor representatives, and other supporters, Matthew and Sara are alerted that representatives of this more radical labor wing demand an audience. Sara refers to them as "Bolsheviks" and "Communists." In an earlier meeting, they had pressured her on Matthew's positions on the "regulating and seizing the railroads" and "abolishing private ownership of capital," among other positions his platform would not address (198). But when Matthew enters the room, he soon realizes that Kautilya is herself this delegation of "Bolsheviks." Before they become intimate—before he even sees her—she hands him a letter which demands a radically different approach to politics on his part: a public promise "that on every occasion you will cast your vote in Congress for the interests of the poor man, the employee, and the worker, whenever and wherever these interests are opposed to the interests of the rich, the employer, and the capitalist" (208). As he describes the beauty of her script and moves to embrace her, he is also finding pleasure in and embracing the "Communism" Sara had earlier, albeit unknowingly, used as metonym for Kautilya. Matthew's repair of what he had earlier understood as a "void" in his soul (136) involves moving outside the bounds of the structure he has, up to now, worked to uphold. It is a transition to a new mode of being in the world, made clear by the allusion to slavery Kautilya makes in telling Matthew, who Sara and Sammy have "bought," that she will "*buy…back*" his soul "at any price" (210).

III.

If the aesthetic, as Du Bois suggests, is a means of envisioning new ways of living and demanding recognition as (differently) human, writing plays a major role in the formulation of that new sociogeny: it is, in *Dark Princess*, the space in which experiments in living take shape within the governing sociogeny of racial capitalism. The erotic (and, correspondingly, aesthetic) space of letter writing serves as a site of possibility in Du Bois's novel, what Sylvia Wynter calls a "liminal deviance" (2003, 328) in the development of a way of life which is not yet. I discuss epistolarity in *Dark Princess* as the making of anticolonial imaginative and textual spaces, a liminal space in which Matthew and Kautilya, and by extension the anticolonial black counterpublic they represent, can shape self and world against the constraints of racial capitalism and hostile white publics.

In *Dark Princess*, letter-writing mediates Matthew and Kautilya's relationship, and it acts as means of recognizing and shaping broader connections across the international Black Belt. Lisa Lowe describes the double-edged character of intimacy in the 19th century British empire: on the one hand, the private and domestic sphere of citizens in the metropole relied in part on the denial of liberal rights to the colonized and enslaved: there existed a "colonial division of intimacy, which charts the historically differentiated access to the domains of liberal personhood, from interiority and individual will, to the possession of property and domesticity" (2015, 17-18). On the other hand, empire also *produced* relations of intimacy between its subjects, which colonial governments tried to manage, often through the enforcement of racial distinctions. She writes that "[t]he repeated injunctions that different groups must be divided and boundaries kept distinct indicate that colonial administrators imagined as dangerous the sexual, laboring, and intellectual contacts among enslaved and indentured nonwhite peoples" (Lowe 2015, 35). In her reading of Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, Lowe highlights how Du Bois "situated the African American freedom struggle within a world historical struggle of laborers of

color," whose success depended on a future "recognition by other laborers of color in the colonized world" (Lowe 2015, 170). While in *Black Reconstruction*, she argues, "Asian labor appears as a *figure* whose addition would be necessary for the creation of an international working class of color," yet a relationship largely unexplored, *Dark Princess* makes this connection in its climactic epistolary turn (Lowe 2015, 172).

The epistolary is a private, intimate mode of communication, mediated both by its vehicle—the letter—as well as the spatiotemporal (perhaps emotional) distance between sender and receiver it hopes to bridge (or, at times, accentuate). In epistolary literature, the letter often signals a liminal phase in a relationship, a period of erotic delay when separated lovers or possible future lovers seek to make one another present through the letter form. Their relationship evolves at a distance, built up through their reciprocal disclosure and interpretation. Confidants share mundane details of their daily lives, their thoughts, experiences, and desires, as well as their reactions and interpretations to past messages. These efforts to express the writer's passion and situatedness are a sort of mutual "mapping," Janet Altman notes: "To write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing" (Altman 1973, 119). Part of that situatedness being mapped is always the correspondent's work as reader and writer. Letters are events in their lives, often obsessively interpreted, which shape their conduct and, of course, shape the relationship between sender and receiver. This practice of reciprocal disclosure and interpretation is a transformative event, the making of a textual space within a spatio-temporal separation, animated by a creative, erotic and aesthetic drive. Reader/writers quote past letters, perform close readings, and imagine the lover's life beyond the letter's contents (see Altman 1973, ch. 1).[41]

[41] At times, letters themselves become objects of desire, sometimes even containing traces of the writer's physical presence—distinct handwriting, but also the blot of teardrops, even locks of hair (Altman 1973, 93; Wingrove 2012, 144).

It is a letter which disrupts Matthew's pursuit of wealth and position within the terms of Chicago's machine politics. At the dinner party Sara throws for Matthew's candidacy, Matthew finds himself defeated, finally having sacrificed, he believes, "pride, soul, and body" (192) in the pursuit of wealth and power. When the labor delegation enters to speak with Matthew privately in the library, he simply stares at the floor, and is handed a letter by the delegation's single member. By reading the letter, Matthew realizes who has handed it to him. He undergoes a transformation at first through his experience of the beauty of Kautilya's script, the letter acting, it seems, as a metonym for her, as he realizes who wrote this letter precisely through its beauty. His earlier-stated longing for an "ideal beauty, fitness and curve and line" (207) is fulfilled by "the strong beauty of the great curves, the breadth and yet delicate uplifting of the capitals, the long, sure sweep of the slurred links" (208). He describes how "the letters started out from the page and burned his gaze, they flamed and spread before him," a writing he "knew…as he knew his own face" (208).

Only after reading this letter does Matthew look to Kautilya and observe her changed face and figure: her shorter hair, thin body, "calloused" hands with "broken nails," and the lines on her face (209). Kautilya has given up her titles (temporarily) and labored across the country while they have been apart. Because Matthew, too, has changed since their last meeting, having abandoned their shared ideals, her letter is sent and read, in some sense, from a distance despite their physical proximity. Matthew at first finds the letter "absurd," and "almost laughed aloud." He thought to respond to the radical demands the same way he had in the past: to "carry it off with a high hand, to laugh at these oafs and jolly them, insisting that first he must *get* to Congress, and then, of course, he would do what he could" (208). But this realist mode Du Bois has employed to describe the limitations of electoral politics up to this moment (see Ahmad 2000) is radically disrupted; a distance between his pessimism amid the "heavy flesh of fact" (311) is bridged by the aesthetic, textual beauty of Kautilya's (to Matthew, at least) fantastic

demands. The letter disrupts Matthew and precedes his embrace of Kautilya, now the transformed, radical socialist union representative.

Following this letter are several weeks of aesthetic and erotic pleasure in Matthew's apartment. After this brief period, however, Kautilya and Matthew declare that their commitment to revolution requires a separation. Kautilya remarks that "[t]his honeymoon...must end. It was our due. We earned it. But now we must earn a higher, finer thing" (260). Matthew and Kautilya during this separation will remain "apart but eternally one"; they "walk the long straight path of renunciation in order that the work of the world shall go forward with our hands" (261). There is a later, convoluted reason for this separation, having to do with Kautilya's line of succession.[42] But in the meantime, it seems to make sense to both Kautilya and Matthew that the immediate denial of erotic and aesthetic fulfillment might give room for a possibility which distance allows. Matthew describes how, although his world has been altered by the "physical urge of sex between us," he is willing to forego this fulfillment for the "nobler worlds that others may enjoy" (260).

Why does this "world work" require a separation? Of course, it is emblematic of the condition of physical and cultural distance of the counterpublic they hope to bring about. But more than this, their letter-writing symbolizes a temporal distance between the present and future terms of the human, before the revolution Kautilya hopes will unite the global "black belt" in anticolonial rebellion. They consider the meaning of work, love, beauty, revolution, democracy, and finally memory, all the while contesting what a new world will look like, and what their places in it will be. They consider what it might mean to live a good life, to live in a good society, and the relationship between love and work. But the letters are not mere vehicles for these thoughts and arguments; they are already a space in which these worlds and new modes of living might be shared.

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[42] Namely, that she wants to make sure they are having a son; with a daughter, she will have no successor, and will have to return to India to marry someone of nobility. With a son to secure her line, she can marry as she chooses.

Matthew returns to work, now as a digger in Chicago's subway tunnels, and later in the city's meat-packing houses. Increasingly deprived of the food, sex, art, and literature he experienced with Kautilya, and even more starved for art and leisure than when he was a politician, Matthew turns to letter writing as a site of reflection and aesthetic exploration. While at first Matthew is able to find beauty in his labor, he soon finds it mechanical and unreflective. It pays little, and affords him no time for aesthetic pleasure—it literally keeps him sense-deprived, in a dark hole under the city. In his letters, Matthew contrasts the daily life of labor with the aesthetic and erotic ideals he and Kautilya share. "There is no beauty in this world about me," he writes. Instead of music, he describes an ambient "great, thick sheet of noise" which hangs over his neighborhood; the food he eats is "rotten" and (in an unfortunate description) "is flung to me by a slatternly waitress who is as tired as I am"; the bed he once shared with Kautilya is now "dirty" (271). Matthew describes a world filled with "mud and filth and grayness" from which he emerges desiring "color and curve and form" (279). After a failed effort to unionize, and Matthew and his coworkers are replaced with scabs, Matthew begins work at "the one place where workers were scarce": the stockyards. Here Matthew experiences the nadir of his aesthetic and moral disgust. "The world stinks about me. I am lifting rotten food. I am helping murder things that live. The continual bleating of death beats on my ears and heart. I am drugged with weariness and ugliness. I seem to know as never before what pain and poverty mean" (281).

At the furthest depths of deprivation, the world they construct in their letters offers respite from an ugly, sense-killing world, as well as the promise of another one which grants them beauty. Matthew writes to Kautilya that "In the world there is only you—only you and that halo about your head which is the world-wide Cause" (281-2). In writing that "there is only you," Matthew uses the letter to stand in for Kautilya's presence. Just as he had earlier described her writing in erotic terms, Matthew lives now for the beauty he finds in her writing, the letters themselves being the only respite from a world which showers him in stink, noise, and death.

At the same time as their letters offer a respite, they are also instrumental in shaping their values and self-perceptions. In a typical epistolary romance, that shaping is a sort of orienting of lovers to one another (or, at other times, away from one another) in preparation for an eventual erotic encounter (Altman 1973). In *Dark Princess*, they are a shaping of two lovers not so much for an erotic encounter (which, at any rate, has already been fulfilled) but for a new way of life they will share. Their future, they indicate, will be animated by revolutionary work, but also a different orientation to beauty and goodness which will animate workers of the black belt more broadly: Matthew imagines a dictatorship of the proletariat, in which workers might free themselves from the soul-killing effects of a labor which denies their thought and agency and deprives them of the resources and leisure for aesthetic cultivation. The "democratic laborer" of *Souls* becomes, in *Dark Princess*, the "unit of a real democracy" who might at times "literally forg[e]t" labor and, perhaps as Matthew does when, for several days, he walks off the tunneling job and heads to the Art Institute, "bathe[oneself] in a new world of beauty" (280-1). Matthew dreams of "lifting work to its natural level," and writes:

> If only I could work and work wildly, unstintingly, hilariously for six full, long hours; after that, while I lie in a warm bath, I should like to hear Tschaikowsky's Fourth Symphony….Then I would like to have clean, soft clothes and fair, fresh food daintily prepared on a shining table. Afterward, a ride in green pastures and beside still waters; a film, a play, a novel, and always you….[A]nd at last sleep, deep sleep within your arms. Then the morning and the fray (271).

Recognition of this necessity of beauty and pleasure to human life, a new human life, requires a new orientation to work and "a new dream of living" based on profitless labor: "a different kind of man" (272). The letter in some sense mediates Matthew's becoming this latter subject, emerging from the world of Man to that of an only dimly defined, human subject constructed from his dual experiences of love and labor.

Kautilya's letters complete the other half of this transformation. The liminal space of Matthew and Kautilya's letters can bring about some new way of being, but they do not do so by severing themselves from the past. Their letters, as much as they are a practice of futurity, are also a negotiation of the past. As Matthew is suffering from the oppression of Man and imagining, in his letters, the regime of labor and beauty which would replace it, Kautilya asks him to pursue this struggle, as yet hazily defined, in conversation with the past of African Americans and traditions of his mother. Matthew has remained estranged from his mother for much of the novel. In a brief chapter recounting his visit to Prince James County, Du Bois does not record their interaction: the chapter ends with Matthew walking toward her, at a distance, and she waiting in the doorway, "singing something low and strong," perhaps the spirituals which punctuate the book's final scene (131). Matthew's aversion to his mother' s home and way of life stems from his equation of that space, and perhaps even his mother, with a history of slavery. Their letters become a contestation over that space and its history. Kautilya envisions his mother's small plot of land as one piece of the global "Black Belt," one piece of a broader international public of the colonized and people of color. Kautilya labors with his mother and is nurtured by her during her pregnancy. She writes to him that such a place is "no mere temporary refuge," but a site with "deep founding-stones" upon which "you may perhaps build." She draws its international connections, both through its history of slavery and present site of racal capitalist exploitation:

> This brook dances on to a river fifty miles away…And the river winds in stately curve down Jamestown-of-the-Slaves. We went down the other day, walking part of the way through woods and dells, toward the great highway of the Atlantic. Think, Matthew, take your geography and trace it: from Hampton Roads to Guiana is a world of colored folk, and a world, men tell me, physically beautiful beyond conception; socially enslaved, industrially ruined, spiritually dead; but ready for the breath of Life and Resurrection" (278).

Kautilya imagines a world simultaneously "enslaved" and "ruined" but also "beautiful." As Matthew and Kautilya had created a site of beauty in Matthew's apartment, Kautilya imagines an existing beauty in the traditions and ways of life built in Man's margins. These "deep founding-stones" are the beginning of her decolonial project.

But Matthew contests this painful but possibility-filled image. He responds in horror to her presence there, writing "Think not of home in that breeder of slaves and hate, Virginia. I shudder to find you there even for a season. There is horror there which your dear eyes are not yet focused to see and which the old blindness of my mother forgets." "The land is literally accursed with the blood and pain of three hundred years of slavery" (279). Just as Matthew, in his earlier visit to his mother, is described as at a distance, down the road and perhaps just out of range of her singing, here he signals his distance from the home and traditions she and those before her have created even amid the pain of slavery and its afterlives. Change must instead take place, he writes, at the "center of the world," not its margins. In the very next paragraph, he describes escaping Chicago's "filth and grayness" (279) by visiting an exhibit made up entirely of modern white European artists (279-80).

In *Souls*, Du Bois describes this aversion to folk traditions, and specifically to the tradition of African American spirituals which grew out of slavery. He argues that those songs offer a source of group consciousness, a connection with the past and an enduring statement of striving in slavery's afterlives. But in these letters, Matthew's effort to abandon his mother's way of life and the history she represents takes on different stakes. It is Kautilya, representing India at the council, who finds meaning and possibility in Prince James County, and who seems to draw a connection between its history and India's condition of colonization. When she tells Matthew to "take you geography and trace it," she is asking him to understand its possibility not only for African American emancipation but as a part of an international revolutionary public. "[T]o be in the center of power is not enough," she writes.

> You must be free and able to act. You are not free in Chicago or New York. But here in Virginia you are at the edge of a black world. The black belt of the Congo, the Nile, and the Ganges reaches by way of Guiana, Haiti, and Jamaica, like a red arrow, up into the heart of white America. Thus I see a mighty synthesis: you can work in Africa and Asia right here in America if you work in the black belt (286).

In asking Matthew to join she and his mother to "build a world," she is not ignoring its history; she is asking him to find freedom in the margins that he does not find at the "center." Their epistolary mediation of these two places, Chicago and Virginia, notably, takes place in the *textual space* they do share. Even as Kautilya tells Matthew that they must "build a world," they are in fact operating in an insurgent space in which that world's first seeds are being planted. She envisions for Matthew the beauty of Virginia at length, as well as his mother's wisdom. She tells him of the home she has built for them, and of their labor. In doing so, she offers Matthew a reimagined world of the (for now) margins which he does not yet recognize, but which they share within this epistolary space. That process ultimately leads to the book's final scene, when Matthew is summoned to Virginia, greeted by his mother, Kautilya, and their newborn son.

My aim in this chapter has been to consider the ways Du Bois critiques existing concepts of the human which inhibit democracy in the US, while imagining the ways its reconstruction might unite an international, anticolonial democratic union. And, as I argued, one of the striking things about this effort is his choice to use his novel's epistolary turn as the stage for that reimagining. Matthew and Kautilya's intimacy becomes the precondition for the revolution the novel's conclusion anticipates. Some have suggested that this intimacy also, perhaps, limits the form to a particular mode of aristocratic politics for which Du Bois is often criticized. Arnold Rampersad argues, for instance, that Matthew and Kautilya's romance obscures the stakes of a broader, mass politics. It is worth noting, he argues, that among the transformations Kautilya goes through in becoming a socialist revolutionary, she does not abandon her royal titles

(Rampersad 1976, 209). Moreover, Matthew and Kautilya speak in *Dark Princess* of democracy as a means of choosing the "aristocracy" to lead, finding the "genius, gift, and ability in far larger number than among the privileged and ruling classes" (225). In one sense, the epistolary would seem the privileged mode of the international vanguard Du Bois depicts in the "council" early in the novel, whose democratic claims rest in their role as representatives.

But I also think *Dark Princess* invites its readers to consider a different, democratic interpretation of the novel's letters. They suggest, in the reading I have offered, an ambivalence which characterizes politics beyond Matthew and Kautilya. Matthew cannot find democracy in America, and he is faced with the "color line within the color line" of the anticolonial resistance with whom he allies himself. Their letters are in anticipation of something otherwise. Moreover, they suggest the role Du Bois understood aesthetic and erotic pleasure to play in cultivating that otherwise, as well as the relation he saw between that cultivation, as argued in "Criteria," and his writings on, and affiliation with, Asian and African anticolonial politics.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with some considerations of the foregoing for contemporary efforts to theorize race and democracy in the US. I consider two broad invitations for further theorizing which Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois pose: rethinking the relationship between publics and peoplehood, and the role of opacity *in* those publics. In considering the second, I turn to the poet Claudia Rankine's 2014 book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which, I argue, both speaks to the history I trace in the preceding chapters and invites consideration of what an ethics of democratic ambivalence might involve.

First, the history of thought traced in the previous chapters demands democratic theorists' attention to the relationship between publics and peoples. If democratic community remained unattainable in the near term, the imaginative efforts of authors like Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois nevertheless took place in publics of readers which spanned the color line and engaged would-be comrades. This is by no means to deny the important meaning of their thought for Black counterpublic spaces, and the way the latter shaped the former. Indeed, Cooper, Johnson, and Du Bois' works must be read in the context of the expansion of the African American counterpublic, its institutions and internal debates, from the late nineteenth century through the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, it is to claim the complex dynamics of their double-audience, the character of which was in persistent tension with their democratic hopes.

Publics, Michael Warner argues, are constituted by, among other things, the circulation of texts among strangers over time. They are autopoetic, and their scope is constituted by the active attention of its participants who (in the case of writing) read, discuss, respond, and reference (etc.) some work. Importantly, this association differs from that brought about by "state institutions, laws, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions" (Warner 2002, 68). The democratic significance of publics is in part that they at times transgress borders and hierarchies, including those of the racial polity. Johnson's claim in chapter 2 that art acts as "the plane on which all men are more willing to meet and stand with us" reflects this promise

(Johnson 1924, 2). As he shows in the *Autobiography*, however, Johnson's claim does not reflect a naive hope in a kind of equality granted *within* those relations of author and reader, performer and audience, and so on. Rather, they were (but have never been reducible to) a site of politics when other, formal avenues were closed (Iton 2008, 17). As Richard Iton has argued, histories of Black cultural production, in part because of its diasporic character, have precluded "aligning culture and the borders of nation-states" (Iton 2008, 202).

The public, then, is a site of struggle, and the authors I have written on in the foregoing chapters attempt to reconfigure its relations through their contributions. Cooper's efforts to assemble otherwise the turn of the century women's movement, Johnson's authoring of fugitive performances which escape his readers, and Du Bois' romantic account of the formation of relations across the global "Black Belt" each reflect on the existing character of the publics to which they contribute. Publics are, returning to Warner, reflexive and creative: participants reflect on, or at least suppose the precedent of, the circulation of texts and reception leading up to their own contribution. At the same time, they

> try to specify in advance…the lifeworld of [that contribution's] circulation: not just through its its discursive claims—of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding—but through the pragmatics of its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, mise-en-scène, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world (Warner 2002, 114).

While these authors, in their ambivalence, may not (or, rather, not *only*) make aspirational claims to shared democratic community, they practice a freedom in agonistic relation to their would-be comrades. This is both, as I noted in the introduction, a practice of self-realization in public, as well as the contested shaping of the terms by which he/she is (mis)recognized. This is one sense in which their efforts to rethink the terms of public expression and reception complemented the more formal, institutional politics each pursued alongside their writing.

There is a shaky line between the sort of politics I am describing and what Jason Frank, reading Rancière, calls the "stage" of constituent claims. Frank describes the people as an unstable, indeterminate entity which exists through its repeated performance. The meaning of the term transforms as new actors make claims to it, or do so in new ways. While the clear, commonly cited case remains the performative utterance "We the People" in the US Constitution, Frank notes that representations of the people were also performed by crowds, novels, and speeches. When these new, eruptive claims are made, putting forth a vision of peoplehood which was previously deemed illegitimate or inconceivable, he argues, they generate their own conditions of intelligibility. Writing of Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" address, he writes that "Douglass staged what Rancière characterizes as the '*demonstration* proper to politics,' which 'is always both argument and opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact—argument about the very existence of such a world'" (Frank 2010, 212).

But what occurs in the history prior to what Frank and Rancière characterize as the perceptual transformation inherent in the "constituent moment," the performance in which a new collective subject is invoked?[43] The staging they describe itself occurs on a stage, not only of previous articulations of political peoplehood, but contestations over the meaning of the public in which they are formulated. While I wish to maintain my distinction, then, between the ambivalent present and the aspirational, democratic future, the effort to find meaning in the former may very well shape the terms of the latter.

Secondly, the foregoing chapters invite consideration of what relation opacities might have to a democratic aesthetic politics. In an earlier chapter, I referenced Michaele Ferguson's politics of "sharing." By "sharing," she refers to the ways democratic communities intersubjectively shape lifeworlds. This is, she notes, a contested process, never finished, and is distinct from efforts to find some (what she calls) "objective" basis, such as common culture,

[43] I thank Kevin Duong for raising this point.

institutions, identity, citizenship, and so on (Ferguson 2012, 14-16). Because "we share the world in common with plural others," taking this objective view can in fact result in less democracy (Ferguson 2012, 139). Necessary rather is what she calls a "democracy sense": an acknowledgement of this plurality and one's finitude in understanding and shaping the world; and a corresponding commitment to doing so with others. This is an uncertain practice, she notes, which already entails disagreement.

Interestingly, Brooks' use of the term opacity could be a sort of sharing in Ferguson's sense, but it is one which also occludes. Performing race otherwise, in her study, entails disrupting the "representational timelessness projected onto blackness" (Brooks 2006, 6) by one's audience. While this might be, in Ferguson's framework, one way of intersubjectively shaping perception of a world in common, the opacity entailed in these performances in fact relies on the audience's incomprehension: it is the performance of new meanings they do not have access to. For Brooks, it is precisely *through* this incomprehension that new meanings of racial identity and embodiment can emerge in public. Each of the foregoing chapters emphasizes this: the indeterminate outcome (and indefinite combinations) of Cooper's assembling, the untranslatable improvisations of the *Autobiography*, and the uncertain event anticipated by Matthew and Kautilya's letters. Each of these opaque moments, I have suggested, plays a role in frustrating the terms of invisibility while, on the other hand, inviting the improvisation of new meanings.

This picture is not necessarily incompatible with Ferguson's, who herself emphasizes the improvisational, uncertain character of sharing. But it complicates the goal of "understanding" she describes, and even more so for authors who envision intersubjective sharing as entailing, for instance, perspective-taking as the end-result (especially in political theories of narrative: e.g. Nussbaum 1997, Schiff 2014). Opacity is (also) part of a "*strategy* of cultural performance," and here I take Brooks' meaning to echo Foucault's concept of strategy, entailing a sort of

"confrontation," a break in relations of power and their possible reconstitution as its outcome (Brooks 2006, 4).

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, offers a contemporary, ethical complement to these themes. The book begins with a series of "moments [which] send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs" (Rankine 2014, 7). She writes of moments of hurtful speech, instances in which she finds herself "erased": on the one hand, a reduction of her individuality, her personal relationships, and her standing in society to a static white vision of her racial identity and its attendant hierarchy; and closely related, white Americans' disavowal of (a refusal to acknowledge) that erasure's violence, as well as the deeper histories of violence, which shape collective life. These painful events become a refrain throughout *Citizen*, alongside collective experiences of racial injustice. Together, they form memories which, even as the white world disavows them, remain in her body, she writes, having "turned your flesh into its own cupboard" (Rankine 2014, 63). The burden of that collected, collective pain, subject to neither acknowledgment nor redress, and white society's demand for the sufferer's silence, is "how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on" (Rankine 2014, 151).

Harm among "friends," as she writes, builds into collective, present and historical experiences of violence and disavowal. Rankine understands *Citizen*'s first-person descriptions of erasure as written (as she notes in a later interview) from a "structural position unconnected to any particular self" (Rankine 2016, 160); while her reflections on events which have animated public attention and social movements maintain an intimate lens. Several scripts for "situation videos" included in the collection act as elegies: for Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, and for Mark Duggan, murdered by London police in 2011. And in a striking moment, she ties police violence to white men's refusal to "police their imagination" (Rankine 2014, 135). She does not, therefore, contrast the first-person accounts of friends' harmful speech with faceless, structural accounts of violence. Everything in *Citizen* happens at the interpersonal level. Even her

collection of CNN quotes during Hurricane Katrina emphasizes this dimension, with its first- and second-person reactions to the emergency, paired with the frequent refrain, “Have you seen their faces?”

At one point, Rankine turns to Judith Butler, who reflects before an audience on “what makes language hurtful.” The answer, Butler says, is that “Our very being exposes us to the address of another….We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability” (Rankine 2014, 49). I want to suggest in closing that Rankine invites consideration of an ethics of democratic ambivalence. She maintains a faith, in part, that shifts in consciousness at the micro-level can have structural meaning. Just as bodies hold personal and collective memories of pain, she suggests that disclosing the ways they manifest in an individual’s feelings can counteract the interpersonal, invisibilizing dynamics she describes. The vulnerability before “friends” seems to also entail the latter’s addressability, the potential of communicating feelings which “destabilize” and “don’t sit comfortably inside the communal” (Rankine 2014, 152).

Citizen is often, then, an effort to communicate feeling. The memories she describes gather in the body and produce feeling; they are “headache-producing” (Rankine 2014, 10), like “a bad egg in your mouth” (Rankine 2014, 8), they recall moments which “stink” (Rankine 2014, 9). She suggests that sharing feeling differs from the sharing of narratives. If constituent claims can be understood as a sort of narrative of collective identity, she writes that the stress which builds up in the body from repeated insult and harm creates an anxiety that in fact “isn’t a narrative. It’s what *interrupts* the narrative, what stalls mobility. It’s an invisible sensation that requires adjustment by the body, beyond the space of words. As a poet, I want to use language to enter that space of feeling. I’m less interested in stories” (emphasis mine, Rankine 2016, 146-7). She disrupts the citizenship which required her willingness to accede to the disavowal of her memory and experience. But in its place, as was true of the various instances of opacity in the preceding chapters, is the possibility of something otherwise.

At the same time, it is important to note that she seems to differentiate this knowledge communicated to friends from a desire for recognition, what she calls a "need to be found." In a later poem, she alludes to the artist David Hammon's *Concerto in Black and Blue*, a series of empty, lightless rooms which visitors navigate with tiny blue lights. Reflecting on that experience, she writes of a choice: "You could build a world out of [that] need or you could hold everything black and see. You give back the lack" (Rankine 2014, 70). To "give back the lack," as I understand it, is to "refus[e] what has been refused" (Moten and Harney 2013, 103) in favor of something otherwise, the "seeing" which might arrive in Hammon's black and blue space.

This refusal of what was refused, and the disruption of existing narratives of national (and) racial identity in her friends' imagination, leaves space for some other meaning of "citizen." But as has been true in previous chapters, here the particular account of what might constitute that citizenship is left open. What *Citizen* instead offers is a more ambivalent picture of engagement, between the harmful present and a more democratic future. As she describes seeking "an answer to question," buried somewhere in a friend's face, to trouble something which can disavow her humanity (Rankine 2014, 118), the language of "friendship" seems to suggests something ambiguous. But it is perhaps the ambiguity of the term which makes it appropriate for this discussion. For now, she can ascribe to her interlocutors neither the "political friendship" characteristic of democratic community (as Danielle Allen describes) nor, in the examples she offers, an unproblematic intimate relationship. But the curious, undefined language nevertheless reflects, always in tension with the present, a sense of its possible transformation.

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