

RACE AND ROMANTIC VISIONS:
A TRAGIC READING

by

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Abstract

My dissertation explores a set of creative intersections between romanticism, black political thought, and Nietzschean philosophy. In so doing it asks two overarching questions. First, how do different ethical theories, philosophies of time and history, and conceptualizations of subjectivity and community suggest contending ways of understanding the roles that race and race-making play in modern life? Second, how can reflective black experiences of modernity shed light on discussions in political theory about the relationship between theory and history, the significance of identity, identification, and difference in democratic life, and the complex interrelations between affect, ethics, culture, and politics? Ultimately, I argue that a tragic vision of an unbalanced world neither governed by providence nor readily susceptible to human mastery provides a valuable lens through which to assess contemporary racial politics. Articulated through a series of engagements with the works of Sophocles, Immanuel Kant, Johann Herder, W. E. B. Du Bois, Friedrich Nietzsche, and James Baldwin, such a vision incorporates the crucial insights of the romantic vision (as found in Herder and Du Bois) regarding embodied subjectivity, the importance of belonging, and the deep plurality of values and cultural perspectives; but it resists romanticism's organic social ontology and providential image of time. It emphasizes instead the creativity of becoming, elements of real uncertainty in life and action, and the importance of practices that foster existential affirmation. Tragic wisdom calls attention to the contingent, time-bound character of life and urges us to accept *and* affirm our entanglements in the inexorable flux of creation and destruction that gives shape to the world. It does so to encourage us to participate in those processes with less existential rancor. The point of tragic wisdom is to help us better care for the world, not abandon it; although skeptical of appeals to Revolution and Redemption, a tragic sense is not one of passive resignation, despair, or political quietism. Instead, by urging respect for the contingent, paradoxical, and unpredictable in life, tragic wisdom teaches a lesson of modesty and responsiveness out of which a noble ethic of solidarity, care for the world, and militant struggle may arise.

Faculty Readers: William E. Connolly, P. J. Brendese, Jane Bennett, Hollis Robbins, N. D. B. Connolly

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Introduction

My new path to a "Yes." —*Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence. From the long experience I gained from such a wandering through ice and wilderness, I learned to view differently all that had hitherto philosophized: the hidden history of philosophy, the psychology of its great names, came to light for me. "How much truth can a spirit endure, how much truth does a spirit dare?"—this became for me the real standard of value. Error is cowardice—every achievement of knowledge is a consequence of courage, of severity toward oneself, of cleanliness toward oneself—Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this—to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal circulation:—the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements. The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is amor fati.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. This intimation made my heart heavy and, now that my father was irrecoverable, I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now.

—James Baldwin²

Even in dark times such as these, life sometimes surprises in strange and delightful ways: it provides moments of hope and creative possibility that shine

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books, London: 2004) "Why I Write Such Good Books," 77 [*Zarathustra*: 6]. Hereafter cited as *EH*.

² James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, in *James Baldwin Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 84.

through the routine injustices of the everyday. One such moment for me was Cornel West's recent appearance on CBS's *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Needless to say, Dr. West is not your typical late-night network television talk show guest—one does not ordinarily expect to find representatives of the black prophetic tradition featured there. But perhaps for that reason, Letterman appeared to be energized by West's visit, and the two engaged in a truly compelling discussion about race, power, inequality, history, and the conditions of possibility for justice, community, and cultural renewal. It was the best thing I have seen on television in years, and I watch far too much television.

With his characteristic mix of charisma and humility, West explains to Letterman and the audience that any understanding of race in America must begin with reference to its historical determinants:

I think when we talk about race in America, you're really talking about the legacy of white supremacy—not just black folks. It starts with indigenous peoples; then you got brown; then you got yellow; and then you got black folks. And, of course, white brothers and sisters too, in many ways, are dehumanized by dehumanizing others, so they need to be liberated *from* this false sense of access to undeserved privilege and benefit in order for democracy to be what it ought to be.³

With these powerful words, West introduces a number of vital ideas for understanding race, inequality, and the prospects for democracy in America (and elsewhere). First and foremost is that race must be understood historically and politically. As James Baldwin put it, "Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality."⁴ Races are not natural communities or *essential* identities that exist prior to political mobilization and intervention; race is the result of ongoing

³ *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Interview with Dr. Cornel West, part 2. March 16, 2015

⁴ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books), 104.

processes of *racialization* and ascriptive identification in which certain groups or populations are marked out as suitable for domination and exploitation for the benefit of others. It is these violent, multivalent, dynamic processes that make whiteness—and the access to power and false sense of security it provides—possible. Whiteness thus depends on the degradation of people of color. And it ends in dehumanizing those who are devoted to it: “*Whoever debases others is debasing himself.*”⁵

But white supremacy is not only constitutive of racial hierarchy: it inscribes that hierarchy into nearly every facet of life—from our macropolitical structures and institutions down to our daily interactions. Racism is thus not an anomalous deviation from American principles and democratic institutions: white supremacy is inscribed in the formative structures, basic social arrangements, and patterns of identification constituting the American polity. Racial hierarchy inflects the character of our public and private lives in ways that are both abundantly evident and hard to grasp: “race functions as a conduit between culture and social structure, between the meanings and values that groups place upon racial distinctions, and the selection, imposition, and reinforcements of those meanings and values in labor markets, the state apparatus, social, and cultural institutions.”⁶ Among other things, this means that racial hierarchy will not be overcome through the elevation of a select few people of color to positions of social, economic, and political power within the system *as it is currently constituted*. “Every 28 hours,” West tells the audience,

⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁶ Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14. Hanchard draws on Paul Gilroy, *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Routledge, 1987) for this understanding of race.

“there’s a black youth or brown youth who is shot by the police. We have a black President and black Attorney General, and not one federal prosecution of a police man of killing, of murdering, those folks.”⁷ What is necessary, then, is to reformulate and reconstitute American society’s basic arrangements, institutions, values, and civic practices. We desperately need what Nietzsche calls a ‘trans-valuation of values’ on the basis of which we might radically reform our “polity by reimagining and reconstituting its constitutive norms.”⁸

In order to accomplish this *radical* reform, however, we must first abandon the cynical politics of calculation and mass appeal and, instead, speak truth to power and bear witness to suffering:

The fundamental question is always, first: not being in denial, and [second] recognizing that if you really do have a love for anybody, let alone poor people, working people, black people, or whatever, you ought to have a hatred of them being treated unjustly, and a *loathing* of them being treated unfairly. But that has to do with courage, integrity, honesty, and willingness to tell the truth.⁹

West calls for *and* enacts a prophetic approach to American politics. Prophets are not those who predict the future or announce immutable decrees. Instead, they point to present conditions and practices and warn of their consequences if they are left unaltered. Prophets, much like the soothsayers and seers of Greek tragedy, “are *messengers* who *announce* truths their audience is invested in denying;” they bear witness, pronounce judgments, and “testify *against* injustice and idolatry;” and they are “*watchmen* who *forewarn*” of the dangers inherent in our conduct and of the

⁷ *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Interview with Dr. Cornel West, part 2. March 16, 2015

⁸ Robert Gooding-Williams, “*Look, A Negro!: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 119.

⁹ *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Interview with Dr. Cornel West, part 2. March 16, 2015

consequences that will befall us if we do not change our ways.¹⁰ Prophets do not tell us of what is feasible, but of what is necessary—what must be done. But as West makes clear, at its best, the (black) prophetic tradition does not demonize or denigrate; instead, it seeks to provoke us to acknowledge what we disavow and to act upon that acknowledgment as the only way of redeeming our world. Such enactments are most likely to be successful when they are rooted in a radical love for humanity—a militant love that despises degradation without utterly demonizing those it holds responsible for it. As Cornel West says at the end of his interview with Letterman, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”¹¹

There are key affinities between aspects of the black prophetic tradition West celebrates and the tragic vision I recommend in the final chapter of this dissertation—particularly the way in which both perspectives provoke us to acknowledge what we disavow as they warn of the evils we risk incurring if we refuse to do so. In fact, West himself endorses a tragic or “tragicomic” worldview, one that both acknowledges the sheer absurdity of the human predicament and “yields a courage to hope for betterment against the odds without a sense of revenge or resentment.”¹² There is indeed a great deal of overlap between our respective accounts of the tragic. Most notably, we both turn to tragic wisdom to help navigate the paradox Baldwin identifies in the epigraph above: how to accept life as it is, “without rancor,” while struggling against the injustices that continually seep into it?

¹⁰ George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 5).

¹¹ *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Interview with Dr. Cornel West, part 2. March 16, 2015; cf. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

¹² Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 216.

But whereas West's tragicomic view is ultimately rooted in a Christian metaphysic, which presents our tragic sojourn here on Earth as a prelude to the divine comedy of cosmic redemption, I draw critical inspiration from Nietzsche's non-theistic reverence for being and his joyful affirmation of an unbalanced world composed of diverse forces that do not always harmonize with one another or support human intentions and aspirations. My sense is that West believes an element of cosmic providentialism to be an indispensable part of the existential arsenal needed to resist resignation and despair—"this tragicomic sense," he writes, "propels us toward suicide or madness unless we are buffered by ritual, cushioned by community or sustained by art."¹³ While Nietzsche agrees that art, ritual, and worldly engagements are vital, he advances a Dionysian account of the world itself joined to existential affirmation of the tragic as a condition of our existence and a prelude to our struggles. "A highest state of affirmation of existence is conceived from which the highest degree of pain cannot be excluded: *the tragic-Dionysian state*."¹⁴ In other words, we do not need to look outside the tragic visions for a comic 'supplement' or external sources of existential affirmation. The tragic, properly internalized, *is* fundamentally affirmative. Moreover, Nietzsche warns that providential worldviews are liable to intensify pre-existing drives toward existential *ressentiment* when tough times come; they weaken our attachment to this world, which we come to resent for what it 'lacks' in comparison to that Other World we have conjured. "Even the 'Beyond'—why a Beyond if not as a means of befouling the

¹³ Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 89-90

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, ed. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), #853 III. Hereafter cited as *WP*.

Here-and-Now?”¹⁵ As Cornel West himself shows, however, and as Nietzsche at his best recognizes, not all bearers of providentialism necessarily become resentful; nonetheless, “those who demand extra compensation to face life—a moral god, the hope of eternal salvation, the compensatory promise of human mastery over the world—teeter on the verge of resentment unless they fold into those very faiths an expansive love of the world they depict.”¹⁶

Despite these metaphysical differences, however, both West’s tragicomic worldview and the tragic vision I articulate by exploring the affinities between Sophocles, Nietzsche, and James Baldwin emphasize the importance of affirming existence *as such* in the midst of its ongoing tragedies, of drawing upon a love of life in resisting injustice, and of cultivating the ethical practices, ‘arts of the self,’ and political alliances needed to sustain an affirmative existential orientation and to struggle in the right keys. And they both advance existentialist accounts of anti-black racism, seeing it as an expression of a deeper, underlying dissatisfaction with life itself. In other words, the implacable insistence on preserving whiteness stems from an unwillingness among white folks to confront the reality of their own lives and to come to terms with the most fundamental conditions of human existence. This helps to explain the vigilance with which whiteness is so often protected when challenged: whiteness provides a form of ontological compensation for contingency in an uncertain world of becoming replete with uneven modes of suffering. Blackness thus becomes an object for the projection of fears and a target for the

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 2003), 98 [“Expeditions of an Untimely Man” 34].

¹⁶ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 112.

venting of *ressentiment*—a convenient scapegoat to blame for life’s misfortunes and disappointments. This is what James Baldwin, an inheritor of both the prophetic and tragic traditions, means when he writes, “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”¹⁷

Another important feature our respective accounts of the tragic share is an integral connection to the reflective black experiences of modernity and to the politico-existential insights that have arisen as creative responses to those experiences. West speaks of a distinctive *black* tragicomic sense of life that can be found, for example, in the tradition of the blues, which “forges a mature hope” and “encourages us to confront the harsh realities of our personal and political lives unflinchingly without innocent sentimentalism or coldhearted cynicism.”¹⁸

Similarly, I suggest that there are tragic resonances within and across various genres of modern black political thought. I bring these resonances into critical contact and conversation with a Nietzschean account of the tragic, particularly through the writings of James Baldwin. Pursuing this connection, I suggest that a tragic perspective enhances our understanding of the construction and contestation of racial categories, and it provides a valuable framework for making sense of the ethico-political challenges confronting contemporary racial politics in late-modern and post-colonial societies. Although a tragic vision indebted to Nietzsche rejects the romantic notion of an *a priori* black identity or essence that can serve as the secure

¹⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 22.

¹⁸ West, *Democracy Matters*, 216.

foundation for black politics, I argue that because of its keen historical sense, this kind of tragic vision also recognizes the central role that race-making has played in the emergence of Western modernity, the *continued* relevance of race in the contemporary world, and the crucial importance of forging race-conscious forms of political solidarity in the manifold struggle against white supremacy.

Black experiences of modernity have been shaped by the inescapable encounter with white supremacy and racial violence, which accompany those varied experiences—at least as a specter—at every moment of struggle, articulation, and expatriation. However, these experiences cannot be reduced entirely to forms of resistance or mere survival: there is also something in them that is irreducible—forms of life that exceed the determining conditions of white supremacy and persist alongside, against, or even beyond the modes of abjection racial hierarchy fosters. These practices and experiments offer creative possibilities within the tragedy of racialized modernity. For Baldwin, this creative power is tantamount to the miraculous in history—“and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”¹⁹ Importantly, however, because Baldwin’s tragic vision shares with Nietzsche’s a view of history as a constitutive inheritance we can never entirely shake off, he contends that the possibility for creative transformation (i.e., human freedom) resides in first accepting our inescapable entanglements with the past, which we must make conditions of action rather than mere objects of *ressentiment*. It is at this moment

¹⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104.

that the need to be able to accept life as it is, “without rancor,” emerges with pressing importance. Indeed, for Nietzsche the creation of life-affirming values and new forms of life becomes possible only when we affirm the most fundamental human conditions of existence and take part in the creative processes of becoming that exceed us but are not entirely outside our realm of influence.

All told, West’s appearance on *The Late Show* was a micropolitical triumph of anti-racist praxis, one dearly needed today to help combat the vast array of racist macro- and micropolitical forces at play in American society—racial micro-aggressions in everyday life, coded language and racist themes on television programs, racial evasions and stereotypes in Hollywood films, populist movements fueled by racist sentiments coded in the language of nostalgic patriotism, anti-immigration movements, news stories conditioned by racist attitudes (e.g., when people of color are blamed for their own victimization). These forces make possible and sustain the glaring levels of racial injustice and inequality in this country, the routine subjection of black bodies to violence by agents of the state, and in general the establishment of the “new Jim Crow” in America.²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of micropolitics and fascism may be instructive here:

We would even say that fascism implies a molecular regime that is distinct both from molar segments and their centralization... The concept of the totalitarian State applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization. But fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, *before* beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran’s fascism, fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and

²⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press), 2011.

office: every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole.²¹

Micropolitics intervenes at the “molecular” level in order to shape, in often imperceptible ways, our beliefs, sensibilities, dispositions, attitudes, attachments, perceptions, and affective structures. It involves modes of political engagement that operate below the threshold of the state and its institutional enactments, creating conditions of possibility for these larger structures—but also potentially the conditions for their disruption and transformation. “In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*.”²²

One reason why I think West’s *Late Show* appearance was so effective as a micropolitical technique for countering white supremacist systems and logics was that it was a real instance of the type of interracial sympathy W. E. B. Du Bois yearned for when he wrote the following:

The white man, as well as the Negro, is bound and barred by the color-line, and many a scheme of friendliness and philanthropy, of broad-minded sympathy and generous fellowship between the two has dropped still-born because some busy-body has forced the color-question to the front and brought the tremendous force of unwritten law against the innovators... In a world where it means so much to take a man by the hand and sit beside him, to look frankly into his eyes and feel his heart beating with red blood; in a world where a social cigar or a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches,—one can imagine the consequences of the almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races, whose separation extends even to parks and street-cars.²³

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 214.

²² *Ibid.*, 213.

²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, eds. Robert Gooding-Williams and David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), 145.

As we shall see in the third chapter, sympathy was a central concept in Du Bois's early political thought. For Du Bois, the tragedy of racism is that it prevents black and white folks alike from seeing each other as *humans*, that is, from recognizing their common humanity. But he saw sympathy as a powerful ethical force capable of dissolving the racial estrangements of the color-line: "Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph."²⁴ For his understanding of sympathy, as for much of the interpretive framework and worldview operative in his early writings, Du Bois was indebted to the *romantic vision* of the German philosopher and theoretician of the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress') movement, Johann Gottfried von Herder.

Herder is often associated with German nationalism and presented as the 'father of cultural nationalism.' Generally speaking, the romantic vision tends to carry negative connotations, especially among scholars of racial politics, many of whom associate it and its organic image of the nation exclusively with authoritarianism, chauvinism, and mystical notions of race and racial authenticity. There is more than an element of truth in these assessments, but there is also far more to Herder's romantic vision than they suggest, in part because there are important differences between Herder and many of the romantic nationalist thinkers who came after him. In our rush to condemn romanticism's organic conception of the nation, we should be careful not to lose sight of the significant social, political, and philosophical insights Herder's romantic vision articulates.

²⁴ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 147.

In one sense, Herder's romantic vision can be seen as a profound expression of desire for social harmony, for overcoming the alienation wrought by the Enlightenment and modern revolution, and for expanding and strengthening the bonds of sympathy within *and* between nations. I argue that although a tragic vision can better serve us today in making sense of the contours and dilemmas of racial politics, the romantic vision nonetheless contains vitally important insights regarding embodied subjectivity, the partiality of all perspective and the plurality of values, and the importance of affect, sensibility, and disposition to political life. These insights emerge through Herder's socio-historical investigations, which seek to uncover the sources of social cohesion that can provide for a communal way of life that harmonizes the diverse interests, perspectives, and values in a nation. The goals behind this are noble ones: to secure the self-determination of all peoples, eliminate the need for hierarchical political systems, and help non-European peoples resist colonialism and Empire. In the end, however, I also want to suggest that many of the dangers inherent in Herder's (and by extension, Du Bois's) romantic vision stem not just from what is potentially base or ignoble in it—chauvinism, the thirst for power—but from its noble impulses as well: the desire for community, the celebration of cultural creativity, and the drive for self-determination. When these laudable intentions are connected to providential assumptions that remove traces of ambiguity or ambivalence from them, we are liable to lose sight of their potential costs, limits, or contestability. We are apt to pursue them in a dogmatic manner. And *that* is a recipe for tragedy in a pluralistic

world of becoming, as Sophocles tried to teach us. Hence, a “tragic reading” of the romantic vision both draws upon it and drains some elements from it.

Herder was in fact one of the first thinkers to assert the principle of nationality, according to which each ‘people’ ought to have its own state, but this fact needs to be placed in its proper context in order for its significance to be clear. In chapter 1 I undertake this task and examine the philosophical foundations, conceptual innovations, and ethical motivations animating Herder’s romantic vision of the world and human history. I focus in particular on Herder’s cultural pluralism—the flip side of his ‘nationalism,’ demonstrating how it is undergirded by his expressivist theory of subjectivity, according to which the subject is always already embedded in a nature-culture matrix that inexorably conditions its mode of being-in-the-world. This embedded view of the subject demands that we take seriously the essentially social character of reason, the culturally infused nature of identity formation, and the existence of a plurality of incommensurable values and forms of life. Although Herder’s romantic vision does not amount to an outright rejection of Enlightenment notions and values, it did articulate a critical reaction to them, and his claims regarding embodied rationality, cultural pluralism, and the partiality of all perspectives called into question the Enlightenment’s belief in the transcendental autonomy and authority of reason, its linear conception of historical progress, and its abstract, arrogant, and ahistorical universalism.

Herder’s organic conception of the nation is indeed problematic. It is insufficiently alert to the complexities of identity formation and differentiation, to the existence of a plurality of incommensurable values *within* each society, and to

the distinct possibility that the affective and emotional bonds formed through nationalist development may all too easily be transmuted into drives to chauvinism, militarism, and authoritarianism. Moreover, an organic conception of the nation projects a logic of belonging and collective identification that, if followed to its conclusion, ends in a call for the consolidation and normalization of collective identity, potentially silencing those voice and values—usually belonging to the most marginalized within a group—that do not correspond to the ideal being advanced. However, it is important to recognize that Herder himself was not a chauvinist; in fact, he was vehemently opposed to chauvinism, nationalist aggression, all forms of authoritarianism, and, perhaps most importantly, colonialism and Empire. His organic conception of the nation was a component of his staunch and consistent anti-imperialism, and his promotion of the development of distinct national cultures was in many ways motivated by his opposition to the degradation and debasement entailed in the colonial enterprise. While this certainly does not make his organic communitarianism unproblematic, it does help us better understand why thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois found a romantic vision appealing as they worked to elaborate emancipatory political projects under conditions of racial domination.

As we shall see, one of the key virtues of Herder's expressivist notion of the subject and his concomitant theory of embodied rationality is that taken together they suggest a mode of theorizing human diversity that does not immediately disparage difference or dismiss the unfamiliar as the irrational. Because his thought is attuned to the embeddedness of reason in concrete forms of life, Herder avoids presuming that he could understand different cultures and modes of existence

solely on the basis of his own experiences, general ideas, and values. From the perspective provided by his romantic vision, the unfamiliar forms of life one encounters cannot be assimilated to one's own experiences or dismissed as provincial or backward modalities of social organization that must be brought in line with the rational order of things; they form distinct and vital sites of belonging that provide the necessary conditions for individual and collective flourishing, and they ought to be respected as such. However, this should not be conflated with an uncritical embrace of nativism or an insistence that indigenous cultures be preserved as static and unchanging formations. On the contrary, Herder's ideal of cultural authenticity "is an ideal of *development*; it does not encourage societies to remain as they are, but suggests that their evolution needs to consist in the unfolding of their own potentialities."²⁵

For Herder, history is providential and purposive, but it is not oriented toward the achievement of a singular end; it is a dynamic process of ongoing transformations through which the diversity of human forces is manifested. In place of the Enlightenment vision of a singular model for civilization, then, Herder posits a rich plurality of incommensurable cultures, each with its own way of pursuing human fulfillment and flourishing, its own internal "standard of perfection, totally independent of all comparisons with that of others."²⁶

All this does not make Herder a "moral relativist," as some of his critics have suggested. In urging his readers to adopt an open, relational approach towards

²⁵ Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 119.

²⁶ Johann Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 98.

forms of life different from their own, Herder did not mean that they should forgo all judgment and critical assessment—after all, “he persistently passes ethical judgments, often negative ones, on many aspects of the societies he describes, foreign societies no less than his own.”²⁷ As I read him, Herder’s argument is simply that *embedded understanding must precede judgment*, and that understanding itself is only possible if one remains sensitive to a variety of contextual factors, maintains a posture of humility in the face of the strange and unfamiliar, and resists the tendency to make one’s own standards the universal measure of things. Herder did not believe that the radical evaluative neutrality supported by the moral relativist is at all possible, let alone desirable: one simply cannot go through life without passing judgments, without deeming some things good and others bad. But here is the difficulty: not only is judgment inescapable and indispensable, it is also uncertain and deeply fallible because we lack ready-made universal criteria for judgment and our understanding of others always starts from within our engrained pre-understandings. So we must make judgments, but we must do so without having all of the resources at our disposal we would like. Herder offers no generic solution to this problem; rather, he suggests that as knowledge about others expands so does the aptitude for reaching discerning judgments. In the end, there is no clear solution to this paradoxical condition: it is an inescapable part of the human predicament. As Nietzsche says, “all evaluations are premature and are bound to be... We are from the very beginning illogical and unjust beings *and can recognize this*: this is one of

²⁷ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 15.

the greatest and irresolvable discords of existence.”²⁸ Those who look to the world for *a priori* guarantees here look in vain.

The virtues of Herder’s romantic perspective, pluralistic egalitarianism, and relativistic approach are thrown into sharp relief in chapter 2, where I examine the public debate between Herder and his former teacher, Immanuel Kant. Their quarrel began in 1785 with Kant’s unfavorable review of the first volume of Herder’s *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* and continued for a number of years thereafter as the two argued about a range of topics including the proper vocation of the philosopher, the nature of human history, the character of reason, and, most significantly for our purposes, the question of the race concept and its applicability to the study of mankind. Given the way Kant is typically taught and understood, we might expect that he would be the one to reject the validity of the race concept and any attempt to make sense of human diversity in hierarchical terms. But such was not the case. On the contrary, Kant argues that in studying the natural history of man we *must* have recourse to the idea that there are innate and fundamental racial differences that account for the distinct character and capabilities of different peoples; moreover, the different races can be schematized hierarchically, with the white race at the top, far above the rest. Kant is thus among the first to initiate the concept of “whiteness.”²⁹ Herder, on the other hand, did not think that human differentiation occurred along racial lines; he rejected a hierarchical ordering of human forms, refused to see any group of people as

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1996), 28 [I: 32].

²⁹ Mark Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race: Diversity and Destiny in Kant,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, nos. 4-5 (2008): 341-63.

inherently superior to any other, and argued that any use of the term “race” to describe human diversity was a dangerous mistake and an affront to the universal dignity, diversity, and fraternity of mankind. “The negro has as much right to consider the white man a degenerate, a born albino freak, as when the white man considers him a beast, a black animal... The *Cherokee* and the *Huswana*, the *Mongol* and the *Gonaqua*, are as much letters in the great word of our species as the most civilized Englishman or Frenchman.”³⁰

Through a detailed discussion of their opposing views of human differentiation, I both underscore the relevance of Herder’s romantic vision for theorizing ‘race’ and racial politics and disclose some of the pitfalls and perils entailed in assessing human history and culture from a purportedly universal normative standpoint. Ultimately, I contend that Herder’s willingness to eschew the security of an *a priori* system, his emphasis on the particular over the universal, and his attunement to the imbrications between nature, culture, and embodied thinking left him better situated than Kant to make sense of a world that continually exceeds and confounds the categories we initially bring to it.

At the same time, I argue that Kant’s claims regarding racial hierarchy and the superiority of European culture(s)—claims that Herder vehemently opposed—were not simply aberrant instances of personal prejudice but, rather, were intimately related to defining features of his philosophical project. By focusing on this deep disagreement about race and situating it within the larger context of differing philosophical visions, I show how these conflicting ideas about race and

³⁰ Johann Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 394-5.

cultural difference stemmed from the two thinkers' markedly different worldviews and existential orientations. I do not claim that either of these philosophical visions *requires* the adoption of a particular point of view on human diversity, but I do contend that each has internal tendencies inclining it in the directions actually taken by Kant and Herder respectively.

Although it is true that Kant's racism would seem to be in blatant contradiction with his conception of "persons" and moral universalism, there is also a sense in which that moral philosophy solicits and solidifies a racial configuration to support the "subjective" teleology of history it finds to be necessary to morality as such. The whole of Kant's critical philosophy is oriented by what I call the *imperative of realization*—the insistence that the dictates of pure practical reason must be realizable in the impure world of man. For Kant, life itself—the mere act of living—is meaningless. Without a single purpose susceptible to gradual approximation, existence is worthless—"the duration of the world has a worth only insofar as the ultimate ends of the existence of rational beings can be met within it."³¹ As such, the pursuit of the universal and the idea that humanity has made considerable progress toward it are needed by Kant's philosophy because in the first instance we are obligated, in order to save morality, to act *as if* history is progressive and to advance that progress. This is a requirement of practical reason as he understands it. So Kant suggests that we need to search for signs and evidence in actual history that support the case for uninterrupted historical progress. That is where the trouble begins.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, "The End of All Things," in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 96.

For Kant, practical reason enjoins upon us a universally valid moral ideal, which also implies a singular end toward which we must assume history is progressing; his metanarrative of civilizational progress is grounded in his notion of transcendental rationality. Using this purportedly universal framework to assess the realms of politics, history, and culture, Kant tends to denigrate forms of life that are lower on the historical scales of progress as he understands it. Because Kant insists upon the categorical univocity of practical reason he cannot conceive of the possibility that there might be a multiplicity of valid ways of living in the world or that he may have something important to learn from those fundamentally different from himself. Indeed, once he turns to the empirical data of history and anthropology, Kant concludes that certain peoples already correspond more closely than others to the form of life suggested by practical reason, and that encourages him to link his observations to a hierarchical theory of race and their different contributions to progress. If, given his substantive notion of progress, the Occidental race and European civilization come closest to the on-marching ideal, then he would also be inclined to seek reasons for that in the fundamental composition of the white race and European civilization. Or, put another way, he would also be inclined to explain why non-white races do not appear to match the white race in contributing to historical progress. In this way the philosophy solicits and solidifies a racial hierarchy, even if it may not require it. In doing so it calls our attention again to the dangers that accompany a universalist philosophy of this sort combined with a progressive image of history.

Viewed in light of his racial hierarchy, Kant's cosmopolitanism is revealed to be untenable. It is not just that Kant denigrates non-white races (in a sense these are the only races: whiteness exists above or beyond race) and deems them inferior; he also claims that racial differences are now fixed permanently in nature, and he portrays (non-white) races as essentially lacking the capacity or aptitude for civilizational development. Thus, although Kant routinely denounces colonial practices in his later political writing, his theory of race expresses a colonial logic, for if it really is the case that the "Negro" can neither educate nor civilize himself, as Kant claims, then some form of colonial intervention will be necessary since Kant insists that it is "our" (by which he apparently means "us white people") moral duty to see to it that history progresses through the highest possible cultivation of man's natural capacities. Indeed, I suggest that this is why Kant contends that in the cosmopolitan future to come, Europe "will probably legislate eventually for the other countries."³²

In marked contrast to this, Herder articulates a form of cosmopolitanism that respects and maintains cultural difference. This may seem like a strange claim given Herder's 'nationalism,' but I suggest that we can see a kind of cosmopolitanism in his thought stemming from his impartial concern for all human beings and peoples; it is reflected in his hope for a future characterized by universal justice, which he thought would occur not through the pursuit of a supposedly universal ideal but, rather, through each 'people' pursuing its own mode of expressive self-realization. I call this Herder's *nationalism with a cosmopolitan intent*. Although I find this view

³² Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 52.

laudable in many ways and agree with Herder that pluralism should be seen as a source of enrichment rather than a fount of danger, I also suggest that Herder fails to come to terms with the potential dangers of collective identification as he falls back on a belief in the fundamental innocence of belonging and community. Indeed, Herder never really grapples with the possibility that the part of us which requires a concrete sense of belonging in order to flourish may also be the part that lashes out at difference and reacts with antipathy towards those outside of our circle of belonging, seeing them as a threat to our way of life. I thus suggest that learning from the insights and limitations of the romantic vision on this score, we should begin to think through what it would mean for belonging to be understood and practiced as a continuous, creative, and expansive process of self-making and social formation, rather than as the expression of a collectively shared identity that unites us prior to our political engagements and struggles.

In chapter 3 I focus on W. E. B. Du Bois's early political writings, particularly "The Conservation of Races" (1897) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). I suggest that his appeal to racial identity and racial community in these texts should be understood as stemming from the same historico-political logic as Herder's nationalism with a cosmopolitan intent. For both thinkers, a more universal sense of human community will be achieved not by eliminating group differences but, instead, by cultivating each group's unique cultural formation, out of which a broader respect for difference and, ultimately, the 'fusion of horizons' amid the diversity of perspectives may take hold. Indeed, Du Bois conceptualizes black politics using a romantic framework quite similar to Herder's. I read him as

adopting and adapting Herder's notion of *Volksgeist*—the idea that each people (*Volk*) has a unique spirit (*Geist*), the expressive self-realization of which constitutes that group's collective purpose or historical destiny. Through a close reading of Du Bois, I trace out the correspondences and tensions between Herder and him and demonstrate how they share a fundamental understanding of the sources and significance of cultural differentiation, the nature of belonging, and the proper conduct of group-based politics. Both strive to articulate a cultural/sociohistorical theory of human differentiation, and each endorses a form of *political expressivism* according to which political leadership ought to express the underlying spirit of the people. Ultimately, I suggest that reading Du Bois in this light provides an opportunity to reach a more nuanced understanding of his complicated relationship to European romantic nationalism. Although romantic nationalism is generally associated with authoritarianism, chauvinism, and imperialism, my reading of both Herder and Du Bois reveals that such writings also bear traces of underlying democratic ideals and egalitarian commitments.

Du Bois's politics, however, are notoriously difficult to pin down—not only because he was an intellectual polyglot who drew from such a wide array of traditions and approaches, but also because there are real tensions in his thought, tensions that sometimes give rise to incongruous expressions of principle or purpose. Du Bois was, I suspect, often at odds with himself on the matter of elite versus radical democratic formations of a people, and this accounts for a great deal of the conceptual and political uncertainty his early works solicit. This is a common enough assertion regarding the constitutive tensions animating Du Bois's early

political thought; what I want to challenge is the way in which these tensions are typically understood as emanating from a conflict between his romantic authoritarianism and enlightened liberal individualism. I suggest instead that the conflict between his elitism and his egalitarianism can be seen as a manifestation of tensions within the romantic vision itself. In other words, the romantic vision is not just a storehouse of authoritarian supplies: it also offers democratic armaments.

Relating Du Bois's theory of the Talented Tenth and Herder's account of organic nationalist development carried out under the guidance of "aristocrats," I show how for both thinkers the ultimate objective of elite leadership is not the permanent establishment of Platonic philosopher-kings but, rather, the cultivation of capacities for self-determination and democratic life across the broader *demos*. Similarly, I contend that Du Bois's appeal to racial identity is neither chauvinistic nor intended to sanction an authoritarian politics; instead it aims to foster a participatory politics enlivened by a shared sense of purpose in which development occurs through dynamic, democratically structured interactions between leaders and the led. For Du Bois, the race concept, because of its ability to forge solidarity around a shared outlook and to engender new spiritual ideals and forms of life, provides one of the most effective political resources for challenging the beliefs and encoded practices that have made racial *hierarchy* central to modern life. This helps to further clarify the underlying motivations behind Du Bois's appeal to "the unifying ideal of Race" as an organizing principle for a black politics oriented toward collective uplift, democratic development, and political assimilation.³³ In

³³ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 43.

much the same way that Herder wagered that sociopolitical development was most likely to occur when unity and coordinated action were premised on the collectively shared sentiments and outlooks imparted to the people through their shared experiences and common life-world, Du Bois believed that the political solidarity needed for black progress could best be secured by appealing to and cultivating (both the affective and cognitive dimensions of) a distinctive black ethno-cultural identity. Du Bois desires to see the end not of racial differences and distinctions (for the various ideals these differences give rise to enrich modern life) but the end of racial hierarchy and discrimination. He believes that mobilization around race is the most effective way for black folks to achieve this. In short, Du Bois's embrace of racial identity stems not from chauvinism but, rather, aims to overcome it.

By and large we no longer unreservedly embrace Du Bois's belief in the viability of such a form of racially inflected "identity politics." And for good reason: identity is far too layered, dynamic, and diffuse a phenomenon to provide a stable foundation for *political* community. To cling to identity as if it were something solid and stable encourages some of the destructive relational tendencies animating political life in contemporary pluralistic societies. Forging racial solidarity in the manifold struggle against white supremacy and racial hierarchy remains vitally important today, but this task cannot be achieved by appealing to a collectively shared and deeply rooted ethno-cultural identity antecedently uniting black folks prior to political mobilization and contestation. Political engagements are always connected to a particular set of antecedent conditions that mediate and structure group interactions and intentions; these are what compel us towards politics. But

these conditions—history, culture, racial hierarchy—are themselves shaped and conditioned by prior political engagements and in this sense are both effects and (inherently unstable) conditions of politics. This recognition calls for a tragic conception of history and politics, one that would recognize the importance and inescapability of identity as a factor in political life without making it the foundation for our politics: identity is not a solid structure or a coherent essence but a shifting amalgam of forces, experiences, commitments, drives, beliefs, and impulses that are liable to make us vengeful when we become overly enamored with them and seek their reification. Put differently, identity is not a noun but a verb condensing a complex range of processes and forces that need to be examined, not taken for granted.

In chapter 4 I suggest that Nietzsche's tragic vision of a non-providential world of becoming that also exceeds our best efforts for mastery or control may provide a valuable framework for theorizing contemporary racial politics in late-modern and post-colonial societies. The tragic vision I elaborate incorporates the romantic vision's insights into pluralism, perspective, and embodiment, but it rejects an organic social ontology and a providential image of time. While romantic visions dream of harmonious reconciliation or revolutionary overcoming, tragedy has recourse to neither. Rather than seeing History as either a single timeline that carries us forward or a providential system of differential organic growth, a tragic vision posits multi-directional and open-ended historical processes lacking inherent purpose in which dynamic networks periodically struggle over the meaning and terms of existence within and between themselves, even as new values, forces, and

relations surge into being. Whereas providential visions set us as either in control of our own destinies *or* as part of a larger plan or purpose, tragedy suggests that we are much less the masters of our own destiny than we presume. But this does not mean that a tragic sense is one of resignation, despair, or political quietism. Instead, by urging respect for the contingent, paradoxical, and unpredictable in life, tragic wisdom teaches a lesson of modesty and responsiveness out of which a noble ethic of solidarity, care for the world, and militant struggle may arise.

Such a vision has its origin in the tragic plays of Sophocles, which I read as a meditation on the human condition in an unbalanced world composed of diverse forces that do not always harmonize or correspond to human intentions. Nietzsche draws inspiration from Sophocles' tragic worldview and extends it to articulate a vision of the tragic that emphasizes existential affirmation, the productive element in becoming, and the creative, artistic potential of the will to power. This factor of elemental affirmation is crucial in preventing tragic wisdom from sliding into passive resignation, or, worse, into the very *ressentiment* it seeks to surmount. Nietzsche's affirmation of tragic possibility can, in turn, only be understood within the general context of his vision of a world of becoming with multiple forces in conflict in which new events and values periodically arise. For Sophocles, Nietzsche, and Baldwin alike, a tragic vision entails an awareness of the contingent, time-bound nature of existence, of the ways in which we are caught up in the inexorable flux of creation and destruction that gives shape to the world, and of the constitutive power of the past we cannot hope to escape entirely. By focusing on time in this way, we acquire a richer appreciation of both the profound existential challenges

posed by the tragic vision of the world and how to come to terms with these challenges.

Indeed, Nietzsche's distinctive understanding of the tragic as a pluralist affirmation of multiplicity, chance, and becoming provides valuable resources for thinking about racial politics in a contemporary world characterized by rapid change and the proliferation of difference. The perspective of time as becoming (sometimes) advanced by Nietzsche can help make sense of the persistent desire for a secure sense of belonging and explains why that very desire carries dangers with it. It also suggests some conceptual tools for articulating an account of the politics of racial solidarity that does not rely on a logic of racial essentialism or notions of an 'authentic' racial self or community.

Ultimately, I contend that exploring the critical affinities between Nietzsche's tragic philosophy and black political thought enriches our understanding of each and provides an opportunity to develop new conceptual and theoretical resources in the struggle against racial hierarchy and other barriers to human flourishing. In order to bring this out, I turn to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which articulates a tragic vision of the world with distinctly Nietzschean resonances. But Baldwin also brings an alertness to conditions of power and powerlessness, and a moral idiom for reproaching the injustices these asymmetrical relationships foster, and this adds a *sharper, more critical and militant edge to the tragic vision he articulates*. Baldwin's work thus gives us a prime example of how thinking about the tragic in conjunction with insights gleaned from black experiences of modernity helps to clarify the potential political significance of a tragic vision. Read in this way

his work shows how a tragic ethos of finitude and responsiveness might be marshaled to support a militant, anti-racist politics that promotes forbearance and receptivity in light of the opacity of Being while simultaneously insisting upon the unacceptability of those forms of injustice which serve to perpetuate unnecessary relations of domination and exploitation. Through these engagements, this chapter formulates a tragic account of racial politics that is less “optimistic” than its romantic counterparts, even as it draws upon the vital forces and demands of today to transcend the ugly histories of racism.

Chapter 1

Herder's Romantic Vision: Organicism, Pluralism, and Belonging

The fervor, depth, and dispersion with which we receive, process, and communicate passion makes of us the shallow or deep vessels that we are. Often there lie under the diaphragm causes which we very incorrectly and laboriously seek in the head; the thought cannot reach there unless the sensation was in its place beforehand. The extent to which we participate in what surrounds us, how deeply love and hate, disgust and revulsion, vexation and pleasure, plant their roots in us – this tunes the string-play of our thoughts, this makes us into the human beings that we are... In my modest opinion, no psychology is possible which is not in each step determinate physiology.

—Johann Herder¹

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the philosophical foundations, conceptual innovations, and ethical motivations animating Johann Gottfried von Herder's romantic vision of the world and human history. I focus in particular on Herder's cultural pluralism and show how it is undergirded by his expressivist theory of subjectivity, according to which the subject is always already embedded in a nature-culture matrix that fundamentally shapes its mode of being-in-the-world. For Herder, such an understanding of the subject and its relation to the world requires that we take seriously the essentially social character of reason, the culturally infused nature of identity formation, and the existence of a plurality of incommensurable values and forms of life. Although Herder's romantic vision does not amount to an outright rejection of Enlightenment premises and aspirations, his

¹ Johann Herder, *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 196.

claims regarding embodied rationality, cultural pluralism, and the partiality of all perspectives challenges the validity of the Enlightenment's belief in the self-sufficiency and autonomy of reason, its linear conception of historical progress, and (some of) its universalistic pretensions. Through these critiques Herder discloses the distortions caused by certain aspects of the Enlightenment vision and calls for the formulation of a new philosophical approach, one informed by a keen historical sense and a posture of humility in the face of the strange and unfamiliar. In short, in place of the abstract, arrogant, and ahistorical universalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Herder develops an empirically grounded philosophy more closely attuned to the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of human experience in its manifold manifestations.

I suggest that ultimately, in spite of some significant limitations, Herder's thought remains relevant to the concerns of contemporary political theory broadly speaking, as well as to the emergent literatures in comparative political theory, critical race theory, and post-nationalist black political thought. This is the case for a number of reasons. First, Herder's ruminations on the sources of morality, the character of historical development, and the relationship between the individual and society influenced or anticipated many of the philosophical debates and developments that have helped shape the contours of Western political thought over the past two and a half centuries. Second, something like Herder's organic theory of the nation and his notion of *Volksgeist*—the idea that nations constitute expressive wholes animated by a collectively shared *spirit*—played a central role in the development of modern black political thought, as can be seen, perhaps most

vividly, in the early writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, which themselves continue to “exert considerable influence on post-segregation African American political theory.”²

Third, irrespective of its particular historical significance, Herder’s thought contains vital insights for theorizing contemporary (racial) politics. Chief among these are its depiction of the complex interrelations between affect, ethics, and politics, its account of how individual strivings, aspirations, and creative expressions are situated in a specific cultural milieu, and its recognition of both the importance and difficulty of forging intercultural understanding.

In addition to these virtues, however, Herder’s thought contains shortcomings that limit the extent to which it can shed light on the contemporary politics of identity and difference. As has been noted by many of his critics, Herder’s organic conception of the nation is deeply problematic: not only does such an account inadequately capture the complexities and dissonances of (collective) identity formation, it also unduly derogates “hybrid” or “hyphenated” identities and incorrectly dismisses the possibility that a territorial state can accommodate (let alone encourage) a multiplicity of cultural ideals and concrete forms of life. More troubling still, it runs the risk of fostering chauvinism, militarism, and totalitarianism, as the historical fate of the nation idea(l) all too grimly attests. Although Herder’s political philosophy is neither chauvinistic nor totalitarian, the organic image of the nation it projects establishes a potentially dangerous socio-political logic that calls for the consolidation and normalization of collective identity under a unifying principle, thereby silencing or subordinating those voices—usually

² Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 210.

belonging to the most marginalized and vulnerable within a racial/national group—that do not correspond to the collective ideal being advanced.

Also deeply problematic, I want to suggest, is the romantic vision's reliance on a providential image of time. As we shall see below, Herder's philosophy of history secretes the assumption of a providentially designed world in which "we can legitimately believe that our profoundest drives and wishes... may point to something true," and that the world is conducive to the realization of these drives and wishes.³ Drawing critical insight from Nietzsche, one of the principle claims of this dissertation is that providential worldviews—by which I mean any account of the human condition premised on the idea of a world characterized either by intrinsic purpose, providential guidance, or high susceptibility to human mastery and control—are likely to intensify individual and collective drives toward existential *ressentiment*: toward resentment of the basic terms of life itself. In many cases, such resentments are never explicitly articulated; instead, they become embedded in spiritual dispositions, typically resulting in a punitive orientation toward the world and a simmering desire for revenge against those taken to be responsible for life's inevitable disappointments. Moreover, the dangers posed by the generalization of *ressentiment* are amplified when it is conjoined with a strong sense of national identity, especially when that national identity is thought to be providentially ordained. In such cases, the spirit of revenge is intensified and collectivized and is expressed through the vilification of outsiders, the persecution of marginalized and vulnerable insiders, or both.

³ Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations and aporias, Herder's thought contains a wealth of insight and innovation; the philosophical orientation he inaugurates helps us to better grasp the importance of affect, sensibility, and disposition to politics and ethics, alerts us to the dangers of methodological arrogance, and demonstrates how a sense of belonging is an integral aspect of human happiness and flourishing. Moreover, despite its contemporary ill repute, Herder's organic conception of the nation was a key component of his staunch and consistent anti-imperialism, and his promotion of the development of distinct national cultures was in large part motivated by his opposition to the oppression and widespread degradation that accompanied imperialism and colonial expansion. While this does not mean that Herder's version of organic communitarianism is unproblematic, it *does* mean that we should not assume that his defense of nationality is simply reactionary or inevitably chauvinistic. Furthermore, it suggests that we ought to be mindful of the variability of forms of nationalist thought and practice, of the differing roots and routes of nationalist movements, and of the contrasting political ideals towards which they strive. Indeed, once we understand the ways in which the romantic vision first emerged—not as a justification for Empire or a stratagem for imperial expansion but, rather, as a means of opposing them—we may develop a better, more nuanced understanding of the reasons why thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who were involved in constructing emancipatory political projects under conditions of racial domination, found aspects of the Romantic *Weltanschauung* appealing.

The Enlightenment Vision and the Romantic Reaction

The romantic vision first came into focus in Germany near the end of the eighteenth century as a critical response to the worldview expressed by the proponents of the English and, especially, French Enlightenment(s). This is not to say, however, that the romantic vision amounted to an absolute rejection of the 'Age of Reason' or the claims of enlightened rationality. Instead, the romantic vision shared some aspirations with the enlightenment vision even as it forged a different spiritual ethos and interpretive orientation.

Although it is not my intention to provide a detailed account of all the historical, political, and social forces that contributed to the emergence of the Romantic movement, a number of contextual factors are worth noting, including the spiritual influence of Pietism, the fragmentation and relative backwardness of German political institutions at the time, and widespread resentment of French cultural and political dominance. All of these contributed to "a post-Enlightenment climate [in Germany] at once critical of some of the main themes of the modern revolution, and yet striving to incorporate much of it."⁴ In any case, against a mechanistic image of a world dissected and objectified by the relentless pursuit of reason, the romantic vision posits an organic, dynamic, and unitary world in which "mankind"—far from being "so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange"⁵—is seen as differing tremendously across time and space.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13.

⁵ David Hume, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 150.

Johann Gottfried von Herder was perhaps the most important figure in crafting this new philosophical vision. He was one of the principle theoreticians and critics of the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress') movement in German art and literature, the "prophet" of modern nationalism,⁶ and in general the figure who "introduced what became the leading political and social ideas of German Romanticism."⁷ Although Romanticism is often associated with mysticism, the passionate embrace of irrationality, and authoritarian nationalism, this is a one-sided and distorted account of what was in fact a complex and multifarious movement that underwent a number of transformations over time. More specifically, it paints a false picture of Herder's thought, which, contrary to Liah Greenfeld's claim, did not aim for "the absolute devaluation of reason and exaltation of its opposite, the irrational, unthinking feeling."⁸ Instead, Herder held that the use of reason was necessary, but not sufficient, for human advancement. What he objected to was not every idea of reason but, rather, the Enlightenment's relentless pursuit of "a disembodied, eternally selfsame, and universal reason."⁹

Like many of his contemporaries and romantic successors, Herder found the systems of the French *philosophes* from Helvetius to Voltaire to be full of cold abstractions that resulted in alienating man and tearing apart the unity of life. In this way, much of his perspective brings to mind Rousseau's critique of Enlightenment culture in the first *Discourse*. Herder rejected mechanistic worldviews, atomistic

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57.

⁷ Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 93-4.

⁸ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads To Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 332.

⁹ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 211.

images of the subject, and any objectification of human nature that rendered it timeless, universal, and unchanging. He objected to the notion that the French Enlightenment offered a universal paradigm to be followed in all cases, and “his anger was particularly aroused by those who, in claiming cultural superiority for European civilization, felt themselves justified in subjugating and exploiting non-European peoples.”¹⁰ Significantly, he came from humble origins and was acutely aware of the stifling restrictions this entailed. Indeed, many commentators have suggested that the experience of imposed limitations and frustrated ambition fostered in Herder an acute sense of discontent with the social and political conditions of his time, as is evidenced in his personal correspondences and many of his political writings.

However, Herder’s deep-seated sense of socio-political discontent and alienation did not, as Liah Greenfeld further claims, lead him to envision “a totalitarian society” that would gather “all within its iron embrace” and leave no room for individual freedom as the answer to the ills plaguing modern life.¹¹ On the contrary, Herder was a committed egalitarian, democrat, and republican¹² who abhorred political coercion, entrenched patterns of inequality, and any form of

¹⁰ F. M. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 140.

¹¹ Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 346.

¹² These are Herder’s political ideals concerning domestic and (European) politics, where he generally favors a republican form of government and the impersonal rule of law. However, for reasons that will become clear, Herder is hesitant to suggest that other nations should necessarily adopt these political forms, for he contends that the best form of government does not exist and that, even if it did, it would not be suitable to every nation. Just as there is no one best form of life, there is no one best form of government. Herder is a fierce advocate of freedom and the right of all peoples to self-determination, that is, the right to pursue their own happiness and self-realization, but this also means that they be allowed to develop the mode of self-government that is most appropriate for them. Cf. Letter 121 of Herder’s *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 412-15.

social organization that failed “to make use of man’s divine and noble gifts” for conscious striving and self-improvement.¹³ Above all, he was a ‘man of the people’ motivated by what Sheldon Wolin suggests is the fundamental quality common to all great (or “epic”) political theorists: concern for the world and care for the *res publicae*.¹⁴ Philosophy, Herder insisted, must be for the “benefit of the people”; it must function as a tool in the continual process of *Bildung*,¹⁵ the comprehensive shaping and harmonious development of the intellect, character, and spirit of the people.

Echoing Rousseau, Herder argued that the spread of the Enlightenment—of “philosophical reason” and “*philosophical ability*”—had, in fact, been “*harmful* for the people.”¹⁶ It had destroyed ancient virtues, diminished the power of local ties, alienated men from one another, weakened the sentiments upon which morality depends, and diminished the people’s attachment to existence. “Our age,” Herder laments, “has used *aqua fortis* to etch the name ‘Philosophy!’ on its forehead, and this seems to be having its effect deep inside the skull.”¹⁷ The problem was not simply that the Enlightenment vision was distorted but also that it had begun to

¹³ Quoted in Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 79, from a letter Herder wrote to Duke Karl August of Weimer dated December 14, 1785.

¹⁴ Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1968): 1078-82.

¹⁵ *Bildung* is one of those German terms that are notoriously difficult to translate into English. Michael Forster lists the following as possible translations for the term: formation, education, civilization, or culture, to which we might also add development and cultivation. Forster, “Introduction,” in Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, xliii.

¹⁶ Johann Herder, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, in Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, 11; see also Johann Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 49-52.

¹⁷ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 11.

infect and distort every facet of existence, creating a world of alienation, superficiality, and decay:

The cold, sensationlessly thinking science of the soul has perpetrated its deception as far as into life and action... Thus there arose a hypocritical figment of the imagination which the metaphysician calls the soul, clothes in the gloomy rays of abstractions, but which only appears in the presence of his magical lamp... representing to us a vaporous skeleton as a true, whole, living human being. Hence the great enmity between metaphysics and experience, between the abstract and the concrete, between thought and sensation. Hence the great illusion with which all abstractionists consider the living human being, and themselves act as shades of living human beings... [and] know so much about the human soul in general that they know nothing about each individual human soul and *no longer have any vision for seeing it as it is*.¹⁸

The way out of this crisis, according to Herder, was not to be found in a retreat into irrationalism, mysticism, or primitivism, for “only philosophy can be an antidote for all the evil into which philosophical curiosity has plunged us.”¹⁹ What was needed, then, was a new way of doing philosophy, a new framework for philosophical investigation. Instead of seeking to transcend existence, “our philosophy must descend from the stars to human beings”;²⁰ instead of abstracting from experience and dividing the human and non-human world, it must “seize the whole in its fullness, in all its peculiar, complex, historically changing manifestations”;²¹ and instead of seeking to generalize on the basis of a set of supposedly universal criteria, it must strive for a sympathetic understanding that respects the uniqueness of each particular in its relation to the whole. Ultimately, Herder’s call for a reformulation of

¹⁸ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 183; emphasis added.

¹⁹ Herder, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal*, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 380.

philosophy is a call for philosophy to *see differently* and to approach the world from a different perspective than the “*eagle’s view*” of the Enlightenment.²² This new perspective and the interpretation of the human condition that developed alongside it established the basic parameters of the *romantic vision*. Although the romantic vision would subsequently come to take a range of forms, each with varying emphases and implications, it was Herder who first gave it shape and established its general parameters.

The Romantic Subject

For Herder, nothing better captured the poverty of the Enlightenment vision than its mechanical and dualistic rendering of the subject. By separating thought from sensation, dividing the mind into discrete faculties, and isolating the subject from its constitutive environment, the Enlightenment vision had reduced the subject to a mechanical being forever set in opposition to itself and the world. According to Herder, (human) life is composed of a single stream of movement, development, and expression, no part of which can be adequately grasped in isolation from the others. He found the notion of a solitary human being isolated from society to be unintelligible,²³ and he believed that thought could not and should not be separated from feeling. In opposition to the mechanical image of the subject, Herder developed

²² Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 51.

²³ This is one of the crucial ways in which Herder differed from Rousseau. For Herder, there is no need to posit the existence of a hypothetical social contract because man is born in and for society, which itself is a natural formation arising out of human interdependence. According to Herder we can only properly conceive of social life as something that is given; in other words, the state of society *is* man’s state of nature. Cf. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 54: “we cannot but regard social life as something this is given: the state of society *is* man’s state of nature.”

an anti-dualist and vitalist notion of a self-unfolding subject striving toward the *expressive self-realization* of an inner essence or purpose.²⁴ As an expressive being man is an indivisible whole in whom cognition and sensation are indelibly intertwined such that they cannot be understood in opposition to one another or seen as different modes of existence. Man is also whole in the sense that everything he does is an expression of his inner nature and a reflection of his complete personality. According to this image of man, language both expresses the subject's inner nature and is constitutive of thought: human consciousness is fundamentally linguistic.

To be human is to be engaged in a continual process of striving and holistic development toward the fullest expression of an inner ideal or essence, the meaning of which can only be realized in the very act of expression. Man achieves self-fulfillment only with expressive realization of his inner purpose, which, in turn, requires the harmonious development of not just his thought but also his feeling, inclinations, and volition. In other words, because sensation, cognition, and volition are intertwined within the indivisible whole that is man, the development of each 'aspect' of the human soul requires the harmonious development of all:

Cognition without volition is nothing as well, a false, imperfect cognition... Hence also, *no passion, no sensation* is excluded that would not become volition through such cognition; precisely in the best cognition all can and must be effective, because the best cognition arose from all of them and only lives in all of them. [Those are] liars or enervated people who boast of having nothing but pure fundamental principles and curse inclinations, from which alone true fundamental principles arise! That would amount to sailing without wind, and fighting without weapons.²⁵

²⁴ Taylor, *Hegel*, 13-27.

²⁵ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 213.

By separating sensation, affect, and bodily disposition from the individual's cognitive and moral development, the mechanical view of the subject not only leads to a distorted image of man but also serves as an obstacle to human flourishing. On the one hand, all thought (and morality) is dependent on (perceptive and affective) sensations, such that separating the mind from the body distorts cognition and harms the foundations of morality. On the other hand, expressive realization requires the purposive cultivation of dispositions and the rationally guided organization of affect. In short, the development and improvement of cognition and bodily-disposition are mutually dependent on one another. Thought and feeling are not two separate modes of existence; they are interrelated aspects of a unitary subject striving toward expressive self-realization. Man is not just another animal with reason added on top,²⁶ but a spiritually unified whole, a "multitudinous harmony"²⁷ in which body and spirit are imbricated aspects of an expressive unity integrally related to its (natural and cultural) environment. "Hence, there is nothing one must guard against as much as one-sided mutilation and dissection."²⁸

The Romantic Subject of Belonging

Not only must we guard against imposing an artificial separation between cognition and sensation within the subject, we must also guard against imposing an artificial separation between the subject and her immediate community. As noted

²⁶ Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, 56; Taylor, *Hegel*, 21.

²⁷ Johann Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, trans. Frank E. Manuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 4. NB: Because this text is commonly known under the title *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, I will refer to it in the text as the *Ideas*.

²⁸ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 214.

above, Herder found the notion of an individual subject isolated from society to be unintelligible, and he believed that “the human being is in his destiny a creature of the herd, of society.”²⁹ Why is this so? One way to think about this is to consider the implications of Herder’s notion of expressive self-realization. In order to express my inner essence, I require a community of meaning in which such expression is possible. In other words, I can only express myself with the symbols I have been brought up with and taught from a young age; these symbols in turn imply a background of implicit meanings, shared understandings, collective values, and common strivings—in short, a comprehensive *way of life*. Therefore, a concrete sense of belonging (with)in a discrete community is not just a source of social cohesion but, more importantly, the necessary condition for the possibility of individual self-improvement and expressive realization. For Herder, there can be an ‘I’ only on the basis of a ‘we’ within which the ‘I’ shines.

The individual thus *belongs* to his place in a fundamental sense; he has roots and can express himself only in terms of those symbols, values, and meanings that shaped his upbringing and socialization. According to Herder, Providential Nature brings the individual into the world in an incredibly vulnerable state, “weaker, needier, more abandoned by nature’s instruction, more completely without skills and talents, than any animal,” so that “he may enjoy an *upbringing*” through participation in a common way of life.³⁰ In other words, the individual does not come into the world fully formed, but rather becomes what he is only through his constitutive attachments to society:

²⁹ Johann Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

The more deeply someone has climbed down into himself, into the structure and origin of his noblest thoughts, then the more he will cover his eyes and feet and say: "What I am, I have become. I have grown like a tree; the seed was there, but the air, earth, and all the elements, which I did not deposit about myself, had to contribute to form the seed, the fruit, the tree."³¹

The subject is inexorably a part of some group, and all of his activity is in some way an expression of the spiritual ideals of that group. Moreover, the group to which he belongs is not some soul-less entity or contractual arrangement among atomistic individuals; it is an organic network of social affiliations that nurtures and shapes him.³² The individual "is always a flower which, torn from its roots, broken from its stem, lies there and withers."³³ Hence, it follows that although the ideal he aims to realize comes from within him and is distinctly his *own*, it also reflects and is a product of the life-world in which he is organically embedded. Herder's point, then, is not simply that as inherently social creatures we require a tangible sense of belonging within a discrete community, but also that that belonging to a large extent defines who we are, how we understand the world, and what we find meaningful. Likewise, what unites a 'people'—a *Volk*—is not a set of innate racial traits but, rather, a common language, culture, and history that binds them together and shapes their distinctive national character. "*Manner of living* (habitus) is what defines a kind; in our diverse humanity it is extremely various."³⁴

³¹ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 212.

³² Cf. Herder, *Reflections*, 59: "Conceived in the bosom of Love, and nourished at the breast of Affection, he is educated by men, and receives from them a thousand unearned benefits. Thus he is actually formed in and for society."

³³ Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 159.

³⁴ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 396.

A Pluralism of Nations

Herder's cultural pluralism functions as a corollary to his ideas about the nature of belonging and provides the context in which his support for nationalist development is situated. Herder was by no means the first person to recognize that nations (or 'peoples') are different from one another,³⁵ but he affords radical significance and import to this observation. There exists a multiplicity of national cultures, forms of life, and modes of expression. "Like *individual human beings*, similarly *families* and *peoples* are different from each other," and just as each person has a unique spiritual ideal towards which she is striving, so too does each nation.³⁶ This means that there are a variety of conceptions of self-realization or, put another way, numerous values and ideals in the world. Moreover, Herder adds to this the important claim that some of these values are *incompatible* with one another. In other words, the realization of one value (e.g. devotion to one's family) may be fundamentally at odds with the realization of other values (e.g. devotion to one's nation or community), and moments of conflict between two values or ideals cannot be resolved into a higher synthesis that could accommodate both. Some ideals are

³⁵ Montesquieu, for example, had examined the diversity of forms of life in *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Herder thought Montesquieu represented a marked improvement over Voltaire's philosophy of history because Montesquieu appreciated the importance of context and particularity, but Herder objected to the way in which Montesquieu reduced the rich variety of peoples to three categories. In *Another Philosophy of History*, for example, Herder declares *The Spirit of the Laws* to be "a work that stumbles dizzily through the ages, nations and languages, circling them like the Tower of Confusion, and inviting everyone to hang his scraps, riches, and hat on *three puny nails*. The history of all peoples and ages, this great living work of God *with all its ramifications*, turned into a pile of rubble with three protruding peaks and capsules—though of course with some very noble, worthy materials. [So much for] *Montesquieu!*" (78).

³⁶ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 219.

simply incompatible with one another, and no one form of life can contain all of the good things in the world.

Furthermore, Herder suggests that values are not only frequently incompatible, but also *incommensurable*—that is, they lack a common measure according to which one could make comparative judgments of worth. For Herder, there is no universal scale of values and no general overall ranking of the realization of one value against the realization of others. It is in this sense that different forms of life can be said to be *incomparable*, for each way of life bears within itself its own system of values, modes of fulfillment, and forms of happiness. As such, there is no answer to the question “Which people, in history, might have been the happiest?”³⁷ Every society has its own virtues and vices, which are themselves usually inextricable from one another since they are a part of the same whole, and the forms of happiness possible in one society cannot be realized in others. “Basically, then,” when it comes to different forms of happiness and ideals of realization, “all *comparison* becomes *futile*,”³⁸ for “who could compare the shepherd and father of the Orient, the ploughman and the artisan, the seaman, runner, conqueror of the world?”³⁹

The pursuit of one form of life—and its attendant values and mode(s) of happiness—necessarily includes the cost of excluded alternatives. Every victory is accompanied by a form of defeat. Indeed, one of Herder’s great insights was to

³⁷ Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

recognize that, as Nietzsche puts it, “by doing we forego:”⁴⁰ in pursuing a particular way of life, we must necessarily forego other possible modes of being. Of course, for Nietzsche such a choice should be a matter of personal preference whereas for Herder the individual’s ‘choice’ is largely determined by her constitutive relationship to society. Nonetheless, for both thinkers the good is inherently heterogeneous, and, as such, there is no singular, universally valid moral principle or ideal form of life. As Isaiah Berlin explains,

If Herder’s view of mankind was correct – if Germans in the eighteenth century cannot become Greeks or Romans or ancient Hebrews or simple shepherds, still less all of these together – and if each of the civilizations... are widely different, and indeed incompatible – then how could there exist, even in principle, one universal ideal, valid for all men, at all times, everywhere?⁴¹

In place of the Enlightenment vision of a singular model for civilization, Herder posits a rich plurality of incommensurable cultures, each with its own way of pursuing human fulfillment and flourishing, its own internal “standard of perfection, totally independent of all comparisons with that of others.”⁴²

To be certain, Herder’s account of cultural pluralism is replete with sites of tension and ambiguity, especially in relation to his elusive notion of *Humanität*—the idea that the full breadth and meaning of something like universal humanity is revealed in the global development of the diverse array of national cultures and forms of life. But his general position is that the world is composed of a rich plurality of distinct and incommensurable national cultures, each striving toward its own

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §309. Hereafter cited as *GS*.

⁴¹ Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 426.

⁴² Herder, *Reflections*, 98.

unique spiritual ideal. This is what he means when he proclaims, “every nation has its *center* of happiness *within itself*, as every ball has its center of gravity!”⁴³ If we wish to understand a people different from ourselves, then we must do our best to enter into their life-world, feel the gravitational pull of their ideal, and grasp the *spirit* that animates their strivings. As such, “it is completely necessary that one be able to leave one’s own time and one’s own people in order to judge about remote times and peoples.”⁴⁴ If we fail to do this, not only will our assessments be incorrect, but we will also be likely to unfairly disparage and denigrate those different from us simply because they deviate from our ideal(s).⁴⁵ Above all, we must avoid presuming that there are universally valid criteria for judgment given to us by “universal reason.” At best, the notion of universal human reason is too lacking in feeling and abstract to be applied to any particular cases; at worst it “is a cover for our favorite whims, idolatry, blindness, and laziness” in which we narcissistically presume our own manner of thought to be universally valid.⁴⁶ To avoid the dangers of interpretive arrogance, Herder urges us to adopt a relativistic spirit and assess things according to their own standards. “Each nation must therefore be considered solely *in its place with everything that it is and has*.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 29.

⁴⁴ Johann Herder, *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 62.

⁴⁵ Herder, *Fragments*, 53; 57.

⁴⁶ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 222.

⁴⁷ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 395.

Pluralism and Belonging

Herder's apparent cultural relativism raises a number of pressing issues, not the least of which concerns the practical and ethical implications of the idea that there are no universally applicable standards of judgment. Let us set that concern aside for the moment, however, and consider another likely objection to Herder's position: namely, that the empirical diversity of life-worlds does *not* demonstrate that there is no universally valid form of life toward which all mankind is (or ought to be) striving and that *in principle* there is an ideal form of life, discoverable through the use of reason (or revealed to us by Providence). This objection could take a number of forms. For example, it could be argued that the apparent diversity of forms of life represents not a plurality of incommensurable ends but rather the different ways in which humans strive after the same fundamental set of ends and values (i.e., beneath the apparent diversity there is uniformity). Or it could be argued that while the diversity of forms of life *does* signify a real plurality of values, these values are neither incompatible nor incommensurable but rather can be synthesized in an ideal form of life that accommodates them all. Alternatively, the different forms of life may be seen as evidence of differential levels of historical development along the singular path of civilization. While it was this last view that Herder particularly objected to (because he thought it treated the existence of purportedly less advanced peoples as if it were merely a means for the achievement of a higher end),⁴⁸ he thought that all such arguments were based on a flawed and

⁴⁸ In *Another Philosophy of History*, Herder reflects on the ways in which each people or era seems to draw upon the achievements of previous years and civilizations and exclaims: "But I cannot persuade myself that anything under God's dominion is ever *only* means—everything is both *means* and *end*,

highly abstracted account of the subject and an impoverished understanding of human experience.

As noted above, Herder argues that cognition ultimately depends on (but cannot be entirely reduced to) sensation; the senses “are so to speak the door for all our concepts, or the *optical medium* through which the idea comes in like a ray of sunlight.”⁴⁹ If our thinking is indeed embodied in this way, then all of our concepts (whether they be aesthetic, moral, or theoretical) will vary with the structure of our sensations, the scope of our experiences, and the character of our bodily disposition. On a fundamental level, then, it is cognition’s relation to sensation and the embodied, culturally infused nature of thinking that accounts for the variation in human mentality throughout history:

Our species falls into heaps: peoples, cities, families, which all certainly live closer in a single circle of sensation, a single region, a single mode of life. Sons of a single tribal father of more identical organizations, hence also of more similar manners of thought. How different is the world in which the Arab and the Greenlander, the soft Indian and the rock-hard Eskimo, live! How different their civilization, food, education, the first impressions that they receive, their inner structure of sensation! *And on this structure [of sensation] rests the structure of their thoughts, and the offprint of both, their language...* What a mode of life and sensation in Japan compared to neighboring China! The former people’s manner of thought is as really the daughter and witness of their sky and earth, their mode of life and their government, their mountain and their sea, as the Chinese language and wisdom is the daughter of strict rein and rules.⁵⁰

and this surely goes for the centuries in question, too” (43). At issue here is Herder’s desire to reconcile his belief that *every* past and present form of life is valuable and worthwhile in itself and therefore cannot be seen as a mere precursor to later, more “advanced” forms of life with the evident ways in which there are forms of progress and development in history. I shall discuss this issue more fully in chapter 2.

⁴⁹ Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 250.

⁵⁰ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 220 fn. 42; emphasis added.

Herder posits an image of a dynamic and organic world composed of a plurality of national cultures, and he locates the source of this plurality in the mutual interactions of body and spirit and the subject's integral relationship to its (cultural and physical) environment. It may be objected that in anchoring the diversity of human mentality in the variations in human sensation, Herder is ultimately reducing human culture to natural or biological factors, thereby endorsing a dangerous and pernicious view of cultural development. However, Herder's point is neither that cognition can be reduced to the effects of sensation nor that culture can be explained in purely naturalistic terms, but, rather, that the boundaries between body and spirit, sensation and cognition, and nature and culture are less definitive and more porous than the Enlightenment vision would have us believe. Thus, he advises us to allow sensation and affect to have their say in thought while taking care not to become blind servants of inclination: "in short, follow nature! Be no polyp without a head and no stone bust without a heart; let the stream of your life beat freshly in your breast, but let it also be purified up into the subtle marrow of your understanding and there become *life-spirit*."⁵¹ Moreover, he suggests that bodily dispositions and structures of sensation may themselves be altered through repeated acts or practices of the self that become habits deeply rooted in our way of being.⁵² Lastly, Herder asserts that with respect to a "people's manner of thought,"

⁵¹ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 215

⁵² Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, 252-3. In general Herder seems to offer a negative assessment of the way in which habit becomes "deeply rooted *stubborn idiosyncrasy in sensation*" (253). This is the case, I think, because he tends to see the cultivation of "idiosyncrasy" as amounting to an affectation—a deviation that takes us away from an authentic expression of our true essence or character. Thus, it is Herder's belief that we each have a true essence and his corresponding concern for authenticity that prevents him from seeing the positive political and ethical possibilities at work not just in the purposive cultivation of disposition (which he thought was necessary and important

in addition to sensation, “laws, government, manner of life count still for more, and in this way a people’s manner of thought, a daughter of the whole, becomes also the witness of the whole.”⁵³ This approach may frustrate those who wish to determine clear and definitive lines of causality in the realms of politics, ethics, and culture, but Herder’s point is that in a world of complex interrelations no such definitive lines can be drawn.

In any case, Herder’s expressivist notion of the subject and his concomitant theory of embodied rationality suggest a mode of theorizing human diversity that does not (automatically) disparage the different as the deficient or dismiss the unfamiliar as the irrational. By virtue of recognizing the ways in which we are fundamentally shaped and constituted by our cultural environment and upbringing (such that reason is always situated and partial), Herder refuses the temptation to presume that he can understand forms of life different from his own solely on the basis of his own experiences, concepts, and values. From this point of view, the different forms of life one encounters (many of which are profoundly strange and unfamiliar) cannot be assimilated to one’s own experiences and values or dismissed as provincial or backward modalities of social organization that must be brought in line with the rational order of things; they do not represent different levels of advancement along the singular scale of civilizational progress. Rather, they are distinct and vital sites of belonging that provide the necessary possibilities for individual and collective flourishing. Likewise, history is not an integrated system

insofar as it corresponded to our authentic essence) but also in creative experimentation with multiple modalities of existence.

⁵³ Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*, 220.

oriented toward the achievement of a singular end but rather is a dynamic process of endless “transformation” and “continued metamorphosis” through which the diversity of human forces expresses itself.⁵⁴

Herder not only recognizes a rich tapestry of human variation, he exalts in it, marveling at the numerous paths taken by human striving: “Of what endless variety is our artful structure susceptible!” he exclaims.⁵⁵ And he sets out to give his readers “examples of how far the diversity of human beings can extend,”⁵⁶ not only because he finds this to be fascinating, but also because the knowledge thus acquired has a morally edifying effect: by studying the diverse manifestations of the human spirit, we acquire an enriched appreciation for the nearly infinite possibilities and potentialities of human flourishing and, in so doing, begin to recognize the partiality of our own outlook and thereby take the first steps necessary for the noble and arduous task of forging inter-cultural understanding. But if we take our partial and limited perspective to be the universally valid standard of judgment, this becomes impossible, for such an approach inevitably impoverishes socio-historical understanding and prevents us from grasping the distinctiveness of that which is truly different, seeing in it “nothing but anomaly, merely deviation from the rule” that we have presumptuously established beforehand.⁵⁷ In short, if the study of history is to be a vehicle for the expansion of inter-cultural understanding, it must begin not with *a priori* principles but rather with empirical investigation informed by feeling and imaginative insight in the quest for sympathetic understanding.

⁵⁴ Herder, *Reflections*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, 249.

⁵⁷ Herder, *Fragments*, 57.

Pluralism, Language, and Sympathetic Understanding

Language—the “offprint” of sensation and thought—constitutes a vital site of interpretative inquiry into the spirit of distant times and places. According to Herder, words do not just designate something external; they also express a mode of consciousness. In fact, our consciousness is fundamentally linguistic in character.⁵⁸ Thought is both dependent on and shaped by language—“language sets [the] limits and outline for the whole of human cognition.”⁵⁹ To think is to use a language, and to use a language is to think. For Herder,

Language is essential to thought. And if thought or the characteristically human activity can only be in the medium of language, then the different natural languages express each the uniquely characteristic way in which a people realizes the human essence. A people’s language is the privileged mirror or expression of its humanity.⁶⁰

Language offers a means for entering the inner world of thought and feeling—of “*character and ethics* in short, the secret of the nation”—and the study of national literatures and folk art is therefore indispensable for understanding the spirit of a people.⁶¹ However, language cannot be abstracted from the lived context in which it is embedded, and any interpretation of language, literature, or art must therefore proceed with reference to the comprehensive historical context of the expression. To truly understand ancient Greek tragedy, we must know something about what it was like to be an Athenian citizen in fifth century B.C.E.; we must strive to think and

⁵⁸ Cf. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 128-32.

⁵⁹ Herder, *Fragments*, 49.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Hegel*, 20.

⁶¹ Herder, *Fragments*, 47.

feel as Athenians thought and felt, otherwise in our philological studies we only “grasp their formalities and have lost their spirit, we learn their language and do not feel the living world of their thoughts.”⁶² However, to think and feel in a manner foreign to us is no easy task—in fact, it may even be impossible. Are we therefore tragically fated to perpetual inter-cultural misunderstanding and unintelligibility? Herder entertains such a conclusion, but he ultimately rejects it, arguing that there are in fact means available for acquiring historical knowledge and expanding inter-cultural understanding.

In *Another Philosophy of History* Herder attempts to develop a method for grasping a foreign way of life with his notion of *Einfühlung*, an empathetic ‘feeling one’s way into.’ Because of its passion for classification and generalization, human reason by itself is ill equipped for the task of grasping the rich complexity and unique spirit of a distant people. Thus, we must supplement our reason with feeling—more specifically, with sympathetic and imaginative immersion in the life-world of a people:

One would first have to *sympathize* with a nation to feel a *single* of its *inclinations* and *actions*, to feel them *all together*, to *find* one word, to *think* all in its richness...To empathize with the *entire nature* of a soul, which rules through everything, which *molds* all other inclinations and forces of the soul *after its model*, *coloring* even the most indifferent actions, do not answer with words, but enter into the age itself, follow the compass, enter into all history; feel your way into everything – only then will you be on your way to understanding the word; only then will the thought fade whether all this, taken separately or taken together, is really you! You as everything taken together? *The quintessence of all ages and people*? That already shows the foolishness!⁶³

⁶² Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 138-9.

⁶³ Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 24.

We must “feel our way into everything”: into the thoughts, strivings, sensations, and experiences of a people. But for Herder, empathetic feeling is not a mystical turning away from the use of reason. *Einfühlung* is a meticulous method of empirical inquiry and a demanding process of historical, psychological, and philological investigation. Sympathy does not replace the scientific study of historical events and material relations but rather helps us grasp their significance and meaning. The achievement of sympathetic understanding requires rigorous research into historical context, the willingness to cast aside preconceptions and *a priori* categories, the performance of audacious acts of imagination, and, above all, the cultivation of an *ethos* of responsiveness to the strange, paradoxical, and unpredictable. So, while the challenges facing historical and inter-cultural understanding are immense, Herder thinks we can achieve a good measure of understanding so long as we recognize that we cannot judge another era or culture according to our own standards and are willing to proceed with appropriate modesty and care.

Even then, though, there is always the possibility that we will be mistaken in the conclusions we reach, for there will always be ineradicable elements of opacity, indiscernibility, and mystery in the world:

Whoever has noticed what an *inexpressible thing* the *peculiarity* of one human being is, how difficult it is to be able to *put the distinguishing distinctively*, how he feels and lives, how *different* and *peculiar* all things become for *him* after *his* eyes see them, *his* soul measures, *his* heart senses—what *depth* there is to the character of even *one nation* that even though one may have perceived and marveled at it often enough, yet *flees the word* so persistently, and that put into words, rarely becomes recognizable to *anyone*, so that he may understand and empathize.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ibid., 24.

There will always be aspects of the world that escape our cognitive reach, and so the possibilities of misunderstanding, error, and confusion are inescapable. The quest for absolute certainty is a futile endeavor. But just because our understanding is fallible and our perspective always partial, it does not follow that we have no hope of understanding or communicating with others, that peoples must remain mutually inexplicable to one another. Rather, Herder means to impress upon us that the first step to forging mutual understanding is to recognize these limitations and acknowledge the partiality of *all* perspectives. We must come to terms with the fact that abstract reason alone cannot bridge the differences in outlook between peoples and that, whether it be past or present societies different from our own, the work required for forging a common horizon is both difficult and indefinite. Again, though, nowhere does Herder claim that it is impossible to understand cultures different from one's own; he merely warns that such an endeavor is fraught with challenges and limits: it requires that we (do our best to) leave behind our own culturally determined point of view and be willing to approach the world from a new perspective.

It is because Herder believes in the possibility of achieving (some measure of) cross-cultural understanding that he cannot properly be classified as a *moral relativist* if by this term we mean the position that holds that because "right" can only mean "right for a given society," we have no "right" to criticize or condemn the values and practices of cultures different from our own—indeed, that we are acting unjustly when we do so—and that we must therefore maintain a posture of evaluative neutrality in which we assent to whatever practices and values have been

agreed upon by a given collectivity.⁶⁵ This is not Herder's position. In urging his readers to adopt a relativistic approach towards forms of life different from their own, Herder did not mean that they must forgo all judgment and critical assessment. Rather, his argument is that *understanding must precede judgment*, and that the former is only possible if one remains sensitive to a variety of contextual factors, maintains a posture of humility, and resists the urge to elevate "one's own likes and dislikes to an absolute and universal standard of judgment with little concern for understanding the experiences of those in different cultures and historical times."⁶⁶ Nowhere does Herder suggest that different cultures are without their faults, only that these faults must be understood in context.

On my reading Herder does not believe that the type of radical evaluative neutrality supported by the moral relativist is possible, let alone desirable. Indeed, Herder himself "persistently passes ethical judgments, often negative ones, on many aspects of the societies he describes, foreign" ones as well as his own.⁶⁷ For Herder, judgment is an inescapable and indispensable aspect of the human condition. One simply cannot go about life without passing judgments, without finding some things to be good and others to be bad. However—and here is the rub—not only is judgment indispensable, it is also uncertain and fallible; we lack ready-made universal criteria capable of definitively guiding or grounding our judgments of value. This conclusion follows from Herder's theory of human cognition, according

⁶⁵ This definition of relativism is taken from Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 20.

⁶⁶ Vicki Spencer, "In Defense of Herder on Cultural Diversity and Interaction," *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 96.

⁶⁷ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 15.

to which reason is not autonomous but, rather, inseparable from sensation, (in)formed by experience, and conditioned by language. From this, “it follows that, in the sphere of morality, there are no intuited principles... no pure reason... [and] no *transcendent* norms to which individuals in every culture could have access.”⁶⁸ Herder, then, confronts us with a fundamental dilemma with which we must grapple: “One is without criteria, yet one must decide.”⁶⁹

This is not to say, however, that Herder does not espouse a certain form of (weak) universalism. On the contrary, there is a sense in which he “accepts the basic content of the universal moral principles we have come to associate with the Enlightenment,”⁷⁰ namely, that all persons are of equal moral worth and have “an equal right to the enjoyment of life.”⁷¹ Indeed, Herder places ultimate value on the self-determination and freedom of the individual and the group, with freedom generally being understood as authentic expression and self-realization. He thereby places human fulfillment and flourishing at the center of his ethical thought. Put another way, in surveying the diverse manifestations of the human spirit throughout history, Herder argues that we gradually “discern the grand law of nature: let man be man; let him mould his conditions according as to himself shall seem best... we every where find mankind possessing and exercising *the right of forming themselves to a kind of humanity*.”⁷² But because forms of life, happiness, and expressive realization vary so greatly across time and space, we cannot infer

⁶⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 17.

⁷⁰ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 249.

⁷¹ Herder, *Reflections*, 71.

⁷² Ibid., 84; emphasis added.

from this “grand law of nature” a single set of principles from which we could judge in all instances what contributes to and what hinders human flourishing—that is, what is good and bad. In order to do that, we must turn to history and anthropology, not abstract metaphysics. And if these endeavors are to be successful, if they are to render the kind of knowledge necessary for producing discerning judgments, they must be carried out in a spirit of modesty and humility that resists the imperialist urge to subsume the particular under the “universal.”

Enlightenment and Empire

Modesty and humility, however, are precisely what the *philosophes* lack; their attitude and approach toward history—their belief that they represent the highest achievement of human civilization and their insistence on *a priori* methods of historical inquiry—are inimical to the task of recognizing (let alone grasping) the unique *spirit* of other peoples. According to Herder, they insist on judging all of history from their own standpoint, taking themselves to be the quintessence of all ages and the (sole) measure of all things. This leads to a variety of misconceptions and confusions, which are not merely of intellectual interest but also of political importance. In particular, Herder thinks that the arrogance of the Enlightenment perspective helps to fuel the pernicious drive for colonial expansion and exploitation by contributing to a smug sense of European superiority that is purchased through the devaluation of other peoples. Indeed, the advocates of the imperial venture are only too happy to draw upon these universalist prejudices: “people readily draw support from contemptuous judgments about other peoples in

order to justify dark deeds, savage inclinations.”⁷³ Thus, as Frederick Beiser explains, “a major source of Herder’s dissatisfaction with the *Aufklärung*, then, was his belief that it justifies oppression. The *Aufklärer* are the allies of the princes in their campaigns to exterminate local self-government and to exploit the native peoples of Africa, America, and Asia.”⁷⁴

Moreover, even if the colonial project were in fact a benevolent “civilizing mission,” the attempt to force all of humanity into a singular form of life is doomed to generate disastrous consequences. A people’s way of life cannot simply be replaced with another one at will: it develops organically in response to local conditions through the development of social bonds and can only be transformed through the gradual work of subtle and persistent forces. “What,” asks Herder, “is a foisted, foreign culture, a formation [*Bildung*] that does not develop out of [a people’s] own dispositions and needs? It oppresses and deforms, or else it plunges straight into the abyss.”⁷⁵ Far from representing universal progress toward “civilization,” the desire to reduce the rich complexity of forms of life to a singular model is a destructive endeavor that spreads misery and desolation across the globe.

⁷³ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 394. To be clear, Herder’s claim is not that Enlightenment doctrines were formulated for the express purpose of providing ideological cover for colonialism but, rather, that they contributed to an atmosphere of arrogance and false judgments among Europeans that served to mask the *inhumanity* of the colonial project. This is why he declares in Letter 115 of his *Letters for the Advancement* that “All works which nourish the—already in itself intolerable—pride of the Europeans through distorted, unproved, or manifestly unprovable assertions—the genius of humanity throws them back with contempt and says: ‘An unhuman [*Unmensch*] wrote them!’” (386).

⁷⁴ Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought—1790 – 1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 203.

⁷⁵ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 382.

Let the land be named to which Europeans have come without having sinned against defenseless, trusting humanity, perhaps for all aeons to come, through injurious acts, through unjust wars, greed, deceit, oppression, through diseases and harmful gifts! Our part of the world must be called, not the wise, but the *presumptuous, pushing, tricking* part of the earth; it has not cultivated but has destroyed the shoots of peoples' own cultures wherever and however it could.⁷⁶

Amid the growing hegemony of colonialist ideology across Europe, Herder recognized that the expansion of European civilization, while bringing light for some, also had the effect of “blinding so many eyes, causing so much *misery* and *gloom*.”⁷⁷ Moreover, he recognized something that many are all too quick to forget today: the damages wrought by colonial exploitation will not be repaired overnight, for colonialism not only exploited these lands for profit, it fundamentally disrupted and disabled the growth of organic forms of life and thus deprived these populations of their primary source of social cohesion, cultural development, and expressive realization. It may be objected that Herder's argument here slides toward an uncritical embrace of nativism, which has often functioned as a corollary to colonial ideologies. But for Herder the organic forms of life harmed by colonialism are not static and unchanging formations that attest to the uniqueness of some “primitive mentality” but are instead forms of developed and developing culture capable of providing for the health and happiness of a people.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 381-2.

⁷⁷ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 86.

Nationalism and Expressivism

Herder is often credited (or, perhaps, blamed) with laying the intellectual groundwork for the principle of nationality through his valorization of community and his belief that nations form distinct organic entities, inherently linked to a native territory and bound together by a shared language, history, and culture. Indeed, he declared that “the most natural state is ... *one* people, with one national character” and further asserted that nothing was “so obviously counter to the purpose of government as the unnatural expansion of states, the wild mixture of all types of races and nations under one scepter.”⁷⁸ As such, Herder was one of the first thinkers to advocate the principle of nationality according to which the borders of the nation and the state ought to coincide.

The nation is taken to be an expressive whole in which each part—including its government—should harmoniously relate to the others and express the character of the whole. Whatever form it takes, then, the political organization of a national community is only legitimate if it is integrally related to and reflective of the nation’s culture, “which is at once the product and the source of its shared activities, ideas, values, artifacts and process, in short, its shared way of life.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Herder, “Governments as Inherited Regimes,” in *Another Philosophy of History*, 128. As we shall see in chapter 2, Herder generally rejects the language of race, believing it to have no analytic value in distinguishing peoples. This passage is one of the few places in Herder’s writings where the term ‘race’ appears, and the reader should not infer from it that Herder’s understanding of the nation was racially based. In fact, Sonia Sikka has suggested that the translation of *menschen-gattungen* in this passage as “race,” is problematic and confusing, if not entirely unfair (*Herder on Humanity*, 139), while Sankar Muthu argues that *menschen-gattungen* is mistranslated and ought to have been rendered, “various kinds of humans,” rather than “types of races.” Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 248. In any case, for Herder *Volk* represents a social-historical category, not a racial one.

⁷⁹ F. M. Barnard, “Culture and Political Development: Herder’s Suggestive Insights,” *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 2 (1969): 390.

Herder thus espouses what Charles Larmore calls *political expressivism*—the idea that the political organization of a society should *express* the shared commitments, beliefs, and values of the people. Accordingly, the state is neither an autonomous body over and above the national community, nor an artificial mechanism created to serve tightly circumscribed ends; instead, it is (or ought to be) an organic formation that both reflects the spirit of the people and plays an active role in cultivating their collective development [*Bildung*]. Herder offers a paradigmatic example of political expressivism, Larmore argues, because “he passionately extolled the worth of the state, so long as... it did express the society’s shared conception of the good life.”⁸⁰ And though Larmore does not directly address the role of nationalism per se in Herder’s political thought, he is clear that the adoption of Herder’s ideas by a number of “Romantic successors”—and in particular the argument that the ideal of the holistic individual should be applied to state and society—led to “an aestheticization of politics” that had “disastrous consequences” and contributed directly to “the tragic course of German political thought and practice for more than a century.”⁸¹ Indeed, from our contemporary vantage point, such valorization of the State as the exponent of the cherished folk-spirit of the people strikes an ominous tone that evokes the aggressive, ascriptive, and absolutist forms of nationalist thought and practice that still haunt us today.

But to think of Herder as a nationalist in this way is misleading in important respects. Although he stressed the importance of national belonging and advocated

⁸⁰ Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 97.

⁸¹ Ibid., 99. Larmore asserts that although Herder’s thought operated at a higher “level of sophistication” and “appreciated the truth of pluralism” more than its Romantic successors (99), it was nonetheless “paradigmatic for the argumentative style of German Romanticism” as a whole (98).

the cultivation of a distinctive German national identity and culture, Herder did *not* support (and, in fact, vehemently opposed) the idea that any one nation was superior to others and therefore ought to rule over them. “Let no one put into the hands of any people on earth,” he proclaimed, “the scepter over other peoples—much less the sword and the slave whip.”⁸² Herder’s theory of nationality insisted on the right of self-determination for *all* peoples, and he believed that every nation (and certainly not just the German nation) should preserve and cultivate its unique way of life, for each nation has an important and irreplaceable contribution to make to the development of humanity as a whole. In fact, nothing displeased him more than the attempt by one nation to impose its cultural formation on another, and his rejection of multinational “machine-states” should be understood in this light: Herder took such states to be the product not of natural or voluntary plans for cooperation between different peoples but rather of foreign conquest and subjugation. According to Herder, such artificial contrivances were both inherently oppressive and destined to fail, “for the very statecraft that brought them into being is also the one that plays with peoples and human beings as with lifeless bodies. But history shows sufficiently that these instruments of human pride are made of clay, and like all clay on earth, they crumble and dissolve.”⁸³ Although Herder’s organic conception of the nation is certainly out of step with some of the complex, differentiated, and pluralistic ideals of our time, it is important to recognize that his rejection of multinational states did not stem from a commitment to preserving

⁸² Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 394.

⁸³ Herder, “Governments as Inherited Regimes,” in *Another Philosophy of History*, 128.

national or racial “purity” but instead was motivated by his concern for the cultural integrity, well-being, and independence of all peoples.

Moreover, insofar as Herder urged patriotic attachment, it was to be directed not toward the State per se but, rather, toward the *people* and what they share in common—their language, art, customs, traditions, ideals, and strivings. In fact, far from passionately extolling the virtues of the state, Herder’s nationalist sentiment was resolutely anti-statist,⁸⁴ leading some commentators to conclude that he was “hostile to *all* states” and merely saw the nation-state as the *least unnatural*, the least oppressive, of existing forms of political rule.⁸⁵ Although this interpretation of Herder’s opinion of the state is by no means universally accepted,⁸⁶ Herder clearly

⁸⁴ Larmore acknowledges that Herder had his anti-statist moments as well: “[Herder] was of two minds about the view of the political realm that this expressivistic theory of society required. Sometimes he praised the societies of stateless people, since in them individuals could not be sacrificed to some alien goal. At other times he passionately extolled the worth of the state, so long as, like supposedly the Greek polis, it did express the society’s shared conception of the good life: ‘The most natural state is thus *one* people, with *one* national character’” (*Patterns*, 97). While Herder did praise the Greek polis in both *Another Philosophy of History* (18-21) and the *Ideas*, ancient Greece represented something of a special case for Herder—“the cradle of *humaneness... of fine legislation*, of all that is *most agreeable...*”—that could not be recreated under contemporary conditions (*Another Philosophy*, 19). Moreover, the passage Larmore draws on—“the most natural state is thus *one* people, with *one* national character”—to support his claim that Herder passionately extolled the virtues of the state is more ambiguous than he acknowledges. First, as Eggel et al have shown (“Was Herder a Nationalist?” *The Review of Politics* 69, no.1 [2007]), Herder wrestled with this passage to such an extent that he re-drafted it at least five times. Ultimately, they suggest, the “natural” state (or national governance) he mentions was meant to refer to forms of government that were only found in early organic communities and were no longer possible given the conditions of the modern world (53). Moreover, even if we assume that Herder is talking about modern states in this passage, when it is read in full it does not seem to convincingly support Larmore’s claim, for at the very least, it can just as plausibly be read as more of a critique of multinational states than an endorsement of the modern nation-state. Indeed, when read in this way, and in conjunction with some of Herder’s passionate denunciations of modern governments and the “reason of state,” it suggests an ambivalence, verging on enmity, about the state that Larmore’s account underplays (cf. Herder *Reflections*, 77; Herder *Philosophical Writings*, 412).

⁸⁵ F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 10.

⁸⁶ Alan Patten, in “‘The Most Natural State’: Herder and Nationalism,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 4 (2010), argues that, for pragmatic reasons, Herder endorsed “a ‘remedial’ view of the state” (677). Likewise, in “Was Herder a Nationalist?” Eggel et al. suggest that Barnard “fails to recognize the positive transitory role” Herder thought “states might play” in fostering nationalist development

harbored serious doubts about the ability of centralized bureaucratic states to promote human flourishing, and he even suggested that, as a general rule, the greatness of the state and the happiness of individuals tend to exist in an inverse relationship.⁸⁷ Ultimately, Herder sees the modern state as a necessary, yet (hopefully) transitory, institution for securing internal order, providing protection from external threats, and, at its best, fostering social cohesion. For Herder, government in one form or another—i.e., the organization of social life according to authoritative rules and generally agreed-upon principles and practices—is an indispensable aspect of social life. But the state-form is only one example of government generally speaking. In fact, Herder’s theory of national consolidation and development ultimately aims for “the disappearance of the State as an administrative ‘machine’ of government, and its replacement by an ‘organic’ way of ordering social life, in which active co-operation would render all forms of subordination obsolete and superfluous.”⁸⁸ Thus, although he argues that each nation ought to have its own state and govern itself, Herder neither looks to the (modern)

(76). Interestingly, both suggest, in different ways, that Herder supported something like the liberal ideal of the state, i.e. that Herder’s image of the ideal (modern, European) state was “loosely ‘liberal’ in character” (Patten, 678). If this is meant to suggest that because of his wariness of centralized power, which he saw as a threat to the freedom of the people, Herder opposed large, highly centralized and heavily bureaucratic state while also supporting such liberal ideals as freedom of speech and the like, then I think it is correct. This seems to be the position of Eggel et al., who suggest that Herder, “in an almost liberal fashion... asks for ‘lighter’ and ‘better’ public administration” (66). If, however, this claim is meant to suggest that Herder supports a version of the state in which it ought to remain neutral with respect to endorsing a particular notion of the good life, as Patten seems to say (676), then I do not think it is accurate, for although Herder thinks that the “good state” needn’t be tied to any particular constitutional structure or institutional arraignment (cf. Eggel et al., 60), he does argue that its purpose (i.e., its source of legitimacy) consists in reflecting and advancing the collectively shared spirit (and notion of good-life) animating the polity. Thus, whatever form the state takes, it would not strive to achieve the liberal ideal of neutrality (cf. Larmore, *Patterns*, 91-99).

⁸⁷ Cf. Herder, *Reflections*, 77: “With the greatness of the state... the danger of rendering individuals miserable is infinitely augmented. In large states, hundreds must pine with hunger, that one may feast and carouse: thousands are oppressed, and hunted to death, that one crowned fool or philosopher may gratify his whims.”

⁸⁸ Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 77.

state for worldly salvation, nor approaches anything like Hegel's divinization of the state.⁸⁹

What binds a people together is not allegiance to the State but rather a common language, history, culture, and way of life. It is towards one's fellow countrymen and -women, and the common life-world one shares with them, that loyalty should be directed. In almost every case loyalty to the state is misguided. Should we conclude, then, along with Isaiah Berlin, that "Herder's nationalism was never political" but was instead always cultural?⁹⁰

Perhaps—but only if we are also careful to recognize that Herder drew significant political implications from his cultural conception of the nation. Chief among these, of course, was the principle of nationality. Underlying Herder's support for this principle was his conviction that a nation, or 'people,' constitutes an expressive whole, held together not by a social contract but by a shared form of life that nourishes and shapes them. *This*—the concrete sense of belonging and the constitutive attachments to which it gives rise—Herder concluded, was "the one and only effective cohesive force in socio-political association" and, therefore, the "essential element" of political development and social growth.⁹¹ Thus, while it is certainly the case that Herder's understanding of the nation is fundamentally

⁸⁹ This is an important distinction (among many) between Herder and Hegel, one that, so far as I can tell, Larmore does not address in *Patterns of Moral Complexity*. The impression that the reader receives from this otherwise insightful and provocative book is that Herder and Hegel shared a common, organic-expressivist view of state and society and, therefore, shared a common, anti-liberal political ideology. This is not the case, and it does a great disservice to Herder (or, perhaps, to Hegel, depending on one's philosophical and political proclivities). Even if one chooses to read Herder as an anti-liberal thinker, his politics are still markedly different from Hegel's, especially, though not exclusively, with respect to the international order.

⁹⁰ Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," 397.

⁹¹ Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, 141.

cultural, his “approach to politics itself is essentially cultural.”⁹² For Herder, the purpose of government, and of political life generally speaking, is to ensure the happiness of the people by fostering the progressive development of the nation’s cultural formation; “a good government is one that strengthens and preserves the national character.”⁹³ Indeed, this is in keeping with the expressivist thesis, and should come as no great surprise. The Herderian wager, then, is that progress, “genuine reform and social change can best take place when a sense of shared purpose animates the body politic”;⁹⁴ when there is a sympathetic relationship between the people and government, and when unity and coordinated action are premised on the collectively shared sentiments and outlooks imparted to the people through shared processes of enculturation. In other words, Herder’s ideal of cultural authenticity “is an ideal of *development*; it does not encourage societies to remain as they are, but suggests that their evolution needs to consist in the unfolding of their own potentialities.”⁹⁵

However, given his mistrust of the state—not to mention his disdain for the existing social and political order in Germany—Herder doubted the state’s ability to effectively express and advance the national character, and he therefore placed his faith in the emergence of popular leaders whom he called *aristodemocrats*,⁹⁶ “‘men of the people,’ who, imbued with missionary zeal, would preach and spread the gospel of education (*Bildung*) and guide the rest of the nation to a stage where it

⁹² Robert Loudon, *The World We Want: How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.

⁹³ Eggel et al., “Was Herder a Nationalist?,” 49

⁹⁴ Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 325.

⁹⁵ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 119.

⁹⁶ Herder, *Letters Concerning the Progress of Humanity*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 364.

would no longer be in need of political rulers.”⁹⁷ Much like Plato’s philosopher-kings, Herder’s aristo-democrats would lead and guide the ignorant, nonerudite masses, who were currently “educationally and politically unfit for government” due to “centuries of neglect” and socio-cultural stagnation.⁹⁸ Unlike Plato’s philosopher-kings, however, the rule of Herder’s aristo-democrats was conceived of as a temporary expedient, the best way to encourage the development of the people and prepare them for self-rule, that is, for the day when all forms of hierarchical governance—whether state-based or consisting in elite leadership—would no longer be necessary.⁹⁹

Self-determination, that is, the ability and willingness of individuals and groups of individuals to order their social and economic lives within a legal framework of their own making, conscious of their freedom *and* inter-dependence: this is the goal of the political transformation which Herder had in mind... This is as far as Herder would go. We search in vain for a more detailed treatment of the transition from the somewhat paternal system of “aristo-democracy” to the “pluralist” diffusion of government associated with his concept of “nomocracy.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 76.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81

⁹⁹ The ultimate purpose of national development, Herder suggests, is to reach a stage of collective development [*Bildung*] and social cohesion where the people will truly be capable of self-governance and the existence of the centralized state will no longer be necessary for maintaining order and regulating behavior and would be replaced by the *Volk*-state, “an ‘organic’ way of ordering life” (Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 77), characterized by the “pluralist diffusion of government” (Barnard, *Herder on Nationality*, 395) and high levels of civic participation in which a spirit of reciprocity “and active co-operation would render all forms of sub-ordination obsolete and superfluous” (Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 77). Herder’s account of the disappearance of the state is thoroughly unconvincing and “has more in common with a religious creed than a political doctrine” (86). What is important for our purposes, however, is not the specifics of this politico-theological ideal (Herder is, not surprisingly, sparse when it comes to the details of the process and end result of this achievement) but, rather, the general account of aristo-democratic leadership that accompanies it. As we shall see in chapter 3, W. E. B. Du Bois advances something very similar to it with his notion of the “Talented Tenth” and his account of black politics as consisting of elite leadership and rule that guides the race towards expressive self-realization.

¹⁰⁰ Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 82.

The aristo-democrats seek not only to cultivate the intellect of the people, but also to shape their dispositions and sentiments, ultimately instilling in them an enhanced national consciousness and an awareness that they can only achieve individual self-realization by taking part in the common life of the nation and working toward its improvement.¹⁰¹ In other words, by fostering a sense of homogeneity and collective identity, the period of aristo-democracy would also foster a spirit of reciprocal obligation, active co-operation, and, ultimately, civic virtue that would enrich the life of the nation, creating the social conditions most conducive to human flourishing.¹⁰² In this sense, Herder's cultural nationalism is also a form of civic nationalism, the purpose of which is to create a self-sustaining political community that could safeguard the liberty of the people. Indeed, far from being totalitarian in spirit, as some commentators have suggested, Herder's nationalism aims to cultivate a noble "sense of community" and encourage practices of self-organization so as to provide "security, activity, [and the] occasion for every free, beneficent practice" among the people.¹⁰³

For Herder, the importance of collective development as a means for protecting collective self-determination was given added significance by the rapid pace of change and increasing levels of inter-dependence that he thought were, and would continue to be, characteristic of the modern world:

All the peoples of Europe (not excluding the other parts of the world) are now in a contest of, not physical, but *mental and artistic forces* with each other. When one or two nations accomplish steps of progress in a short time

¹⁰¹ "People must learn that they can be something only in the place in which they stand, where they *should* be something" (Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 406).

¹⁰² Barnard, *Herder on Nationality*, 34.

¹⁰³ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 377.

for which formerly centuries were required, then other nations cannot, and may not, want to set themselves back by centuries without thereby doing themselves painful damage. They *must* advance with those others; in our times one can no longer be a barbarian; as a barbarian one gets cheated, trodden on, despised, abused. The epochs of the world form a moving chain which no individual ring can in the end resist even if it wanted to.¹⁰⁴

This, ultimately, is the larger context in which Herder's defense of the right of national self-determination and development must be situated. As we shall see in Chapter 3, it was the combination of developmental and democratic ideals in Herder's organic conception of the nation and national politics that appealed to W. E. B. Du Bois, who developed and advocated his own brand of cultural-civic nationalism as a response to the dilemma of under-development and marginality.

Conclusion: The Romantic Vision and the Perils of Homesickness

I have provided an overview of Herder's philosophical project as it developed in opposition to various aspects of the Enlightenment vision and have discussed some of the primary political motivations and theoretical insights contained within Herder's romantic vision. I have attempted to show in particular how the romantic vision articulated by Herder opposed the Enlightenment assumption of an *a priori* universal standpoint and offered in its place an image of a world characterized by dynamic pluralism and the incommensurability of perspectives. A key aspect of this development was Herder's expressivist notion of the subject and his corresponding doctrine of *Volksgeist*, both of which are fundamental to his ideas about human history, politics, and culture. As we have seen, in positing the existence of a plurality

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

of incommensurable cultures, Herder neither rejected the idea that cultures could understand or learn from one another nor endorsed a form of moral relativism entailing a radical suspension of ethical judgment. Instead, he meant to warn us that achieving cross-cultural understanding and reaching discerning judgments are difficult tasks that cannot be left up to the work of abstract reason alone. Moreover, we have also seen that in arguing for the preservation of national borders and distinct cultural communities, Herder was neither a chauvinist obsessed with preserving the purity of racial/national essences nor an authoritarian determined to secure German superiority over all other nations. On the contrary, his ethico-political motivations were thoroughly democratic, egalitarian, and anti-imperialist in character.

Though he is perhaps somewhat underappreciated today, Herder's earlier intellectual influence was immense. He was a central figure of the *Sturm und Drang*, and he contributed greatly to the development of the Romantic Movement in Germany, which culminated in what Isaiah Berlin has termed the "unbridled romanticism" of Fichte, Schlegel, Schelling, and others.¹⁰⁵ Despite their significant differences from one another, in these latter thinkers the romantic vision underwent an intensification and amplification that tended towards mystical vitalism, a deepened yearning for wholeness, and glorification of the virtues of the unrestrained will. This last element—the celebration of the self-determining and

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999), 93-117. There are, of course, important differences between these thinkers (e.g. Fichte's doctrine of the will and Schelling's doctrine of the unconscious), but it is not possible in this space to adequately attend to these. In general, however, we can say that the "unbridled romantics" who followed Herder tended to extend his critique of reason into a position of anti-rationalist mysticism and mutate his advocacy of the self-determination of individuals and nations into a fanatical assertion of the indomitable will of the (German) nation.

indomitable will—was often applied to both the individual subject and the nation itself, which came to be understood as a metaphysical unity in its own right. Thus, the Romantic movement as a whole can be seen as contributing to the current of nationalist sentiment that ran through Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the romantic vision articulated by Herder must necessarily culminate in racist or fascist thought.

In fact, romantic visions take many forms and varieties. As Isaiah Berlin notes, “it is impossible to pin down romanticism to any given political view,” for it may be reactionary or revolutionary depending on circumstances and the organization of its doctrinal elements, and it often appears “on the surface to say everything and its opposite.”¹⁰⁶ Yet, in speaking of a romantic vision, I do not think we are speaking of nothing. Rather, inside the diversity of its articulations, we can identify a general set of assumptions about the nature of the individual’s relationship to the world. Herder, it turns out, is exemplary in this regard because he offers a paradigmatic expression of the romantic vision.

What, generally speaking, are the basic parameters of the romantic vision? As we have seen, it posits an organic social ontology and a related notion of the history or tradition of a ‘people’ as unfolding from a single potency or essence. Within this framework the romantic vision places ultimate value on the self-determination and freedom of the individual and the group, with freedom generally understood as the authentic self-realization of an inner essence. Moreover, the world is seen as being

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, 127; 134.

composed of a rich plurality of unique and incommensurable (national) forms of life such that the freedom and authentic self-expression of one group cannot legitimately be imposed on another. An emphasis on the distinct spiritual or cultural identity of different peoples is central to any romantic vision, but the way in which these differences are understood and the consequences that are attributed to them can vary greatly from one articulation to another. This, in fact, accounts for a great deal of the ideological diversity possible within romanticism. For example, the diversity of forms of life may be given a positive value, leading one to a position of pluralist affirmation; or, pluralism may be seen as a neutral but ineluctable fact of existence, leading one to a position of tolerant acceptance of diversity; or, difference may be seen as a threat to the security of one's identity or the self-determination of one's nation (e.g. the German nation), leading one progressively down the path of bellicose nationalism. Each of these possibilities exists within the broad parameters of the romantic vision.

Somewhat at odds with its notion of pluralism, there is in romanticism a desire for harmony with nature and one's fellow man, for a sense of spiritual and social unity, and for universal sympathy, all of which the Enlightenment is seen as having put in grave danger through its objectification of man and nature. The romantic vision, in short, is a profound version of what Nietzsche terms homesickness—the longing to establish a 'home' in the world where one can realize life's most cherished ideals and obtain transparency, security, and freedom. According to Nietzsche, homesickness dreams of recapturing the lost unity that is supposed to have existed in the ancient Greek world:

German philosophy as a whole—Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, to name the greatest—is the most fundamental form of *romanticism* and homesickness there has ever been: the longing for the best that ever existed. One is no longer at home anywhere; at last one longs back for that place in which alone one can be at home, because it is the only place in which one would want to be at home: the *Greek* world! But it is precisely in that direction that all bridges are broken... But what happiness there is already in this will to spirituality, to ghostliness almost! How far it takes one from “pressure and stress,” from the mechanistic awkwardness of the natural sciences, from the market hubbub of “modern ideas”!¹⁰⁷

Above all, the romantic vision yearns to be at home in the world “again” and to make it “whole”—to be free of the sense of exile and alienation wrought by the modern revolution. Although Nietzsche thinks homesickness expresses itself in the (impossible) desire to “go back,” it may in fact be more helpful to think of it as the desire to re-establish the unity of life once enjoyed in the Greek world within the more complex conditions of modernity. Herder recognizes that there is no question of actually going back, for “the human vessel... must always *depart* as it *moves on*,” yet ancient Greece remains an archetype because it was “the cradle of *humaneness*, of *friendship between peoples*, of *fine legislation*, of all that is *most agreeable*.”¹⁰⁸ For Herder, what is most significant about the Greeks was that they experienced “*a unity*

¹⁰⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), §419. Herder does not, in fact, appear on Nietzsche’s list of homesick thinkers, but I suspect that this is due to the fact that Nietzsche did not think highly enough of Herder to include him in a list with Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche writes of Herder that he “fails to be all that he made people think he was and himself wished to think he was. He was no great thinker or discoverer, no newly fertile soil with the unexhausted strength of a virgin forest. But he possessed in the highest degree the power of scenting the future, he saw and picked the first fruits of the seasons earlier than all others, and they then believed that he had made them grow... The unrest of spring drove him to and fro, but he was himself not the spring” (“The Wanderer and His Shadow,” §118). This makes one wonder if Nietzsche’s elusive comment in *Daybreak* may perhaps be directed (in part) at Herder: “Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but only the soil of the plants that grow in him!” (Nietzsche, *Daybreak* ed. R.J. Hollingdale [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], Book IV, §382). In any case, Herder certainly qualifies as a homesick philosopher in the sense that Nietzsche gives it, for he explicitly states that romanticism is homesickness. See also *The Will to Power* §849 and *The Gay Science* §370.

¹⁰⁸ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 19.

and diversity that... made for the *most beautiful whole*" because they retained "their *spirit of community, the feeling of one nation, one fatherland, one language!*"¹⁰⁹

Herder's homesickness is expressed in an overriding desire to establish a sense of integral belonging and secure rootedness in "*one fatherland*," with "*one language*." His deepest longing is to belong to a community in which he can create and express himself while being a part of a common cause or undertaking. His writings articulate the desire to truly *belong* to something, to be a part of a community in which he can understand and is understood by those who create and express with him. In this sense, Herder's project can be understood as the quest to uncover the sources of social cohesion that can provide for a communal existence and common way of life that harmonizes the diverse interests, perspectives, and values in a nation.

As William E. Connolly explains, homesickness manifests itself as "the demand, the insistence, that one realize within theory what one yearns for most in life. It becomes translated into presuppositions and assumptions one treats as the unquestionable standard by which all other elements in the theory are to be judged."¹¹⁰ Homesickness results in a mode of theorizing that derives the "can" or the "is" from the "ought"—it identifies or establishes an ultimate *desiderata* in human affairs and proceeds to insist upon a set of assumptions about the world that are necessary for its achievement. For example, according to Herder, both man and society are expressive wholes existing in a harmonious interrelationship, which is possible only if we take as a starting point an organic social ontology. For Herder,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁰ William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.), 135.

holism and organicism of this sort are seen as absolutely fundamental and any theory of man or society that violates them is rejected out of hand because belonging as he understands it requires both holism and organicism. The constitutive attachments that connect the members of a society together must tie them all “to a single substantial purpose or conception of the good life. Either a society forms an expressive whole or it has collapsed into a heap of indifferent or antagonistic fragments, stripped of any shared bonds of conviction.”¹¹¹ Likewise, each subject must exist in a harmonious relationship with the constitutive bonds of society, “without which he could neither have received his being, nor have become a man.”¹¹² The nation must constitute an expressive, organic whole, and each individual must exist in a harmonious relationship with that whole, otherwise it sinks into the abyss. The key is this: although Herder sees a world composed of a plurality of national cultures, that pluralism does not extend to the internal dynamics of a “people” who must be defined by a unitary spiritual essence in order to avoid being pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of multiple and conflicting circles of happiness.

One of Herder’s principle virtues as a political thinker is that he brings into sharp focus the need for belonging and community that we all experience in one form or another. Indeed, one way of conceptualizing politics itself is as the quest for belonging or as that which seeks to generate political community.¹¹³ The accompanying problem, however, is that Herder translates that desire into an

¹¹¹ Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 96.

¹¹² Herder, *Reflections*, 59.

¹¹³ Cf. Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

insistence that the world *must* be designed to accommodate harmonious communality rooted in place. Thus Herder writes that though much is uncertain in this world, “whatever I may be, a call from heaven to earth [assures me] that like everything else, so I, too, must have *some* meaning in my place—with *powers reserved for the whole* and with a *feeling* of happiness that adequately reflects the *scope* of these powers!”¹¹⁴ This ultimately becomes an article of faith for Herder—he places his faith in a providential order that ensures that we can be comfortably at home in the world. He assumes but does not demonstrate that Nature, through the work of Providential Guidance, has constructed a meaningful world designed to accommodate human belonging as he construes it. This must be a world composed of distinct nations, each with a unique essence that is expressed in its language, customs, values, and beliefs and which ensures the cohesive identity of the nation. As such, national identity is seen not as one possible outcome of politics but as both the basis *and* intended purpose of politics and collective striving.

But what if the world is not structured that way? What if it lacks purposive design or providential guidance? What if belonging is a human drive and the world is not all that conducive to its fulfillment? What if communal harmony is a contestable end among other ends and not the sole good or purpose of society? What if neither an organic (at least of this sort), nor a mechanistic, nor an individualistic metaphor provides a sufficient framework for interpreting human society? Indeed, even if we were to adopt for a moment an organic worldview, what reason do we have to assume that nations would constitute holistic organisms?

¹¹⁴ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 74.

What makes them the privileged locus of belonging and principle unit of history?

What if the quest for community is fraught with dangers and haunted by incompleteness in ways that Herder does not acknowledge? What if the organic trades off its contrast to individualistic and mechanical ideals, but fails to come to terms with modes of connection and pluralism that fit neither model? If we question whether the world is designed in this way, then we have reason to question Herder's communitarian ideal.

Herder's thought itself contains insights that ought to lead us to doubt that national cultures constitute relatively homogenous organic wholes. Indeed, this image of the nation as an organic whole can only ultimately be justified by appealing to some providential design or plan. Recall that Herder's cultural pluralism is undergirded by his expressivist theory of the subject in which cognition and sensation are imbricated aspects of the expressive unity that is the human being. In short, it is the variability and diversity of human sensation that accounts for the variability and diversity of human mentality. But if this is the case, then a great deal of the diversity Herder sees existing between national cultures can also subsist *within* them. To be sure, Herder acknowledges that a certain amount of diversity exists within nations, for no two individuals are exactly alike, and a national culture necessarily contains a range of practices, enterprises, and institutions. Nonetheless, in the final instance, the nation must be held together and defined by a common spiritual essence such that the pluralism that does exist within it is significantly bounded. Perhaps it is Herder's homesickness—his desire for wholeness and harmonious communality—that causes him to fail to apply his own pluralistic

insights to the internal life of the nation. Whatever the sources, this failure carries with it significant political and ethical dangers.

Consider, for example, Herder's insistence that "it is not your place to ponder theoretically about your fatherland, for you were not its creator, but you must join others in helping it where and as you can, encourage it, save it, improve it – even if you were the goose of the Capitol."¹¹⁵ In one sense this expresses a noble sentiment and demonstrates his commitment to the advancement of the common good, but we must also keep in mind that for Herder *this requires that the nation as a whole be committed to a single purpose* and that each individual fully embody the collective identity. And this demand for a unity of purpose is potentially dangerous not only because it may take perverse or aggressive forms (Herder recognized the threat of 'narrow nationalism' but thought it could be contained) but also because it demands a normalization of in-group identity that can force people to reform themselves in ways that may be arbitrary, violent, or harmful. Simply put, if we do not assume, as Herder does, that all the members of a nation share a common spiritual identity or *essence*, then the attempt to impose one may be as violent, destructive, and wasteful as the attempt reduce the global plurality of national forms of life to one ideal. But if we start with Herder's core assumptions—that nations grow naturally like organisms and only thrive if they maintain their unitary organization in accordance with the natural order of Being—then concerns over the potential costs of communitarian harmony do not register sufficiently.

¹¹⁵ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 376.

In saying that Herder's communitarian ideal harbors some unacknowledged or unresolved dangers I am not suggesting that there is a social ideal without dangers. Indeed, as Foucault says, "everything is dangerous."¹¹⁶ If everything is dangerous, "then we always have something to do"; we must constantly be on the guard, assessing and struggling against the dangers we take to be the most pressing and urgent, and this is why Foucault described his work as leading "to a hyper- and pessimistic activism."¹¹⁷ But the way in which Herder figures organicism and holism as necessary aspects of any vision of social and political life bars precisely this kind of critical examination. If we want to evaluate the insight, allure, and limitations of the romantic vision, then we must reckon with both the articles of faith that hold its elements together and their potential implications. Doing so reveals how the romantic vision courts disaster by fleeing complexity, ignoring the irrevocably composite nature of *all* identities, and demanding a normalization of in-group cultural identity. Thus, although Herder's political thought is deeply democratic and emancipatory in intention, it also contains impulses that run counter to these noble intentions. As a result it cannot, in and of itself, provide the theoretical and political resources necessary to forge the emancipatory politics for which it strives.

But even the failures of the romantic vision may be instructive: they provide occasion to reflect on the ways in which our determination to achieve some noble purpose—such as harmonious communality conducive to human flourishing—may blind us to important social realities or existential forces that inevitably complicate

¹¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 256.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

such efforts. Read in this way, they warn that tragedy may befall us not only when we are wicked, but when we become dogmatic and single minded in our pursuit of the good, that is, when we begin to insist that the world or human life itself are designed in such a way as to assure the eventual realization of our most cherished desiderata. The question becomes, then, how do we forge theoretical visions and political movements animated by a belief in transformative possibilities and a militant conviction to challenging barriers to human flourishing on the one hand, and a fundamental appreciation for the inherent contestability and uncertainty of all human belief and action, for the fact that “everything is dangerous,” on the other?

Chapter 2

Kant *contra* Herder: Race, Reason, and Universal History

One human being, goes the saying, is for the other a wolf, a god, an angel, a devil. What are the human peoples that affect each other for each other? The Negro depicts the devil as white, and the Latvian does not want to enter into heaven as soon as there are Germans there. "Why are you pouring water on my head?" said the dying slave to the missionary. "So that you may enter into heaven." "I do not want to enter into any heaven where there are whites" he spoke, turned away his face, and died. Sad history of humanity.

—Johann Herder¹

Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the philosophical foundations of Johann Herder's romantic vision and asked how his ideas about embodied subjectivity, the persistent desire for belonging, and the incommensurability of values might help us better navigate some of the most pressing ethico-political dilemmas of the contemporary condition. I suggested that although Herder's providential worldview concealed some of the dangers inherent in the organic communitarianism he endorsed, his thought remains a valuable and in some ways indispensable resource for thinking about the politics of belonging and identification in a rapidly changing, inherently uncertain, and increasingly interdependent world. In this chapter I continue and extend this line of exploration through a critical analysis of Herder's public debate with his former teacher Immanuel Kant. I do so in order both to underscore the relevance of Herder's romantic vision for thinking about race and

¹ Johann Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, in *Herder's Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 383.

racial politics and to disclose some of the pitfalls and perils entailed in assessing human history and culture from a purportedly universal normative standpoint. The debate between Kant and Herder began in 1785 following the publication of the first part of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* and Kant's rather unfavorable review of that work; it continued for a number of years as the two exchanged heated polemics (some explicit, others thinly veiled) regarding a wide array of philosophical issues, from epistemology and moral theory to aesthetics and natural history. Though their public quarrel covered a number of topics, as we shall see, it "came to a head around the notion of race."²

While the initial object of Herder's ire was the universalistic egoism of the French *philosophes*, much of his criticism could also be applied to and were in fact eventually directed at significant elements of Kant's critical philosophy, including the separation of the mind into discrete faculties, the transcendental basis of the moral law, and the assertion of a unilineal trajectory of historical progress.³ Indeed, this should come as no great surprise, for in many ways Kant's critical philosophy represents the culmination of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. One of Herder's primary criticisms of that philosophical movement concerned the thoroughly unsympathetic way in which its adherents approached the study of

² Robert Bernasconi, "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 28.

³ As noted above, one of the primary targets of Herder's attacks was the mechanistic view of the subject put forth by Enlightenment thinkers such as Holbach and Helvetius. However, Kant's theory of the subject (as it appears in the first two *Critiques*) is not mechanistic but rather *constitutive*. In other words, Kant develops a view of the subject whose basic mode of being constitutes how the world appears to it. In the third *Critique*, at least on my reading, Kant subtly shifts this account toward an image of the subject that emphasizes the *receptivity* of the subject to the world of sense and experience (and in so doing moves closer to Herder's understanding of the subject's relationship to the world). Nonetheless, Herder critiqued Kant's (critical) theory of the subject on much the same grounds that he critiqued the mechanistic theory of the subject.

history and foreign cultures. According to Herder, such an approach impoverishes socio-historical understanding and leads to a distorted and unduly dismissive depiction of unfamiliar modes of existence as mere instances of deficiency and deviation in need of “enlightened” reform. Herder thus writes that he must confess “to an unphilosophical weakness: namely that all these histories of human powers and orders and fates [observed] *without empathy* annoy me.”⁴ If the study of history is to be a vehicle for the expansion of inter-cultural understanding and thereby contribute to a more humane future, the philosopher-historian must renounce false universals and embrace the challenges entailed in the effort to forge sympathetic understanding. Only then, Herder claims, can one begin to understand and appreciate a world suffused with the strange and the unfamiliar.

While Herder spoke of his unphilosophical “weakness” in an ironic manner, Kant asserted that it was precisely this weakness that rendered his former student’s approach to history inadequate. Kant disapproved of Herder’s attempt to grasp the inner-world of thought and feeling, and he reproached Herder for his lack of systematic grounding, “logical precision,” and “cool assessment.”⁵ According to Kant, Herder had allowed his “bold imagination,” “cursory and comprehensive vision,” and “aptitude for arousing sympathy for his subject” to lead him away from the *a priori* grounding and systematic analysis that are the hallmarks of philosophical analysis.⁶ And, at the end of his review of the first installment of Herder’s *Ideas*, Kant

⁴ Johann Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 63 fn. 81.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*

expressed the hope that in the future Herder would “curb his lively genius somewhat” with the help of sound philosophical principles and “precise concepts.”⁷ Kant was to be disappointed.

As anyone who has read Herder can attest, there is a good measure of truth in the complaint that his work lacks systematic grounding and precision. Indeed, as Charles Taylor notes, “Herder is not the most rigorous of thinkers,” especially when compared to Kant, who regularly pushes to produce precise distinctions. But this does not mean that Herder is not a valuable source of socio-political insight and imagination, for, as Taylor also notes, “deeply innovative thinkers” such as Herder “don’t have to be rigorous in order to originate important ideas.”⁸ Herder himself thought that the “will to a system” (as Nietzsche puts it)⁹ and an imperious demand to convert affinities into identities so that a logical analysis could then proceed led to premature closures of inquiry and imagination—strict adherence to the rules of logic or *a priori* systematicity puts an unnecessary straightjacket on thought and thinking. And, given Herder’s ideas about the vital social role of philosophy, he understandably wanted his writings to be accessible and stimulating to the general reading public, which meant eschewing many philosophical conventions.¹⁰

Herder deliberately strove to spur creative thinking by provoking affectively imbued thoughts that had not yet crystallized so firmly for his readers, thus lending

⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or How To Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 35.

¹⁰ In fact, Herder was so intent on ensuring that his works not resemble standard philosophical writings that, as Michael Forster explains in his introduction to *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, he “sometimes deliberately ‘roughed up’ material in this direction”—i.e., toward spontaneous speech and away from academic writing—“between drafts (e.g. between the 1775 and 1778 drafts of *On the Cognition*)” (ix).

his texts an at-times lyrical quality far removed from Kant's austere prose. He employed a number of textual strategies to stimulate and enhance the ethical sensibilities of his readers. For instance, he interspersed a series of poems—perhaps most notably, the ironically titled series of “Negro Idylls,” which depict in various ways the grave injustices of slavery and aim to draw the reader into the inner life-world of the “Negro” slave—throughout the Tenth Collection of his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* in the hopes of engendering the kind of sympathetic identification he found lacking in the Enlightenment vision. Such textual strategies may not have led Herder to produce good philosophy as Kant understood it, but Herder was not particularly concerned with producing good philosophy as Kant understood it. Instead, he wanted to create texts that tapped into extant feelings and emotions in order to inspire the public and connect his readers to the sensuous foundations of morality. In so doing, he aimed to expand his readers' ethical horizons, even as he also encouraged them to cultivate their own cultural formation and embrace their particularity.

Ultimately, I want to suggest that Herder's willingness to eschew the security of *a priori* systems and the comfort of generalizing propositions left him better situated than Kant to make sense of a world that continually exceeds and confounds the categories we deploy to make sense of it. At the same time, I want to show how Kant's claims about racial hierarchy and the superiority of European culture(s) were not simply aberrant instances of personal prejudice but, rather, were intimately related to central features of his philosophical project. Although it is true that Kant's racism would seem to be in blatant contradiction to his critical philosophy, there is

also a sense in which that philosophy solicits and solidifies his hierarchical theory of race. By focusing on the disagreement between Kant and Herder about race and situating it within the larger context of their differing philosophical visions, we can begin to see how their conflicting ideas about race and cultural difference stemmed from the markedly different world images and existential orientations through which they made sense of the human condition. By no means am I suggesting that the debate between these two thinkers exhausts the range of possibilities of these competing visions for thinking about racial politics, let alone the diverse modes assumed by the “enlightenment” and “romanticism.” Rather, this important episode in intellectual history helps us to see how their respective ideas about race and human difference emerged out of their reflections on the history of humanity and the nature of existence.

Herder and Fascism

Before turning to the relationship between these two pivotal thinkers, however, it may help to address a common objection: namely, that regardless of whatever valuable insights it may contain, Herder’s philosophy must be rejected outright because it inexorably drives us down the road to fascism. This is the case, a number of critics have argued, not so much because Herder endorsed nationalism¹¹ but rather because of the theory of human differentiation and development

¹¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, Herder’s version of “nationalism” is opposed in almost every way to nationalist socialism and is quite incongruous with many of the varieties of political nationalism we see today, although, as I shall discuss in chapter 3, it has much in common with certain strands of black nationalist ideology.

underlying that endorsement. R. G. Collingwood's influential *The Idea of History*, a posthumously published collection of lectures and manuscripts from the 1930s, represents a prominent example of such an interpretation. Apart from his larger claim regarding Herder's connection to fascist thought, Collingwood suggests that Herder ushers in two important developments. The first is that Herder dramatically increases the scope of historical thought, in contrast to "the Enlightenment tendency to care only for the present and the most recent past."¹² The second is that he "was the first thinker to recognize in a systematic way that there are differences between different kinds of men, and that human nature is not uniform but diversified."¹³ Collingwood is certainly correct about this; however, he errs gravely when he contends that the whole of Herder's philosophy of history hinges on his "doctrine of the differentiation of the races."¹⁴

Collingwood reaches this conclusion by focusing on three interrelated aspects of Herder's thought. The first is Herder's organic worldview. The second is his interest in studying man as a natural being, particularly with respect to the impact of sensation on cognition. The third is Herder's pluralism of nations as it relates to the first two aspects—that is, the idea that peoples are different not superficially but in their very way of seeing and living in the world, their conceptions of happiness, and their ideals of life. From this combination of elements Collingwood concludes the following regarding Herder's understanding of human differentiation:

¹² Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Revised edition, ed. Jan Van Der Dussen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

As a natural being, man is divided into the various races of mankind, each closely related to its geographical environment and having its original physical and mental characteristics molded by that environment; but each race, once formed, is a specific type of humanity which has permanent characteristics of its own depending not on its immediate relation to its environment but on its own inbred peculiarities (as a plant formed in one environment remains the same when transplanted into another). The sensuous and imaginative faculties of different races are thus genuinely differentiated: each race has its own conception of happiness and its own ideal of life.¹⁵

According to Collingwood, Herder sees the formation and differentiation of the races as initially arising from the impact of climate and physical environment; once formed, the character of each race becomes fixed and acquires the status of innate traits and predispositions that are biologically transmitted and unchangeable. As such, the unique character of a people does not stem from historical experiences or a common way of life—rather, a way of life is in fact a function of a people's racial character. In other words, the character of each race "is regarded not as an historical product but as a presupposition of history."¹⁶ Thus, Collingwood concludes that the whole of Herder's philosophy of history hinges on his ideas about the differentiation of the races. Now, it would be one thing to demonstrate that in so far as he conceives of group identity as something innate and essential, Herder courts the logic of racial essentialism even though he places primary emphasis on the role of cultural and historical factors in shaping collective group identity. But it is entirely another thing to claim that Herder himself understood human variation in fundamentally racial (and hierarchical) terms, and it is this latter interpretation that Collingwood emphatically advances.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 91.

Collingwood further attributes to Herder “the idea that there is a European race whose peculiar virtues render it fit to dominate the rest of the world” and concludes (not without reason given this interpretation and the circumstances under which it was written) that “at present time, we have seen enough of the evil consequences of this theory to be on our guard against it.”¹⁷ At this juncture, Collingwood suggests that we might wish “to defend” Herder by bracketing his Euro-centrism and “arguing that his theory does not in itself give any ground for believing in the superiority of one race over another... that it only implies each type of man to have its own form of life, its own conception of happiness,” such that peoples can differ from one another without being intrinsically superior or inferior to one another.¹⁸ But even if we were willing to be generous in this way, such a reading “would not be a legitimate interpretation of Herder’s thought” because, Collingwood says, Herder believed that the differences between various life-worlds “are derived not from the historical experience of each race but from its innate psychological peculiarities.”¹⁹ Herder, Collingwood suggests, made the error of confusing nature with culture and mistaking physical anthropology for cultural anthropology. He therefore failed to distinguish sufficiently between the spiritual and biological aspects of man, “and in terms of practical politics this means that the task of creating or improving a culture is assimilated to that of creating or

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 92.

improving a breed of domestic animals. *Once Herder's theory of race is accepted, there is no escaping the Nazi marriage laws.*"²⁰

But Herder does not advance the theory of race Collingwood attributes to him. In fact, Herder explicitly and consistently rejects both the language of race and the idea that one could produce a hierarchical ordering of peoples on this (or any other) basis; he insists that distinct races of mankind *do not exist*, that there is only *one* human race. Indeed, in *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*, the text upon which Collingwood bases his interpretation, Herder unequivocally asserts his opposition to the race concept:

Lastly, I could wish the distinctions between the human species, that have been made from a laudable zeal for discriminating science, not carried beyond due bounds. Some for instance have thought fit, to employ the term of *races* for four or five divisions, originally made in consequence of country or complexion: but I see no reason for this appellation. *Race refers to a difference of origin, which... does not exist...* For every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language... This originality of character extends even to families, and its transitions are as variable as imperceptible. *In short there are neither four nor five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this Earth. Complexions run into each other... and upon the whole, all are at last but shades of the same great picture, extending through all ages, and over all parts of the Earth.* They belong not, therefore, so properly to systematic natural history, as to the physico-geographical history of man.²¹

According to Herder, the concept of race cannot legitimately be brought to bear on the study of man; its use misconstrues the sources and nature of human diversification, mistaking human varieties for natural kinds with definitive boundaries grounded in the natural order of things. Moreover, Herder worried, not without good reason, that the understanding of human difference implied by the

²⁰ Ibid., emphasis added.

²¹ Johann Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, ed. Frank Manuel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 7, emphasis added.

race concept was dangerously divisive in its implications, that it frustrated plans for human cooperation and sympathy, and that it fostered the exploitation of racialized populations.²² As such, he stressed that no matter how great the differences between others and ourselves may seem, no matter how strange and unfamiliar “they” may appear to “us,” we must always remember that “they are our fellow brothers, and their history is the history of our nature.”²³ Herder was a resolute opponent of the notion of European racial/cultural superiority, and there was perhaps nothing he opposed more than the notion that Europe was “fit to dominate the rest of the world.” Such a belief was anathematic to his egalitarianism and his conviction that every *Volk* contributes to the enrichment of humanity in its own unique and irreplaceable way. “Least of all,” he proclaimed, “can our *European culture* be the measure of universal goodness and human value; it is no yardstick or a false one.”²⁴

Given his forceful renunciation of both the race concept and assertions of European superiority, and perhaps owing to a desire to defend Herder against interpretations such as Collingwood’s, much of the contemporary scholarship on Herder’s thought has stressed the extent to which his conception of *Volk* is cultural rather than racial, egalitarian rather than hierarchical. Although Herder claims that there are significant differences in outlook and form of life between different

²² Consider, for example, the way in which Herder leads up to his denial of the validity of race in *Ideas*: “For each genus Nature has done enough, and to each has given its proper progeny. The ape she has divided into as many species and varieties as possible, and extended these as far as she could: but thou, O man, honour thyself: neither the pongo nor the gibbon is thy brother: The American and the Negro are: these therefore thou shouldst not oppress, or murder, or steal; for they are men, like thee: with the ape thou canst not enter into fraternity” (6-7).

²³ Johann Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 248.

²⁴ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 396.

peoples, he insists that these differences are primarily attributable to embodied cultural and historically situated factors rather than to racial or innately biological ones. In other words, a group's collective identity is shaped not by its innate racial makeup but by its language, traditions, and environment. "*Manner of living* (habitus) is what defines a kind; in our diverse humanity it is extremely various."²⁵ Any sensitive interpretation of Herder's thought must recognize that cultural-historical factors are the central determinants in his theory of *Volk*. That being said, however, if we carefully examine "the content of his theory of human types" we discover that while cultural factors certainly predominate, there is a sense in which Herder "accepts a view about the identity of peoples that contains a racial component."²⁶ This is the case, in short, because Herder advances a proto-Lamarckian theory of adaptation in which some acquired attributes may become hereditary traits that play a role in shaping the collective character of a *Volk*.

In *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Herder explains that one of his primary objectives is to "obtain a *physico-geographical history of the descent and diversification of our species* according to periods and climates."²⁷ At first glance it might seem that this ought to entail studying man as a purely natural being, but this is not the case because, "for Herder, man is not a composite of animal and spirit, but a fully formed whole; categories taken from the animal kingdom must not be applied to him."²⁸ Because the spiritual and physical aspects of man cannot be neatly

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 144; 128.

²⁷ Herder, *Reflections*, 29.

²⁸ Eric Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea: From Ray to Carus*, ed. Klaud Vondung, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 70.

differentiated, Herder proposes studying man as “a multitudinous harmony, a living self, on whom the harmony of all the powers that surround him operates.”²⁹ What we want to know is: What are the various effects of physical environment (*Klima*) on humans? What adaptations has *Klima* brought about? How have physical adaptations influenced human mentality across time and space?³⁰ In other words, what role has *Klima* played in shaping human diversity?

In order to properly answer these questions, Herder asserts that the modification of the human form in relation to *Klima* must be understood in terms of an innate “vital principle” or “genetic force” (*genetische Kraft*) within the individual that (partially) modifies itself in accordance with environmental circumstances and *remains active in the body it has formed*.³¹ According to Herder, this invisible genetic force is the primary determining factor responsible for shaping the internal organization and external appearance of all organic forms in nature, including man. Thus, *Klima*, while important, is “merely... an auxiliary or antagonist” in relation to *genetische Kraft*.³² Nonetheless, *Klima* is capable of altering the *genetische Kraft*, and it is for this reason that acquired characteristics can become hereditary:

Climate [*Klima*] is a chaos of causes, very dissimilar to each other, and in consequence acting slowly and in various ways, till at length they penetrate to the internal parts, and change them by habit, and by the genetic power [*genetische Kraft*] itself: this resists long, forcibly, uniformly... but as it is not independent of external affections, it also must accommodate itself to them in length of time.³³

²⁹ Herder, *Reflections*, 4.

³⁰ Cf. Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, 250.

³¹ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 217. For Herder’s account of genetic vital force see *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. 20-32. See also Voegelin, *History of the Race Idea*, 68-70.

³² Herder, *Reflections*, 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

Like many of his concepts, Herder's notion of *genetische Kraft* is rather vague and "ill-defined,"³⁴ and Herder himself admits that, of this "*living organic power*: I know not whence it came, or what it intrinsically is: but that it is there... this is incontestable."³⁵ So, what is this mysterious, yet indisputable force? According to Herder, it is the vital, form-producing power that *shapes and sustains a living being*; it is an invisible, active force that reveals itself through the creature it forms. "This principle is innate, organical, genetic: it is the basis of my natural powers, the internal genius of my being."³⁶

For Herder, then, the character of a (human) being is inextricably a function of her inner force or "genetic power." Now, if *Klima* is indeed capable of altering this invisible organizing force such that certain acquired characteristics become innate hereditary traits which the inhabitants of a particular geographic region will share in common,³⁷ does this mean that Collingwood's interpretation was correct after all, and that Herder does in fact divide the human species into distinct psycho-physical races, each with its own traits and predispositions, initially shaped by environmental factors, but then becoming fixed, innate, and hereditary? The answer is no, and for at least two overarching reasons.

First, such an interpretation elides the fact that the overwhelming emphasis of Herder's account of human variation is placed on the cultural determinates of group identity. Although Herder does reserve a role for naturalistic factors in

³⁴ H.B. Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science*, (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association), 228.

³⁵ Herder, *Reflections*, 20-21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁷ I take this to be the implication of Herder's comment in *Reflections* that *Klima* "operates rather on the mass than the individual: Yet on this, through that" (19).

accounting for the distinct character of a *Volk*, he maintains that the primary factors are cultural and socio-historical—in addition to the physical environment, “laws, government, manner of life count for still more.”³⁸ Indeed, for Herder *Klima* itself is not reducible to purely naturalistic forces; it is meant to indicate the totality of external forces affecting the individual, including “heat and cold, electricity, air (or vapors in the air), altitude, the nature of the soil and its products, food and drink, ‘*Lebensweise*’ [way of life], type of work, dress, ‘*gewohnte Stellungen*’ [customary positions], and pleasures and arts.”³⁹ This is why Herder calls *Klima* “a chaos of causes.”

Second, such an interpretation fails to take account of the fact that for Herder the distinctive psychophysical characteristics engendered in the struggle between *Klima* and *genetische Kraft* are not ineradicable or unchanging essences: the *genetische Kraft* remains active in the body it has formed and is both subject to and resists further modifications. The system of human variation is not fixed or static; rather, it is indeterminate and variable. For Herder, then, human nature is not just diversified, it is also dynamic such that even if the character of a *Volk* is partially acquired through hereditary means (and is therefore to some extent “racial”), it is not fixed for eternity but, rather, is amenable to further alterations. According to Herder, then, the sources of human variation and distinction are not to be found in an inherent and unchanging natural order but, rather, reside in the vagaries of historical change and development.

³⁸ Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation*, 220.

³⁹ Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy*, 225. Translations of the German terms in this passage are not included in the original text; I have added them.

Moreover, if the distinctions between human types are not permanent, this also suggests that they are not exact:

The varieties of man, that is, are not natural kinds. They are much too fluid, and their borders much too fuzzy, for them to be designated by terms that would constitute them as objects of scientific investigation, rather than of historical hermeneutics, albeit one in which a certain study of bodies is involved. At this point in time, the term 'race,' in Herder's view, threatens precisely to name human varieties in such a way as to turn them into natural kinds. There are in nature, he wants to insist, no such human kinds.⁴⁰

Contrary to Collingwood's claim that Herder conceives of the differentiations between different peoples as "non-historical differentiations like that between a community of bees and a community of ants,"⁴¹ Herder in fact argues that these embodied differences can *only be understood in historical terms*, which is why they belong to the physico-geographical history of man and not to systematic natural history, and his rejection of the term "race" is grounded in an acute awareness of the dangers of thinking of human diversity in terms of natural kinds.

In short, Herder asserts that the human race is a spiritually unified whole—a differentiated unity, as it were—and he does not think that human varieties can be sharply divided into distinct and permanent types with clear, definitive borders between them. Each *Volk* has its own character, to be sure, but

This originality of character extends even to families, and its transitions are as variable as imperceptible. In short, there are neither four or five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this Earth. Complexions run into each other... and upon the whole, all are at last but shades of the same great picture.⁴²

So, while it is true that Herder was interested in accounting for human differentiation in terms of physical geography, and that this occasionally led him to

⁴⁰ Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 142.

⁴¹ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 92.

⁴² Herder, *Reflections*, 7.

account for human variation in “racial” terms, ultimately he took peoples (nations)—*not* races—to be the fundamental units of history, and he understood nations primarily in cultural and historical terms (though the imbrication of culture and biology must be retained insofar as the body cannot be neatly differentiated from spirit). Collingwood’s mistake was to take Herder’s claim that culture becomes embodied in the senses of a people to mean that these senses were racially shaped prior to the work of culture. So Collingwood, in effect, has a less dense image of culture than Herder. Herder believed that “human history unfolded in harmony with nature” but that this process must be “understood in specifically human terms, in terms of culture.”⁴³ Collingwood’s interpretation is thus notable for the way in which it identifies key aspects of Herder’s thought and yet ultimately reaches a set of conclusions that are mistaken. This is the case, I think, because Collingwood fails to grasp Herder’s conceptual framework, particularly his expressivist theory of the subject, according to which body and spirit are inseparable aspects of an integral whole.

Moreover, for all of Collingwood’s concerns regarding Herder’s supposed theory of race (concerns that would not be misplaced if they actually applied to Herder), it is surprising that in his much lengthier discussion of Kant’s philosophy of history, which he suggests is superior to Herder’s, the topic of race disappears completely. This elision of the role of race in Kant’s thought is particularly puzzling because it was Kant, not Herder, who argued that in studying the natural history of man we must have recourse to the idea that there are innate and fundamental racial

⁴³ Mark Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race: Diversity and Destiny in Kant,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 42 nos. 4-5 (2008): 352

differences that account for the distinct character and capabilities of different peoples. In fact, it has become increasingly accepted that Kant, as Eric Voegelin suggested in 1933, “offered the first systematic justification for the use of the word *race* in connection with the description of man”—though the implications of this fact still remain a matter of intense scholarly debate.⁴⁴ Indeed, when Herder criticized those who “have thought fit, to employ the term of *races* for four or five divisions” of the human species, it was primarily Kant he had in mind. Turning now to the debate between Herder and Kant, we will see that the very different conclusions they reached regarding human diversity can be understood to reflect fundamentally different orientations toward existence and the different worldviews through which each thinker made sense of human history.

History and/as Teleology

As noted above, Kant disapproved of Herder’s lack of systematic grounding and analytic rigor, his appeals to sympathetic understanding, and his attempt to use emotion and imagination to grasp the inner essence of historical events. He further criticized Herder for conceiving of man’s spiritual organization and development by analogy with the organization of nature, and he rejected Herder’s theory of *genetische Kraft*, dismissing “the whole hypothesis of invisible forces” responsible for organizing the totality of nature (with man at its pinnacle) as an incoherent

⁴⁴ Voegelin, *History of the Race Idea*, 75; see also Bernasconi. “Who Invented the Concept of Race?,” 14: “The idea of a single author of the concept of race is at best only a useful fiction, but I shall argue that, if any one person should be recognized as the author of the first theory of race worthy of the name, it should be the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.”

“attempt to explain *what is not understood* in terms of *what is understood even less*.”⁴⁵ He further objected that Herder’s council to “follow nature”⁴⁶ misconstrues the character of human reason and freedom and therefore misconceives mankind’s purpose, which is to make “*incessant progress*” towards moral perfection.⁴⁷ According to Kant, such progress occurs to the extent that man moves “from the leading-strings of instinct to the guidance of reason—in a word, from the guardianship of nature to the state of freedom.”⁴⁸ Thus, whereas Herder urges a refined sensuality and a harmonious relationship with nature, Kant asserts that the history of human progress consists in man regulating his natural inclinations to the extent that he gives priority to the voice of reason over the voice of nature.

According to Kant, history can only be comprehended coherently as a progressive advance toward the realization of the principles of practical reason through human freedom; “*the concept of freedom must realize the end imposed by its law in the sensible world*.”⁴⁹ What must be analyzed in history, then, is the principle of reason through which we can attribute meaning and purpose to history. Kant reproaches Herder for presuming that the Truth of history was given by providence and had merely to be discovered in historical experiences revealing the presence or action of God. For example, in *Another Philosophy of History*, Herder suggests that in order to discover truth or meaning in history, we need not deploy *a priori* categories of reason or reduce the complexity of nature to a mechanical ordering of forms;

⁴⁵ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 209.

⁴⁶ Herder, Johann Gottfried. *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*. 215. For further elaboration, see fn. 53 in chapter 1 of this work.

⁴⁷ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 220.

⁴⁸ Kant, “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” in *Political Writings*, 226.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 73; emphasis in the original.

instead, we “just follow the *stream of the divine power* and strive to feel it deeply and faithfully in all its forms, shapes, and creations.”⁵⁰ And in the *Ideas* Herder argues that in contrast to “the metaphysician” (i.e., Kant) who “sets out with establishing a certain idea of the mind, and from this deduces every thing, that can be deduced,” “the philosopher of history” (i.e., Herder) “can proceed on no abstract notion, but on history alone.”⁵¹ Kant countered by asserting that Herder’s approach amounted to an outright abandonment of rigorous philosophical investigation and insisting that we cannot demonstrate the presence of God or the meaning of history by means of experience alone. For Kant, the existence of God is a “postulate” reached *after* the logic of morality is recognized.⁵² Empirical investigation that is not first guided by the *a priori* principles of reason amounts to nothing more than a blind “empirical groping about without a guiding principle that might direct one’s search.”⁵³

Kant and Herder also differed dramatically in their conceptions of historical progress. According to Herder, there are multiple forms of life, each of which is valuable in itself and cannot be understood as simply a precursor to later, more advanced cultural forms. This suggests that we cannot accept a linear notion of historical progress in which past cultures are seen as mere stepping-stones along the path of civilizational development. However, this does not mean that he rejected the idea of progress altogether, for there is a sense in which cultures build on one another: they draw from others to create qualitatively new formations that cannot

⁵⁰ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 82. Those familiar with the thought of Henri Bergson will no doubt recognize the resonance in this passage with Bergson’s account of intuition.

⁵¹ Herder, *Reflections*, 33.

⁵² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103-5. [5:124 – 5:127]

⁵³ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” in *Race*, ed. Bernasconi, 38.

be understood in terms of linear development but, rather must be seen as part of an endless process of “transformation” and “continued metamorphosis.”⁵⁴ As such, he preferred to speak of *progression* in history, as opposed to *progress*, which he thought implied a simplistic and unilinear conception of development that failed to take seriously the diverse forms of life exhibited throughout history.⁵⁵ For Herder, history is an arena of constant change: though we can trace its complex progression from one period to the next, in no way can we posit a singular goal toward which these periods have been building. Accordingly, he opposed any philosophy of history, including Kant’s, which conceived of the end of history in terms of either the perfection of humanity or the achievement of a perfect political condition.⁵⁶ Behind such views, Herder suspected, was the imperious and ultimately destructive desire of Europeans to fashion the rest of the world after their own image. He warned that “it would be the most stupid vanity to imagine, that all the inhabitants of the World must be Europeans to live happily.”⁵⁷

By asserting the historical nature of man’s existence and contending that history is not an integrated system but instead a dynamic process through which a diversity of human forces express and transform themselves, Herder was as an early proponent of historicism. Ultimately, he contends that insofar as there is a form of progress in history, it is secured by the work of God, who is both within and beyond every historical moment, event, or epoch. At times, Herder expresses grave doubts

⁵⁴ Herder, *Reflections*, 4.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 30-32; 70-74

⁵⁶ See, for example, Herder, *Reflections*, 75-78. Although not mentioned directly, it is clear that Kant’s essay “Universal History” is the object of Herder’s criticisms in this passage.

⁵⁷ Herder, *Reflections*, 71.

about the providential design of history, but he resists his own skepticism with repeated assertions that there *must* be some sort of providential purpose, which we cannot fully comprehend because of the limitations of our earthly point of view. Thus, while Herder rejects a view of history as an integrated system progressing toward a singular purpose, he also explicitly rejects a *tragic* vision of history⁵⁸ and declares that although we cannot understand it for ourselves, history is nothing but the “*blueprint of omnipotent wisdom*.”⁵⁹ History, then, is purposive, but we cannot fully understand its purpose(s) or means other than to say that the whole of History is moving in some way toward the full realization of *Humanität*, which will be achieved not so much through the narrowing of forms of life to one model of civilization as through the rich flourishing of national cultures.

Kant’s philosophy of history also involves a theodicy, but it is very different from the one proposed by Herder. According to Kant, we must posit a teleological structure of history in order to make sense of it as a unified whole and interpret it philosophically: that is, we must assume a goal towards which history is progressing, even though we cannot specify it closely. From the perspective provided by reflective judgment, “the history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally—and for this purpose also externally—perfect political constitution.”⁶⁰ Ultimately, such a purpose must be projected subjectively to vindicate the dictates of pure practical reason, which inform us that it is man’s duty to act morally and to fully develop his rational

⁵⁸ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁰ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Reiss, 50.

capabilities. Given this undeniable duty, and given the fact that a duty must be realizable *in principle* since “duty demands nothing of us which we cannot do,”⁶¹ the idea of purposiveness in history imposes itself upon us as a regulative principle of reflective judgment. In order to conceive of history in a manner that does not contradict the moral law, we *must* assume that it is progressing towards the realization of a constitution grounded in civil right because this is “the only state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely.”⁶² In other words, having established the nature of morality as law (the “categorical imperative”) in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant then argues that we must postulate a vision of universal progress in human history because the moral law is only intelligible if we do: “one must in a practical way believe in a concurrence between divine wisdom and the course of nature, if one is not to give up one’s cherished ultimate purpose.”⁶³

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant grounds the possibility of human freedom in the indubitable recognition that morality takes the form of law. This “apodictic” recognition serves as the starting point for his transcendental exposition of morality and freedom. Just as Kant contends in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the categories of time and space are the necessary conditions for the possibility of objects of experience *as such*, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he argues that the necessary condition for the possibility of human freedom is found in the recognition

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 43.

⁶² Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 50.

⁶³ Kant, “The End of All Things,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 101.

of morality as law conveyed by the voice of reason within each of us. “The moral law is, in fact, a law of causality through freedom and hence the law of the possibility of a supersensible nature, just as the metaphysical law of events in the sensible world was a law of the causality of sensible nature.”⁶⁴ This is the case because Kant thinks that in the absence of the moral law we would remain subject to the natural law of causality and the “despotism of desires.”⁶⁵ If we allow our desires and inclinations to determine our will then we remain dependent on the natural causality that governs them. The will can only be *autonomous*, which is to say free, if it is capable of being determined by the pure form of the moral law; otherwise it remains mired in what Kant calls the heteronomy of choice. Freedom is therefore understood to be self-legislation: in following the law of reason we are in fact following a law we give ourselves. And just as the laws of causality in nature are universal and unchanging, so too is the law of reason. The categorical imperative must be universal, for “if the maxim of the action is not so constituted that it can stand the test as to the form of a law of nature in general, then it is morally impossible.”⁶⁶ Thus, practical reason conveys a universally valid ideal that it is our duty to promote, which in turn requires that we act “as if” history is progressing toward its realization.

But this view of freedom is possible only on the basis of a sharp separation of the sensible (the realm of appearance) from the supersensible (the realm of ‘things in themselves’) that shields morality from the laws of efficient causality: the moral law must be *unconditioned*. The force of the moral law as the determination of the

⁶⁴ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 47.

⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1952), 282 [§83].

⁶⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 70.

will must not be associated with feeling, bodily disposition, or somatic experiences, otherwise the determination of the will is not autonomous but heteronomous. To bring our bodily sensations, inclinations, and somatic experiences to bear on our moral motivations is to risk abandoning the autonomy of the will, thereby sinking into the unfreedom of heteronomy of choice, where behavior is not determined by the law of freedom but the law of nature.

However, this does not necessarily mean, as Friedrich Schiller famously argued in *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that Kantian morality must always be in a constant struggle with inclination (i.e., that inclination and obligation are necessarily opposed to one another). To be certain, Kant does at times give readers this impression. For example, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he argues that it ought to be “the universal wish of every rational being to be free from [inclinations]” since their presence distracts us from our moral obligations.⁶⁷ Over time, however, Kant came to appreciate the fact that inclinations cannot be eliminated from life and that any adequate theory of moral motivation must therefore take into account the ways in which they can play a “positive role in human moral experience” through the cultivation of forms of character and disposition that are *receptive* to the obligations of the moral law.⁶⁸ Thus, in *Religion*

⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Christine Korsgaard, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37.

⁶⁸ Robert B. Louden, “The Critique of the Morality System,” in *Bernard Williams*, ed. Alan Thomas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126. Louden’s essay, which proceeds by way of a critical engagement with Bernard Williams’s critique of the “morality system,” offers a delicate and nuanced argument for the continued viability and importance of the Kantian system of morality to the contemporary world. A key aspect of his argument is his contention that Schiller and others are mistaken in claiming that Kant’s practical philosophy sets our moral freedom in a constant struggle against inclination. “Again, it is certainly not Kant’s view that obligation and inclination are always necessarily opposed to one another—that, as Schiller famously objected, it is only when we act ‘with

within the Limits of Reason Alone, Kant not only deems the desire to “extirpate” inclinations futile, he also asserts that doing so would “be harmful and blameworthy”⁶⁹ because it would diminish our natural capacity for action. Instead, he advises that the inclinations should be “tamed” and “brought into harmony” under the dominion of lawgiving reason;⁷⁰ by modifying our inclinations in this way, we fashion ourselves into the kind of subjects predisposed to carry out the commands of the moral law. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains that virtue—“human morality in its highest stage”—entails not only “autonomy of practical reason,” but “also *autocracy* of practical reason,” that is, “the *capacity* to master one’s inclinations when they rebel against the law.”⁷¹ So, while it remains the case that reason must legislate if we are to be free, freedom “is attended by a mastery of inclinations constituted not by their absence or suppression but by the tranquil equipoise resulting from their due proportion. It is composed of every inclination but determined by none.”⁷²

In any case, it is on the basis of this view of moral freedom that Kant contends that historical progress consists in subordinating nature to the use of

aversion’ that we can be sure to have acted from the motive of duty. Rather, virtuous agents will educate their emotions so that they truly enjoy pursuing morality’s demands whenever possible, and so that they exhibit the appropriate moral feelings in the right contexts” (122). Louden offers a good deal of convincing evidence to support his claim that Kant’s account of morality is deeply concerned with the development of personal character and motivational structures conducive to moral behavior, but he does not, at least on my reading, sufficiently address the extent to which this aspect of Kant’s moral theory opens up—rather than resolves—the ongoing debate between proponents of an ethic of cultivation (such as Bernard Williams) and proponents of a system of morality as law. If it is indeed the case that Kant thought we needed to form ourselves into the types of subjects who can receive and follow the moral law, this would seem to challenge the apodictic nature of the experience of the moral command upon which the entire Kantian moral system rests.

⁶⁹ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason*, 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Roger J. Sullivan, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 148. [6:383]; see also 6:408.

⁷² Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race,” 350.

reason. It is also why Kant opposes Herder's view that morality depends more on sentiments than cognition, or rather, on sensibilities infused *into* cognition. The source of mankind's progress and moral improvement lies neither in "dogmatic" and direct awareness of the presence of God in history, nor in a harmonious relationship to nature, but rather in man's ability to act rationally and develop to the fullest extent possible his natural capacities as a rational being:

Nature gave man reason, and freedom of will based upon reason, and this in itself was a clear indication of nature's intention as regards his endowments. For it showed that man was not meant to be guided by instinct or equipped and instructed by innate knowledge; on the contrary, he was meant to produce everything out of himself. Everything had to be entirely of his own making... It seems as if nature has worked more with a view to man's rational *self-esteem* than to his mere well-being.⁷³

According to Kant, then, Herder's affirmation of a plurality of distinct forms of life, each one inherently valuable in itself, and his belief that humanity as a whole is enriched by a diversity of forms of life pursuing unique and (often) incommensurable ends are both fundamentally mistaken. History's purpose is not to secure the happiness of individuals or nations, which varies according to circumstances of time and place and from person to person. Instead, it is to ensure the development of human rationality and the creation of a world that corresponds to the principles of right. As Kant rhetorically asks his readers in his review of Herder's *Ideas*,

But what if the true end of providence were not this shadowy image of happiness which each individual creates for himself, but the ever continuing and growing activity and culture which are thereby set in motion, and whose highest possible expression can only be the product of a political constitution

⁷³ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 43.

based on concepts of human right, and consequently an achievement of human beings themselves?⁷⁴

The value of existence, the reason we are placed here on earth (for there *must* be a reason), lies not in the pursuit or achievement of individual or national happiness but, rather, in the progressive development of (human) reason and the creation of a world that conforms to its principles. From this perspective, whether or not a given form of life contributes to the happiness of its members is irrelevant. What matters is whether it contributes to the realization of “the end which reason directly prescribes to us (i.e. the end of morality),” which, Kant reminds us, it is “our duty to promote.”⁷⁵ Kant thus rejects Herder’s view of history as entailing the realization of a plurality of ends without a singular purpose or trajectory not only because he deems it false, but also because he finds it morally dangerous, for if it were accepted as true, it would ultimately mean that “the moral law... must be fantastic and directed to empty ends and must therefore in itself be false.”⁷⁶

Whereas Herder finds earthly existence to be inherently worthwhile and meaningful in itself, Kant asserts that existence—“life itself and the enjoyment of it”—“has no value of its own; what alone has value is the use to which life is put and the end to which it is directed.”⁷⁷ Without an ultimate purpose, without a reason for existence, “the whole of creation would be a mere waste” lacking justification.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 219.

⁷⁵ Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 109.

⁷⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 95.

⁷⁷ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Hans Rudnick, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 141. Kant expresses a similar sentiment in “The End of All Things,” asserting that “the duration of the world has a worth only insofar as the ultimate ends of the existence of rational beings can be met within it” (96).

⁷⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 293 [§86].

There must be an answer to the “why?” of existence, which happiness cannot supply, “because happiness as an end leaves entirely untouched the question: Why does man exist (in a ‘form’ such that he strives to make his existence happy)?”⁷⁹ Kant thus challenges Herder to account for the value of existence in terms of the mere enjoyment of life:

Does the author [Herder] really mean that, if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more civilized nations, were destined to live in their peaceful indolence for thousands of centuries, it would be possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why they should exist at all, and of whether it would not have been just as good if this island had been occupied by happy sheep and cattle as by happy human beings who merely enjoy themselves?⁸⁰

Kant’s objection that Herder’s framework cannot provide a reason for the isolated existence of these “peacefully indolent” Tahitians perhaps tells us more about his own thought than about Herder’s. It vividly demonstrates the manner in which Kant’s notion of what is significant in human affairs is determined by his understanding of what constitutes or contributes to historical progress, which, in turn, is a function of his conviction that reason is transcendental, universal, and unchanging. In other words, “the tendencies toward monoculturalism that surface in Kant’s account of progress... [are] prefigured in his fundamentally monological conception of reason and rationality.”⁸¹ Using this purportedly universal framework to assess the realm of politics, culture, and history, Kant exhibits a tendency to denigrate forms of life that either do not correspond to his normative point of view

⁷⁹ Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 71.

⁸⁰ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 220.

⁸¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68.

or are not seen to contribute to the development of human rationality as he understands it.

It is true that Herder also sometimes expresses prejudiced views about other peoples (see, for example, his derogatory remarks about the Chinese),⁸² and his writings are by no means entirely free of Eurocentric biases. In short, Herder does not always heed his own warnings about the universalizing pretensions and distortions of the European gaze. Nonetheless, he strives to combat these forces by fostering a pluralistic ethos and an appreciation for cultural diversity among his readers. Kant, on the other hand, “appears constitutionally unable to detect the presence of culture among non-western European peoples when he does not find social practices and institutions that explicitly match those with which he is already familiar.”⁸³ Because Kant insists upon the categorical univocity of practical reason he cannot conceive of the possibility that there might be a multiplicity of valid ways of living in the world or that he may have something important to learn from those fundamentally different from himself. In this sense Kant’s historical and anthropological writings reveal the limitations of abstract universalism pursued in conjunction with a progressive view of history. They expose the scotomas that stem from a failure to come to terms with the multiplicity of forms of embodied rationality and the contestability of any notion of universal history.

Recognizing the embeddedness of reason in concrete forms of life opens up a space for a plurality of modes of embodied rationality and requires us “to think in

⁸² Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 106-16.

⁸³ Robert Louden, *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179.

terms of the unavoidable dialectic of the universal and the particular.”⁸⁴ However, as we shall see in chapter 4, developing a more robust account of pluralism and corresponding modes of social analysis that are alert to the ethico-political dilemmas of the contemporary condition also requires going beyond a focus on the distinction between the particular and the universal and addressing the plural-potentiality of the incipient: that is, that which is becoming but is not yet actual. Focusing solely on the particular as that which limits the claims of the universal misses the fugitive force of the incipient, through which new and unforeseen constellations surge into being. Every “particular” is always an instantiation of the universal, of the already-there, but it is the periodic unforeseeability of the not-yet that ultimately renders any claim to universality radically incomplete and calls upon us to become attuned to the disruptive force and creative potential of becoming. In short, while Herder’s philosophy is in many ways indispensable, it cannot in itself adequately come to terms with the human predicament in an unbalanced world that is composed of diverse forces and in which the creativity of time as becoming accounts for both the ineradicable element of real uncertainty in life and action and the enduring potential for the emergence of new ideals and novel forms of life and action.

The Dictates of Reason and the Imperative of Realization

As far as we know, Herder never directly responded to Kant’s objection regarding the happy Tahitians, but if he had, his response might well have been that

⁸⁴ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea*, 186.

their existence had value in itself, for them, and for us as a counter to our own tendencies towards self-aggrandizement; and that furthermore, their existence is a part of God's divine blueprint, which need not be justifiable according to the *a priori* categories of the philosopher. Herder asserts a direct faith in providence that Kant only articulates through postulates. But unlike Kant he does not seem to think that life or earthly existence must be justified (and judged) according to universal criteria. In short, whereas for Herder earthly existence is inherently meaningful in its own right, for Kant it "is characterized by a disconcerting meaninglessness"⁸⁵ — a meaninglessness that can only be redeemed by the promise of reason and the possibility of a Kingdom of Ends. And, as we shall see, the development of Kant's racial anthropology in conjunction with his teleological philosophy of universal history can be understood in relation to his anxious search for evidence that mankind is in fact progressing toward that end.

Again, Kant and Herder both articulate providential accounts of human nature and history, but they differ in fundamental ways. Whereas Herder argues that a trace of transcendence can be discerned directly in historical experience, Kant insists that we must project a purpose in history in order to vindicate a conception of morality that we cannot coherently deny. According to Kant, once we have determined the necessary conditions for achieving this purpose, historical inquiry must then seek out events that attest to their existence; that is, events that attest to "a moral disposition within the human race."⁸⁶ Pure practical reason demonstrates the end toward which all mankind ought to be progressing, and from this we are led

⁸⁵ Voegelin, *History of the Race Idea*, 68.

⁸⁶ Kant, "The Contest of the Faculties," in *Political Writings*, 182.

“subjectively” to posit a teleological structure to history. Nonetheless, we still need historical inquiry in order to identify events that provide evidence that human nature *in fact* contains such a possibility. In other words, the teleological conception of history is *regulative and not constitutive*, which is to say that it tells us what is subjectively necessary to make sense of history as a unified whole, but it does not tell us about the objects of (historical) experience themselves. It is man’s duty to strive for the realization of a world that corresponds to the principles of reason, but

that he will do so, however, cannot be determined *a priori* from what is known to us about man’s natural tendencies. It can be determined only from experience and history, with expectations as well-founded as necessary, that we should not despair about our species’ progress toward the better, but instead further (each to his best ability) with all good sense and moral inspiration the approach to this goal.⁸⁷

The rationally guided, empirical study of history and human behavior is absolutely fundamental for Kant, because the whole of his philosophy is oriented by what I call the *imperative of realization*—the insistence that the dictates of pure practical reason be realized in the impure world of man.

For example, in “The Contest of the Faculties” Kant argues that the French Revolution and, more importantly, the moral enthusiasm that accompanied it, reveal “in human nature an aptitude and power for improvement of a kind which no politician could have thought up by examining the course of events in the past,” because “only nature and freedom, combined within mankind in accordance with the principles of right, have enabled us to forecast it.”⁸⁸ This event is not explicable

⁸⁷ Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Hans H. Rudnick, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 246.

⁸⁸ Kant, “Contest of the Faculties,” 184. For a fascinating discussion of this aspect of Kant’s work that links it to both analytic and critical tendencies in twentieth-century philosophical movements, see

solely in terms of a politics of self-interest or class interest but, rather, attests to the fact “that man has a moral character, or at least the makings of one.”⁸⁹ What is significant about the French Revolution for Kant, then, is not so much the success or failure of the event itself as the fact that it constitutes a sign of the existence of a moral disposition in mankind. Kant acknowledges that the empirical study of history can never definitively prove that there is true moral progress in history (after all, we can never know things-in-themselves), but he contends that the enthusiasm that accompanied the French Revolution (in spite of its failings and limitations) suggests the possibility of human progress because this enthusiasm could not have been “caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race.”⁹⁰

Pure practical reason suggests to us a necessary condition for its eventual realization—a moral disposition within mankind as a whole—but we require the empirical study of historical events in order to identify “signs” of the existence of this cause. The moral enthusiasm that accompanied the French Revolution serves as just such a piece of evidence, for it is a sign not only that men think that people have the right to give themselves their own political constitution but also that men seek to give themselves a republican constitution that avoids all aggressive or offensive wars. Thus, the sympathy aroused by the French Revolution is a sign that history is progressing toward the construction of a cosmopolitan society, which it is our innate duty to assume is possible.

Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Other: Lectures at the College de France, 1982-1983*, ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-24.

⁸⁹ Kant, “Contest of the Faculties,” 182.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

The interplay between the innate duty to assume moral progress and the quest to find signs of moral progress in history and nature constitutes the *double logic of the imperative of realization*. It proceeds as follows. First, we are told that it is our innate duty to assume that mankind is making incessant moral progress and that “this progress may at times be *interrupted* but never *broken off*.”⁹¹ Second, we find that we need reassurance regarding moral progress in the form of historical signs that suggest a correspondence between moral duty and the way of the world. The search for such signs, then, itself becomes a (secondary) duty of sorts because we require reassurance regarding mankind’s “progressive improvement in relation to the moral end of existence.”⁹² Without such a hope we are in danger of abandoning the moral law and sliding into a state of fatalistic resignation.

The double logic of the imperative of realization also underlies Kant’s belief that the systematic study of practical anthropology and physical geography were of vital importance; it is through a study of man’s natural capacities and behavior that we can determine if the moral law revealed to us by pure practical reason can in fact be promoted progressively. Furthermore, it is through such study that we ascertain the means for encouraging the continual moral development of mankind.

The application of the moral law is not merely of passing interest, for as Deleuze warns, in Kant “*there is a single dangerous misunderstanding regarding the whole of practical Reason*: believing that Kantian morality remains indifferent to its own realization. In fact, the abyss between the sensible world and the suprasensible

⁹¹ Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice,’” in *Political Writings*, 88.

⁹² Ibid.

world exists only in order to be filled.”⁹³ In other words, although the sensible realm of nature cannot influence the suprasensible realm of freedom, the law of freedom is meant to be realized in the sensible realm. As Kant explains in *The Critique of Judgment*,

Even if an immeasurable gulf is fixed between the sensible realm of the concept of nature and the supersensible realm of the concept of freedom, so that no transition is possible from the first to the second... yet the second is *meant* to have an influence upon the first. The concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the world of sense the purpose proposed by its laws, and consequently nature must be so thought that the conformity to law of its form at least harmonizes with the possibility of freedom.⁹⁴

Ultimately, it is within the space opened by the Kantian imperative of realization that the study of history and practical anthropology become decisive.

On the whole, however, the evidence supplied by history would seem to argue against Kant’s hopeful teleology and his assertion of incessant moral progress within the species. Although man *may* be blessed with a moral disposition, this often seems to be countered by other, more powerful forces; in all times and places we find man embroiled in conflict and discord. By his “nature” man is both drawn to live in society, “since he feels in this state more like a man,” and bound to desire independence because of his “unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas.”⁹⁵ The inevitable result is recurrent antagonism and conflict, and Kant admits that the cultural, technological, and material progress experienced across (parts of Western) Europe had thus far produced only a

⁹³ Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 39.

⁹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, “Introduction,” II, 12.

⁹⁵ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 44.

“glittering misery” of external refinement and internal dissatisfaction.⁹⁶ But he insists that “this splendid misery is bound up with the development of the natural capacities of the human race” and is therefore the unconscious means through which historical progress unfolds.⁹⁷ As such, the contemptible state of affairs across Western civilization is not an argument against historico-moral progress but a sign that it is occurring. This is the case, according to Kant, because the conflict engendered by “the *unsocial sociability* of men” is the very thing that “awakens all man’s powers and induces him to overcome his tendency to laziness.”⁹⁸ In the absence of “these asocial qualities (far from admirable in themselves)” which bring about conflict and foster widespread misery,

man would live an Arcadian, pastoral existence of perfect concord, self-sufficiency, and mutual love. But all human talents would remain hidden forever in a dormant state, and men, as good-natured as the sheep they tended, would scarcely render their existence more valuable than that of their animals. *The end for which they were created, their rational nature, would be an unfilled void.*⁹⁹

Without the dynamics of conflict and struggle engendered by our unsocial sociability we would live as those indolent Tahitians in a state of effortless contentment. We must be shaken out of our blissful concord by physical need, interpersonal conflict, and covetous desire so that culture, which Kant defines as the “the production of the aptitude of a rational being for arbitrary purposes in general,” may advance.¹⁰⁰ The development of culture does not on its own ensure the moralization of the species; it is, rather, a necessary precondition for achieving it, “a

⁹⁶ Kant, “Conjectures,” 231.

⁹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 282 (§83).

⁹⁸ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 44.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 45; emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 281 [§83]

foundation for possibility.”¹⁰¹ “Reason,” Kant explains, “constantly increases with the continuous progress of culture”¹⁰² as men gradually acquire the ability to both further their own ends *and* discipline their inclinations.¹⁰³ Cultural elevation and the “refinement of society” “make man more civilized, if not morally better, win us in large measure from the tyranny of sense propensions, and thus prepare men for a lordship in which reason alone shall have authority.”¹⁰⁴ It is certainly true that cultural refinement does not in itself make men morally better, but without it they have little chance of achieving the ultimate purpose for which we must assume they were created.

Conflict, inequality, oppression, exploitation, and war are transformed, according to this historico-teleological vision, from reasons to doubt the moral progress of mankind into signs that progress is occurring, that the groundwork for the realization of the principles of pure practical reason is slowly but surely being established. A moral disposition within man is necessary for him to be able to realize his ultimate purpose as conveyed by the moral law, but his path is prepared by a cunning plan of nature and paved by the unconscious barbarity and wicked actions of the fallen creatures that are men:

Nature comes to the aid of the universal and rational human will, so admirable in itself but so impotent in practice, and makes use of precisely those self-seeking inclinations in order to [promote man’s moral purpose]... We may therefore say that nature *irresistibly wills* that right should eventually gain the upper hand. What men have neglected to do will ultimately happen of its own accord, albeit with much inconvenience.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 71.

¹⁰² Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” 125.

¹⁰³ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §83.

¹⁰⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 284 [§83].

¹⁰⁵ Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” 112-3.

Thus, practices that are contrary to the principles of right and are reprehensible from a moral-legal perspective (e.g., war and the rationally organized exploitation of others) may be seen as indispensable from a historical-functional perspective according to which they represent the necessary material conditions for progress.¹⁰⁶ This is why Kant calls inequality “that abundant source of so much evil but also of everything good,” for it is only through inequality and conflict that the species progresses towards its moral destiny.¹⁰⁷ In short, there is a palpable tension between some of Kant’s teleological reflections on the sources of historical progress and the principles enshrined in his moral philosophy.

Importantly, however, Kant consistently asserted “that the functional perspective of historical development” was “subordinate to the normative perspective of moral duty.”¹⁰⁸ The principles of pure practical reason must take priority over the exigencies of practical politics or the logic of historical progress, and a “true system of politics cannot therefore take a single step without first paying tribute to morality... [and] all politics must bend the knee before right.”¹⁰⁹ It is on this basis that Kant sharply condemns European practices of settlement and colonization as contrary to cosmopolitan right in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.¹¹⁰ Even if these practices contribute to the spread of civilization throughout the world, Kant argues, they must be rejected from a moral point of view because “these supposedly good intentions cannot wash away the stain of injustice in the means used for

¹⁰⁶ Cf. McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*.

¹⁰⁷ Kant, “Conjectures,” 230.

¹⁰⁸ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea*, 189.

¹⁰⁹ Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” 125.

¹¹⁰ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 121-2 [6:353].

them.”¹¹¹ Ultimately, it was Kant’s unwavering commitment to the primacy of morality and his conviction that political judgments must be grounded in the principles of right and not in the utilitarian logics of historical development or political expediency that led him to oppose the colonial practices of his day.

Nonetheless, the implications of Kant’s teleological philosophy of universal history are deeply troubling, especially when examined in relation to his anthropological observations. They lead to the conclusion not only that human development requires conflict and entrenched patterns of inequality—“skill cannot be developed in the human race except by means of inequality”¹¹²—but also that existing patterns of gross inequality and structures of European domination were themselves part of a purposive design in nature for ensuring progress. Thus, although Kant rejected the conduct of colonialism in his day, significant elements of his philosophy of history can easily lend themselves to colonialist ideologies. More troubling still, given Kant’s arguments regarding the innate attributes and permanent characteristics of the different races (which we shall discuss below), the question arises as to whether, on Kant’s view, nonwhite peoples can truly participate in historical progress or have any meaningful role to play in the course of human advancement. In other words, Kant suggested that in the cosmopolitan future to come, Europe “will probably legislate eventually for all other continents”¹¹³ not only because Europe alone exhibited cultural practices conforming to his understanding of historical progress, but also because he thought that the nonwhite

¹¹¹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 122 [6:353].

¹¹² Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 282 [§83]

¹¹³ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 52.

racism were inherently (and permanently) less capable of meaningful cultural development and moral improvement.

Anthropology and the Imperative of Realization

Although interest in Kant's historical and political writings has recently drawn more attention to his lectures and essays on anthropology, physical geography, and natural history, these remain widely neglected in philosophy and political theory today in comparison to his writings on metaphysics, moral philosophy, and aesthetics. There are probably a number of reasons for this. One is that these neglected texts complicate the image of Kant as a strict rationalist—an image in which many Kantians and non-Kantians alike are invested. Another reason, I suspect, is that in these texts Kant articulates a hierarchical theory of race and expresses views about nonwhite peoples that are virulently racist. Discomfort and embarrassment over this fact has contributed to a tendency among (some) scholars to separate these texts from his critical philosophy; the result is an imposed division between the two sets of texts that is as absolute as that between the sensible and suprasensible in Kant's two-world metaphysic. However, to dismiss these works as somehow separable from his critical project or as unreflective works of passing interest that speak more to the prejudices of his time than to the nature of his thought would be a mistake. In fact, Kant himself thought anthropology was central to his philosophical project. And his interest in race was anything but peripheral—his writings on race run from his pre-critical through his critical period, and it was through the development of his racial theory and the debates this spurred with

Herder and others “that Kant recognized that he needed to expand his Critique of Taste into what we now know as the *Critique of Judgment* by adding the second part on the Critique of Teleological Judgment.”¹¹⁴ This was the case, as we shall see, because Kant thought that racial differences could only be accounted for in terms of a *teleological explanation*, that is, in terms of the postulate of a purposive causality operating in conjunction with mechanical causes to spur, shape, and solidify distinct and permanent racial types.

As evidence of the importance Kant placed on the “scientific” study of man as an empirical being and the general interest it spurred, his courses on anthropology and physical geography at the University of Königsberg were immensely popular; indeed, his physical geography course, in which he first began working out his theory of race, “was given more often than every lecture course he taught except for logic... and metaphysics.”¹¹⁵ Interestingly, Herder attended Kant’s courses on metaphysics, moral philosophy, and physical geography from 1762 to 1765, and he deeply admired Kant despite his intellectual disagreements with him, many of which were exacerbated after Kant’s critical turn. The admiration was mutual. Kant took an immediate interest in Herder, in whom he found a talented and promising young thinker, and he allowed him to attend his lectures for free despite the fact that he

¹¹⁴ Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept?,” 15.

¹¹⁵ “In addition to the expected lecture courses on logic, metaphysics, and moral philosophy, Kant also gave lecture courses on natural law (twelve times between 1767 and 1788), the encyclopedia and history of philosophy (eleven times between 1767 and 1787), natural theology (once in 1785-86), pedagogy (four times between 1776 and 1787), anthropology (twenty four times between 1772 and 1796), [and] physical geography (forty-six times between 1756 and 1796)... His physical geography course, which was quite innovative and well received, was given more often than every other lecture course he taught except for logic (offered fifty-four times between 1755 and 1796) and metaphysics (forty-nine times between 1756 and 1796). However, logic, metaphysics, and moral philosophy (offered twenty-eight times between 1756 and 1789) were all required courses; geography was an elective,” Loudon, *Kant’s Impure Ethics*, 4-5.

was an unpaid lecturer who relied on student fees to support himself. Herder, for his part, greatly respected Kant and later in life wrote fondly of those years as Kant's pupil, despite the acrimony that came between them in subsequent years:

I have had the good fortune of knowing a philosopher [Kant], who was my teacher. In the bloom of his youth, he had the gaiety of a boy, which, I think, accompanied him to his grayest of old age. His open brow, built for thinking, was a set of indestructible cheerfulness and joy. Speech brimming with ideas flowed from his lips. Jokes and wit and good mood were at his disposal, and his lectures were not only extremely learned but also most entertaining... He was indifferent to nothing worth knowing; no cabal, no sect, no advantage, no honorary title ever had the slightest appeal for him compared to the expansion and illumination of the truth. He encouraged and forced one in a pleasant way towards independent thinking. Despotism was foreign to his nature.¹¹⁶

It is clear that Herder was profoundly influenced by Kant's lectures, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the mutual fondness they once shared contributed to the bitter nature of their later disagreements. Kant was disappointed in his former student, and Herder seems to have been deeply hurt by his mentor's public disapproval.

In any case, we again see the *imperative of realization* at work in the background of Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, establishing the integral relationship between moral philosophy and practical anthropology:

Practical philosophy... and anthropology... are closely connected, and morality cannot exist without anthropology, for one must first know of the agent whether he is also in a position to accomplish what it is required from him that he should do. One can, indeed, certainly consider practical philosophy without anthropology, or without knowledge of the agent, only then it is merely speculative, or an Idea; so man must at least be studied accordingly. People are always preaching about what ought to be done, and nobody thinks about whether it can be done... *So one must know of man whether he can also do what is required of him.* Consideration of rules is

¹¹⁶ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, Sixth Collection, 79th Letter, quoted in the Introduction to *Another Philosophy of History*, xi.

useless if one cannot make man ready to follow them, so these two sciences are closely connected.¹¹⁷

Anthropology is central to Kant's ultimate objective: to determine the moral destiny of mankind through the use of pure practical reason and to indicate the means for achieving it through rational study of the basic attributes of human nature.

To the three questions corresponding to the three *Critiques*—What can I know? What ought I do? What may I hope?¹¹⁸—anthropology adds a fourth: What is man? In much the same way that the philosophical study of history must seek out evidence of continual moral progress underlying the course of phenomenal events in order to reinforce the validity and practicality of the moral law, pragmatic anthropology is concerned with man's character as it relates to the duties enjoined to him by practical reason, for "the character of a living being enables us to determine its destiny in advance."¹¹⁹ Anthropology is thus "the counterpart of a metaphysics of morals" and takes as its object "the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in *fulfilling* the laws of a metaphysics of morals."¹²⁰ Anthropology aims to discern the limits of man's possibilities and power; it constitutes a field of knowledge concerned with man's imperfections, limitations, and failings as a finite, impure being. The moral law must be determined by the principles of pure practical reason alone, and anthropology "must not precede a metaphysics of morals, or be mixed with it; for one would then run the risk of

¹¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, eds. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1965), 635.

¹¹⁹ Kant, *Anthropology*, 246.

¹²⁰ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 10 [6:217].

bringing forth false or at least indulgent moral laws”¹²¹—but anthropology cannot be dispensed with, because morality “needs anthropology for its *application* to human beings.”¹²² Without the rationally guided empirical study of man, the whole of moral philosophy remains a purely speculative (and ineffectual) enterprise. In order for the pure laws of freedom to be actualized in the impure world of man, they must be “refracted through the denser medium of human nature, culture, and history”¹²³ so as to determine the character of the human species as a whole and the means for improving it.

Anthropology is concerned not only with studying mankind in general; it is also concerned with identifying the different characteristics of various peoples, sexes, and races, and delimiting the ethical duties owed to them according to their condition. For Kant, the manner in which the pure principles of right are applied to the impure world of experience will vary according to differences in the condition, character, and historical standing of the subjects under consideration. As such, our ethical principles must be schematized according to a whole series of differences—from “differences in rank, age, sex, health, prosperity, or poverty” to differences between those “in a state of moral purity” and those in a state of “depravity”; between the “cultivated” and the “crude”; and between the “learned” and the “unschooled”—in order to be made ready for use.¹²⁴ Anthropology is indispensable, then, in part because it provides the knowledge necessary for this practical schematization and differential application of our ethical duties.

¹²¹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 11 [6:217].

¹²² Kant, *Groundwork*, 23 [4:412].

¹²³ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea*, 47.

¹²⁴ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 214 [6:468-9].

On the one hand, Kant insists that all human beings are as such rational beings worthy of respect. What is most significant about us is not our social status, physical appearance, or level of material success, but the fact that we are all rational beings and therefore each ought to be treated not merely as a means but also as an end in our own right. On the other hand, Kant was fascinated—as were many of his European contemporaries—with observing and ordering the biological, geographical, and cultural distribution of human beings so as to develop a systematic taxonomy of their differences according to the notion of natural kinds—that is, according to the idea that their differences could be explained in terms of a *natural* order of things. He sought to give a systematic order to empirical human variations, and he believed that certain groups of people had different capacities to act rationally and partake in human development. Moreover, he asserted that there were *distinct races of mankind*, that each race had markedly different psychophysical attributes and capacities for rational development and moral improvement, and that these innate racial characteristics were ineradicable and unchanging.

As we know, Herder too was interested in studying human differentiation in relation to the effects of climate and physical environment, but he did not think that human types were sharply divided into distinct and unchanging racial groups. Unlike Kant, he rejected a fixed hierarchical ordering of human forms, refused to see any group of people as inherently superior to others, and argued that those differences that did exist within the human species were neither immutable nor amenable to typological schematization on the basis of clear and distinct borders

between different (racial) types. He argued that any use of the term “race” to designate different human types entailed a dangerous mistake because it implied a fundamental difference of origin between types and posed an affront to the universal dignity, diversity, and fraternity of mankind.

In his review of the second part of Herder’s *Ideas*, Kant bypassed the ethico-political dimension of Herder’s objections and focused instead on clearly defining the race concept and specifying its role in natural history. “Our author,” he explains, “disapproves of the division of mankind into *races*, especially on the basis of inherited colour, presumably because he believes that the concept of race is not yet clearly defined.”¹²⁵ Not only did Kant think race was clearly defined (for he had defined it himself!), he suggested that it was Herder who was in fact mistaken about its definition and significance. “Race” refers not to a difference of origin but, instead, is meant “to indicate a *radical* peculiarity that announces a common descent.”¹²⁶ Herder’s confusion, according to Kant, was not without consequence, for Kant further asserted that in the act of observing nature, the race concept, properly understood, imposes itself on our cognition as a reflective concept of teleological judgment and was thus “necessary from the viewpoint of natural history.”¹²⁷ In other words, Kant contends that if we wish to study the natural history of man and understand the diversity of human deviations, we *must* have recourse to the idea of race.

¹²⁵ Kant, “Review of Herder’s *Ideas*,” 217.

¹²⁶ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological,” 40.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Kant distinguished natural history from natural description: whereas the latter merely amounted to an “overly detailed artificial system for the description of nature,” the former could provide “a physical system for the understanding” by identifying the reasons for or causes of the conditions of things in nature, including the diversity of human deviations.¹²⁸ For Kant, this meant assuming that nature is organized purposively as a systematic unity; an assumption he took to be a transcendental principle of reflective judgment without which the apprehension of regularity in nature would not be possible. Whereas previous “theorists” of race such as Linnaeus and Blumenbach had offered empirical and largely superficial classificatory schemas of racial difference, Kant sought to (and believed he had) provide a systematic formulation of the race concept that could give racial classification a logical grounding capable of accounting for the large number of different human “types” in terms of four distinct races of man.

Kant’s Theory of Race: A Brief Overview and Summary

The race concept first appeared in Kant’s lectures on *Physical Geography* in the late 1750s, and references to race and racial hierarchy recur throughout a number of texts spanning both his pre-critical and critical periods. The bulk of Kant’s racial theory, however, was worked out in three essays: “Of the Different Human Races” (1775; 1777), which served as the preliminary announcement for his lectures on *Physical Geography*; “Determination of the Concept of a Human Race”

¹²⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” in *The Idea of Race*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 13 fn. 1.

(1785); and “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy” (1788). Whereas Kant’s first (pre-critical) essay on race suggests a definite connection between the physical characteristics of a race and its mental attributes, his second (critical) essay on race “Determination” presents a theory of race solely concerned with explaining physical differences among humans. We should not conclude from this, however, that Kant adopted a purely physiological understanding of race and racial difference after his critical turn. In his third essay on race (“On the Use...”), Kant reasserts an understanding of race according to which it designates not only shared physical characteristics but also mental and moral ones. Written in response to the vociferous criticisms of Herder, Georg Forster, and others, this essay—perhaps “the richest and strangest of Kant’s essays on race”¹²⁹—aims to justify the use of teleological principles in those instances where “physico-mechanical”¹³⁰ explanations cannot account for the organization of an organic being. As such, it anticipates key elements of the “Critique of Teleological Judgment” and attests to the race concept’s integral relationship to Kant’s critical philosophy as a whole.

According to Kant, there are four distinct human races, all belonging to the same human species. Each has its own unique set of innate talents, traits, and attributes. This theory of race is meant to satisfy two objectives Kant thought necessary for a coherent account of human diversity. The first is to prove monogenesis—the thesis that there is a single origin to the human species—in opposition to polygenesis. The second is to account for human diversity and the permanence of certain hereditary characteristics, particularly skin color, which Kant

¹²⁹ Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race,” 356.

¹³⁰ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological,” 50

took to be the primary marker of racial difference. In order to ground monogenesis, Kant drew on Buffon's rule that two animals were of the same species if they could mate and produce fertile offspring. In order to account for the persistence of human diversity, Kant introduced a distinction between race and variety that had not existed in previous racial theories. Whereas "variety" refers to differences that do not necessarily persist from generation to generation and thus are not always transferred hereditarily, "race" refers to deviations such as skin color that persist from generation to generation irrespective of environmental factors. The latter are hereditary, innate, and unchanging. Kant thus defined "races" as "deviations that are constantly preserved over many generations and come about as a consequence of migration (dislocation to other regions) or through interbreeding with other deviations of the same line of descent, which always produces half-breed offspring."¹³¹

Given this idea of race, Kant argues, we need recourse to the idea of four distinct races in order to account for "all of the enduring distinctions immediately recognizable within the human genus. They are: (1) the white race; (2) the Negro race; (3) the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuck); and (4) the Hindu or Hindustani race."¹³² For Kant, the race concept makes possible a comprehensive theory of natural history capable of making sense of nature as a unified whole by reducing the almost infinite variety of apparent kinds of people proposed by Herder and others to four distinct races of the same genus. In place of Herder's impressionistic portrait of human diversity, Kant presents a systematic taxonomy of racial distinction.

¹³¹ Kant, "Of the Different Human Races," 11.

¹³² Ibid.

However, in addition to helping us achieve “rational comprehensibility”¹³³ in nature, the theory of race also demonstrates the reason or cause for the nature of human deviation. In other words, because it is located within natural history, which examines “the connection between certain present properties of things of nature and their causes in an earlier time,” the race concept must account for the type of causality that brings about racial deviation.¹³⁴ To this end, Kant contends that there was an original lineal root genus to the human species and that the original human beings carried within them the “seeds” [*Keime*] of all of the traits and predispositions contained in human nature, enabling them to adapt to and live in any climatic environment or geographical location; these seeds were then actualized in response to environmental factors as humans began to migrate, with some seeds being realized while others were held back. The end result was the creation of four distinct races, each uniquely suited to its formative environment. Once racial characteristics had developed, they became permanent, and the other seeds were disabled, with no future deviations possible. *Thus, if we recall the theory of race that Collingwood mistakenly attributes to Herder, we see that in fact it corresponds directly to Kant’s account of race: as natural beings, humans are divided into distinct races, each with its character and predisposition initially shaped by the environment but then becoming fixed, innate, and hereditary.*

For Kant, each race represents a deviation from the original lineal stem genus of the human species, which contained within it the seeds and predispositions for all the races. These deviations were brought about in response to environmental

¹³³ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological,” 44.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

factors as humans began to migrate, but Kant did not think that climate alone could account for the formation of racial types. To be sure, environmental factors triggered the differential actualization of innate seeds, but they did not themselves *cause* or account for the form of these deviations because external factors alone cannot account for the internal organization of an organic being:

External factors might well be occasional but not productive causes of those creatures that necessarily pass on the same characteristic features that they have inherited. It is just as unlikely that chance or physical-mechanical causes could produce an organic body as that they might add something to the reproductive power of such a body, that is, as that they might effect the particular form or relationship among the various parts of a thing that can reproduce itself. Air, sun, and diet can modify the growth of the body of an animal. Factors such as these cannot, however, produce this change together with a reproductive power capable of producing such chance without these causes.¹³⁵

We must, therefore, posit a purposive cause that accounts for the internal organization and functional coherence of the organism because “the mechanism of nature alone does not enable us to think the possibility of an organized being.”¹³⁶ In other words, the cause of racial distinctions “does not lie in the climate, but comes from within these peoples themselves.”¹³⁷ In “Of the Different Human Races” Kant accounts for this purposive cause by depicting the internal seeds [*Keime*] as pre-existent germs with formative powers ready to be actualized as required by circumstances: “numerous seeds and natural predispositions must lie ready in human beings either to be developed or held back in such a way that we might become fitted to a particular place in the world.”¹³⁸ Kant, then, is arguing for the

¹³⁵ Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” 14

¹³⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 271 [§ 81].

¹³⁷ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles,” 44.

¹³⁸ Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” 14.

need to combine teleological explanations with physical-mechanical ones, even though we ourselves are incapable of grasping or observing causal mechanisms.

Indeed, it is precisely this incapacity that leads the understanding to turn to (or “posit”) a teleological explanation. The natural scientist must begin by seeking out possible explanations in terms of natural—that is, physical and mechanical—laws, but if no such law can be found to account for the nature of the being in question, then he must have recourse to a teleological explanation; that is, an explanation in terms of purposes. As Kant explains in the third Critique, “in order to see that a thing is only possible as a purpose... it is requisite that its form be not possible according to mere natural laws.”¹³⁹ Thus, race is not an accidental degeneration or a contingent occurrence caused by environmental factors, instead it is a purposive production—the seeds for all the races were contained in the original lineal root genus, “and the appropriate seed was actualized to serve a purpose that arose from circumstances.”¹⁴⁰

If mechanical explanations alone could account for racial deviations, then climatic factors could continue to produce further changes in the composition of the races. But Kant insisted that once racial deviations had arisen, no further changes were possible. “Once a race has established itself... no further climatic influences could cause it to change into another race. For only the lineal formation can turn into a race.”¹⁴¹ In fact, Kant emphasized the immutability of racial deviation in his

¹³⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 216 [§64].

¹⁴⁰ Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race?,” 23.

¹⁴¹ Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” 21.

review of the second part of Herder's *Ideas* in order to clarify the nature of their disagreement regarding the causes and consequences of human differentiation.

Herder had rejected Kant's notion of *Keime*, arguing instead that the modification of the human form in relation to climate (*Klima*) must be understood in terms of *genetische Kraft*, an innate "genetic force" or "vital principle" that modifies itself in accordance with environmental circumstances and remains active in the body it has formed; this innate, formative drive is both subject to and resists further modifications, thus allowing for the possibility of future psychophysical variations while also limiting them to some (indeterminate) extent.¹⁴²

In his review of the first part of the *Ideas*, Kant dismissed Herder's theory of *genetische Kraft* as an "attempt to explain *what is not understood* in terms of *what is understood even less*,"¹⁴³ but in his review of the second part of the *Ideas* Kant reconsiders his position somewhat, suggesting that despite Herder's prior objections, they were actually in "full agreement"—since they both rejected the sufficiency of mechanical explanations—"but with one reservation": the vital principle that modifies itself in accordance with external circumstances should be seen as

limited by its nature to only a certain number and degree of differences in the development of the creature which it organizes (so that, once these differences were exhausted, it would no longer be free to work from another archetype under altered circumstances)... such differences should be regarded simply as limitations imposed on a self-determining power.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Kant, "Review of Herder's *Ideas*," 217. For Herder's account of genetic vital force see *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 20-32. See also Voegelin, *History of the Race Idea*, 68-70.

¹⁴³ Kant, "Review of Herder's *Ideas*," 209.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-8.

By pointing out this agreement—with one reservation—Kant aimed to show Herder that their respective theories of human differentiation were in fact quite compatible—so long, that is, as Herder acceded to Kant's claim that *genetische Kraft*, once shaped by environmental factors, was no longer capable of modification and that the character of the current races (or “peoples”) was now therefore fixed and ineradicable. But this was precisely what Herder found so objectionable and dangerous about the race concept. Herder acknowledged that there were significant differences in the physical and mental characteristics of various peoples. He was more than willing to recognize a measure of relative stability in the collective character of a *Volk*, but he refused to accept the notion that the currently existing human varieties are fixed and unalterable. Herder thought that each *Volk* had its own mode of being-in-the-world and its own collective spiritual *ethos*, but he insisted that these particularities were the result of cultural and historical factors, not “racial” ones.

According to Kant's theory, “race” represents a deviation from the original stem genus, a deviation that, once completed, represents a double limitation: first, a limitation with respect to the full set of traits and predispositions within the original lineal root genus, and second a (total) limitation in terms of an organism's ability to undergo any further transformation. In other words, the deviation is permanent. The Kantian lineal formation had the ability to “turn into a race” precisely because it contained within it the seeds and predispositions for each race. Kant suggests that “solicitous nature” designed it in this way so that human beings could eventually inhabit and develop the whole of the earth. An implication of this theory, however, is

that some races have diverged more and some less from the original lineal root—that is, that certain races are closer to the original human form than others.

Despite the fact that we cannot reproduce or find the original human form anywhere in nature, Kant thinks we can determine which race most closely approximates it, and he further suggests that this race will contain the most complete set of natural talents and favorable predispositions of all the various races since it embodies the fullest set of possibilities contained within human nature.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, those deviations that came about as a result of migration to extreme climates are assumed to be further removed from the lineal formation than those that came about as a result of more temperate climates, because adaptation to extreme climates required the development of a limited set of traits specifically suited to those environs. For example, “solicitous nature” ensured that the “Negro” would be “well-suited to his climate” in two ways: he is “strong, fleshy, and agile,” but he is also “lazy, indolent, and dawdling,” since an energetic disposition does not suit a hot climate.¹⁴⁶ In short, the development of traits and talents suitable for one region may also involve severe limitations with respect to other traits, talents, and regions.

From what has been established thus far, it will come as no surprise that Kant thinks that the white race most closely approximates the characteristics of the original human beings. He explains that this must be the case because “the area between 31 and 52 degrees latitude in the old world” (i.e., Europe) has “the most fortunate combination of influences of both the cold and hot regions,” such that it is

¹⁴⁵ Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” 19.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

“where human beings must diverge least from their original form, since the human beings living in this region were already well-prepared to be transplanted into every other region of the earth.”¹⁴⁷ Kant’s theory of race as deviation is thus explicitly hierarchical, with the value of each race being determined according to its proximity to the original root genus. And it is interesting to note that while Kant postulates that the original lineal formation was purposively designed so that humans would come to populate the entire earth, he also suggests that as things currently stand, it is the white race that is the most suited to continue carrying out this task. Indeed, he implies that nature has not intended that the non-white races migrate to regions for which they are not adapted. “Where,” he asks rhetorically, “have Asian-Indians or Negroes ever attempted to spread out into northern lands?”¹⁴⁸ Such expansion, clearly, is only for the white race, with its abundance of skills, talents, and predispositions.

In contrast, for Herder, the modification of the human form is not limited by a determinate stock of pre-existing seeds. He argues that the prototypical “original form” posited by Kant never existed and is only an “abstracted concept from all exemplars of human nature in both hemispheres.”¹⁴⁹ “The culture of humanity” cannot be measured or understood in relation to a prototypical form: “it shoots forth everywhere *in accordance with place and time*, here more richly and more luxuriantly, there more poorly and meagerly. The genius of human natural history

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 19-20

¹⁴⁸ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles,” 44.

¹⁴⁹ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 394-5

lives in and with each people as though this people were the only one on earth.”¹⁵⁰

Thus, for Herder, distinct phenotypical attributes and forms of life are not deviations from an original prototypical form; instead, they are unique and irreducible expressions of the “genius of humanity” and cannot be judged according to a single standard of value or a universal measure of cultural worth. Herder acknowledges that there are psychophysical differences between peoples, but he asserts, first, that these are the result not of “various *seeds* (a word which is empty and which contradicts the formation of humankind),” but of “various *forces* in various proportions” and, second, that they cannot be organized hierarchically according to a single standard or archetype—“The negro, the [native] American, the Mongol has gifts, talents, preformed dispositions that the European does not have. Perhaps the sum is equal—only in different proportions and compensations.”¹⁵¹ To be sure, there is still a troubling current of quasi-biological essentialism running beneath Herder’s account of human differentiation, one that I certainly would not wish to endorse. That being said, I also think it is important to keep in mind that what Herder calls “genetic force” should not be conflated with the contemporary meaning of the term genetic. For Herder, *genetische Kraft* is a dynamic force operating in constant interaction with a host of other forces (particularly cultural ones) that are capable of transforming it. Moreover, and most importantly, he neither attributes moral incapacity or unworthiness to any peoples nor accepts the idea that any people is more (or less) fully human than others. “The negro has as much right to consider the white man a degenerate, a born albino freak, as when the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 396.

¹⁵¹ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 395.

white man considers him a beast, a black animal... The *Cherokee* and the *Huswana*, the *Mongol* and the *Gonaqua*, are as much letters in the great word of our species as the most civilized Englishman or Frenchman.”¹⁵²

The four distinct races found within the Kantian racial schema do not represent ‘separate but equal’ deviations with respect to the original formation: some deviations are better equipped to carry out the task of civilizational development than others. So while “solicitous nature” has ensured that the “Negro” will be “well-suited” to his intended geographical location, the talents and temperament it imparted to him do not leave him nearly so well placed when it comes to his capacity for rational development and moral self-improvement. For example, in his lectures on *Physical Geography*, Kant asserts that “humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.”¹⁵³ Indeed, he thought the “American peoples” to be so far removed from the original lineal formation and to contain such a limited range of talents that their natural disposition “reveals a half-extinguished life power,”¹⁵⁴ placing them “far below the Negro himself, who undoubtedly holds the lowest of all remaining levels by which we designate the different races.”¹⁵⁵ In stark contrast to the “half-extinguished life power” of the Native American, the white race can be said to “contain all the impulses of nature in affects and passions, all talent, all

¹⁵² Ibid., 394-5.

¹⁵³ Immanuel Kant, *Physical Geography*, in *Race and the Enlightenment*, ed. Emmanuel Eze (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 63.

¹⁵⁴ Kant, “Of the Different Human Races,” 17.

¹⁵⁵ Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles,” 48.

dispositions to culture and civilization and can as readily obey as govern. *They are the only ones who always advance to perfection.*"¹⁵⁶

What are we to make of the claim that it is only the white race that "always advance[s] to perfection" if this advance is also repeatedly said to be the destiny of mankind as whole? Is history nothing more than a grand theatre for the perfection of the white race?

Kant asserted that certain races—particularly Native Americans and Negroes—were so lacking in rational capacity, healthy inclinations, and active volition that some scholars have wondered if he thought they even counted as rational beings worthy of dignity and respect as "persons."¹⁵⁷ For example, he suggested at various points that if "Negroes" have any culture at all, it is a slave culture: "Americans and Blacks cannot govern themselves. They thus serve only for slaves."¹⁵⁸ This is the case, according to Kant, because the so-called Negro lacks the requisite skills for rational autonomy and "can be disciplined and cultivated, but is never genuinely civilized. He falls of his own accord into savagery."¹⁵⁹ Kant's low estimation of and general lack of moral concern for black people is reflected in the casual callousness with which he offers the following advice on the proper way to

¹⁵⁶ Kant. This quotation is from his lecture notes on anthropology and is quoted in Robert Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, eds. Julie K. Ward and Tommy Lee Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 147-8. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁷ To cite just two examples of the scholarly debate surrounding this question: Charles W. Mills, in his article "Kant's *Untermenschen*," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 169-93 argues that for Kant, Blacks and Native Americans were "subpersons" (*Untermenschen*) by virtue of their inferior rationality and limited capacity for autonomy such that they have a diminished moral standing and are neither as worthy of respect as whites nor seen as full members of the "kingdom of ends." Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Bernard R. Boxill, in "Kant and Race," published in *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernard R. Boxill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 448-72, articulate an opposing view on this matter and insist that Kant "was clear... that even the race he believed to be the least talented was capable of moral action and had dignity" (455).

¹⁵⁸ Kant, quoted in Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," 152.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

discipline Negro slaves in an early version of his lectures on *Physical Geography*: “when one disciplines them, one cannot hit with sticks but rather whip with split canes, so that the blood finds a way out and does not suppurate under the skin.”¹⁶⁰ And in another infamous comment, this one from *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, he rejects the criticisms put forth by a “Negro carpenter” solely on the grounds that “*this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.*”¹⁶¹

On the other hand, Kant’s cosmopolitan ideal and the kingdom of ends are consistently represented as the destiny of human beings generally, inclusive of *all* peoples. Moreover, despite his derogatory remarks regarding their natural capacities, “Kant is absolutely clear that Negroes are fully human in the sense that they meet the criterion of Buffon’s law of propagation” and in the sense that he grants “them legal status” within the sphere of cosmopolitan right.¹⁶² Some scholars—most notably Pauline Kleingeld—have pointed to Kant’s later political writings, particularly “Perpetual Peace” (1795) and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), in which he condemns the appalling “injustice” of European practices of colonial settlement, exploitation, and oppression as “contrary to natural right,” as evidence of the fact that Kant must have ultimately abandoned his hierarchical theory of race.¹⁶³ While these passages clearly indicate that Kant thought black and other non-white peoples were indeed human, they do not in themselves

¹⁶⁰ Kant, *Physical Geography*, 61.

¹⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 57, emphasis added.

¹⁶² Robert Bernasconi, “Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race,” in *Reading Kant’s Geography*, eds. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (Albany: State University of New York Press), 301.

¹⁶³ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 106-7.

demonstrate a newfound belief in racial equality in Kant's thought. The fact that Kant's mature political philosophy seems to be incompatible with his previously articulated ideas about race does not in itself demonstrate that he *must* have abandoned his hierarchical theory of race altogether. Besides the fact that Kant never publicly renounced his published views on race, his racism had long been in contradiction with the universal moral theory that informed his mature political philosophy. Thus, without further supporting evidence, it is not clear why Kant would have necessarily been led to abandon his hierarchical theory of race while he was in the process of elaborating his political theory simply because these two theories contradicted each other.

In addition to Kant's criticism of European colonialism in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kleingeld places significant importance on the fact that "in his notes for *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant repeatedly and explicitly criticizes slavery of non-Europeans in the strongest terms, as a grave violation of cosmopolitan right."¹⁶⁴ However, as Robert Bernasconi has pointed out in response to Kleingeld, Kant ultimately "decided *not* to include this discussion [of the slave trade] in his published text."¹⁶⁵ More to the point, Bernasconi notes that it is quite possible for one to be opposed to slavery while also believing in racial hierarchy. Indeed, in his 1792 *Lectures on Physical Geography*, which "is the only occasion where we know that Kant *publicly* condemned the slave trade," Kant did just that: he simultaneously condemns slavery *and* reasserts his hierarchical theory of race in terms consistent

¹⁶⁴ Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 229 (October 1, 2007): 587.

¹⁶⁵ Bernasconi, "Kant's Third Thoughts on Race," 302.

with his previously stated views on race.¹⁶⁶ Ultimately, I suspect that the question of whether Kant abandoned a belief in racial hierarchy late in his life is unanswerable. In any case, whether or not Kant eventually realized the error of his ways and abandoned his account of racial hierarchy, what is certain is that many of the ideas contained within that account played a role in the course of events that were to follow and continue to haunt the world today.

There are two significant aspects of Kant's theory of race and his related account of racial hierarchy that came to play a central role in racist ideology after him. The first is the way in which Kant represents the white race as not one race among others, but rather as the privileged center—the non-racialized standard—according to which other races are to be judged. The white race is characterized by a (near) completeness that will forever elude the other races; the white race contains *all* the talents, impulses, and dispositions in a harmonious balance, whereas the other races only have some uneven and deficient mixture of these, with traits and predispositions suiting them for their environment but not for civilizational development. It seems, then, that for Kant, to be fully human is to be white. Thus, “by tucking into his theory of race an idea of Whites distinguished by a completeness no other race could attain, Kant invented ‘whiteness’ at the same time and by means of his theory of race.”¹⁶⁷ In this sense, Kant can be seen as inaugurating, or at least

¹⁶⁶ Bernasconi, “Kant's Third Thoughts on Race,” 304.

¹⁶⁷ Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race,” 346.

anticipating, the ideology of “whiteness” that has only recently begun to be demystified by scholars working in and around the field of “whiteness studies.”¹⁶⁸

The second aspect, which is related to the first, is that his theory of race served to provide a “naturalistic rationale for existing power relations between Europeans and the nonwhite world,” a rationale that ultimately acquires a quasi-transcendental status and “merges into a philosophical and even theological justification: it becomes part of a theodicy justifying God’s ways to humankind.”¹⁶⁹ Historically, one of the key political functions of the ideology of race and racial hierarchy has been to mask the role of power in structuring unequal outcomes by obscuring them under claims of innate talents and abilities—that is, under claims about the natural order of things. Thus, although Kant routinely denounces colonial practices, his theory of race contains within it some resources to justify colonialism, for if it really is the case that the “Negro” can neither educate nor civilize himself, then some form of colonial intervention will be necessary since Kant insists that it is “our” (by which he apparently means “us white people”) moral duty to see to it that history progresses through the highest possible cultivation of man’s natural capacities. In fact, Kant contends that history itself both attests to the innate civilizational superiority of the “northern races” and indicates the functional

¹⁶⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Bruce Baum, *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: A Political History of Racial Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007); Neil Irvine Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

¹⁶⁹ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 51.

necessity of whites continuing to take an active role in the “education” of the less civilized:

The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above all the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. *That is why at all points in time these peoples have educated the others and controlled them with weapons.* The Romans, Greeks, the ancient Nordic peoples, Genghis Kahn, the Turks, Tamurlaine, the Europeans after Columbus’s discoveries, they have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons.¹⁷⁰

Whereas Herder finds in colonialism evidence not of Europe’s superiority but rather of its deceitful and depraved nature, in his lectures on *Physical Geography* Kant sees the history of northern domination as a confirmation of innate superiority and an encouragement to Europe’s civilizing role. The ‘white man’s burden’ is great indeed, but Kant is confident that “solicitous nature” has equipped the superior race to carry it well.

To be clear, I am not arguing that Kant’s critical philosophy determines his racial anthropology. I am not claiming that his critical philosophy is inevitably racist or that adopting its principles requires adopting his racist anthropology. Indeed, Kant’s moral philosophy is in many respects a noble and inspiring account of mankind’s ethical possibilities. But I am suggesting that Kant’s critical philosophy and racist anthropology are not entirely separate either. The philosophy tends to solicit a racial configuration to support the teleology of history it finds necessary. Thus, I do not agree with Robert Loudon’s claim that the racist aspects of Kant’s anthropology can be set aside as statements of “private prejudices” that “are not centrally connected to the defining features of his theory of human moral

¹⁷⁰ Kant, *Physical Geography*, 64. Emphasis added.

development” on the grounds that his universalist moral theory means that he is “logically committed to the belief” in the unity *and* (eventual) equality of all persons in the kingdom of ends.¹⁷¹ To be sure, the pursuit of the universal and the idea that humanity has made considerable progress toward it are required by Kant’s philosophy because in the first instance we are obligated, in order to save morality, to act *as if* history is progressive and to advance such progress. This is a requirement of practical reason, as Kant understands it. But Kant also suggests that we need to search for signs and evidence in actual history that support the case for uninterrupted historical progress. We can determine the moral code without reference to any empirical data, but such a determination neither provides evidence that mankind is disposed to be moral nor helps us determine the best means available for actualizing the ends of practical reason. For these latter tasks we need the empirical study of history and practical anthropology (conducted, of course, with the guidance of the *a priori* principles of practical reason).

Once he turns to the empirical data of history and anthropology, Kant concludes that certain races correspond more closely than others to the form of life suggested by practical reason, and that encourages him to link his observations to a hierarchical theory of the races and their different contributions to progress. Since, given his substantive notion of progress, the Occidental race and European civilization come closest to the on-marching ideal, Kant is also inclined to seek the

¹⁷¹ Louden, *Kant’s Impure Ethics*, 177. To be clear, Louden does not argue that we can simply ignore Kant’s racist beliefs entirely, and he acknowledges that “they should not be hidden or rationalized away. Their presence constitutes a central weakness of Kant’s ethics” (177). But he does insist that these prejudices are not “centrally connected” to Kant’s ethical theory or theory of human development *as such* and, in so doing, Louden implies that Kant’s racist anthropology has no fundamental relationship to or bearing on his moral philosophy.

reasons for that in the fundamental composition of the white race and European civilization. Or, put another way, he is also inclined to explain why the non-white races do not appear to match the white race in contributing to historical progress. In this way the philosophy solicits and solidifies a racial hierarchy, even if it may not require it. In doing so it once again calls our attention to the dangers that accompany a universalist philosophy of this sort combined with a progressive image of history. Once we have posited a universal normative standpoint along with a progressive image of history, it is hard to see how we can conceive of those who do not match our normative-developmental standpoint other than as deficient, deviant, or inherently inferior.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitan Visions

Seen from this perspective, Kant's cosmopolitanism is problematic, to say the least. Even if we presume for the moment that Kant did conceive of the non-white races as members of the "kingdom of ends," it is not clear what role they would play in its realization since he suggests that they lack the capacities upon which the growth of culture and civilization depend. For Kant, practical reason enjoins upon us a universally valid moral ideal, which also implies a singular end toward which we must assume history is progressing; his metanarrative of civilizational progress is grounded in his notion of transcendental rationality. Unlike Herder, he evinces no sense that there might be a multiplicity of embodied forms of reason, each with potentially different understandings of what constitutes human realization and historical progress. As such, there is no space for a pluralism of values or inter-cultural exchange and enrichment in Kant's vision of the cosmopolitan society to

come. At best, nonwhite peoples would be passive recipients of the gifts of cosmopolitanism; they would have no active role in the construction of a cosmopolitan society, no positive input into the values and ideals that that global society ought to reflect, and no discernible purpose in its development other than as brute laborers or objects of cultivation. Thus, what Kant articulates is a cosmopolitanism of, for, and by Europeans. Europe “will probably legislate eventually for all other countries.”¹⁷² Indeed, it would seem—at least from a historical-functional perspective—that the realization of a cosmopolitan society is only possible on such a basis.

Turning to Herder, we see that his cosmopolitan vision is in many ways superior to Kant’s. Most importantly, because of his sense of the partiality of all points of view, his position combines cosmopolitanism with an argument for respecting cultural differences. Thus, whereas Kant’s approach to history seems to suggest a historical-functional warrant for some form of colonial “guidance” or “oversight,” (even though he did condemn the way colonialism was practiced and justified in his day), Herder’s insistence that each people has its own way of contributing to humanity through the development of its own form of life provides a basis for opposing colonial imposition by showing it to be not only unjust but also detrimental to the advancement of humanity as a whole. Suggesting that Herder can be seen as a cosmopolitan may strike some as strange because of his insistence on respecting, preserving, and cultivating national groupings, but Herder did not think that this contradicted cosmopolitanism (of a certain sort). In fact, he thought it was

¹⁷² Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 52.

necessary for the achievement of a cosmopolitan future characterized by peace and a sense of universal justice. Herder's cosmopolitanism was not grounded in abstract universalism but rather in impartial concern for all human beings and peoples. "Above all," he declared, "let one be *unbiased* like the genius of humanity itself; let one have no pet tribe, no favorite people on earth," and he hoped for a future characterized by "*universal justice, humaneness, [and] active reason.*"¹⁷³ He contended that the way to achieve this was not through worldwide convergence toward a singular ideal or model of civilization; instead, he thought the best hope resided in each people pursuing its unique ideal and remaining within its "center of gravity."

Indeed, he thought that Kant's effort to construct a "universal history" encompassing all of mankind from a single perspective was a grand illusion, for he insisted that Kant's universal ideal was *not* in fact universal. Instead, it is an uplifting of the empirical and the particular to the level of the transcendental and the universal. From this perspective the Kantian framework takes a set of ideas and ideals that emerge out of the particular cultural circumstances in which they were embedded and embodied and re-figures them as transcendental and universal, thus shielding them from further critical scrutiny. For Kant there can be no (rational) disagreement when it comes to universal reason; we must simply be shown the error of our views and brought into agreement with reason. Again and again, Herder insists that there is no universal form of life and no form of government or constitution that suits all peoples and all circumstances, "hence a history that

¹⁷³ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 394; 404.

calculates everything in the case of every land with a view to this utopian plan in accordance with unproved first principles”—by which he means Kant’s universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose—“is the most dazzling *deceptive* history.”¹⁷⁴ And so the way forward to a genuinely cosmopolitan future lies not in the narcissism of false universalism but in respectful appreciation of difference and the eventual encouragement of forms of inter-cultural exchange that foster reciprocal understanding and reduce those forms of difference and disagreement that occasion conflict.

Kant’s universal history is the opposite of what it claims to be: it does not serve as an impetus for development or an encouragement for peace because the homogenization it entails is not only unfeasible but harmful, for reasons we have seen. Moreover, not only does Herder contend that the existence of a plurality of values means that global homogenization is impractical, he also argues that providential nature has purposively designed the world with the intent of ensuring a plurality of forms of life against the drive to conform to a single ideal:

Nature begins from *families*... Nature has *divided* peoples through language, ethics, customs, often through mountains, seas, rivers, and deserts; it, so to speak, did everything in order that they should for a long time *remain* separated from each other and become rooted in themselves... The diversity of languages, ethics, inclinations, and ways of life was destined to become a bar against the presumptuous *linking together* of peoples, a dam against foreign inundations – for the steward of the world was concerned that for the security of the whole each people and race preserved *its* impress, *its* character, peoples should live *besides* each other, not mixed up with and on top of each other oppressing each other.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 413

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 385. Note here that Herder does use the term “race,” but this is not consistent with his general terminology for designating human groupings. As we have seen, consistency was not always one of Herder’s strengths as a thinker.

Thus, we could say that Herder's nationalism amounts to *a nationalism with a cosmopolitan purpose*. The diversity of forms of life is not a problem to be overcome, but rather a source of security and human enrichment, for the fullest expression of universal humanity consists in the richest expression of its particularities. If human history were an ecosystem populated by nations, then the diversity of national forms would be a measure of the health of the system and a source of well-being for its inhabitants.

Now, it may of course be objected that Herder's position is contradictory here, or perhaps simply naïve. After all, does he really mean to suggest that we can focus so much attention on cultivating national identities without this leading to conflict among groups, who will inevitably come to hold and value different and potentially contradictory ideals and beliefs? Will an attachment to a particular community necessarily reveal itself over time to be aggressive or chauvinistic? And shouldn't this possibility at least be reckoned with, rather than avoided? In fact, Herder does recognize (some of) the dangers here, and in *Another Philosophy of History* he denounces the prejudice of "narrow nationalism," which he defines as the collision of two nations' respective circles of happiness.¹⁷⁶

The solution he proposes to the dangers of narrow nationalism may well strike us as an evasion of the real problem at hand, for he suggests that the most prejudiced and aggressive nations are the ones that have not properly cultivated their own ideals and have prematurely wandered out of their circle of happiness. As such, his proposed solution is to ensure that a people has properly cultivated its

¹⁷⁶ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 29.

distinct cultural formation before encountering others outside of its circle. So long as each nation focuses first on realizing its ideal and stays within its center of gravity, there will be no conflict among nations. This may be a happy thought, but it is not a particularly convincing one.

While Herder's solution is attractive in some respects and helps us to discern the deep problems in the Kantian image, it is insufficient today in at least two, overarching ways. First, it presents an overly idealized and simplistic account of the complexity of identity and difference. In a world of global migration, complex interdependence, and high levels of structural inequality in the international politico-economic system, it is now not possible, if it ever was, for a people "to stay in their own circle" and avoid "mixing." Moreover, this framework cannot properly conceive of (or value) pluralism within societies. That is, it cannot accommodate the existence of multiple, overlapping, and potentially conflicting "circles of happiness" within a pluralist community and territory; it thus renders agonistic pluralism impossible. Second, the counsel for each people to stay within its "own" circle does not address the way in which the emotional and affective bonds formed in even non-chauvinist modes of collective identity-formation may be translated into antipathy towards forms of difference that threaten the collective identity of the group. This danger is amplified when identity and difference are essentialized and thus, in a sense, rendered non-negotiable, as they are in Herder's framework. The point is neither that all forms of community are to be rejected, nor that the paradoxical relationship between identity and difference is responsible for all the violent and destructive conflicts in the world. Rather, in a world of irreducible pluralism in

which the minoritization of territorial states is proceeding at a rapid rate, we cannot simply assume a harmonization of values within a society or a peaceful coexistence of discrete, 'natural' national communities. As such, one of the most pressing theoretical tasks today is to experiment with modes of belonging and identity formation that do not rely on the idea of innate, intrinsic, or natural identities. For example, belonging might be conceived and practiced as a continuous, creative, and expansive process of self-making and social formation rather than as expressive of an innate, intrinsic, and discrete identity or collective essence. This, of course, may entail new problems, but it is likely to at least mitigate some of the dangers associated with a commitment to collective identity tied to national (or racial) unity.

In short, in the contemporary age, we cannot accept the notion, as Herder does, that there are wholly innocent forms of belonging. Consider, for example, Herder's response in *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* to those who argue that a focus on national identities will necessarily lead to conflict. "Indeed... it is a well-known and sad saying that the human species never appears less deserving of love than when it affects one another *by nations*. But are the machines that affect one another in this way even nations, or does one misuse their name?"¹⁷⁷ And he insists that "the machines that affect each other" are not nations; it is not nations that are responsible for conflict, but *states*. It is not the fact of belonging but the greed of power politics that accounts for 'national' conflicts in the world.

Does the earth not have space for us all? Does not one land lie peacefully beside the other? Cabinets may deceive each other, political machines may be moved against each other until the one blows the other to pieces. *Fatherlands* do not move against each other in that way; they lie peacefully beside each

¹⁷⁷ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 384.

other, and support each other as families. *Fatherlands against fatherlands* in a combat of blood is the worst barbarism in the human language.¹⁷⁸

Herder's embrace of national belonging is thus resolutely anti-statist, and what must be opposed, according to Herder, are the machinations of a devious and deceitful politics and the corrupted forms of cultivation that encourage greed and exploitation.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, Herder is correct that we must struggle against these sources of conflict. But to recognize these as persistent sources of discord does not acquit nationalist sentiment of any and all responsibility in precipitating conflict. It is simply not the case that families (let alone nations!) always "lie peacefully beside each other" and never come into serious conflict. Nor is it even true that members of the same family always live peacefully with one another.

The problem with Herder's argument that *in principle* the existence of a plurality of (national) values does not imply the inevitability of violent conflict is twofold. First, it does not come to terms with the troubling paradox of identity and difference: the fact that all forms of identity (whether individual or social) are forged through a necessary relationship to a series of differences without which that identity could not be established. Identity requires difference in order to be able to exist. The troubling part of this is that in establishing itself through a relationship to difference, identity has a tendency to fix and diminish those differences, seeing them as threatening or in some way immoral. In short, "built into the dynamic of identity

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 379.

¹⁷⁹ "Certainly a dangerous gift, *power without kindness, inventive slyness without understanding*. The corruptedly cultivated human being wants only *to be able, to have, to enjoy*, without considering to what end he is able, what he has, and whether what he calls enjoyment does not eventually turn into a killing of enjoyment. What philosophy will free the nations of Europe from the stone of Sisyphus, from the wheel of Ixion, to which a greedy politics has damned them?" Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 384.

is a polemical temptation to translate differences through which it is specified into moral failing or abnormalities.”¹⁸⁰ What is necessary, then, is to develop strategies and resources for preventing identity’s dependence on difference from sliding into the drive to fix that identity once and for all through the demonization or disparagement of difference.

Yes, sometimes one set of differences is dangerous to health or to survival. But, nonetheless, the preliminary drive must be to seek relations with other constituencies which do not condemn them merely because their very existences threatens *your* desire to occupy the authoritative center of things. Herder, on my reading, wants us to respect and value difference, but he does not provide enough strategies for ensuring that this affirmative *ethos* towards difference prevails, especially given his insistence on further cultivating national identities. Second, and partially as a result of the first limitation, the forms of national identification Herder advocates are more fraught with danger than he acknowledges (or recognizes). For example, although he opposes militaristic or politically aggressive forms of nationalism, the nationalist sentiment he encourages and the passionate bonds it forges are all too easily mobilized for such purposes. For even if it were true that “fatherlands” do not mobilize against one another without the intervention of the State, it is certainly the case that the affective and emotional bonds forged in the process of collective identification can be powerfully mobilized by state elites, particularly when that identity is understood as the exclusive possession of the nation alone.

¹⁸⁰ William Connolly, *Identity \ Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiv.

As such, for those of us positioned at the mid-point of the second decade of the 21st century, looking back on the 20th century—the most violent century in human history, in which fatherlands most certainly did go to war with one another—and looking ahead to the future possibility of renewed ethno-national conflicts across the globe, such a sanguine view of nationalist sentiment is dangerous indeed. And so we cannot help but feel that Herder is insufficiently alive to the dangers inherent in an emphasis on particularity and group identity.

The point, however, is not so much that Herder should have anticipated the dangers laying in wait in his advocacy of national community but, rather, that if we want to preserve what remains valuable in his thought, we must come to terms with its shortcomings and limitations. In fact, elsewhere in his *oeuvre* Herder gives us reasons to doubt the optimism of the *Letters*. So there is an opportunity here for an immanent critique of sorts: Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, written some two decades prior to *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, can be read as a critique of his later, seemingly-naïve position.

In the *Treatise* Herder argues that conflicts between linguistic groups who share a common territory cannot be explained solely in terms of material needs and disputes. "Hunger and thirst" are important, but

a much hotter spark kindles their fire: *jealousy, feeling of honor, pride in their race and their superiority*. The same liking for family which, turned *inward on itself*, gave strength to the *harmony of a single tribe*, turned *outward from itself*, against another race, produces strength of *dissension, familial hatred!* ... Hence the slogan soon became natural: *Whoever is not with and of us is beneath us!* The foreigner is *worse than us, is a barbarian*... And there the second synonym was ready: *Whoever is not with me is against me. Barbarian and spiteful one! Foreigner, enemy!*¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 151-2.

Thus, in this earlier work Herder recognizes that the part of us that requires sources of belonging may also be the same part that reacts with antipathy towards those outside of our circle of belonging, seeing them as a threat to our way of being. We are too quick to convert differences that do not threaten our health or survival into threatening otherness to be marginalized or eliminated. Indeed, if we think about how fundamental Herder believed the community to which we belong is in shaping our values, beliefs, and sense of self, it should not be surprising that the encounter with difference is often experienced as a threat. One of Herder's primary arguments is that there is no part of the individual that escapes her constitutive attachments to society, which shapes her very sense of self and what she values most dearly. If this is indeed the case, then we have good reason to be worried that strong forms of collective identification may encourage rather than diminish the sources of conflict in the world. If I am what I am *only* by virtue of the collective identity in which I have been raised and nurtured, then protecting that collective identity from perceived threats becomes a matter of first-order importance.

Herder, I think, would argue that his position in these two texts is *not*, in fact, contradictory because the dynamic he identifies in the *Treatise* refers to the sources of group-based conflict at a much earlier stage of man's civilizational development, a stage in which humanity "has more *forces of efficacy* than goods of possessions," with the result that conflicts over national ideals are intensified.¹⁸² Herder seems to be suggesting that within the conditions of modernity, in which we have achieved a higher level of material cultivation and have developed forms of education that

¹⁸² Ibid., 152.

diminish tendencies towards bellicosity, the forces that encourage national hatred will be diminished and thus pose less of a concern. But again, Herder's optimism here is misplaced; if anything, the conditions of life in late-modern and post-colonial societies have intensified the pressures that encourage people to cling to purportedly static collective identities and to see in difference or otherness a threat. Thus, Herder's defense of pluralism remains valuable, even indispensable, but his accounts of identity, community, and belonging need to be rethought in a manner appropriate to the ethical and political demands of the contemporary condition.

Chapter 3

W. E. B. Du Bois and the Romantic Vision: Race and Democratic Development

A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay. "The problem of the twentieth century," wrote Du Bois around sixty years ago, "is the problem of the color line." A fearful and delicate problem, which compromises, when it does not corrupt, all the American efforts to build a better world—here, there, or anywhere. It is for this reason that what white Americans think they believe in must now be reexamined. What one would not like to see again is the consolidation of peoples on the basis of their color. But as long as we in the West place on color the value that we do, we make it impossible for the great unwashed to consolidate themselves according to any other principle. Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality. But this is a distinction so extremely hard to make that the West has not been able to make it yet.

—James Baldwin¹

The nineteenth was the first century of human sympathy,—the age when half wonderingly we began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself; when clodhoppers and peasants, and tramps and thieves, and millionaires and—sometimes—Negroes, became throbbing souls whose warm pulsing life touched us so nearly that we half gasped with surprise, crying, "Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of Hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?" And then all helplessly we peered into those Other-worlds, and wailed, "O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?"

—W. E. B. Du Bois²

Introduction

Prophecy is a risky business, one that social scientists usually do well to steer clear of, but W. E. B. Du Bois's prophetic warning, delivered over a century ago, still rings hauntingly true today. "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (*SBF* 61). Through his analysis of the causes and consequences of

¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 103-4.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997), 165-6. Hereafter cited in text as (*SBF*).

the “color-line” Du Bois highlights the intertwined legacies of the emergence of modernity, the elaboration of racial hierarchy, and the struggle for freedom; he challenges the commonplace assumption that past and present manifestations of racism in the United States are anomalous deviations with no significant bearing on the fundamental character of the American polity; and he urges his readers to confront and contest ongoing processes of racialization that disable democratic life. To read his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is to be affected by its tragic account of American history and its arresting portrayal of the destructive legacies of racial slavery. Du Bois invites his readers to step behind the “veil” engendered by the color-line, “raising it that [they] may view faintly its deeper recesses” and begin to grasp “the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century” (*SBF* 34). His subsequent depiction of life behind the veil has exerted an undeniable and lasting influence on how scholars and activists understand the social, political, and existential challenges facing black folks in a racialized environment that, as James Baldwin put it, “has evolved no terms for [their] existence, has made no room for [them].”³

Indeed, Cornel West deems Du Bois “*the* towering black scholar of the twentieth century:” a “great titan of black emancipation” and “the brook of fire through which we all must pass” before undertaking “any examination of black strivings in American civilization.”⁴ With the “remarkable subtlety of his mind” Du Bois thematized the tragic consequences of racial hierarchy in modern life, and with

³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 30.

⁴ Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999) 88; 101.

the “undeniable sincerity of his heart” he powerfully and evocatively portrayed the complex strivings and sorrows of black life in America.⁵ His life and copious writings have thus left an indelible mark on our understanding of racial politics, and they continue to serve as crucial sources of insight and inspiration for those engaged in the struggle against racism and other barriers to human flourishing. And yet in the end, West argues that Du Bois “falls short of the mark” and cannot provide the theoretical resources necessary to respond effectively to the most pressing economic, political, and social problems of our current historical conjuncture.⁶

For West, this inadequacy stems less from the shortcomings of any particular concept in the Du Boisian framework and more from the fact that Du Bois put forth an “inadequate interpretation of the human condition,” one that failed to come to terms with the tragic (or ‘tragi-comic’) sense of life and “the sheer absurdity” of existence.⁷ According to West, Du Bois’s commitment to an *Enlightenment worldview* carried with it a set of unexamined presuppositions regarding reason, progress, and civilization that both limited the scope of his critical vision and prevented him from immersing himself in the rich currents of everyday black life. Relating this Enlightenment worldview to Du Bois’s cultural elitism, advocacy of the Talented Tenth, Victorian strategies for social uplift, and worldly optimism, West argues that we need a different perspective, one that disrupts the self-certainty of the Enlightenment ethos and acknowledges the tragic terms of human existence.

The tragic plight and absurd predicament of Africans here and abroad requires a more profound interpretation of the human condition—one that

⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 89.

goes far beyond the false dichotomies of expert knowledge versus mass ignorance, individual autonomy versus dogmatic authority and self-mastery versus intolerant tradition. Our tragicomic times require more democratic concepts of knowledge and leadership which highlight human fallibility and mutual accountability; notions of individuality and contested authority which stress dynamic traditions; and ideals of self-realization within participatory communities.⁸

Given our current political impasse—where progressive and emancipatory possibilities for the future appear increasingly foreclosed, especially for racialized populations struggling against subtle and systematic forms of racial domination—it has become all the more necessary to confront and come to terms with the tragic sense of life. Thus, Du Bois may indeed be a “titan,” but what is needed is not so much the triumphant, soaring vision of a titan but rather the everyday, tragic wisdom of “sorrowful, suffering, yet striving ordinary black folk.”⁹

I follow West’s lead by exploring how different worldviews, or “interpretations of the human condition,” suggest differing accounts of the historical and contemporary significance of race, the sources of political community, and the best means available for countering racialized structures of domination. Although I agree with West regarding the contemporary relevance of the tragic vision of an uncertain and, at times, absurd world that exceeds our best efforts at mastery, knowledge, or control, our respective notions of the tragic and its theoretical-political significance diverge in some critical respects. Whereas West’s tragicomic sense of life is rooted in a (prophetic) Christian worldview, in Chapter 4 I develop and commend a decidedly Nietzschean conception of the tragic, one that

⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁹ Ibid., 90.

simultaneously challenges the necessity of appealing to divine redemption and affirms the need to promote individual and collective strategies for warding off resignation and despair in the face of meaninglessness and suffering. Such a vision has its origins in the Theban plays of Sophocles, from which Nietzsche drew inspiration, but it also finds expression in the writings of some of the most prominent thinkers associated with modern black political thought, including Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, and James Baldwin, among others. It also resonates in some ways with *The Souls of Black Folk*, which sees racial hierarchy as generative of an ongoing social tragedy that extends throughout the body politic. As we shall see, however, the fundamental worldview underlying that text, and Du Bois's early political thought in general, is romantic and providential rather than tragic.

Thus far in this study we have examined the philosophical foundations of Johann Herder's romantic vision and seen how his thought developed in response to various aspects of Enlightenment philosophy as he understood it. Then, using the Kant/Herder debate regarding race, reason, and universal history as a starting point, we discussed some of the benefits and limitations of approaching racial politics from a romantic perspective, with Kant's Enlightenment vision serving as something of a negative case illustrating the dangers of failing to heed Herder's pluralistic insights. I will now continue to assess the romantic vision and connect it to some of the issues surrounding the theorization of racial politics and democratic life in pluralistic societies through a careful reading of some of Du Bois's most influential early writings, especially "The Conservation of Races" (1897). I suggest that although there are indeed good reasons to think of Du Bois as a carrier of an

Enlightenment vision, it may in fact be more productive and illuminating to read him as articulating a romantic vision similar to Herder's. In order to show why this is the case, I trace the affinities between Herder and Du Bois through an analysis of Du Bois's early understanding of race, history, and politics. In so doing, I seek to further highlight the insight, allure, and limitations of a romantic portrayal of history, culture, and the politics of group identification in a pluralistic world.

My claim that the early writings of W. E. B. Du Bois express a romantic worldview rests, in part, on the well-documented similarities between Herder and Du Bois, as well as the influence of German idealist historiography on Du Bois more generally.¹⁰ In "The Conservation of Races" and *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois delineates the nature and scope of black politics through a number of themes and concepts with unmistakable Herderian resonances. I suggest, in particular, that Du Bois can be read as adopting and adapting Herder's notion of *Volksgeist*, the idea that each people (*Volk*) has a unique spirit (*geist*)—an incipient or partially latent collective ethos, the expressive realization of which constitutes that group's historical destiny. Du Bois's romantic vision, like Herder's, does not represent an outright rejection of Enlightenment claims and premises. Rather, it is best seen as an attempt to attenuate some of the universalist pretensions of the Enlightenment's

¹⁰ The literature addressing the Herder – Du Bois connection includes Bernard Bell, "W. E. B. Du Bois's Struggle to Reconcile Folk and High Art," in *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. William L. Andrews (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), 106-22; Ingeborg Solbrig, "Herder and the 'Harlem Renaissance' of Black Culture in America: The Case of the 'Neger-Idyllen'" in *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Volmer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990) 402-14; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 163-5; 171-4, 199; Shamooin Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1995) 105-6, 173-5; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 13-14; 140.

historico-normative gaze by positing an organic social ontology that emphasizes cultural pluralism and highlights the situated and embodied character of human reason, the consequent partiality of all perspectives, and the importance of belonging as an integral aspect of human flourishing. As such, by explicating the affinities between Herder and Du Bois, we can further trace the contours of the romantic vision, highlight its philosophical principles and political implications, and determine what in that vision remains viable and what must be rethought or abandoned.

Although Herder prefers the language of “nation,” whereas Du Bois prefers the language of “race” to name the fundamental units of human diversity, a careful reading of both thinkers reveals that they share a fundamental understanding of the sources of cultural differentiation, the nature of belonging, and the proper conduct of group-based politics. Indeed, both Herder and Du Bois strive to articulate a sociohistorical—rather than biological—theory of what constitutes a “people,” and each endorses a form of *political expressivism* according to which political rule is only legitimate and effective if it expresses the cultural message internal to the collective spirit of the people.¹¹ The terminological difference between the two on this issue can best be understood as a function of the different contexts in which

¹¹ In identifying Du Bois with the tradition of romantic political expressivism, I am following Robert Gooding-Williams’ *In the Shadow of Du Bois*; Gooding-Williams demonstrates that Du Bois shares a common notion of *Volksgeist* with Herder (and Hegel) and explores how this notion of a holistically shared spirit informs Du Bois’s understanding of black politics. Gooding-Williams adopts his notion of political expressivism from Charles Larmore’s *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, which I also draw upon in this dissertation, especially in chapter 1. In many respects, my reading of Du Bois aligns quite closely with Gooding-Williams’s, and I seek to expand upon his work by examining in a more sustained manner the critical affinities between Herder and Du Bois. In so doing, I seek to call attention to some of the democratic aspects and implications of Du Bois’s expressivist view of politics that are elided in Gooding-Williams’s interpretation and his sharp distinction between expressivist and democratic notions of political legitimacy.

they wrote. When Herder was arguing against the race concept, the terms of discourse regarding human diversity had not yet been firmly established. But for Du Bois the terms had been set, even though their meaning remained somewhat open to interpretation and contestation. Rather than arguing against the race concept as such and asserting its fundamental incoherence—as, for example, Frederick Douglass had done—Du Bois used the dominant terms of his day. As he did so, however, he subverted them by making race cultural and dynamic rather than biological and static—and, most importantly, by insisting on the fundamental equality of all peoples and races beneath their apparent differences.

To be clear: I am not claiming that Du Bois's early political thought can be reduced to a reflection of Herder's thought (or German idealist historiography in general), nor am I suggesting that such a reading gives us exclusive access to the philosophical and political contexts that informed Du Bois. Clearly it does not. Above all, W. E. B. Du Bois was a remarkably eclectic, creative, and *original* thinker. As such, I doubt that any one approach can fully account for the diversity of his influences or the originality of his thought. Indeed, a quick perusal of the literature elucidating Du Bois's famous idea of *double consciousness*—the notion that the African American psyche is split between two different ethno-cultural identities and perspectives on the world that must be reconciled in a higher unity—attests to the likely impossibility of establishing such a singular reading. Although most scholars would in some broad sense agree that “as an idea and a term double consciousness” was derived by Du Bois “from philosophical discourses on European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, as well as from medical and psychological

discourses on personality disorders,” this is more or less where the agreement comes to an end.¹² For example, Du Bois’s account of double consciousness has been read as locating him primarily “among the pantheon of pragmatist thinkers”;¹³ or as an emanation of nineteenth-century black nationalism;¹⁴ or as expressing a set of neo-Lamarckian assumptions about race and evolution that pervaded American social-science at the turn of the century;¹⁵ or as attesting to Hegel’s decisive influence on Du Bois.¹⁶ My goal is not to displace or disprove any of the broader interpretive frameworks in which these various interpretations are situated. I aim instead to add another voice to the conversation—one that will speak to the

¹² Bernard Bell, “Genealogical Shifts in Du Bois’s Discourse on Double Consciousness as the Sign of African American Difference,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*, eds. Bernard Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1996), 90; see also Dickson D. Bruce, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness,” *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (1992): 299-309. For a dissenting voice, which argues that “Du Boisian double consciousness was not so much a usable concept” requiring philosophical elucidation “as an exquisitely crafted metaphor” that served specific political purposes, see Ernest Allen, “Du Boisian Double-Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument,” *The Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 2 (2002): 233.

¹³ Eddie S. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2. The most prominent and influential account along these lines can be found in Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 138-150; for a reading of Du Bois’s “Conservation” as employing a Jamesian notion of race, see Bernard R. Boxill, “Du Bois on Cultural Pluralism,” in Bell, Grosholz, and Stewart, *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, 57-86. For a critique of West’s argument in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, see Robert Gooding-Williams, “Evading Narrative Myth, Evading Prophetic Pragmatism,” in *Look, A Negro! – Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2006), 69-86. For an interesting critique of Boxill that incorporates some of his insights, see Ronald R. Sundstrom, “Douglass and Du Bois’s *Der Schwarze Volksgeist*,” in *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 32-52.

¹⁴ Wilson J. Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W. E. B. Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism,” in Andrews, *Critical Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois*.

¹⁵ Adolph Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91-125.

¹⁶ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 401-13; Robert Gooding-Williams, “Philosophy of History and Social Critique in *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *Social Science Information* 26 no. 1 (1987): 99-114; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 134-137; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography of a Race*, 130-140; 171-4; Sandra Adell, *Double-Consciousness / Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 8; 11-28; Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 113-168.

democratic possibilities of romantic expressivism through a Herderian reading of Du Bois.

In proposing that we explore critical affinities between Herder and Du Bois, then, I am not claiming that such an approach is capable of producing a singularly authoritative interpretation; instead, I am suggesting that reading Du Bois in relation to the romantic vision articulated by Herder provides a valuable opportunity to reach a more nuanced understanding of an important aspect of Du Bois's early political thought: namely, its multifaceted relationship to European romantic nationalism. Moreover, since Herder's romantic vision also influenced the thinking of a number of prominent twentieth-century African American thinkers—including Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson, the “elder statesmen of the Harlem Renaissance”—on race, (folk-)culture, and collective identification, obtaining a richer sense of the possibilities afforded by that vision is vital for students of black political thought generally speaking.¹⁷ Although romantic nationalism is generally associated with authoritarianism, chauvinism, and imperialism, my reading of both Herder and Du Bois reveals that even their writings that resonate with what we would today call authoritarianism, chauvinism, and imperialism also bear traces of underlying democratic ideals and egalitarian commitments. Indeed, as we have seen, Herder's romantic account of national development was not connected to—and, in fact, vehemently opposed—the ideology and practice of Empire. Furthermore, on my reading, both “Conservation”

¹⁷ Bernard Bell, “Folk Art and the Harlem Renaissance,” *Phylon* 36 no. 2 (1975): 155.

and *Souls* express a worldview and political orientation closer to Herder's than to many other nationalist thinkers often associated with Du Bois.

Although scholars are correct in noting the problematic aspects of Du Bois's relationship to European romantic nationalism and his endorsement of a vanguard politics, more attention needs to be paid to the varying political significance of different versions of the romantic vision as well as different versions of nationalist thought and practice. Doing so will give us a better sense of what Du Bois drew from the romantic vision and how it both empowered and hindered his effort to develop an emancipatory black politics under conditions of racial subordination.

"Bismarck Was My Hero"

In 1888 W. E. B. Du Bois, then only 20 years old, graduated from Fisk University and chose a somewhat surprising topic for his commencement address: Otto von Bismarck, the "Iron Chancellor" of the Second German Reich, whom Du Bois described as the "the most... autocratic statesman of modern times."¹⁸ Nonetheless, "Bismarck was my hero," Du Bois would later explain, for he "had made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples. He had dominated the whole development with his strength until he crowned an emperor at Versailles."¹⁹ This greatly impressed the young Du Bois and "foreshadowed" for him "the kind of thing

¹⁸ Du Bois's Fisk Commencement Address remains unpublished, though it can be found among the Du Bois papers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Unfortunately, I do not at this time have the resources to access this collection, so my reading of Du Bois's "Bismarck" is based on his reflections on it in *Dusk of Dawn* and *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* as well as the interpretations of Du Bois scholars, including Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 77-78; Zamir, *Dark Voices*: 30-31; Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*: 10, 14, 20-21, 32.

¹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1984), 32; see also W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 126.

that American Negroes must do, marching forth with strength and determination under trained leadership.”²⁰

As the end of the nineteenth century drew near and the promise of Reconstruction faded to a distant memory, Du Bois thought that “American Negroes,” despite their considerable achievements since Emancipation, were a culturally backward, economically underdeveloped, and politically fragmented people in need of collective uplift in order to enter the modern world on equal standing with the developed nations. In this context the case of Bismarck provided a measure of hope for Du Bois: Bismarck transformed an underdeveloped people and carried them to world-historical prominence through visionary leadership and unity of purpose. What attracted Du Bois to Bismarck, then, was what the Iron Chancellor represented: the possibility of worldly salvation for the Negro race through the *vitalism* of heroic political leadership.²¹ “The life of this powerful Chancellor,” Du Bois told his audience, “illustrates the power and purpose, the force of an idea... It shows what a man can do if he will.”²² More than that though, it suggested what African Americans must do in order to overturn white supremacy and overcome the historical legacies of racial slavery: follow the example set forth by the German people and submit to the resolute leadership and rigorous discipline of a black Bismarck.

Du Bois’s faith in heroic leadership as the engine of progress capable of unifying and uplifting the masses was most likely inspired by the writings of

²⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 32.

²¹ Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 30-31.

²² Du Bois, “Bismarck,” quoted in Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 77.

Thomas Carlyle, though “the speech must also be located within a wider field of nineteenth-century obsessions with hero worship and heroic vitalism.”²³ Du Bois had previously referenced Carlyle in an editorial for the *Fisk Herald* (March 1888) in which he chided his Fisk classmates for their lack of dedication to individual and collective advancement.²⁴ And two years later while at Harvard he wrote a speech in which he endorsed “Carlyle’s resistance to the dangers of industrialization and his opposition to the values of a commercial society.”²⁵ At the time of his Fisk commencement address, however, Du Bois seems to have been more interested in Carlyle’s philosophy of history than in his ethical critique of modernity. In *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle argues that “Universal History... is at bottom the History of the Great Men” who are “the leaders of men, these great ones,” who give shape to the world we live in, which can be understood as “the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s

²³ Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 31.

²⁴ At the time, Du Bois “was undoubtedly ignorant of Carlyle’s infamous fulminations against blacks in ‘The Nigger Question’ as incapable of surviving outside of slavery” (Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 75). Du Bois did not fully immerse himself in Carlyle’s writings until he was a student at Harvard, where Barrett Wendell encouraged his interest in Carlyle (Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976], 66). But even at Harvard Du Bois retained his admiration for Carlyle, and it was not Carlyle’s personal politics that interested him. Instead he was drawn to Carlyle’s critique of the corroding effects of industrialization and his stress on the importance of countering these by establishing an ethical culture, which could only be achieved through the determined leadership of an small elite composed of a “natural” aristocracy of talent and virtue. Scholarly works that address Carlyle’s influence on Du Bois include Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination*, 33, 40, 44-45, 66-67; Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 18, 31, 65-66; Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 25-28, 54.

²⁵ Zamir, *Dark Voices* 65.

history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.”²⁶ In short, “the History of the world is but the Biography of great men.”²⁷

According to Carlyle, who also counted Bismarck among his heroes, Great Men are characterized by remarkable “*sincerity*, a deep, great, genuine sincerity”; by tremendous moral purpose and “force direct out of God’s own hand”; and by penetrating vision that “flashes direct into the heart of things, and *sees* the truth of them.”²⁸ By marshaling these divine qualities Great Men forge a special connection with the masses, inspiring them with a messianic power to control events and literally *make history*. On this view a *Volk* is typically nothing more than “dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of Heaven that shall kindle it”—waiting, that is, for the Great Man, “the lightning, without which the fuel never would have burnt.”²⁹ Similarly, Du Bois generally believed, as he later wrote in *Souls*, that “progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push, surging forward of the exceptional man, and the lifting of his duller brethren slowly and painfully to his vantage ground” (*SBF* 94). He therefore argued that black uplift could only be achieved with the enlightened guidance of cultured elites—the so-called talented tenth—“who by nature and training are the aristocracy and leaders of the blacks” (*SBF* 144). “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois explains, “rises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress.”³⁰

²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45, 13, 68.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 193. This essay is not included in the Blight and Gooding-Williams edition of *Souls* I otherwise cite.

Of course, both the idea that (black) politics consists of the rule of an aristocratic elite and the underlying notion that history is made by the actions of Great Men through processes largely independent of the will of the masses are very much at odds with Herder's interest in folk cultures and his rejection of Great Men approaches to history. This would seem to challenge my contention that Du Bois's early political writings articulate a romantic worldview that resonates with Herder's. However, it is important not to overstate the differences between Herder and Carlyle. For one, as Hill Shine has demonstrated through an examination of Carlyle's notebooks, correspondences, and published writings, not only did Carlyle read Herder intermittently between 1823 and 1832, "his interest in Herder's writings increased with his knowledge of them," and "he at one time entertained thoughts of writing an essay on Herder as a figure in the history of German literature."³¹ This, combined with a number of similarities of thought between the two, gives ample reason to presume that Herder was in fact an important influence on Carlyle's thought.

Both thinkers can broadly be classified as romantic in orientation, a fact that itself attests to the range of possibilities and political positions a romantic orientation may accommodate. Both share a generally idealist view of human history; both see nature and history alike as organic wholes revelatory of divinity; and both conceive of individuals and collectivities as expressive wholes striving toward the realization of an internal ideal. Where Herder cannot be said to have

³¹ Hill Shine, "Carlyle's Early Writings and Herder's *Ideen*: The Concept of History," in *Booker Memorial Studies: Eight Essays on Victorian literature in memory of John Manning Booker*, ed. Hill Shine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), 16.

influenced Carlyle, and the main point where their theories of history diverge, is with respect to Carlyle's hero worship and notion of the heroic in history. While Herder certainly discusses the importance of group leaders—the best of whom, he says, are “noble, great, wise men” purposively created by Providential Nature to lead and govern³²—in the final analysis “many of the implications of Carlyle's hero-concept are not apparent... in Herder.”³³ And while “the theory of heroes is only one aspect of Carlyle's theory of history,”³⁴ it is also its most significant and fundamental one. In short, Carlyle sees history as the work of Great Men and its study as a series of biographies; Herder sees history as the work of ordinary people and its study as a series of cultural hermeneutics.

There are, no doubt, elements of both of these attitudes in Du Bois's early political thought. In some texts Du Bois strikes a resoundingly Carlylean tone, particularly, for example, in “The Talented Tenth,” which begins with the assertion that “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”³⁵ But in many others he seems to operate with a “different understanding of historical process, one that repudiated the bourgeois, individualist ethos of his day; that, rejecting any Carlylean notion of history as hero worship, saw it as the creation of ordinary folk.”³⁶ I contend that despite “his occasional expressions of jarring authoritarianism,” it is ultimately this latter understanding of historical process that

³² Johann Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 364.

³³ Shine, “Carlyle's Early Writings and Herder's *Ideen*,” 23 fn. 47.

³⁴ Grazyna Siedlecka, “Carlyle's Conception of History” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 5 (1974): 180.

³⁵ Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” 189.

³⁶ Thomas C. Holt, “W. E. B. Du Bois's Archaeology of Race: Re-Reading ‘The Conservation of Races,’” in *W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and the City: The Philadelphia Negro and its Legacy*, ed. Michael B. Katz and Thomas J. Sugrue (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 68.

provides the conceptual framework informing Du Bois's political vision and mode of sociohistorical investigation in "Conservation" and *Souls*.³⁷ In other words, although some Carlylean elements persist in Du Bois's account of black politics, these were folded into, and tempered by, a Herderian understanding of human history as shaped by the progressive and differential development of distinct peoples, each striving toward the expressive self-realization of a unique spiritual message. As such, while Du Bois asserts that "History is but the record of ... group-leadership" (*SBF* 65), he also contends that an undue focus on the individual greatness of "the Pharaohs, Caesars, Toussaints, and Napoleons of history" leads us to "forget the vast races of which they were *but epitomized expressions*."³⁸ By figuring leaders in this way, Du Bois signals a shift away from Carlylean Great Men and suggests that we ought to focus first on the people themselves if we want to understand the underlying forces behind historical development. Only once we have come to a sympathetic understanding of their spiritual life-world can we begin to make sense of the specific ways in which a people's expressive self-realization emerges out of a dynamic interplay between their strivings and the leadership of a gifted elite.

In fact, *Souls* is relatively uninterested in charting the exploits of Great Men; instead it takes up the task of sympathetically rendering the everyday experiences of African Americans and the spiritual life-world they inhabit so "that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk" (*SBF* 44). In much the same way that Herder believed real sociohistorical understanding involved grasping the distinct

³⁷ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 26.

³⁸ W.E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races" in *Souls*, 230-1; emphasis added. Hereafter cited in text as (CR).

character or spirit of the people, Du Bois insists that “any clear conception of the group life [of a community or region] taken as a whole” cannot encompass “physical, economic, and political relations” alone, but must also include “the *atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling*, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life” (*SBF* 143, emphasis added). It is in this context that Du Bois repeatedly invokes sympathy as the appropriate means for apprehending the quotidian realm of “thought and feeling.” In the final chapter of *Souls* he even “reinterprets in Afro-American terms Herder’s ideas on the importance of folk music as a window into the souls of a people,”³⁹ declaring that the “Sorrow Songs”—i.e., the folk music of the Negro slave—“are the articulate message of the slave to the world” and the most authentic expression of her spiritual strivings (*SBF* 187).⁴⁰

In short, the underlying worldview and mode of sociohistorical understanding employed in both “Conservation” and *Souls* correspond in a number of fundamental respects with Herder’s philosophy of history and culture, even though these texts also express elitist sentiments and aristocratic commitments that seem to be at odds with Herder’s egalitarianism and interest in folk cultures. It is worth recalling, however, that there is an element of mild elitism in Herder’s political thought as well, for he believed that a small group of dedicated elites—“aristodemocrats,” as he called them—must guide the initial stages of a *Volk’s* social and political development [*Bildung*].⁴¹ As such, while Du Bois’s doctrine of the

³⁹ Bell, “W. E. B. Du Bois’s Struggle to Reconcile Folk and High Art,” in Andrews, *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois*, 115.

⁴⁰ Discussing the character of the Sorrow Songs, Du Bois notes that “the same voice sings here that sings in the German folk-song” (*SBF* 191).

⁴¹ Herder explains the relationship between the *people* and the aristodemocrats thusly: “There exists in the state only a single class: the *people* (not the rabble)—to it belongs the king as much as the

talented tenth has been pointed to as evidence that “his definition of ‘folk’ was less radical than that of Herder,”⁴² the difference is not as dramatic as it first seems. Both Herder and Du Bois conceive of *Volk* as an organic entity defined and unified by a collectively shared spirit that ineluctably shapes the people who compose it, and both see progress as occurring through the realization of each *Volk*’s distinct spiritual message. But both thinkers also held that “backward” peoples, including their own, needed the enlightened leadership of a small group of sympathetic cultural elites who could educate and uplift them.⁴³ Importantly, however, as each portrayed it, the ultimate purpose of an aristo-democratic politics of group development was not to establish a permanent system of hierarchical rule and control but, rather, to prepare the people for self-rule and democratic life. This shared position stands in marked contrast to Carlyle, who greeted the prospect of popular rule with a mixture of revulsion and contempt, finding it to be fundamentally at odds with the rule of Great Men.

farmer, each in his place, in the circle destined for him. Nature creates noble, great, wise men, education and occupations form their abilities—these are heads and leaders of the people (aristodemocrats) arranged by God and state. Any other application or division of this excellent name is and should ever remain a term of abuse” (*Letters Concerning the Progress of Humanity*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 364). For Herder, the ultimate purpose of this elite-driven process is to reach a level of cultivation (*Bildung*) at which the coercive apparatus of the state is no longer necessary for ensuring order or regulating behavior. The state would then be replaced by an organic ordering of life that would eliminate previous forms of subordination and hierarchical control. For a discussion of this aspect of Herder’s political thought that relates it to his project more generally, see F. M. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 76-83.

⁴² Rampersand, *Art and Imagination of Du Bois*, 74.

⁴³ As we shall see below, it is unclear whether Du Bois believes such leadership must always come from within the group in question, or if this is only the case given certain socio-political conditions.

Regarding the political ironies inherent in his admiration for the “Iron Chancellor”—who, for example, organized the 1884 Berlin Conference at which the imperial powers of Europe carved up Africa for colonial consumption—Du Bois later acknowledged that his choice of Bismarck “in itself showed the abyss between my education and the truth in the world.”⁴⁴ The “proudly conventional”⁴⁵ curriculum at Fisk—with its emphasis on reinforcing a Christian worldview, embrace of European high culture, and avoidance of anti-idealist thinkers like Marx—likely reinforced the Victorian values imparted to Du Bois through his New England upbringing. So he continued to see the world primarily through the reigning prejudices and assumptions of his day. Reflecting on his Fisk commencement address half a century later, Du Bois explained that at the time he had neither the conceptual tools to grasp the dynamics of imperialism nor the critical perspective needed to identify the contradictions of European civilization:

I did not understand at all, nor had my history courses led me to understand, anything of current European intrigue, of the expansion of European power into Africa, of the Industrial revolution built on slave trade and now turning into Colonial Imperialism; of the fierce rivalry among white nations for controlling the profits from colonial raw material and labor—of all this I had no clear conception. I was blithely European and imperialist in outlook; democratic as democracy was conceived in America.⁴⁶

Of course, Du Bois’s formal education did not end with his graduation from Fisk; he attended Harvard University, where he received his bachelor’s degree *cum laude* in 1890 and his doctorate in history in 1895, becoming the first African American to

⁴⁴ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 32.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 77.

⁴⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 32.

earn a PhD from Harvard. While at Harvard he imbibed a rich and varied assortment of ideas and intellectual approaches, including the philosophical pragmatism of William James, the post-Kantian idealisms of Josiah Royce and George Herbert Palmer, the metaphysical naturalism of George Santayana, and the rigorous, empirical research method of the historian Albert Bushnell Hart. He also spent three formative semesters from 1892 to 1894 at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, studying, as he had done at Harvard, under some of the most influential scholars of his day.⁴⁷ While in Berlin, which “was in the midst of a Hegelian revival”⁴⁸ at the time, Du Bois took courses in political science, economics, and the humanities, and he almost certainly encountered Herder’s philosophy in Wilhlem Dilthey’s course “History of the 18th Century” and in a “Historical Seminar” taught by Professor Lenz.⁴⁹ Du Bois was also influenced through coursework with Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, who were leading figures in the development of the German historical school of economics, which attacked classical liberalism and laissez-faire economics and emphasized the importance of economic organization as

⁴⁷ Du Bois completed the necessary work to receive his PhD in economics from the University of Berlin in only three semesters and had the support of his principal advisers, Schmoller and Wagner, as well as the support of the dean of the philosophical faculty, but he did not receive his doctorate, due to a “combination of the adventitious and the sinister. Despite Schmoller’s and Wagner’s support and the dean’s assurances, spirited objections from the senior professor of chemistry... precluded Du Bois’s exemption from the requirement of four completed semesters before a student was permitted to stand for the doctoral examination” (Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 145). This meant that Du Bois needed an additional semester of support from the Slater Fund, which had been funding his studies in Berlin, to finish his degree. The Slater Fund, however, declined to extend Du Bois’s time in Berlin, and he did not receive his PhD (at present, there are no known copies of his German doctoral thesis).

⁴⁸ Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 407.

⁴⁹ Solbrig, “Herder and the ‘Harlem Renaissance,’” 402-3.

the historically achieved expression of the ethical attitudes and ingrained cultural beliefs of a society.⁵⁰

Perhaps most importantly, however, Du Bois was deeply impressed by the lectures of “the fire-eating Pan-German” chauvinist and authoritarian nationalist Heinrich von Treitschke, who occupied the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Schmoller and Wagner.⁵¹ Whereas the German historical school critiqued the inequities of the capitalist system and argued that empirical research ought to be oriented toward effecting social justice, Treitschke shared Carlyle’s low estimation of the masses and “had little time for socialism or for liberal politics based on the sovereignty of democratic ideals.”⁵² Despite the fact that Du Bois was present when Treitschke declared “during a lecture on America: ‘*Die Mullatin sind niedrig! Sie fühlen sich niedrig.*’ [Mulattoes are inferior; they feel themselves inferior],” he admired the “fiery” Prussian and found him to be “by far the most interesting of the professors” he encountered at the University of Berlin.⁵³

Du Bois discovered a kindred intellectual spirit of sorts in Treitschke, whose “outlook,” he wrote, was “that of the born aristocrat who has something of the Carlyle contempt of leveling democracy.”⁵⁴ But it was not only the aristocratic outlook that appealed to Du Bois, for Treitschke—an unabashed nationalist who desired to see Germany become an imperial power through the seizure of foreign territories—also represented the growing spirit of German national pride that Du

⁵⁰ Alex Schafer, “W. E. B. Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide in American Progressivism, 1892-1909,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001): 934.

⁵¹ Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 162.

⁵² Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 44.

⁵³ Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 165, 164.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

Bois hoped African Americans would one day experience. "When I heard my German companions sing '*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt*' I realized that they *felt something* I had never felt and perhaps never would. *The march of soldiers, the saluting of magnificent uniforms, the martial music and rhythm of movements stirred my senses.*"⁵⁵ In fact, Du Bois took such pleasure in the sight of Kaiser Wilhelm II parading through the Brandenburg Gate, "riding ahead of his white and golden troops on prancing chargers," that he trimmed his moustache so as to emulate the Kaiser's.⁵⁶

Du Bois was enthralled by these displays of national pride and power, perhaps because they resonated so strongly with his own dreams for a greater future for his race. He also came to recognize, however, some of the dangers lurking within such nationalistic sentiments. "If I a stranger was thus influenced," he wondered, "what about the youth of Germany?"⁵⁷ Might such an influence have a dark side? How might their senses be stirred? What desires and attachments might arise? At the core of his unease was his growing awareness of the conflict between his racial identity and his admiration for Euro-American culture. Watching the Kaiser, he "began to feel that dichotomy which all my life has characterized my thought: how far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country? And when these loyalties diverge, where shall my soul find refuge?"⁵⁸

As Du Bois continued to grapple with this paradox, his vision of the world also continued to be altered and revised. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects

⁵⁵ Ibid., 168-9. Emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

of his long career as a scholar and activist was the way in which he continually transformed himself intellectually and politically in his search for a solution to America's—and the world's—tragic racial dilemma. Over time Du Bois adopted a wide range of political ideologies and approaches, moving from the posture of a detached social scientist to that of an engaged propagandist, from a form of cultural separatism to integration and back again, from liberal civil rights activism to committed communism, and from a vision of a black elites advancing the interests of unlettered and uninformed black masses to Pan-African socialism.

Nonetheless, despite his continuous and complex intellectual development, key aspects of the Fisk commencement address remained central to Du Bois's political thought, at least up to and probably through his Marxist turn in the 1930s and 1940s. Two features, in particular, would persist in his thought and exert considerable influence on subsequent generations of scholars and activists.⁵⁹ The first was his implicit endorsement of the collectivist ideal of an organic racial community unified by a common spirit or essence. In fact, this tendency towards organic collectivism was reinforced by his encounters with nationalism, romanticism, and idealism at Cambridge and Berlin, as well as through his interactions with prominent black nationalists such as Alexander Crummell and Edward Blyden, who themselves had been influenced by European nationalism.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 167.

⁶⁰ It has been suggested by Wilson J. Moses that "while it is probably true that Du Bois was influenced to some extent directly by German nationalism, it is just as likely that his ideas on race were informed by direct and indirect contacts with the ideas of such early Christian black nationalists as Blyden and Crummell, who admitted to European influences themselves" (Moses, *The Golden Age of Racism* [Hamden: Arhon Books, 1978], 133). Such an insight is important for understanding the development of Du Bois's thought in its proper context and ought to temper the tendency to interpret Du Bois solely with reference to (white) American pragmatism and European romanticism. Indeed, a

The second was his elite-oriented conception of progress and corresponding depiction of “African American politics as a practice of group leadership, and group leadership as a form of rule or governance”⁶¹ that establishes the proper tactical and moral coordinates for black politics. As Robert Gooding-Williams shows, these are the basic ideational components of Du Bois’ politics of expressive self-realization, and so if we want to assess that political vision and its implications, it is important to attend closely to Du Bois’s understanding of political leadership and racial community.

Du Bois’s politics, however, are notoriously difficult to pin down—not only because he was an intellectual polyglot who drew from such a wide array of traditions and approaches, but also because there are real tensions in his thought, tensions that sometimes give rise to incongruous expressions of principle or purpose. Du Bois was, I suspect, often genuinely at odds with himself over elite versus radical democratic formations of a people, and this accounts for a great deal of the conceptual and political confusion his early work solicits. This is a common enough assertion regarding the constitutive tensions animating Du Bois’s early political thought; what I want to challenge is the way in which these tensions are typically understood as emanating from a conflict between his romantic authoritarianism and enlightened liberal individualism. I suggest instead that the conflict between his elitism and his egalitarianism can be seen as playing out within

number of recent works have explicitly sought, in various ways, to re-situate Du Bois’s early writings within the context of post-abolition *black* political and intellectual movements and debates. See, for example, Wilson J. Moses, “Culture, Civilization, and Decline of the West: The Afro-Centrism of W. E. B. Du Bois,” in Bell et al., *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, 243-60; Sundstrom, “Douglass and Du Bois’s”; and Robert Bernasconi, “‘Our Duty To Conserve’: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Philosophy of History in Context,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (2009): 519-40.

⁶¹ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 9.

the romantic vision itself. In other words, the romantic vision is not just a storehouse of authoritarian supplies: it also offers democratic armaments as well. Indeed, in the penultimate section of this chapter I aim to show that there are genuine democratic implications and possibilities in Du Bois's political expressivism that Gooding-Williams himself does not acknowledge.

According to Arnold Rampersad and David Levering Lewis (among others), Du Bois's affinity for organic collectivism and his admiration for the likes of Bismarck and Treitschke are evidence not only of a desire for a better future for his race but also of a deep distrust of the masses, a fascination with the symbols of power, and an antidemocratic yearning for order and control. As Lewis puts it, Du Bois began "wading in the waters of authoritarian romanticism"⁶² at Fisk and remained, to some extent, within that current for many years. Rampersad, with reference to Du Bois' admiration for Treitschke, suggests that

It was perfectly consistent with Du Bois' thought that he should be fascinated by this *romantic authoritarianism or incipient fascism*. The idea of a man such as Bismarck welding a historically disparate people like the Germans through the force of his will and personality, converting chaos into a strong political entity, intrigued Du Bois... The romantic vision of the state, with its stress on the authentic *geist*, spirit, or soul of the nation, appealed for a long time to Du Bois, as it tends to appeal to someone who is obsessed by his people's historic deprivation and disunity and who yearns for a greater national or racial future. Du Bois was able to brush aside the full meaning of the fact that Treitschke once defamed against mulattoes in his presence. *Romantic authoritarian nationalism is more than sympathetic to racism and racist oppression. The seed of Treitschke's belief that mulattoes are inferior fell from the same plant that would eventually bear the evil flower of Hitler's genocide.* Although Du Bois never succumbed completely to romantic nationalist authoritarianism, strains of its ideology persisted in his thought for much of his life.⁶³

⁶² Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 75.

⁶³ Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, 45, emphasis added.

There is, no doubt, a good measure of truth in this assessment, but we must be careful, I think, not to overstate the extent to which Du Bois embraced the allures of romantic *authoritarianism*. And we must also be careful, I think, not to assume that the scope of Du Bois's romantic vision reduces solely to a chauvinistic expression of authoritarian yearning.

In contrast to Treitschke, Du Bois believed in the fundamental equality of the different races or nations; he never supported the domination of one people by another; and he avowed the importance of democratic principles and practices, despite his belief in the indispensability of elite group leadership. As such, the argument of "Conservation" utilizes "the framework of the philosophy of history of the nineteenth century"—as epitomized in Treitschke—"while at the same time subverting the racist purposes to which it had previously been used."⁶⁴ Even in his Fisk commencement address the endorsement of Bismarck was accompanied by reservations. Du Bois admonished the "Iron Chancellor" for his despotism, authoritarian excesses, and willingness to subjugate "even truth and liberty" and "popular right" to his "ruthless hand of iron."⁶⁵ By sacrificing the principles of right for the consolidation of power, Bismarck rendered "Germany a nation that knows not the first principle of self-government."⁶⁶ Although Bismarck's achievements provided a valuable lesson regarding the importance of unity and visionary leadership, they also served as a "warning lest we *sacrifice a lasting good to temporary advantage*; lest we raise a nation and forget the people, become a

⁶⁴ Bernasconi, "Our Duty to Conserve," 524.

⁶⁵ Du Bois, "Bismarck," quoted in Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 77.

⁶⁶ Du Bois, "Bismarck," quoted in Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 21.

Bismarck and not a Moses.”⁶⁷ In order to develop into a modern people, African Americans needed effective, enlightened leadership, but they also needed to learn the democratic arts of criticism, deliberation, and collective action. Thus it was the example of Moses, *not* Bismarck, that ultimately provided the template for black political leadership. Moses both raised a nation, transforming a fragmented mass of individuals into a unified people, *and* listened to them, “hearkening to their claims and aspirations and preparing them for self-rule—or so Du Bois implies.”⁶⁸ What was needed, then, was not a black Bismarck but a black Moses.⁶⁹

Interestingly enough, Herder himself saw Moses as *the* historical exemplar of political leadership and regarded “the Jews’ government, in fundamental respects, as the model of government in general. The basic aim behind Moses’ constitution, Herder says, was to form a free nation that was bound to nothing but the law itself.”⁷⁰ In fact, it was ancient Israel, more than the nascent German national consciousness of his day, that served as the primary inspiration for Herder’s theory of national development.⁷¹ Moses gathered together the twelve tribes of Israel and unified them into a single nation, instilling in them a sense of shared purpose and collective identification so as to foster a “spirit of reciprocity capable of engendering a social fabric permeated by widely shared overarching interests ... in which laws rather than men assume supremacy. ‘Nomocracy’ is the term Herder applies to

⁶⁷ Du Bois, “Bismarck,” quoted in Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 77, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 21.

⁶⁹ At one point in *Souls* Du Bois refers to a particularly successful black community leader as “the tall and powerful black Moses who led the Negroes for a generation, and led them well” (115).

⁷⁰ Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 213.

⁷¹ F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History* (Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University, 1969), 18-21.

Israel's confederation and to the Mosaic 'ground rules' that are to have inspired it."⁷² Much like Rousseau before him, Herder believed that a healthy polity characterized by the rule of law and non-coercive social arrangements requires the cultivation of civic virtue and shared value commitments among the populace. Absent such a spirit of reciprocity, the cooperation necessary for social advance and the promotion of the public good will be lacking; feeling themselves unconnected to a greater whole and unaware of their dependence on the community in which they are embedded for self-realization, individuals will tend to pursue their own (myopic) self-interests rather than align themselves with the norms and laws established by society. For Herder, nationality provided a powerful solution to the problem posed by the invidious and dissociative effects of self-interest, and, as I discussed in the first chapter, much of the importance he placed on conserving national identification stemmed from his belief that it was "the one and only effective cohesive force in socio-political association" and, therefore, the "essential element" of political development and social growth.⁷³

The fundamental objective of group leadership, as exemplified by the prophet-politician Moses, is the creation of a free, self-governing society. According to Herder good leaders are both educators who attend to the holistic development [*Bildung*] of the people and conduits for popular participation and collective action. In guiding the process of socio-political development, leaders must therefore be careful not to rule in an overly authoritarian manner since doing so would hinder democratic development and undermine the very purpose of group leadership. "The

⁷² Ibid., 21.

⁷³ Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, 141.

leader is to shorten our path,” Herder writes, “but he must let us do our own walking; he must not, that is, attempt to carry us lest we become paralysed.”⁷⁴ Successful leaders must have an element of the prophetic vision and charismatic force of Carlylean Great Men, but more importantly they must also be *of*, rather than above, the people; they must represent, *express*, and advance the shared cultural formation that unites the people and shapes their collectively shared spiritual identity—“good government is one that strengthens and preserves the national character.”⁷⁵ Not only will government of this nature spur social progress generally speaking—recall that for Herder “the essence of development is fulfillment, the actualization of that which is latent or germinal,”⁷⁶ in this case a *Volk’s* spiritual message—it also contributes to the realization of a self-sustaining, self-governing society by fostering a robust national consciousness, strong “sense of community, [and] noble pride in not letting oneself be organized by others.”⁷⁷

Nationality is thus a key element of political freedom; the developmental and democratic ideals contained in Herder’s organic theory of the nation are intimately interwoven, and “what Herder chiefly had at heart was political freedom, and... political freedom meant for him first and foremost popular participation.”⁷⁸

I would like to suggest that it was this admixture of developmental and democratic ideals—rather than the allure of incipient fascism—that Du Bois ultimately had in mind when advancing the romantic vision of an organic racial

⁷⁴ Quoted in Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 82.

⁷⁵ Dominic Eggel et al., “Was Herder a Nationalist?” *The Review of Politics* 69 no.1 (2007): 49.

⁷⁶ F.M. Barnard, “Culture and Political Development: Herder’s Suggestive Insights,” *American Political Science Review* 63 no. 2 (June 1969): 384.

⁷⁷ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 377.

⁷⁸ Barnard, “Culture and Political Development,” 394.

community as the foundation for a politics of racial uplift. In *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois describes the period during which he wrote “Conservation” and *Souls* in the following terms: “My attention from the first was focused on democracy and *democratic development* and upon the problem of the admission of my people into the freedom of democracy.”⁷⁹ The young Du Bois believed that rectifying the backward social condition of his race—a necessary but not sufficient condition for securing their full inclusion into American society and “the freedom of democracy”—required group leadership by black elites, but he also insisted that leaders be responsive to democratic criticisms and oriented toward nurturing popular participation and civic engagement. Indeed, one of his primary objections to the leadership of Booker T. Washington concerned its antidemocratic character—i.e., its reliance on silencing or suppressing critical voices within the black community. “The hushing of the criticism of honest opponents,” Du Bois warns, “is a dangerous thing... Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched,—criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led,— this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society” (*SBF* 64-5). In short, “for Du Bois contestation is at the core of democracy,” and this means that (earnest) public debate over ideas and ideals, strategies and tactics, must not only be tolerated but facilitated by black leaders.⁸⁰

To be sure, intraracial criticism may jeopardize solidarity and undermine unified action, but its suppression poses a far graver danger: that black folks will be

⁷⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 28; emphasis added.

⁸⁰ Melvin L. Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 191.

deprived of the practical experiences vital to their democratic development, specifically, in the case of Washington, “of that peculiarly valuable education which a group receives when by search and criticism it finds and commissions its own leaders. The way in which this is done is at once the most elementary and the nicest problem of social growth” (*SBF* 65). As Du Bois saw it, then, leadership that stifles popular participation and silences criticism not only violates democratic norms but also hinders socio-political development, sacrificing “a lasting good to a temporary advantage.” To exclude the masses from political participation on the grounds that they are educationally unfit for democracy is to ensure that they will remain so. “Or, in other words, education is not a prerequisite to political control—political control is the cause of popular education.”⁸¹ Likewise, it is perverse to justify the suppression of conflicting points of view on the grounds that dissent threatens racial unity. The appeal to a common racial identity is not meant to sanction an authoritarian politics; instead it aims to foster a participatory politics enlivened by a sense of shared purpose and civic virtue in which leaders govern in interaction with the governed.

But can the appeal to racial community achieve this purpose? Can democratic participation and respect for individual rights coexist with the forms of communitarianism and elite leadership Du Bois advocates? Does a romantic worldview, which challenges the universalistic and individualistic principles that compose the normative and conceptual core of modern liberalism, tend to support antidemocratic political arraignments? Does accepting its quasi-mystical image of

⁸¹ W.E.B Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 109.

the “people” as an organic entity necessarily entail an acceptance of the logic of racial hierarchy? Or might the romantic vision’s insights regarding the importance of belonging, the constitutive attachments of community, and the plurality of forms of life offer potentially valuable resources for individuals seeking to construct emancipatory political projects under conditions of racial domination?

“The Conservation of Races” and/as Romantic Black Nationalism

Du Bois first presented his now-seminal essay, “The Conservation of Races,” which can be read as “a philosophical prolegomena to *The Souls of Black Folk*,”⁸² on March 5, 1897 in Washington D. C. at the founding meeting of the American Negro Academy. Over the last two to three decades this brief but enigmatic essay has become the subject of a complex and spirited scholarly debate, a great deal of which has been spurred by Anthony Appiah’s claim that “Conservation” expresses a biological “racial vision” and endorses pernicious racist theories that form the conceptual bedrock of racism and racial discrimination.⁸³ The responses to Appiah’s influential critique are varied and wide-ranging, but much of the discussion has sought to draw attention to Du Bois’s (anti-racist) political intent,⁸⁴ to situate the text in its proper historical, intellectual, and political contexts,⁸⁵ or to advance

⁸² Robert Gooding-Williams, “Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois’s ‘The Conservation of Races,’” in Bell et al., *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, 53.

⁸³ Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race” in *“Race,” Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 21-37; Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸⁴ Lucius T. Outlaw, “‘Conserve’ Races?” in Bell et al., *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, 15-38; Gooding-Williams, “Outlaw, Appiah...” in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, 39-56.

⁸⁵ Sundstrom, “Douglass and Du Bois’s,” 32-52; Bernasconi, “‘Our Duty To Conserve,’” 519-540; Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 37-58.

alternative readings of his understanding of race and human history altogether.⁸⁶ Rather than trace in detail the contours of this complex debate, however, I would like to focus on the work of Wilson J. Moses, who analyzes “Conservation” as “the principal document of black nationalist conservatism.”⁸⁷ Professor Moses’s approach is particularly relevant to our purposes because he both foregrounds the importance of organic collectivism in Du Bois’s political thought and reaches a dramatically different conclusion regarding its significance than the one offered here.

According to Moses, black nationalism during its “golden age” from 1850 to 1920 was characterized by a reactionary ideological mixture of racial chauvinism, authoritarian collectivism, and “civilizationism”—an evolutionary conception of historical progress that fetishized Euro-American cultural values as the universal standard of civilizational attainment. Alexander Crummell was a central figure of this movement and the co-founder and president of the American Negro Academy to which Du Bois delivered his address. An early black nationalist leader, Episcopalian minister, and Liberian missionary, Crummell opposed both the radical integrationist ideology of Frederick Douglass and the anti-intellectual, materialist ideology of Booker T. Washington (though both he and Washington endorsed racial uplift and black self-help). Crummell advocated (voluntary) racial separation and espoused what came to be known as “Ethiopianism”—a mystical, messianic vision of history that functioned as a kind of manifest-destiny ideology for African diasporic

⁸⁶ Tommy Lott, “Du Bois’s Anthropological Notion of Race,” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 59-83; Kevin Thomas Miles, “‘One Far Off Divine Event’: ‘Race’ and a Future History in Du Bois,” in Bernasconi and Anderson, *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, 19-31.

⁸⁷ Moses, *Golden Age*, 11.

civilization.⁸⁸ Steeped in the Christian missionary tradition, Crummell tended to equate civilization with Christianity; he thought of African civilization as thoroughly *uncivilized*.⁸⁹ It was, he declared, universally afflicted with “mental and moral benightedness.”⁹⁰ His estimation of most African Americans was much the same, though he did think that a privileged few had acquired the accoutrements of modern (Christian) civilization. This aspect of his thought, combined with his racial chauvinism, lent Crummell’s political ideology a somewhat paradoxical character.⁹¹ On the one hand, in texts such as “The Destined Superiority of the Negro” he declared his love for the Negro race above all others and preached the inevitable, divinely ordained rise of African civilization, as prophesied by Psalms 68:31, “Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” On the other hand, his notion of civilization was itself colonized: he endorsed significant elements of colonialist ideology and argued that Africans needed to be taught the moral values and behavioral norms of modern, Christian civilization. This was primarily to be achieved through various forms of colonization and

⁸⁸ “In summary, Ethiopianism may be defined as the effort of the English-speaking Black or African person to view his past enslavement and present cultural dependency in terms of a broader history of civilization. It serves to remind him that this present scientific technological civilization, dominated by Western Europe for a scant four hundred years, will go under certainly—like all empires of the past. It expresses the belief that the tragic racial experience has profound historical value, that it has endowed the African with moral superiority and made him a seer” (Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism,” 96).

⁸⁹ Crummell spent nearly two decades in Liberia as a missionary for the Episcopalian Church.

⁹⁰ Alexander Crummell, “The Progress of Civilization along the West Coast of Africa,” in *Classical Black Nationalism*, ed. Wilson J. Moses (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 171. Crummell goes on in the same passage to echo Hegel’s view of Africa as outside of world history and demonstrating no historical movement. “So far as *Western* Africa is concerned, there is no history. The long, long centuries of human existence, there, give us no intelligent disclosures. ‘Darkness covered the land, and gross darkness the people’” (171).

⁹¹ Other prominent black nationalists of his era, most notably Edward Blyden and Martin Delany, shared this general pattern of thought.

emigration.⁹² Thus, for Crummell, as for other black nationalists of his day, black politics—whether oriented toward black emigration and the establishment of an independent black nation-state with distinct geographical boundaries, or focused on the creation of separate social, political, and economic institutions for blacks within the United States—was fundamentally a civilizing mission to be conducted under the auspices of a small group of black elites who would be responsible for the cultural uplift and moral edification of the benighted black masses.

Focusing on Crummell's influence on Du Bois, as well as a number of clear textual similarities between "The Conservation of Races" and Crummell's writings, Moses contends that Du Bois's address to the American Negro Academy was a rhetorically powerful but conceptually unimaginative "restatement of a mystical Christian idea that Crummell had long preached, the idea that races are 'the *organisms and ordinance of God*.'" ⁹³ Indeed, when we approach the text from this perspective we encounter a number of elements suggesting that it was, as Moses claims, "carefully crafted to gratify the emotions of the Academy and its founder."⁹⁴ Du Bois rejects Frederick Douglass's belief in the efficacy of political assimilation through racial amalgamation (though he does not reference Douglass by name); he stresses the need for moral reform within the black community; and he asserts "the wide-spread, nay, universal, prevalence of the race idea" in history (CR 230).

⁹² His belief in the necessity for civilizational uplift "even led him to praise for a time the colonizing work of Africa's greatest despoiler, Leopold II, King of the Belgians, for its 'noble imagination'" (Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois* 163).

⁹³ Wilson J. Moses, "Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races' and Its Context: Idealism, Conservatism, and Hero Worship," *The Massachusetts Review* 34, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 284, emphasis added.

⁹⁴ Wilson J. Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 264.

We should keep in mind the immediate political context of the address. Speaking less than a year after the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upholding racial segregation, it is not particularly surprising that Du Bois thought that eschewing collective racial identification in the pursuit of political assimilation held little promise for black folks at that time. Given the Court's validation of Jim Crow and the terrifying proliferation of racial violence and lynchings across the South (amid the North's tacit approval of these developments), racial hierarchy and white supremacy were as thoroughly entrenched in American society at that time as ever. But Du Bois also advanced a broader, more philosophically inflected argument for conserving racial identity. "The history of the world," he declares, "is the history not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history" (CR 230). Racial distinction and differential development represents something like a natural law of historical growth because the race idea is an integrative force that draws people together into distinct groups, each of which develops its own unique spiritual ideal and distinctive standard of human flourishing. Historical progress thus occurs through the development of each race's unique message or gift for the world—"its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer the perfection of human life for which we all long, that 'one far-off Divine event'" (CR 232).⁹⁵

⁹⁵ "One far-off divine event" is an allusion to Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam": "Whereof the man, that with me trod/ This planet, was a noble type/ Appearing ere the times were ripe,/ That friend of mine who lives in God,/ That God, which ever lives and loves,/ One God, one law, one element,/ And one far-off divine event,/ To which the whole creation moves." But this reference also resonates with Herder's notion of *Humanität*, understood as the fullest expression of humanity, which can only be achieved through the development of each *Volk's* unique message.

According to Du Bois, however, the Negro race, unlike most other world-historical peoples, has yet to fully realize its spiritual message; in order to do so it must embark upon a process of collective striving and moral uplift guided by black cultural elites and carried out “by race organization, by race solidarity, [and] by race unity” (CR 234). Du Bois thus envisions a successful black politics as one that will be characterized by “Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal,” working collectively and unselfishly toward the cultural enrichment, moral edification, and political development of their race (CR 233). In order for these “race organizations” to be up to the task at hand, however, they must be composed of morally upright black men and women equipped with a thorough knowledge of modern civilization and a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of racial development and historical progress. This combination will guide them in establishing “the broad lines of policy and action for the American Negro. This is the reason for being which the American Negro Academy has. It aims at once to be the *epitome and expression* of the intellect of the black-blooded people of America, *the exponent of the race ideals of one of the world’s greatest races*” (CR 235, emphasis added).

Du Bois thus appears to share Crummell’s belief that race is a function of heredity and divinity—that is, that races “are the organisms and the ordinances of God”—and to follow him in articulating an account of black politics that emphasizes the need for elite leadership, racial unity, and moral reform.⁹⁶ But Du Bois also

⁹⁶ Alexander Crummell, “The Race Problem in America,” in *Civilization and Black Progress: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell on the South*, ed. J. R. Oldfield (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 167.

argued for the importance of conserving race on less lofty, more pragmatic grounds: he held that the conservation of collective racial identity and the further development of the “Negro message” were necessary as a means of “negative defense” given the dire situation facing African Americans in the post-Reconstruction period in which they had been barred from participation in the public sphere, denied full civil and political rights, confined to the margins of the national economy, and subjected to systematic discrimination and routine acts of violence:

Let us not deceive ourselves at our situation in this country. Weighted with a heritage of moral iniquity from our past history, hard pressed in the economic world by foreign immigrants and native prejudices, hated here, despised there and pitied everywhere; our one haven of refuge is ourselves, and but one means of advance, our own belief in our own great destiny, our own implicit trust in our own ability and worth... No people that laughs at itself, and ridicules itself, and wishes to God it was anything but itself ever wrote its name in history; it *must* be inspired with the Divine faith of our black mothers, that out of the blood and dust of battle will march a victorious host, a mighty nation, a peculiar people, to speak to the nations of earth a Divine truth that shall make them free. (CR 235)

Du Bois believed that the only way for black folks to respond productively to the seemingly hopeless situation confronting them was to maintain a belief in their grand collective destiny and take responsibility for achieving that destiny themselves. In this way we can see that the duty to conserve racial identity “was imposed on African Americans primarily because of the need to organize in the face of racism and oppression. But it was also attached to the Herderian idea that each people has a mission to fulfill for the sake of humanity as a whole.”⁹⁷ This Herderian

⁹⁷ Bernasconi, “Our Duty to Conserve,” 523.

idea was in turn marshaled in support of the practical task of “negative defense,” of resisting oppression and degradation.

And yet, in formulating the historically contextualized means for achieving a successful politics of racial uplift, Du Bois also appears to embrace racial separatism, endorse chauvinism, and attack individualism: history shows that collective advance requires the subordination of individuals to the dictates of the racial collectivity because self-realization can only be achieved at the level of the race as a whole.

The question is, then: how shall this message be delivered; how shall these various ideals be realized? The answer is plain: by the development of these various race groups, not as individual, but as races... For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity. (CR 233)

The separatist overtones and authoritarian implications of Du Bois’s call for racial unity here leads Wilson Moses to conclude that “Conservation” engages in a “fantastic celebration of authoritarian, antidemocratic, and ethnocentric values” and promotes the racial ideology and ideas “that Du Bois was certainly aware... were the very ideas that were being used to keep the non-European races in subordinate positions.”⁹⁸ To what are we to attribute such grave intellectual and political failings?

According to Moses, Du Bois’s “celebration of authoritarian, antidemocratic, and ethnocentric values” was part and parcel of black nationalist ideology during this period. Interestingly enough, he traces the reactionary aspects of this

⁹⁸ Moses, *Alexander Crummell*, 264.

movement back to the ideas of European—and especially German—nationalist thinkers such as Herder, Hegel, and Treitschke:

Civilization was to be achieved through unity of all black people. An authoritarian collectivist ideal was evolved, a belief that all black people could and should act unanimously under the leadership of one powerful man or group of men, who would guide the race by virtue of superior knowledge or divine authority toward the goals of civilization. Ortega y Gasset called collectivism ‘the characteristic creation of the nineteenth century.’ Indeed, it was a *basic ingredient of nationalistic theory* as espoused by Herder, Schleiermacher, Hegel and von Treitschke... With the air full of such ideas, it should not be surprising that black nationalists of the nineteenth century, influenced as they were by the European nationalisms, should likewise develop the idea of organic racial unity.⁹⁹

For Moses, organic collectivism is the “basic ingredient” not only of nationalism in general, but also, more importantly, of *authoritarian* nationalism in particular because the unity needed for collective advance requires, in the final instance, the subordination of individuals to the interests of the racial whole—interests determined, of course, by a Bismarckian autocrat. What’s more, Moses contends that organic collectivism provided the conceptual framework not only for authoritarianism, but also for chauvinism. In its religious form, black chauvinism derives from Ethiopianism, but

In its secular form, black chauvinism derives, ironically enough, from European racial theory. Like the concept of civilization, racial chauvinism can be traced back to the writings of Hegel, Guizot, Gobineau, and other continental racial theorists of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was the German, Herder, who in the eighteenth century, developed the theories of organic collectivism upon which Blyden and Crummell later built their own brand of racial chauvinism.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Moses, *Golden Age*, 21, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 25.

Although Moses does not directly attribute either authoritarianism or chauvinism to Herder, he certainly implicates him in their various manifestations. Similarly, he acknowledges that Du Bois was not himself “a chauvinist for black skin or an advocate of biological separatism”—perhaps the defining features of black nationalist ideology during this time—but locates him firmly within the classical black nationalist tradition nonetheless, primarily because Du Bois “wished to conserve races as organic cultures.”¹⁰¹ Ultimately, then, it would seem that for Moses any belief in the image of the “people” as an organic entity, and the corresponding commitment to conserving its identity, inexorably leads to a chauvinistic, authoritarian politics. Regardless of the form it may take, then, he defines organic collectivism as poisonous at its very roots: its promotion can only serve to reproduce, and as likely as not intensify, the patterns of prejudice and inequality Du Bois initially set out to challenge.

Moses’s critique shares an interpretive logic with Appiah’s indictment of “Conservation” for failing to transcend the nineteenth-century scientific definition of race, which accounts for psycho-cultural differences between the races in terms of distinct biological inheritances unique to each race, and for (implicitly) accepting the linkage between racial identity and cultural capacity or moral worth.¹⁰² For both thinkers, Du Bois’s commitment to the romantic image of an organic racial community distorts his theoretical vision, rendering it scientifically inaccurate, morally bankrupt, and politically disastrous—merely another example, as Moses

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰² Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 28-46. In *Alexander Crummell*, Moses himself suggests such a connection between his account and Appiah’s: “As Anthony Appiah has shown, the philosophy expressed in ‘The Conservation of Races’ was one of reprehensible racialistic thinking” (265).

puts it, “of reprehensible racialistic thinking.” In this sense, their criticisms are representative of a broader consensus regarding the relationship between Du Bois and the romantic vision, one that we have already encountered to some extent in the respective works of Lewis and Rampersad. According to this view, the racialized notion of *Volk* bequeathed to Du Bois by the romantic tradition is inescapably implicated in, if not directly responsible for, the troubling elements of chauvinism and authoritarianism that recur in Du Bois’s early political writings.¹⁰³ Indeed, even scholars attuned to the diverse range and varying significance of different articulations of “nation language” within the history of black political thought have generally assumed that *all* organic conceptions of the (black) nation are, “by extension, chauvinistic conceptions of the nation.”¹⁰⁴

These interpretations highlight the most problematic aspects and tendencies of the romantic vision and provide important reminders about the dangers of categorical race-thinking. But they also run the risk of producing an overly generalized account of the romantic vision, one that reduces the multiplicity of its permutations and conceptualizations of *Volksgeist* to a unitary form of racialism inescapably tied to chauvinism or authoritarianism. A governing assumption of a

¹⁰³ For example, Arnold Rampersad has suggested that Du Bois’s sojourn in Berlin served to intensify his attraction to romantic authoritarianism: “In Berlin, away from the philosophical liberalism of William James and Harvard” (and immersed in romantic collectivism) “Du Bois was susceptible once again to his almost instinctive attraction to arbitrary power, force of will, and conspicuous elitism” (*The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 45). Similarly, David Levering Lewis notes that by “implicitly drawing on Herder, Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher’s ideas of separate but equal contributions by the races,” Du Bois was “using a boomerang for a weapon” (Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 171, 173). And Moses, as we know, reads “The Conservation of Races” as embodying “Du Bois’s own dark racial romanticism, which would always be at war with his liberal, proletarian, and egalitarian sentiments” (“Du Bois’s ‘Conservation,’” 264).

¹⁰⁴ Eddie Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 164.

great deal of the literature on Du Bois's relationship to European nationalism and romanticism seems to be that the influence of the various thinkers associated with these movements (i.e., Herder, Hegel, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Treitschke, etc.) can be understood in the singular, that is, that they articulated positions that are more or less politically and philosophically consistent with one another.¹⁰⁵ However, this is simply not the case; as we have seen, Herder's political philosophy is quite different from the chauvinistic historiographies and mystical nationalisms found in the works of Treitschke, Fichte, and Hegel.¹⁰⁶ Although Herder's ideas about the unique character of each *Volk* were no doubt decisive in shaping the contours of the Romantic movement at its outset, this does not mean that his political philosophy necessarily corresponds to either the authoritarian imperialism of Treitschke or the chauvinistic nationalism of what Isaiah Berlin calls the "unbridled romanticism" of Fichte, Schelling, and Schlegel.¹⁰⁷

Not only did Herder vehemently oppose national chauvinism and statist authoritarianism, his anti-colonialist vision was grounded in his image of a "people" as a holistic, organic entity animated by a collective spirit: each people or nation has a unique and irreplaceable message to deliver and, as such, interfering with or

¹⁰⁵ A notable exception to this tendency is Bernasconi's "'Our Duty To Conserve,'" 524-525: "Although it has been widely noted that there are strong echoes of both Herder and Hegel in Du Bois's philosophy of history, more attention still needs to be given to the fact that Herder and Hegel represent two rival tendencies within the philosophy of history, specifically with references to notion of race and culture. Herder rejected the notion of race, but, nevertheless, his conception of nations or peoples each with their own cultural unities, whose strength lies in their diversity from each other, seems to lie behind Du Bois's belief... that each race has a unique contribution to make to civilization and humanity. There is also a distant debt to Hegel's idea that different races have a time in which to play their role in world history."

¹⁰⁶ Of course, Fichte, Hegel, and von Treitschke differ from one another on a number of different registers. As political thinkers, however, they have much more in common with one another than with Herder.

¹⁰⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

harming the endogenous development of any nation is detrimental to humanity as a whole. Moreover, for Herder a primary justification for strengthening nationalist identification and development was the creation of autonomous political communities capable of safeguarding liberty and securing the grounds for self-determination. According to this view, organic national development and popular participation go hand-in-hand—without the latter, lasting, meaningful progress is impossible, and without the former, the social conditions necessary for collective self-determination will be absent. In short, while Rampersad is correct in noting the affinities between racism, authoritarianism, and fascism—“the seed of Treitschke’s belief that mulattoes are inferior fell from the same plant that would eventually bear the evil flower of Hitler’s genocide”—we must not assume that every articulation of a romantic worldview amounts to a case of incipient fascism.

Moreover, as I read it, the account of race and human history offered in “The Conservation of Races” corresponds both in its philosophical underpinnings and in its political intent much more closely to Herder than to the likes of Hegel, Fichte, or Treitschke. Both Herder and Du Bois depict human differentiation as a dynamic, sociohistorical phenomenon, emphasize humanity’s fundamental equality amidst diversity, and pursue non-chauvinistic modes of belonging and collective identification. I am suggesting, then, that we ought not reduce the influence or significance of the romantic vision of distinct national/racial groupings to a tidy sequence in which organic collectivism begets authoritarian romanticism, authoritarian romanticism begets racial chauvinism, and racial chauvinism begets incipient fascism. Doing so fails to capture the specificity of ideas, practices, and

institutions that constitute fascism. The essentialist tendencies embedded in Herder's notion of *Volk* are dangerous indeed, but to presume that his view of the people as an organic entity is comparable to, or has the same political consequences as, say, Treitschke's, is a mistake that hinders our ability to accurately identify both fascist ideologies and the dangers lurking in (relatively) more benign versions of organic collectivism. In other words, by assuming that any form of organic collectivism leads inevitably to fascism, we preclude ourselves from grasping both the valuable insights and possibilities potentially afforded by the romantic vision and some of the more subtle dangers that may reside within even non-chauvinistic, anti-authoritarian forms of organic collectivism.

Pace Wilson Moses, then, I do not think that "Conservation" can be read simply as a restatement of Crummell's ideas about race and politics. Of course, "Conservation" also cannot be reduced to a mere application of Herder's ideas to the dilemmas facing turn-of-the-century black politics, but the historical-theoretical framework it articulates has more in common with Herder's worldview than with Crummell's.¹⁰⁸ This is true, significantly, with respect to the definition of race.

Whereas Crummell understood race in biological and theological terms, Du Bois develops a sociohistorical theory of race that draws on Herder (and others) in order to translate "Crummell's ideas from the deeply theological language in which they had originally been couched into the semireligious language of the philosophy

¹⁰⁸ Du Bois's understanding of Africa and the African diaspora are, not surprisingly, much closer to Crummell's than they are to Herder's. However, as I demonstrate below, Du Bois's conception of race corresponds much more closely to Herder's definition of *Volksgeist* than to Crummell's religious-biological notion of race.

of history of his day.”¹⁰⁹ Granted, in situating his discussion of race in terms of this philosophy of history, Du Bois does not completely divorce race from either theology or nature.¹¹⁰ His understanding of history is providential in much the same way that Herder’s is—indeed, insofar as neither thinker roots his organic social ontology in a biological determinism, they must have some recourse to providential argumentation. And, much like Herder, Du Bois eschews a disembodied model of culture and retains a space for naturalistic factors in accounting for national/racial differences while emphasizing that *the decisive forces are not “natural” but rather cultural, social, and historical*. As such, while it is true that “Conservation” does not entirely transcend the nineteenth-century scientific definition of race, it nonetheless aims “to represent race as a phenomenon that is in essence social, historical, and nonbiological.”¹¹¹ Recognizing this is important for properly understanding Du Bois’s political project, for once we have grasped the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of Du Bois’s understanding of race, we are better positioned to understand the instrumental character of his avowal of racial collectivity and its connection to the question of democratic development.

¹⁰⁹ Bernasconi, “Our Duty To Conserve,” 527.

¹¹⁰ As such, I disagree with Appiah’s claim regarding “The Conservation of Races” that “we do not need the theological underpinnings of this argument” (Appiah, *In my Father’s House*, 30). As Robert Bernasconi astutely notes, Du Bois’s argument “relied heavily on a notion of Providence. One can try to ignore this, as Appiah does, but it leads to a radical distortion of Du Bois’s argument. The idea of Providence in one form or another was vital to the leading representatives of the philosophy of history in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. To omit it from one’s understanding of Du Bois undercuts his position as readily as it would undermine Kant, Herder, or Hegel if it were subtracted from their accounts” (Bernasconi, “Our Duty to Conserve,” 527).

¹¹¹ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 51.

“What, then, is a race?”

Du Bois is neither particularly consistent nor precise (much like Herder!) in his usage of terms such as “civilization,” “race,” and “nation.” At times he confuses these latter two, and he uses “civilization” in at least two different senses.¹¹² To make matters more confusing, Du Bois also presents two different classifications of race. The first, drawn from “scientific” theories of race, suggests “that we have at least two, perhaps three great families of human beings—the white and Negroes, possibly the yellow race” (CR 230). But the approach of classical naturalism does not tell us what we really want to know about the significance of race because

the grosser physical differences of color, hair and bone go but a short way toward explaining the different roles which groups of men have played in human progress, *yet there are differences—subtle, delicate, and elusive though they may be*—which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. *While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent, and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these.* At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist. (CR 230, emphasis added)

From the perspective of the historian or sociologist there are “eight distinctly differentiated races” and, “of course, other minor race groups” (CR 231). The eightfold classification Du Bois provides is neither particularly informative nor entirely consistent; however, rather than reading Du Bois with an eye toward the coherence of his definition of ‘race’ or the analytic rigor (or lack thereof) of his classificatory schema, I think it is more illuminating to consider the political intent

¹¹² Wilson Moses is particularly tough on Du Bois on this score: “Du Bois’s use of terminology in ‘The Conservation of Races’ was disgracefully inconsistent. He interchanged such terms as ‘race’ and ‘nation’ with reckless abandon, and unsqueamishly assigned two different meanings to ‘civilization’ within the same paragraph, thereby confusing it with ‘culture’” (*Golden Age*, 135).

behind his reconsideration of race and ask what work the concept is doing for him. What is motivating Du Bois's commitment to the language of race? Why not do away with this noxious category altogether rather than recast it in a sociohistorical light? What, for Du Bois, is to be gained by conserving race?

Although his references to family, blood, and common impulses can give the impression that Du Bois partakes of a nineteenth-century scientific conception of race, he also rejects the notion that natural science alone can account for the psycho-cultural differences between different peoples. The inability of racial scientists such as Huxley, Raetzl, and Blumenbach to agree on a common system of racial classification "is nothing more," Du Bois explains, "than an acknowledgment that, so far as purely physical characteristics are concerned, the differences between men do not explain all the differences of their history" (CR 230). Although there are indeed physical differences correlated to race, these are much more diffuse and far less deterministic than Kant, the apostles of nineteenth-century biology, or the Social Darwinists would have us believe. Indeed, it is because the spiritual differences between races ultimately transcend physical differences that the concept of race used by the historian or sociologist transcends any scientific determination of race.

If race is not simply a matter of biology or innate hereditary traits—that is, if it cannot be explained in terms of physical differences—this means we cannot understand it in the manner proposed by Kant: the different races are not "natural kinds" whose distinct characteristics are inescapably fixed by the natural order of things. What, then, accounts for these differences? In other words,

What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily *striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life*. (CR 230, emphasis added)

Whether the reference to “common blood” is meant to be figurative or literal,¹¹³ emphasis is placed on sociohistorical indicators of difference, and Du Bois’s claim that what is significant about racial groups is that they each strive for the realization of distinct (and incommensurable)¹¹⁴ *ideals of life* echoes Herder’s conceptualization of *Volksgeist*. On this account, African Americans have a “duty to conserve” (CR 234) their racial identity not because race “is of divine origin” or expresses some deeply rooted “structural facts in our nature,” as Crummell would have it,¹¹⁵ but rather because such conservation ensures a matrix of belonging and provides the necessary conditions for individual flourishing, collective advance, and the emergence of new cultural ideals. The latter enrich and advance humanity as a whole, drawing it progressively closer to the realization of what Herder calls *Humanität* and Du Bois designates as that “one far-off Divine event.”

Approximately two decades after Du Bois presented “Conservation” to the American Negro Academy, Alain Locke delivered his own series of lectures on race

¹¹³ Responding to Appiah, Ronald Sundstrom has suggested that “Du Bois’s talk of ‘common blood’ was figurative. He used the phrases ‘people of Negro blood’ and ‘black-blooded people of America’ as rhetorical devices near the end of the speech when he wanted to emphasize racial unity and collective identity” (Sundstrom, “Douglass and Du Bois’s...” 43).

¹¹⁴ Du Bois does not use this term, or make an explicit argument for value relativism, but he does seem to suggest that the distinct ideals of the different peoples throughout history are uniquely valuable and incapable of being ranked against one another according to a single scale of value; thus they can be said to be incommensurable. However, whereas Herder suggests that these different ideals are in all likelihood incompatible with one another, Du Bois seems to think that this is not the case and that all of these ideals can be reconciled in a final synthesis.

¹¹⁵ Crummell, “The Race Problem in America,” 167.

at Howard University, where he was a professor of philosophy.¹¹⁶ In a Herderian/Du Boisian vein, Locke argued that race is an instrumental force driving historical progress because it knits people together through “kinship feeling”: “Race as applied to social and ethnic groups has no meaning at all beyond that sense of kind, that sense of kith and kin, which undoubtedly is somewhat of an advantage to any ethnic group that can maintain it.”¹¹⁷ Locke’s critical pragmatism went beyond Du Bois’s framework by asserting that biology had no influence on racial types whatsoever, that race is an “ethnic fiction.” But what they both shared was a conviction that the sense of belonging and shared purpose generated by the race idea and race feeling were indispensable for both social organization and political development.¹¹⁸

Consider, for example, Du Bois’s attempt to elaborate the “subtle forces” that sweep across physical differences and ultimately account for the distinct character of a people. Du Bois accepts that physical or natural factors play a role in differentiating humanity—the eight (historical) races generally “follow the cleavage of physical race distinctions”—but also insists that “no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups” (CR 231). What are these deeper differences?

The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but *infinitely transcending them*. The forces that bind together the Teuton nations are, then, first their race identity and common blood; *secondly, and more important, a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain*

¹¹⁶ Alain LeRoy Locke, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (Washington DC: Howard University Press), 1992.

¹¹⁷ Locke, *Race Contacts*, 11.

¹¹⁸ Although Locke asserts that race is an ethnic fiction, he also declares that it “represents a fundamental category of social thinking” (1) and “that kinship is really at the root of human society” (21). He thus depicts race sense (as opposed to racial purity) as the driving force behind historical change and development.

ideals of life. The whole process which has brought about these race differentiations has been a growth, and the great characteristic of this growth has been the differentiation of spiritual and mental differences between great races of mankind and the integration of physical differences. (CR 231-2, emphasis added)

Although Du Bois appears to contradict Herder's preference for the language of *nation* over the language of *race* when he proclaims earlier in his address that "the history of the world is the history... not of nations, but of races," his subsequent definition of race bears a striking resemblance to Herder's definition of *Volk*.¹¹⁹ According to both thinkers the forces that ultimately shape the unique character of a people (i.e., the "forces that bind [them] together") are fundamentally sociohistorical in nature: "a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life" (CR 231-2). It is because of these factors that they share a common perspective on the world and are united by a collectively shared ethos or "spirit," which is expressed in and through their literature, music, art, folklore, and customs. Race, for Du Bois, is fundamentally a spiritual, which is to say social, historical, and cultural, category, rather than a biological one. As such, although the "race idea" is the "central thought of all history," it is important to remember that it is a product or "invention" of human history and not its presupposition (CR 230).

¹¹⁹ It is worth noting here that immediately after delineating the eight historical races (the Slavs, the Teutons, the English, the Romance, the Negroes, the Semitic, the Hindoos, and the Mongolians), Du Bois asks, "What is the real distinction between these nations?" (CR 231).

Should we conclude, then, along with Ronald Sundstrom, that “Du Bois’s conception of race is *purely* social”?¹²⁰ This seems unwise, as Sundstrom himself seems to acknowledge:

We should keep in mind, however, that [Du Bois] was not trying to give a notion of race absolutely divorced from the biological. He thought, after all, that race occasionally did follow lines of physical difference, and he thought that “race,” while social, was *based* on (i.e., inspired by) the physical. The presence of both a social conception of race and references to the biological conception of race does, however, create a tension between the two in his work.¹²¹

Indeed it does, especially if we persist in asserting a radical distinction between the social/cultural and the biological. Separating race from biological determination was important for Du Bois (and for many other opponents of racial hierarchy) because of the particular circumstances in which he wrote and the constellation of forces and modes of prejudice he confronted. Although “Conservation” “borrows extensively from the philosophies of both Johann Gottfried Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, social Darwinism provided its immediate context.”¹²² Perhaps most prominent among the social Darwinists at the time was Frederick Hoffman, whose *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* predicted that the black race would soon die out in a ‘survival of the fittest’ due to its supposed biological inferiority. Hoffman and those of his ilk were strongly influenced by Arthur de Gobineau, an outspoken proponent of white supremacy whose influential

¹²⁰ Sundstrom, “Douglass and Du Bois’s...” 43; emphasis added.

¹²¹ Ibid., 43-4. It seems to me that the description “purely social” fits Locke’s understanding of race but not Du Bois’s. To be sure: Du Bois pursues a notion of race that is primarily social, cultural, and historical, but to suggest that we can sharply distinguish between this “social conception of race” and mere “references to the biological conception,” as if the biological played no role whatsoever in Du Bois’s account, is disingenuous. Du Bois knew that nature and culture could not be so neatly differentiated.

¹²² Bernasconi, “Our Duty to Conserve,” 520.

writings from the mid-nineteenth century argued that racial hierarchy and racial purity were the decisive factors in the rise and fall of civilizations. In his view, the differential moral and cultural capacities of the races were the result of differences in their innate, unchanging biological makeup. As such, he claimed that racial “purity” held the key to understanding historical progress, an examination of which

shows us that all civilization derives from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only as far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it, provided that this group itself belongs to the most illustrious branch of our species.¹²³

This helps explain why Du Bois worked so hard in his essay to separate race from biology, establish the cultural determinates of race, and differentiate himself from the hereditary-deterministic reading of race circulating American society at that time. Thus, one of his primary objectives was to discredit the reductionist, genocentric account of race, according to which heredity fully determines racial characteristics and communal culture. Indeed: “It was especially by focusing on the ‘ideals of life’ as the primary agents of history that he sought to draw attention away from the conviction that racial purity was the main power in history, as had been maintained, for example, in Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s philosophy of history.”¹²⁴

But Du Bois’s Herderian analysis of race and human differentiation also suggests that race cannot be neatly detached from biology, materiality, and physicality. Recall that according to the expressivist theory of the subject, body and spirit are inseparable aspects of an integral whole (the subject) that always already

¹²³ Arthur de Gobineau, quoted in Michael Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology: The Social and Political Thought of Count Gobineau* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), 117.

¹²⁴ Bernasconi, “Our Duty to Conserve,” 523.

finds itself embedded in a nature-culture matrix that shapes its way of being-in-the-world. The human being, according to Herder, is “a multitudinous harmony, a living self, on whom the harmony of all the powers that surround him operates.”¹²⁵

Perhaps we might say, then, that Du Bois was groping for an account of race that neither reduced it to physical causes nor abstracted it entirely from them; but he did not quite have the necessary analytic tools or conceptual language at his disposal to do so. In any case, he advanced a social theory of race that takes into account the imbrications of culture and biology—the layering of culture into the body, the way culture becomes embodied in the senses of human beings entangled in a panoply of forces that affect them. In other words, Du Bois’s notion of race is indeed social/cultural, but for Du Bois the social/cultural cannot be detached entirely from the biological, from the embodiment of the human condition.

Today, perhaps, we are approaching a time when we can begin to productively rethink the fraught connection between biology and society with the help of new theories of dynamic evolution and symbiogenesis, both of which go beyond the reductionism of genocentrism (in the sense that genes determine culture/race) and cultural theories that bracket the human being from her biological character entirely.¹²⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this project, it would be

¹²⁵ Johann Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, ed. Frank Manuel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 4.

¹²⁶ William E. Connolly, “Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom,” *Political Research Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2014): 441-52. Connolly explores the interdependence between biological and cultural theory, showing that neither can do without the other. If this is the case, he suggests that “it is unwise to advance a theory that seeks to bypass altogether culturally infused concepts of life and society. Doing so, you are apt to become a blind carrier of a specific cultural perspective. It is, rather, incumbent upon us to think critically about how such concepts function as we fold them into inquiry” (442). Du Bois enacts something very much like this critical self-reflexivity and conceptual examination in chapter 5 of *Dusk of Dawn*, “The Concept of Race.”

interesting to read Du Bois's early writings on race, history, and culture in conjunction with the recent findings of biological research into symbiogenesis and new dynamic theories of species evolution. Those perspectives avoid reducing human consciousness and freedom to blind expressions of genetic determination and instead explore the biocultural processes at play in species evolution.

Such an approach, if sustained, helps to make human creative agency intelligible as an evolutionary outcome; but it also presses us to qualify both strong, hubristic notions of autonomy and finalist notions of agency. Neither strong agency, nor the simple realization of implicit tendencies, nor reductive determination, but processes that fall into a zone of current indeterminacy between these alternatives... If genocentrists say that organisms are the effect of gene assemblages, the developmental theorists insist that genes are elements within larger organisms and environments that do a lot of the work themselves.¹²⁷

On a very general level, what Du Bois shares with these works is an approach that extends culture deeply into the biosphere and examines the folding of culture into the body and the layered complexity of culture, thinking, and identity. Culture and history are embodied in our senses and expressed through our sensibilities by becoming encoded in passive synthesis that operate below the threshold of conscious thought. There are, then, biocultural dimensions of being. But this does not mean that these senses have been racially shaped prior to the deposits made by culture. Nor does it mean that culturally infused sensibilities and dispositions encoded in us remain beyond the reach of reflective adjustment. Instead, such an approach calls upon us "to come to terms with the complexity, layered character, and opacities that constitute the self as a rich assemblage," so that we might get a

¹²⁷ Connolly, "Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom," 445.

better sense of the complex interrelations between multiple registers of existence upon which we must work if we wish to enact significant change in the world.¹²⁸

In any case, as Du Bois portrays it, collective racial identification can be understood as emerging, in large part, in response to a shared set of experiences, memories, and habits—in this case the memory of slavery, the experience of racialized discrimination and domination, and the struggle for freedom and equality. In other words, the “Negro” is not so much someone who can trace her ancestry back to Africa but rather, quite simply, “a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”¹²⁹ And yet, for Du Bois, the race concept, because of its ability to forge solidarity around a shared outlook and engender new spiritual ideals and forms of life, also provides the most effective political resource for challenging the beliefs and encoded practices that have made racial *hierarchy* a central aspect of modern life. This helps to further clarify the underlying motivations behind Du Bois’s appeal to “the unifying ideal of Race” (*SBF* 43) as an organizing principle for a black politics oriented toward overturning white supremacist systems and logics. In much the same way that Herder wagered that sociopolitical development was most likely to occur when unity and coordinated action were premised on the collectively shared

¹²⁸ Ibid., 450.

¹²⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 153. Although Du Bois is more forceful in his rejection of biological explanations of race and more skeptical of the organic image of a collectively held black folk spirit in *The Dusk of Dawn*, the account of race he gives in this passage remains similar to the account of race found in “Conservation” and is worth quoting at length: “No, no. Human beings are infinite in variety, and when they are agglutinated in groups, great and small, the groups differ as though they, too, had integrating souls. But they have not. The soul is still individual if it is free. Race is a cultural, sometimes an historical fact. And all that I really have been trying to say is that a certain group that I know and to which I belong, as contrasted with the group you know and to which you belong, and in which you fanatically and glorifyingly believe, bears in its bosom just now the spiritual hope of this land because of the persons who compose it and not by divine command. ‘But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it...?’ I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”

sentiments and outlooks imparted to the people through their shared experiences and common life-world, Du Bois believed that the political solidarity needed for black progress could best be secured by appealing to and cultivating both the affective and cognitive dimensions of a distinctive black ethno-cultural identity. Du Bois desires to see the end not of racial difference and distinction (for the various ideals these differences give rise to enrich modern life) but the end of racial hierarchy and discrimination. He believes that mobilizing around race is the most effective way for black folks to achieve this. *Du Bois's embrace of racial identity stems not from chauvinism but, rather, aims to overcome it.*¹³⁰

By and large, we no longer share Du Bois's belief in the viability of such a form of racially inflected "identity politics." And for good reason: identity is far too layered, complex, contingent, dynamic, and diffuse a phenomenon to serve as a secure site for political community, and clinging to identity as if it were something solid and stable encourages some of the destructive and reactionary tendencies animating political life in pluralistic societies today. Moreover, in light of increasing levels of diversity and differentiation within the black community itself, the very notion that all African Americans are, or ought to be, linked together by an authentic form of life or commonly shared ethno-cultural identity has become unsupportable to all but the most committed cultural nationalists. At best, then, the appeal to an (imagined) "authentic" racial community will simply be unpersuasive and ineffective as a means of securing racial solidarity or establishing a durable *political*

¹³⁰ In *Souls* he insists that "the ideal of human brotherhood" will be "gained through the unifying ideal of race" and that the "ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro people" is "not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic" (43).

community, since there will inevitably be those who do not see or feel their concerns or everyday experiences reflected in the collective racial ideal or agenda being advanced. At worst, the romantic imperative to conserve the “authentic” character of the people can result in a dangerous call for the normalization of in-group identity, which may further marginalize or silence the most vulnerable in that group, or force those deemed “abnormal” or “deficient” to “reform” themselves in ways that are likely to be violent, arbitrary, or counterproductive.

Forging racial solidarity in the manifold struggle against white supremacy and racial hierarchy remains vitally important today, but this task cannot be achieved by appealing to a collectively shared and deeply rooted ethno-cultural identity that would unite black folks prior to political mobilization and contestation. Instead, what must be recognized and grappled with “is the persistence of ideological diversity and distinction as the first principle of politics”¹³¹ and the fact that “racial solidarity will have to be forged in the crucible of politics” itself¹³²—that is, through engaged deliberation, disagreement, and debate over competing values, tactics, interests, and visions of the good life. Political engagements are always connected to a particular set of antecedent conditions that mediate and structure group interactions and intentions; these are what compel us towards politics. But these conditions—history, culture, racial hierarchy—are themselves shaped and conditioned by prior political engagements and in this sense are both effects and (inherently unstable) conditions of politics.

¹³¹ Michael Hanchard, *Party/ Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 235.

¹³² Robert Gooding-Williams, “Politics, Racial Solidarity, Exodus!,” in *Look, A Negro!*, 115.

For these reasons and others, the romantic vision advanced by Du Bois cannot in itself provide an adequate theoretical framework for making sense of and responding to the ethico-political dilemmas animating contemporary racial politics in late-modern and post-colonial societies. Du Bois's paternalistic attitude towards the masses unwittingly cedes too much to the opponents of racial equality, and his political expressivism all too easily results in an image of black politics as consisting in a kind of "racial custodianship"¹³³ carried out by black elites who police and protect "the boundaries of blackness."¹³⁴ In this sense, I concur with Wilson Moses's insight that although "Du Bois desired that America evolve into a truly pluralist society... like the majority of black nationalists, he was reluctant to allow pluralism within the black community."¹³⁵ Indeed, when we make collective identity the foundation of our communities and solidarities, then pluralism is likely to be seen *primarily* (if not exclusively) as a threat to the very communities and solidarities we cherish. This is not to say that identity is unimportant or that we should strive (impossibly) for its eradication as a factor in political life. But neither can it be made the foundation for our politics: identity is not a solid structure or a coherent essence but a shifting amalgam of forces, experiences, commitments, drives, beliefs, and impulses that are liable to make us vengeful when we become overly enamored with them and seek their reification.

¹³³ Reed, Adolph. *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999.

¹³⁴ Cohen, Cathy J. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

¹³⁵ Moses, *Golden Age*, 145.

All that does not mean that we should simply dismiss Du Bois as a racial chauvinist, ignore his democratic aspirations and suggestive insights, or elide the subtle yet significant differences between his position and Crummell's or that of other thinkers inspired in some way by the romantic image of an organic community. Doing so impoverishes our understanding of Du Bois's early political thought and misconstrues the moral and political implications of its underlying theoretical premises.

"The question is, then: how shall this message be delivered...?"

Wilson Moses is almost certainly correct that Du Bois consciously crafted aspects of "Conservation" to appeal to Crummell and his followers—indeed, Crummell was quite pleased by Du Bois's exposition and praised it effusively—but he fails to take note of how Du Bois also subtly modified Crummell's notion of race, detaching it from its theological and biological moorings and giving it a sociohistorical explanation. In so doing Du Bois was able to afford the race concept a more dynamic, open potentiality than Crummell had; he opened a space for novelty in history, for the possibility that a radically new spiritual message may surge into being through the spiritual strivings of black folks. "Crummell, by contrast, had offered an account in which blacks retained something of their own, while they received their religious training from Europe."¹³⁶ In this sense, Crummell's approach to black politics was more conventional than Du Bois's, for it appealed to established values and prevailing norms without offering the possibility for their transformation

¹³⁶ Bernasconi, "Our Duty to Conserve": W. E. B. Du Bois..." 527.

or the emergence of new values and ideals. As we shall see, this is indicative of the way in which Du Bois's sociohistorical conception of race both informs and operates within a political project animated by democratic commitments that were at odds with Crummell's authoritarianism.

In "The Destined Superiority of the Negro," Crummell proclaims that the traits of "vitality, plasticity, receptivity, imitation, family feeling, veracity, and the sentiment of devotion," are the common characteristics of all great peoples and civilizations throughout history and that these attributes are abundantly evident in the Negro race.¹³⁷ Crummell emphasizes, in particular, the Negro's inherent vitality, plasticity, and capacity for imitation as the qualities that have allowed the race to survive its historical travails. They testify to its destined superiority:

This quality of imitation has been the grand preservative of the Negro in all the lands of his thralldom. Its bearing upon his future distinction in Art is not germain [*sic*] to this discussion; but one can clearly see that this quality of imitation, allied to the receptivity of the race, gives promise of great fitness for Christian training, and for the higher processes of civilization.¹³⁸

Crummell argues that blacks should (and would) maintain their distinct racial identity going forward, but that they must also accept Christianity and assimilate the behavioral norms of Western civilization. Black uplift, according to this view, occurs through an imitative synthesis of African cultural practices and Euro-American values. "While retaining his characteristic peculiarities," the Negro assimilates the knowledge and morals of the more civilized nations, adopting their most estimable traits: "among Frenchmen he becomes, somewhat, the lively Frenchman; among

¹³⁷ Crummell, "The Destined Superiority of the Negro," 47.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

Americans, the keen, enterprising American; among Spaniards, the stately, solemn Spaniard,” and so on.¹³⁹

Du Bois agrees that black folks will retain their distinctive group identity while learning from their more advanced neighbors, but he further argues that racial uplift will involve more than the synthesis of existing values and cultural practices: the destiny of the black race “is not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality”—the realization of a radically new message for the world that no other people can deliver (CR 233). Thus, although Du Bois’s account of racial uplift conveys an assimilationist bent similar to Crummell’s, it also contains a creative element that differentiates it from Crummell and provides the key ethical rationale for the “duty to conserve” racial identity. Whereas “Crummell viewed black Americans as a source of ‘conservative power’ for the nation,” Du Bois foresees for them a more progressive, transformative role.¹⁴⁰ Anticipating a number of key themes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois declares near the end of his address that African Americans

are the first fruits of this new nation, *the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today*. We are the people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-making plutocracy. *As such, it is our duty to conserve* our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development. (CR 234; emphasis added)

¹³⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴⁰ Moses, *Alexander Crummell*, 230

This statement may suggest a troubling element of ethnocentrism or chauvinism in Du Bois's thought—a suspicion that is further heightened when Du Bois proposes as the first point of the American Negro Academy creed: "We believe that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make" (CR 237). But for Du Bois *black singularity does not imply superiority*; each race-group has its own particular ideal, its own unique message, which no other people can deliver. These distinct messages ought not be ranked hierarchically. Each should be recognized as contributing something unique and irreplaceable to the enrichment of humanity. Indeed, "Du Bois's racial expressivism... is always tethered to a vision of equality among the races" according to which "each race contains truths of life."¹⁴¹

What Du Bois is striving for is something akin to what I called in the conclusion to the previous chapter Herder's "nationalism with a cosmopolitan purpose." For both Herder and Du Bois, the cultivation of collective identity must be understood in the larger context of the effort to create a more universal sense of human community; *the way forward to a genuinely humane and cosmopolitan future lies not in the elimination of group differences but, rather, in the progressive development of each group's cultural formation, out of which a broader spirit of respect for difference and, ultimately, the "fusion of horizons"*¹⁴² *amid the diversity of perspectives may arise.* By assuring African Americans that they have an important—indeed, an irreplaceable—role to play in this process of differential historical

¹⁴¹ Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect," 191.

¹⁴² Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheim and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

development, Du Bois aims to give them hope and assign to their strivings a world-historical significance.

Moreover, the fact that the Negro message remains as yet unrealized and can only be clarified in the very act of collective self-expression suggests that its meaning, and the path to its eventual realization, cannot be known in advance or dictated from above. The (present and future) content of that incipient spiritual message resides within the people themselves; it is a product of lived experiences and the shared memory of a particular history of struggle—not of an innate or pre-determined racial ‘essence’—and it can only be fully realized through a collaborative effort that draws on multiple perspectives in the black community and mines the myriad insights and ideals that have been both shaped and obscured by racialized structures of power and domination. “There are scattered in forgotten nooks and corners throughout the land,” Du Bois explains, “Negroes of some considerable training, of high minds, and high motives, who are unknown to their fellows, who exert far too little influence. These the Negro Academy should strive to bring into touch with each other and to give them a common mouthpiece” (CR 236). Du Bois thus indicates “that he expected the ideals to arise in the process of working together to improve the races.”¹⁴³ By working to repair (or create) the social bonds destroyed (or precluded) by centuries of racial slavery and domination, Du Bois hoped that the Academy would help nurture the conditions of possibility for a participatory political culture within the black community. Thus, although the American Negro Academy as described by Du Bois is an elitist organization that

¹⁴³ Bernasconi, “Our Duty to Conserve” 524.

“seeks to comprise something of the *best* thought,” its ultimate purpose is broadly democratic in character in that it seeks to establish institutional space for a nascent black public sphere wherein ideas and ideologies can be disseminated, discussed, and debated so that the best plan of action may emerge through “careful conference and thoughtful interchange of opinion” (CR 235-6). In this way the American Negro Academy is not just an organ for decreeing “a general expression of policy”; it is also a vehicle for creating spaces for democratic deliberation and contestation, for facilitating popular participation, and for fostering civic engagement and a more robust sense of community (CR 236). Above all though, the Academy must be an authentic *expression* of the underlying *spirit* of black folks—otherwise its policy proposals and calls for action will fall upon unsympathetic ears. The question becomes, then: What type of relationship between leaders and the led, what mode of group leadership, is most apt to result in policies that can be said to express the underlying spirit of the people?

There are at least two models of expression relevant here. Elements of both appear in Du Bois’s early political writings. I suggest, however, that it is toward the second, more dynamic, creative, and indeterminate account of expression that his early political writings ultimately incline. Charles Taylor provides us with a good formulation of what is meant by expression in general:

To express something is to make it manifest in a given medium. I express my feelings in my face; I express my thoughts in the words I speak or write. I express my vision of things in some work of art, perhaps a novel or a play. In all these cases, we have the notion of making something manifest, and in each case in a medium with certain specific properties.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 374.

In the first model of expression, that which is already there implicitly or in a germinal state as a teleological seed finds expression in a manner determined from the start. Aristotle's notion of potentiality can be understood in these terms, as can many accounts of race (and nation)—for example, in genocentric theories of race, racial characteristics are an expression of “blood” or an underlying genetic structure. At times Herder too seems to conceive of expression in these terms; for example, when he equates expression with authenticity: to achieve expressive self-realization is to be true to one's self, which means being true to an essence that was already there from the start as a latent possibility waiting actualization. Theostances sometimes pursue this as well, for example: as allowing god to find expression through us.

But Du Bois's talk of (black) creativity and his depiction of racial consolidation and development ultimately bring him closer to a second model of expression. This second model construes expression as a process whereby a trigger moves a seed *with pluripotential possibilities*. That pluripotentiality is then actualized in this way or that by movements of self-organization back and forth between incipience and conditioning circumstances. This is not unlike Herder's account of the dynamic relationship between *Klima* ('climate') and *genetische Kraft* ('genetic force') in which the two reciprocally affect one another such that the expressive outcome is not reducible to what was already there implicitly. Likewise, for Taylor, when the divine finds expression, it is not as it is itself implicitly, but it

itself is changed through involvement in the inter-subjective world. And it also changes the world as the world changes its manifestations.

And so for this kind of expressive object, we think of its “creation” as not only a making manifest but also a making, a bringing something to be... My claim is that the idea of nature as an intrinsic source goes along with an expressive view of human life. Fulfilling my nature means espousing the inner *élan*, the voice or impulse. And this makes what was hidden manifest for both myself and others. But this manifestation also helps to define what is to be realized. The direction of this *élan* wasn’t and couldn’t be clear prior to this manifestation. In realizing my nature, I have to define it in the sense of giving it some formulation; but this is also a definition in a stronger sense: I am realizing this formulation and thus giving my life a definitive shape. A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation; it is not just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already determinate formulation.¹⁴⁵

The potential animating a human life is, we might say, a pluripotentiality. In formulating a (black) politics of expressive self-realization as a creative, transformative force, Du Bois moves closer, I think, to this second view of expression. This is the case because he sees the expressive self-realization of the black message as occurring through a complex interplay between the people, their leaders, and the larger social, cultural, political, moral, natural, and historical environment in which they are situated. Each of these factors or forces affect and transform one another such that it no longer makes sense to think of expression as the simple actualization of the (implicitly) already-there. I also think, however, that, as in much of Du Bois’s thought, there is a tension between these two views or readings of expression, which he himself did not sharply differentiate. By showing how his political vision ultimately implies (and indeed, relies upon) the more

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 374-5.

dynamic understanding of expression, I hope to clear the way for a more nuanced account of his political expressivism.

In any case, Du Bois continues and expands upon the investigation of expressive group leadership begun in “Conservation” in *The Souls of Black Folks*. Robert Gooding-Williams suggests that *Souls* “contains two models of political authority... One emphasizes the idea of democratic criticism, the other is expressivist.”¹⁴⁶ Although *Souls* initially invokes the democratic idea that “leadership is legitimate only if it is responsive to the criticism of the persons led,” Gooding-Williams contends that it ultimately “reject[s] the democratic criticism model of legitimate leadership” and adopts instead the expressivist model.¹⁴⁷ The latter “holds that ruling leadership is legitimate if, and only if, it avows and embodies a collectively shared ethos that antecedently unites all African Americans.”¹⁴⁸ To be sure, Du Bois’s view of African Americans as by and large a backward, pre-modern people in need of moral, political, and economic guidance means that he cannot endorse the democratic criticism model of political legitimacy as formulated by Gooding-Williams: “to be legitimate leadership must be guided by the criticism of the masses; a good leader will be a legitimate leader, endowed with the authority to lead, only if he takes his bearing from the masses.”¹⁴⁹ This model is obviously problematic for Du Bois: the Talented Tenth’s *raison d’être* is to help lead a people not yet entirely prepared to lead themselves, a people largely “ignorant of the world about them, of modern economic organization, of the function of

¹⁴⁶ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

government, of individual worth and possibilities,—of nearly all those things which slavery in self-defense had to keep them from learning... America is not another word for Opportunity to *all* her sons” (*SBF* 122). For black leaders to be guided entirely by the criticisms of the masses would be a self-defeating abdication of their responsibilities *as leaders*, and in general Du Bois thinks leaders need a measure of autonomy in order to act effectively and exercise their own judgment regarding the best course forward. However, this does not mean that his theory of group leadership altogether lacks a democratic-participatory dimension, or that he thinks it wise (or just) for leaders to ignore the popular voice of criticism.

According to Gooding-Williams, the expressivist model of political legitimacy endorsed by Du Bois “requires that leaders remember their people not by engaging their criticism but by acknowledging the spiritual identity they share with them.”¹⁵⁰ Whether or not this is an accurate description of the expressivist model of legitimacy as such, I think it elides aspects of Du Bois’s political vision and obscures the extent to which he envisions a successful black politics as one in which leaders listen to the people, consider their needs and aspirations, and submit themselves and their policies to democratic criticism—even if they do not allow themselves to be guided entirely by popular opinion. First, as we have seen, one of Du Bois’s primary concerns is with democratic development, which he believes requires *meaningful* broad-based political participation. Second, if Du Bois was indeed working towards a more dynamic view of expression as I suggested above, this further indicates an integral role for the people in governing. Third, throughout

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 56-7.

Souls Du Bois repeatedly suggests that group leadership will only be effective if it is sympathetic in character—that is, if there are bonds of sympathy between the leaders and the led. He equates good leadership with sympathetic leadership and suggests that a good leader is one who expresses the spirituality of the people. Moreover, his depiction of sympathy lends credence to the argument that he was pursuing a more dynamic model of expressivism. While sympathy as he portrays it is facilitated by the acknowledgment of a shared spiritual identity (and all that that entails), it requires more than that because “for Du Bois,” as for Herder, “sympathy means that one understands a person from his or her point of view (*knowledge of the person*) in a way that generates concern.”¹⁵¹ Sympathy, as Gooding-Williams himself shows, involves “apprehending the character of each other’s lives.”¹⁵² As such, it is based on knowledge about the details and conditions of another person’s life and experiences, and it entails the ability to imaginatively represent those experiences for oneself in such a way that one feels concern for the other’s well being. Du Bois says sympathy occurs when we “descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself,” that is, when we begin to discern in others that same “warm pulsing life” we find in ourselves, and feel moved by that discovery to acknowledge our shared humanity, proclaiming, “Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of Hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?” (*SBF* 165-6).

Du Bois connects sympathy with close contact throughout *Souls* (97; 135; 138; 144), and at points he suggests that close social contact and interpersonal familiarity are more important factors for achieving sympathy than the existence of

¹⁵¹ Rogers, “People, Rhetoric, and Affect,” 198; emphasis added.

¹⁵² Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 101.

a shared racial identity. To be sure, Du Bois asserts that African Americans must furnish their own leaders, but this must be understood in the context of “the radical and more uncompromising drawing of the color-line” in Jim Crow America, which has so thoroughly separated the races that “there is 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” (*SBF* 145, 144). Indeed, where Jim Crow reigns, interracial estrangement is so severe “and deep that it absolutely precludes for the present between the races anything like that sympathetic and effective group-training and leadership of the one by the other, such as the American Negro and all backwards peoples must have for effectual progress” (*SBF* 145, 94-5). The effects of racial prejudice are so corrosive, Du Bois thinks, that it prevents blacks and whites from seeing each other as humans (or citizens) as such—that is, from acknowledging their common humanity. The horrific deformations that result are deleterious for all involved, but they are obviously most harmful for the black masses who are “placed by custom and race-prejudice beyond the pale of sympathy” altogether, leaving “them to be preyed upon by... swindlers and rascals” and rapacious capitalists (*SBF* 137).

Surveying this bleak situation, Du Bois concludes that

As a remedy for this, there is but one possible procedure. We must accept some of the race prejudice in the South as a fact,—deplorable in its intensity, unfortunate in its results, and dangerous for the future, but nevertheless a hard fact which only time can efface. We cannot hope, then, in this generation, or for several generations, that the mass of whites can be brought to assume that close sympathetic and self-sacrificing leadership of the blacks which their present situation so eloquently demands. Such leadership, such social teaching and example, must come from the blacks themselves. (*SBF* 138)

This suggests that a shared racial identity between leaders and the led is not a necessary precondition for effective—which is to say, sympathetic—group-leadership. All that is necessary is what Du Bois calls “the opening of heart and hand ... in generous acknowledgment of a common humanity and a common destiny” (*SBF* 145). In principle, then, there is no reason why self-sacrificing whites could not help uplift and educate the black masses, so long, that is, as they acknowledge and avow the common life-world and shared spiritual identity that unites black folks, for that is a fundamental part of *their* ‘common humanity.’

Du Bois gives a concrete example of just such an occurrence of inter-racial leadership: the “Ninth Crusade” of “the missionaries of ’68” (*SBF* 52, 95)—northern teachers in the freedman’s schools during the early years of Reconstruction who, “in a single generation... put thirty thousand black teachers in the South ... wiped out the illiteracy of the majority of the black people of the land, and... made Tuskegee possible” (*SBF* 95).

This was the gift of New England to the freed Negro: not alms, but a friend; not cash, but character. It was not and is not money these seething millions want, but love and sympathy, the pulse of hearts beating with red blood;—a gift which today only their own kindred and race can bring to the masses, but which once saintly souls brought to their favored children in the crusade of the sixties, that finest thing in American history, and one of the few things untainted by sordid greed and cheap vainglory. The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the defilement of the places where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions of New England. They lived and ate together, studied and worked, hoped and harkened in the dawning light. In actual formal content their curriculum was doubtless old-fashioned, but in educational power it was supreme, for it was the contact of living souls. (*SBF* 97)

Du Bois saw this as both an incredibly important and exceedingly rare type of event, one unlikely to be repeated for a multitude of reasons. Indeed, the missionaries of '68 themselves understood that, due to America's rigid racial hierarchy, African Americans must be prepared to teach themselves and furnish their own leaders, and so they made "the establishment of schools to train Negro teachers" one of their top priorities (*SBF* 95). In any case, however, what I want to highlight is that "whenever Du Bois employs the language of sympathy, it conveys a sentiment that brings the life of another into view."¹⁵³ Because sympathy involves seeing the world from another person's perspective and sinking to some degree into the emotional tone of that perspective, it is obviously made easier if you share a common life-world or cultural identity with that person (and thus have roughly the same general perspective on things). But this is neither necessary, nor sufficient. Ultimately, sympathy depends on a creative synthesis of knowledge and fellow feeling. It is the sentiment or ethical attitude that results from empathetic understanding.

All of which means that, in the end, if group leadership is to be sympathetic, leaders must know something of the concrete, *lived experiences* of the people they represent, strive to see and feel the world from their vantage point, and adjust their leadership accordingly. And this means that effective group leadership in the expressivist mold must have a democratic component and provide avenues for meaningful popular participation, for the only way to truly understand the experiences and perspectives of another person is to let her speak for herself. Even "the best and most effective aristocracy, like the best monarchy," Du Bois explains in

¹⁵³ Rogers, "People, Rhetoric, and Affect," 198.

Darkwater, “suffered from *lack of knowledge*. The rulers did not know or understand the needs of the people and they could not find out, for in the last analysis *only the man himself, however humble, knows his own condition*.”¹⁵⁴

In summation: leaders cannot express the character of a people they do not sympathize with; they cannot sympathize with the people without understanding them; and they cannot really understand them without first listening to and engaging their criticisms. That means they must govern in a democratic fashion. Gooding-Williams is correct in noting the prevalence of expressivist notions of legitimacy in *Souls* over democratic ones, but this does not mean, as Gooding-Williams further argues, that Du Bois rejected democratic notions of political legitimacy altogether. On the reading I am advancing, Du Bois’s understanding of expressive group leadership demonstrates that leaders *must* embrace the democratic politics of criticism and contestation in order to fulfill their expressive function. For Du Bois, then, black politics is primarily a matter of authoritative group leadership, of ruling and being ruled, *but* the efficacy and legitimacy of that leadership—that is, its ability to express and embody the spirit of the people—depends not only on the acknowledgment of a shared spiritual identity, but also on the degree to which leaders are able to register and respond to the voice of the people. As Melvin Rogers explains, Du Bois “struggles to render compatible two accounts of politics central to American political thought more broadly... *Souls* advances a vision of politics that focuses on ruling in the form of *giving direction*, but this stands alongside a vision of politics that affirms the capacity of citizens to

¹⁵⁴ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 111.

reflect, amend, or reject the direction presented to them.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, while *Souls* calls for the enlightened leadership of educated elites to uplift a black multitude “ignorant of the world about them,” this call is accompanied by the insistence “that in every state the best arbiters of their own welfare are the persons directly affected” (*SBF* 138). The people must therefore play a substantive role in the governing process. Democratic accountability and the promotion of an inclusive, vibrant public sphere are vitally important, according to this view, because without them political leadership is, at best, ineffectual, and, at worst, tyrannical. “The real argument for democracy is, then, that in the people we have the sources of that endless life and unbounded wisdom which the rulers of men must have.”¹⁵⁶

Conclusion: Pluralism, Sympathy, Micropolitics

In his early political writings, W. E. B. Du Bois adopts a romantic vision similar to Herder’s and adapts it to the unique political challenges facing black folks during “the nadir of American race relations.”¹⁵⁷ In so doing, Du Bois follows Herder in at least three distinct ways. First, he advances a sociohistorical theory of race. Second, he conceives of history as unfolding through the progressive realization of each race or people’s distinct spiritual message. Importantly, the cultural differences between the races are understood relativistically—*not* hierarchically—and each race

¹⁵⁵ Rogers, “People, Rhetoric, and Affect,” 197.

¹⁵⁶ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 112.

¹⁵⁷ Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

is seen as striving toward the expressive realization of a distinct and irreplaceable message for humanity:

The English nation stood for constitutional liberty and commercial freedom; the German nation stood for science and philosophy; the Romance nations stood for literature and art, and the other race groups are striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that “one far-off Divine event” ... Manifestly some of the great races of today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving... The question is, then: *how shall this message be delivered*; how shall these various ideals be realized? (CR 232-3; emphasis added)

Du Bois’s answer to this pressing question—how shall this message be delivered?—takes us to the third way in which he follows Herder: he espouses a form of identity politics that aims to advance each race or nation as a closed group while remaining cognizant of the importance of maintaining democratic practices within the group and cultivating harmonious relations between groups.

For both Herder and Du Bois, the sympathetic relationship between leaders and the led is essential to the politics of national formation, consolidation, and uplift. Moreover, the need for uplift is given particular urgency by the interdependence and rapid pace of change characteristic of the modern world. Urging his countrymen to work for the further development of Germany, Herder writes:

All the nations of Europe (not excluding other parts of the world) are now in a contest of, not physical, but *mental and artistic forces* with each other. When one or two nations accomplish steps of progress in a short time for which formerly centuries were required, then other nations cannot, and may not, want to set themselves back by centuries without thereby doing themselves painful damage. They *must* advance with those others, in our times one can no longer be a barbarian; as a barbarian one gets cheated,

trodden on, despised, abused. The epochs of the world form a moving chain which no individual ring can in the end resist even if it wanted to.¹⁵⁸

From Du Bois's perspective, this warning regarding the dire consequences of underdevelopment would have been particularly pertinent, for he saw African Americans as a pre-modern people struggling to survive in the modern world; they were, as he put it, "swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century" (*SBF* 155). And as if this did not in itself present enough difficulties, the vast majority of white America had shown itself to be not only indifferent to but, in many cases, actively hostile towards the strivings of black folks. Indeed, as Jim Crow spread and sharecropping and debt peonage replaced and largely reproduced the system of slave labor, the South became, in many ways, "simply an armed camp for intimidating black folk" (*SBF* 100).

According to Du Bois, however, the proper response to this situation was not for African Americans to abandon their distinct racial/cultural identity and adjust "all thought and action to the will of the greater group" (*SBF* 65). Instead, they ought to embrace that identity and, with the help of leaders who "can take hold of Negro communities and raise them by force of precept and example, *deep sympathy*, and the inspiration of common blood and ideals," pursue the expressive self-realization of their unique spiritual message (*SBF* 138, emphasis added). Through this "determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion," black folks would uplift themselves as a group and overcome their degraded social condition, thereby undermining "race prejudice against Negroes"

¹⁵⁸ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 377.

(SBF 65, 67). In so doing, they would eliminate what Du Bois took to be the two primary causes responsible for white America's insistence on upholding and rigorously enforcing the color-line: Negro 'backwardness' and white racial prejudice. This is the Du Boisian politics of "assimilation *through* self-assertion" (SBF 66).

Given the governing assumptions and basic tenets of political expressivism, however, one might well ask how two distinct "peoples" can coexist within the same political order while retaining their unique identities. After all, it was Herder who insisted that "the most natural state is... *one* people, with one national character" and warned that a multinational state is "a fragile machine... without inner life or sympathy of the parts for one another," destined to "crumble and dissolve."¹⁵⁹ From this perspective it would seem as if there are only two possible resolutions to the problem of the color-line in America: the disappearance of Negro identity or the destruction of the republic. Du Bois takes up this problem in "Conservation" and acknowledges that the seeming contradiction between the "duty to conserve" racial identity and the need for a stable political order free of racial conflict and dissension constitutes a truly "puzzling" "dilemma" (CR 233). "Am I an American or am I a Negro," he asks, or "can I be both?" (CR 233). If black folks continue to pursue their collective self-realization *as black folks*, are they not "perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates black and white America?" (CR 233). Must they therefore

¹⁵⁹ Johann Herder, *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, in *Another Philosophy of History*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 128. Herder's argument against multinational states stems primarily from his belief that they represent a threat to the principle of diversity because they are the result of an "unnatural expansion" of a state and are destructive of the national identities thus affected.

“cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?” (CR 233). To these last two questions, Du Bois responds with a resounding and emphatic, ‘No.’

Although this dilemma has troubled the mind of every “Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America,” Du Bois argues that upon closer examination it is based on faulty premises (CR 233). According to Du Bois, the modern state can accommodate two (or more) racial groups so long as a certain set of conditions are met: if “there is substantial agreement in laws, language, and religion... then there is no reason why, in the same country, and on the same street, two or three great national ideals might not thrive and develop” (CR 234).

Agreement with respect to laws, language, and religion provides the necessary conditions for a *modus vivendi* among the different groups inhabiting a polity. “We are Americans,” Du Bois declares, “not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that our Americanism does not go” (CR 234). But farther than this it need not go because the differences separating white and black Americans need not precipitate social conflict or threaten the stability of the political order; in fact, they can enrich and strengthen the body politic through the circulation of multiple spiritual messages and cultural practices. Du Bois thus offers a bounded pluralism at the level of the body politic as part of an attenuated version of political expressivism that attempts to reconcile the belief that societies must be organic wholes with the pluralistic nature of societies in a modern world shaped by widespread migration—both forced and voluntary. The “people” must still be “one” with respect to certain criteria (language, laws, religion), and the political order must still express or embody those shared characteristics,

but so long as these conditions are met, a plurality of forms of life can “thrive and develop” side by side.

In contrast to Herder, then, Du Bois asserts that modern civilization can—indeed, must—provide fertile grounds for the flourishing of multiple spiritual ideals and forms of life within a shared territorial state.¹⁶⁰ However, as *Souls* makes clear, Du Bois also thinks that the sympathy Herder took to be indispensable to the internal life of a people must exist between (as well as within) the different groups constituting a multiracial polity if that polity is to maintain democratic institutions and prosper amidst diversity. Thus, it is precisely at the moment when his romantic vision threatens to break apart under the centrifugal pressures of pluralism that Du Bois turns to sympathy as a powerful centripetal force capable of accommodating difference within the romantic insistence on organic wholeness. It is his way of reconciling the romantic notion of *Volk* with the political realities of the modern condition. For Herder it was the lack of sympathy among its constitutive parts (that is, peoples) which rendered the multi-national state soulless and ultimately doomed to dissolution. For Du Bois it is the possibility of achieving broad-based inter-racial sympathy, a possibility strengthened by the underlying *political* identity shared by white and black Americans, that holds out the possibility of reviving the American republic and refashioning it along racially egalitarian lines.

And yet, as we know, the color-line, according to Du Bois, fosters and in turn is perpetuated by a profound lack of interracial sympathy:

¹⁶⁰ “We believe, that, unless modern civilizations is a failure, it is entirely feasible and practicable for two races in such essential political, economic, and religious harmony as the white and colored people of America, to develop side by side in peace and mutual happiness, the peculiar contribution which each has to make to the culture of their common humanity” (CR 237).

The white man, as well as the Negro, is bound and barred by the color-line, and many a scheme of friendliness and philanthropy, of broad-minded sympathy and generous fellowship between the two has dropped still-born because some busy-body has forced the color-question to the front and brought the tremendous force of unwritten law against the innovators... In a world where it means so much to take a man by the hand and sit beside him, to look frankly into his eyes and feel his heart beating with red blood; in a world where a social cigar or a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches,—one can imagine the consequences of the almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races, whose separation extends even to parks and street-cars. (SBF 145)

Racism engenders tragedy by preventing whites and blacks alike from recognizing their common humanity, that is, by precluding that moment of ethical acknowledgment wherein we recognize the Other in ourselves and ourselves in the Other, leading to a call for reconciliation: “And then all helplessly we peered into those Other-worlds, and wailed, ‘O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?’” (SBF 166). Without such a moment of sublime recognition, without really knowing anything about the other, the possibility for sympathetic relations and, indeed, democratic life itself disappears. Writing of Alexander Crummell, who “worked alone, with so little human sympathy,” Du Bois explains: “And herein lies the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor,—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,—who is good? not that men are ignorant,—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men” (SBF 170, 171).

The Souls of Black Folk is Du Bois’s impassioned response to this tragic situation; it represents his effort to stretch his arms across the color-line in the hopes that (potentially) sympathetic whites may do so as well, “in generous acknowledgment of a common humanity and a common destiny” (SBF 145). Thus, in

addition to developing the expressivist view of black politics first articulated in “Conservation,” *Souls* is engaged in another undertaking with distinctly Herderian resonances. As we know, Herder believed that inter-cultural understanding requires a capacity for sympathy and an ability to enter the inner life-world of those different from oneself and perceive the world from their vantage point. For Herder, engendering sympathetic understanding was not only an epistemological project, but an ethical-political one as well: understanding others from their own point of view renders us more responsive to their claims, expands our ethical horizons, and spurs us to intervene in the world and forge new alliances in the struggle against previously unrecognized injustices. Du Bois agrees, and one of his primary objectives in introducing his white readers to life behind the veil is to “elicit an emotional response in the reader that might generate a reasoned desire to alleviate the condition of African-Americans and to expand the political-ethical imagination of the broader citizenry.”¹⁶¹ Indeed, not only does Du Bois indicate his use of a Herderian mode of sociohistorical inquiry “by appealing repeatedly to sympathetic understanding in the final chapters of *Souls*,”¹⁶² he also insists that forging sympathetic understanding between the races is necessary for alleviating the race problem in America. “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph” (*SBF* 147).

Attending to the importance of sympathy as an analytic category in *Souls*, and seeing how Du Bois’s efforts to elicit sympathy from his readers functioned as

¹⁶¹ Rogers, “People, Rhetoric, and Affect,” 195.

¹⁶² Zamir, *Dark Visions*, 105.

“micropolitical techniques of multiracial citizenship”¹⁶³ directed toward bringing about a transformation of the American polity, helps us to better appreciate the democratic dimensions and possibilities of that text and the romantic worldview underlying it. As Lawrie Balfour explains, “Du Bois not only presents a point of view. He works on his white fellow citizens so that they can *see* the injustice of black suffering and the beauty of black accomplishment; and he attempts to activate in black readers a sense of racial solidarity that might engender resistance to the injustice and magnify the accomplishment.”¹⁶⁴ Sympathy is more than a mere emotion or feeling; it is an affectively-imbued mode of understanding that operates as a faculty of moral discernment, generating concern for the well-being of others. Sympathy is thus a potential force for solidarity. The problem, however, is that the human tendency to more readily sympathize with those closer or more familiar to ourselves tends to limit its effectiveness as a tool for fostering mutual trust and ethical concern between groups wherein neither such familiarity nor ethical concern has already been established; hence the importance of “a micropolitics of perception, affection, conversation, and so forth”¹⁶⁵ as a means of cultivating democratic dispositions and sensibilities.

By micropolitics we mean engagements at the level of, affect, sensibility, perception, disposition and belief. Micropolitics has to do with what Du Bois calls the “atmosphere of the land”: it explores and engages the elusive territory of “thought and feeling, the thousand and one little action which go to make up life. In

¹⁶³ Katharine Lawrence Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 213.

any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to... the group life taken as a whole" (*SBF* 143). Micropolitics does not simply refer to the level of the individual, but also to the deployment throughout society of various techniques for encouraging the production of certain sensibilities and ethical-political dispositions in the target population. As such, we can see micropolitics as enabling certain political arraignments and as partially constitutive of macropolitics—the level of political institutions, sovereignty, and regime type:

micropolitics is no less extensive or real than macropolitics. Politics on the grand scale can never administer its molar segments without also dealing with the microinjections or infiltrations that work in its favor or present an obstacle to it; indeed, the larger the molar aggregates, the greater the molecularization of the agencies they put into play."¹⁶⁶

Souls is exemplary for the way in which it called attention to the structures of feeling and belief which sustain and enliven politics long before many political theorists had reached an appreciation for their importance. That is, Du Bois evinces an awareness that

Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving... There's a politics of being/feeling connected (or not), of impacts that are shared (or not), of energies spent worrying or scheming (or not), of affective contagion, and of all forms of attunement and attachment.¹⁶⁷

I suggest that the romantic vision's alertness to the embodied character of life and the culturally infused nature of identity formation is at least part of what helps Du

¹⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 204.

¹⁶⁷ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.

Bois reach an appreciation for the importance of the micropolitical dimensions of racial politics. Du Bois understood better than many theorists today that mere rational argumentation alone will not suffice to transform America's racial order.

However, having helped give him access to the quotidian realm of thought and feeling, that very same romantic vision also contributes to Du Bois's underestimation of the complexity and ambiguity inhering in the micropolitics of race. As Du Bois himself explains in *Dusk of Dawn*, in his early political writings he had underestimated both the systematic articulation of racial ideology and its subtle, often hidden manifestations as a conditioning force in American life:

And again my problem of human difference, of the color-line, of social degradation, of the fight for freedom became transformed. First and natural to the emergence of colder and more mature manhood from hot youth, I saw that the color bar could not be broken by a series of brilliant immediate assaults. Secondly, I saw defending this bar not simply ignorance and ill will; these to be sure; but also certain more powerful motives less open to reason or appeal. There were economic motives, urges to build wealth on the backs of black slaves and colored serfs; there followed those unconscious acts and irrational reactions, unpierced by reason, whose current form depended on the long history of relation and contact between thought and idea. In this case not sudden assault but long siege was indicated; careful planning and subtle campaign with the education of growing generations and propaganda.¹⁶⁸

The race-problem, then, entails more than a lack of sympathy. The romantic vision's notion of sympathy as a powerful moral force underlying all ethical relations rests upon a providential metaphysic in which we are naturally pre-disposed toward the world and one another and life itself.

Herder offered a picture of nature as a great current of sympathy, running through all things. 'See the whole of nature, behold the great analogy of

¹⁶⁸ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 6.

creation. Everything feels itself and its like, life reverberates to life.' Man is the creature who can become aware of this and bring it to expression.¹⁶⁹

If we remove this providential source which makes us at home in the world and provides the basis for harmonious communality in the very structure of things, sympathy loses some of its power. That is not to say sympathy becomes irrelevant, but it no longer brings us into contact with the essence of the world, ourselves, and others. That is because in a tragic world lacking providential input, it turns out there are no essences.

Again, the Du Bois of *Souls* was by no means oblivious to some of these issues; on the contrary, he was keenly aware of the complex interplay between thought and affect, cognition and sensation, and action and disposition. And he was alert to the importance of “influencing folkways, habits, customs and subconscious deeds” in order to change beliefs and behaviors.¹⁷⁰ And yet I think it is fair to say that he dramatically underestimated the intractability of racial hierarchy and the numerous forces—structural, social, personal, and pre-personal—supporting it and ensuring its reproduction. And that was because he was still understandably committed to seeing the cosmos and humanity as being in harmony with one another, to conceiving of the world as a place conducive to the fulfillment of our deepest desires and highest aspirations. Such a belief in providential guarantees is increasingly unsupportable today. The Du Bois of *Souls* was unwilling to abandon it, I think, because he felt it provided hope needed to sustain political action by assuring black folks that their collective strivings would not be in vain. In the next

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 369.

¹⁷⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 222.

chapter, I argue that Nietzsche's tragic vision of a world of becoming can provide the existential resources—including a form of hope—needed to sustain political action in the struggle against racial hierarchy and other barriers to human flourishing without the providential supplement Du Bois took to be crucial. As we shall see, the tragic vision shares the romantic vision's critical insights regarding the embodied self, the partiality of all perspectives, and the persistent desire for belonging, while remaining critical of its organic social ontology and the providential image of time supporting it. It thus challenges us to give up the comforting view that history is a story of progress, but as it does so, it also works to provide us with reasons to affirm a world without guarantees and act resolutely in it.

Chapter 4

Race and Tragic Visions: Sophocles, Nietzsche, Baldwin

The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this... I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. I think I know—we see it around us every day—the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: Whoever debases others is debasing himself. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff—and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition.

—James Baldwin¹

Why, man of mine, you would not have the courage to live one hour as a black man in America, or as a Negro in the whole wide world. Ah yes, I know what you whisper to such an accusation. You say dryly that if we had good sense, we would not live either; and that the fact that we do submit to life as it is and yet laugh and dance and dream, is but another proof that we are idiots. This is the truly marvelous way in which you prove your superiority by admitting that our love of life can only be intelligently explained on the hypothesis of inferiority. What finer tribute is possible to our courage?

—W.E. B. Du Bois²

The most spiritual human being, assuming they are the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but it is precisely for this reason that they honour life, because it brings against them its most formidable weapons.

—Friedrich Nietzsche³

Introduction

In the previous chapters we focused on romantic and, to a lesser extent, enlightenment visions, making only passing references to the tragic, typically in an anticipatory manner. In this chapter I focus primarily on the tragic and suggest that

¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 82-83.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), 147.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 88. Hereafter cited as *TI*.

Nietzsche's tragic vision of a world of becoming that exceeds our best efforts for mastery or control provides a valuable lens through which to make sense of and assess the contours and challenges of contemporary racial politics. Moreover, I argue that modern black political thought contains within its varied traditions significant elements that resonate with the tragic vision thus understood: both perspectives call for a critical genealogy of modernity and its political and ideological formations, seek to impart important lessons about the complexity and fragility of the human estate, and show the importance of taking reflective action at strategic junctures to diminish the amount of undeserved suffering in the world. Pursuing this connection, I show how a tragic perspective both enhances our understanding of the simultaneous construction and contestation of racial categories and provides a valuable framework for making sense of the ethico-political dilemmas animating contemporary racial politics. Though skeptical of appeals to Revolution and Redemption, a tragic sense resists resignation, despair, and political quietism. By appreciating the contingent, paradoxical, and unpredictable in life, tragic wisdom approaches the world in a sensitive and responsive manner so that we might act resolutely and effectively in it. The point of tragic wisdom is to help us better care for the world, not abandon it.

Although one can distinguish the tragic vision from any number of worldviews, for our purposes a primary and overarching distinction is between the *tragic* and the *providential*. By 'providential' I mean a family of worldviews premised on the idea of a world characterized either by internal purpose, providential guidance, or high susceptibility to human mastery and control. The romantic vision

is one such worldview. So is the enlightenment vision, as are any number of (but perhaps not all) religious visions. The trait which links these providential worldviews across their myriad differences is the shared belief in a fundamental (if as yet unrealized) fit between human aspirations and the structure of the world (or cosmos). This ontological optimism, which typically compensates for an existential anxiety rooted in pervasive experiences of absurdity and meaninglessness, often finds expression in a historical register through a stated belief in Progress, which is said to be advanced and assured by the mysterious workings of providence, the immanent trajectory of History, the cunning of reason, or the heroic aptitude of man (or perhaps Great Men) and the mastery of nature. Du Bois, whose romantic vision contains an element of tragic wisdom that unsettles or tempers its optimism, nonetheless gives voice to this providential orientation in the final pages of *Souls* when he affirms the faith sung in the Sorrow Songs, “a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (*SBF* 192). Likewise, though he expresses some serious doubts, Herder also ultimately asserts a belief in a providential world: “Whatever I may be, a call from heaven to earth [assures me] that like everything else, so I, too, must have *some* meaning in my place.”⁴

Against the idea of a world predisposed ‘to us,’ the tragic vision posits a world without intrinsic purpose, transcendental guidance, or “prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favor.”⁵ Whereas providential visions see us as comfortably in control of our own destinies or as part of a larger plan or

⁴ Johann Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 74.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 68.

purpose, tragedy suggests that we are much less the masters of our own destiny than we presume. In other words, “rather than assuming an integrated self in control of a structured world, tragedy presents that self and the structures which surround it and emanate from it as threatened by dissolution.”⁶ But a tragic vision does not thereby counsel us to abandon worldly engagement or the pursuit of social transformation. Instead, its best moments warn that such efforts, while necessary, are inherently uncertain and always susceptible to unforeseen forces and unanticipated consequences. As such, in urging respect for the contingent, paradoxical, and unpredictable in life, tragic wisdom teaches a lesson not of passive resignation but of modesty, responsiveness, and activism out of which a noble ethic of solidarity and care for the world may arise. This point is important, for those who urge us to reject the tragic vision often do so on the grounds that adopting a tragic perspective inevitably leads to resignation, cynicism, and a retreat from worldly engagement.

In order to indicate why this fatalistic reading of tragedy is mistaken, I turn first to David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, an innovative and compelling attempt to articulate the creative possibilities afforded by tragedy as a mode of critical reflection in relation to postcolonial criticism. I then engage the tragic plays of Sophocles, bringing to light a philosophical anthropology and image of time that undergird their depiction of human behavior, showing how the ultimate ethico-political “moral” of these stories is not one of fatalistic withdrawal but of moderation, responsiveness, and reflective

⁶ Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999 [1981]), 41.

action. I then turn to Nietzsche, who drew inspiration from Sophocles' tragic vision while emphasizing the need for existential affirmation alongside the disruptive force and creative potential of becoming. Nietzsche's subsequent understanding of the tragic as a pluralist affirmation of multiplicity, chance, and becoming provides valuable resources for thinking about racial politics in a contemporary world characterized by rapid change and the proliferation of difference. The perspective of time as becoming advanced by Nietzsche can help make sense of the persistent desire for a secure sense of belonging and explains why that very desire carries dangers with it. It also suggests some conceptual tools for articulating an account of the politics of racial solidarity that does not rely on a logic of racial essentialism or on notions of an 'authentic' racial self or community. Moreover, because of its keen historical sense, the tragic vision emphasizes the central role that race-making has played in the emergence of Western modernity, the *continued* relevance of race in the contemporary world, and the crucial importance of efforts to forge (transnational) black solidarity as a matter of political pragmatism. Thus, the tragic vision's rejection of an *a priori* black identity or essence that would be antecedent to and foundational for 'black politics' does *not* imply a dismissal of either the continued relevance of race in contemporary life or the *pressing need for race conscious forms of political solidarity committed to combatting white supremacy*.

Moreover, Nietzsche's warnings about the dangers of *ressentiment* seem to me to be particularly relevant to the existential challenges posed by black existence in a world structured by racial hierarchy and suffused with anti-black racism. Simply put, on the whole black folks have a great deal to be resentful about, and

while these resentments can (and in the past have) motivate action in productive ways, they may also consolidate and solidify into a generalized resentment of the fundamental terms and conditions of life itself, with disabling and disastrous political and ethical consequences. Indeed W. E. B. Du Bois,⁷ Frantz Fanon,⁸ Ralph Ellison, Cornel West, and James Baldwin, to name a few key modern black political thinkers, all grapple with this problem and with the spiritual danger posed by existential resentment in ways that can be seen to resonate with Nietzsche's analysis of the causes and consequences of *ressentiment*. What I mean by this is that these authors emphasize the importance of affirming existence as such in the midst of its ongoing tragedies, of drawing upon a love of life in resisting modes of domination, and of fostering communities of love and fellowship to combat the corrosive power of resentment and the desire for revenge. They all agree with Nietzsche that "it is only in love... that man is creative. Anything that constrains a man to love life less than unconditionally has severed the roots of his strength."⁹

However, these thinkers not only signal the dangers of existential resentment for black folks living in a racialized (nay, racist) environment, they can also be read as suggesting that something like this generalized spirit of *ressentiment*, which insists upon the self-certainty of established identities, accounts in part for the persistence of anti-black racism and racial hierarchy in contemporary societies. In

⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*; see also Katharine Lawrence Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); also, Adam Culver, "Becoming-Active, Becoming-Revolutionary: Fanon's Creative Appropriation of Nietzsche," in progress.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95 [§7]. Hereafter cited in text as *HL*.

other words, they read anti-black racism as a symptom of white existential *ressentiment* and suggest it is towards *white* Americans, for example, that one must look if one wishes to understand America's race problem. This is particularly true of James Baldwin, whose essays on race and modernity mine the subterranean connections between race consciousness, democratic ideals, cultural dispositions, and collective identification. As we shall see below, in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin articulates a tragic vision of the world with distinctly Nietzschean resonances: he argues that an unyielding attachment to the category of whiteness, which is inherently tied to white supremacy and the derogation of blackness, stems from an unwillingness among white Americans to confront and come to terms with the unavailability of the human condition. Baldwin also brings an alertness to the conditions of power and powerlessness and a moral idiom for reproaching the injustices these asymmetrical relationships foster, and this adds a *sharper, more critical and militant edge to the tragic vision as he articulates it*. Baldwin's work thus gives us a prime example of how thinking about the tragic in conjunction with some of the insights gleaned from black experiences of modernity helps to clarify the potential political significance of the tragic vision; read in this way, his work shows how a tragic ethos of finitude might be marshaled to support a militant, anti-racist politics that promotes forbearance and receptivity in light of the opacity of Being while simultaneously insisting upon the unacceptability of those forms of injustice that serve to perpetuate unnecessary relations of domination and exploitation.

Ultimately, through these engagements, I aim to articulate a novel theoretical approach to racial politics, one that combines a tragic ethos of finitude,

responsiveness, and existential affirmation with a militant commitment to struggling against racial hierarchy and other barriers to human flourishing. If successful, then, this chapter will begin to formulate a tragic account of racial politics that is less “optimistic” than its romantic counterparts, yet remains hopeful thanks to an existential orientation of affirmation and gratitude for the abundance of being in a world that exceeds our quest for control and mastery while containing within in it the potential for positive transformations.

Racial Politics in Tragic Times

To stay cheerful when involved in a gloomy and exceedingly responsible business is no inconsiderable art: yet what could be more necessary than cheerfulness?

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁰

In turning to tragedy as a mode of critical reflection, my work draws on and seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature that has investigated, in various ways, the existential insights, ethical implications, and political significance of tragedy’s—and especially Greek tragedy’s—account of the precariousness of the human estate in an unbalanced and unpredictable world composed of diverse forces that do not always harmonize or correspond to human intentions.¹¹ Tragedy, these authors suggest, teaches some lessons about the ambiguous, paradoxical, and

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *TI*, 31 (Foreword).

¹¹ For some of the most important contributions to this literature, see Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*; Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990); J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

contingent in life and thereby helps us to better navigate and intervene in a world that is neither highly providential nor entirely under our control. I concur, and I aim to explore how reflecting on the lessons of tragedy in conjunction with “the standpoint of dislocation associated with black experiences of modernity”¹² can help us formulate a theoretical approach to racial politics that folds a reflexive ethos of modesty into a militant commitment to opposing racism and other barriers to human flourishing. I believe that the cultivation of a generous ethos of critical responsiveness, as urged by tragic wisdom and contemporary theorists of ethical cultivation alike, is necessary for democratic life in pluralistic societies; but so, too, is an alertness to the ways in which racialized systems of power foreclose genuine democratic possibilities and impose hierarchical structures and states of domination. For, as Baldwin’s work suggests, “moving beyond white supremacy is a condition of democratic possibility, period; the alternative is fraudulent pluralism among whites,”¹³ the continuation of the *herrenvolk* democracy which thus far has been our nation’s tradition.

In the post-civil rights era white supremacy in America has assumed more subtle forms and adopted new modes of articulation, often operating just beneath the surface of our social, political, and economic structures, eluding the grasp of many, but especially those with little or no interest in challenging the racial status quo. Sometimes, however, the effects of white supremacy are too shocking and brutal to be ignored. The routine violence and death visited upon black Americans—

¹² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 160.

¹³ George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 166.

particularly young men—by police officers,¹⁴ and the tacit approval of this violence by an American legal system that by and large does not hold the police officers responsible for these deaths accountable in any way, has spurred outrage, widespread protests, and a national movement for racial justice under the slogan “Black Lives Matter.”

One of the many virtues of this nascent movement is that it has called attention to persistent patterns of racial inequality and injustice that have gone largely unacknowledged among the general public in the United States. Despite the smug and premature declarations of a post-racial or post-civil rights era that sustain the superficial color-blind ideology pervading much of American culture, the fact of the matter is that

the significance of race is not declining. The White racial framing of colorblindness operating on a flawed conceptualization of race masks a reality where racism persists robustly, but more subtly than during the pre-civil rights era. While Blacks have made *some* progress compared with their position in the Jim Crow era, a gaping divide persists between Blacks and Whites today across all social spheres. The racial divide is maintained both at the structural and interactional levels preventing Blacks from accessing equal opportunity.¹⁵

Instead of witnessing the progressive realization of racial equality, the past few decades have seen a widespread “retreat from racial justice as a political priority”¹⁶ and the establishment of new, more insidious modes of racial domination, obscured by a discourse of formal equality and color-blindness. To be sure, there have been

¹⁴ George Zimmerman, who murdered seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, was of course not a police officer or an agent of the state. However, he certainly took it upon himself to act as if he were a police officer, and, like the police officers responsible for the deaths of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, and many other others, Zimmerman was not punished for killing Trayvon Martin.

¹⁵ Tahseen Shams, “The Declining Significance of Race or the Persistent Racialization of Blacks? A Conceptual, Empirical, and Methodological Review of Today’s Race Debate in America” *Journal of Black Studies* (2015): 9.

¹⁶ Balfour, *Democracy’s Reconstruction*, 9%.

improvements: “The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of ‘Whites Only’ signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows... But such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere.”¹⁷ Indeed, despite some initial success in reducing inter-racial income disparities after the passage of major civil rights legislation in the 1960s, “the income gap between black and white households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970.”¹⁸ Moreover, “the Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households.”¹⁹ Perhaps more troubling still has been the persistence of racial disparities across almost every facet of American life, including education,²⁰ employment,²¹ housing,²² and the criminal ‘justice’ system.²³ Not surprisingly, then,

¹⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. See also the report published by Paul Taylor and the Pew Center for Research, “The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown” (New York: Public Affairs, March 4, 2014).

²⁰ In “The Unfinished March: An Overview,” a report for the Economic Policy Institute, Algernon Austin writes, “Nearly 60 years after the *Brown* decision, more than 50 years after the ‘Little Rock Nine’ were escorted by federal troops into Little Rock Central High School, nearly three-fourths (74.1 percent) of black students still attend segregated schools, defined as a majority nonwhite... This is nearly the same share as in the late 1960s, when 76.6 percent of black children attended majority black schools” (5).

²¹ “From the 1960s to today, the black unemployment rate has been about 2 to 2.5 times the white unemployment rate. In 2012, the black unemployment rate was 14.0 percent, 2.1 times the white unemployment rate (6.6 percent) and higher than the average national unemployment rate of 13.1 percent during the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1939” (Austin, “The Unfinished March,” 3).

²² “Arrested progress in the fight against poverty and residential segregation has helped concentrate many African Americans in some of the least desirable housing in some of the lowest-resourced communities in America. In addition to much higher poverty rates, blacks suffer much more from concentrated poverty. Nearly half (45 percent) of poor black children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, but only a little more than a tenth (12 percent) of poor white children live in similar neighborhoods” (Ibid., 4).

This lack of housing choice affects affluent blacks as well: “And just as black families of all incomes remain handicapped by a lack of wealth, so too do they remain handicapped by their restricted choice of neighborhood. Black people with upper-middle-class incomes do not generally live in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Sharkey’s research shows that black families making \$100,000 typically live in the kinds of neighborhoods inhabited by white families making \$30,000.

one vital force circulating within the nascent movement for racial justice has been an acute sense of frustration regarding the lack of substantial progress towards dismantling the stubborn structures of white supremacy in America.

The events that sparked the new racial justice movement—the horrific repetition in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri of civil and human rights abuses thought to belong exclusively to a bygone era, the slow but steady dismantling of key pieces of the Voting Rights Act, antidiscrimination laws, and affirmative action policies by the Supreme Court, the seeming irrelevance of black lives in the ethical consciousness of the polity—call upon us to consider giving up the reassuring assumption that history is necessarily a story of progress. Indeed, I am not sure how we are to make sense of the present within that historical framework. Nor do I think we can respond to these developments with the strategies, tactics, and frameworks of old. In particular, I worry that the belief in progress, generally assumed to be an indispensable motivational principle for political action,²⁴ today may in fact intensify individual and collective drives toward existential *resentiment*—that is, toward resentment of the basic terms of human existence itself. This is why even as I sought to (partially) recuperate the romantic vision in the previous chapters by showing its democratic possibilities and anti-imperialist origins, I nonetheless insisted that romance alone cannot respond adequately to the political demands of the present.

‘Blacks and whites inhabit such different neighborhoods,’ Sharkey writes, ‘that it is not possible to compare the economic outcomes of black and white children’” (Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”)

²³ “The systematic racialization of Blacks is perhaps most clearly reflected in the criminal justice system. Even though people of *all* colors use and sell drugs in similar rates, Black men are incarcerated at rates *20 to 50 times greater* than those of White men. In fact, a ‘black man born in the 1960s, *after* the victories of the civil rights movement, is more than twice as likely to go to prison in his lifetime as a man born during the Jim Crow era’” (Shams, “The Declining Significance,” 5).

²⁴ See Loren Goldman, “In Defense of Blindness: On Kant, Political Hope, and Practical Belief,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (August 2012): 781-805.

To do that, I argue, we need a tragic vision with a complex view of history as composed of interactive, multi-directional, and open-ended processes lacking inherent directionality or purpose. But I am also aware of the dangers that would accompany such a move. In renouncing providential banisters, are we not headed rapidly towards hopelessness and despair?

In an essay now three decades old on the practice of philosophy as it relates to the struggles of black Americans for freedom and community, Cornel West anticipates and gives voice to some of these concerns. In short, West sees recent developments in professional philosophy—what he calls the emergence of the “post-philosophical” present—as emblematic of a more general experience of “pervasive despair about the present and lack of hope for the future.”²⁵ In later writings, West comes to champion the adoption of a tragicomic²⁶ sensibility, which he defines as “the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life’s joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the

²⁵ Cornel West, “Philosophy, Politics, and Power: An Afro-American Perspective,” in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: An Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), 51.

²⁶ The tragic vision I advance and West’s account of the tragicomic share a great deal in common, but there are some important differences. Both acknowledge absurdity and meaninglessness and suggest these are fundamental aspects of the human estate. And both work to ward off the threats posed by passive nihilism, resignation, and existential resentment. But West’s notion is rooted in a Christian metaphysic, whereas mine draws inspiration from Nietzsche’s non-theistic reverence for being. In the end, Christianity sees tragedy as a prelude to the divine comedy of cosmic redemption. My sense is that West believes this aspect to be important, perhaps necessary even, for maintaining hope and an affirmative orientation to being, but in my assessment such a providential assumption is unnecessary and perhaps even dangerous, and I hope to show that Nietzsche’s philosophy gives us enough resources to fashion affirmative, non-vengeful modes of political engagement without appealing to a Beyond or an ultimate Redemption. I do not of course insist that everybody must hold such a view, only that it is an important perspective to place in critical/invitational relations with those like that of West’s and others which grapple with the tragic sense of life.

nihilism of paralyzing despair”²⁷ and disillusioned acquiescence to the status quo.

But here West associates tragedy solely with the nihilistic discontent and cynical

conservatism he seeks to counteract. Surveying the past and present state of

Western philosophical activity, West draws a bleak picture of our present:

The disclosure of a deep sense of impotence sits at the center of the post-philosophical present: the sense of reaching an historical dead end with no foreseeable way out and no discernable liberating projects or even credible visions in the near future. This disclosure is related to the detranscendentalizing of the Kantian subject in the sense that the emergence of the transcendental subject—the creative and conquering romantic hero—signifies the sense of optimistic triumph of early modern capitalist civilization. *The detranscendentalizing of the subject portrays the sense of pessimistic tragedy of post-modern capitalist civilization*, with the primary redemptive hope for this civilization, Marx’s collective subject, the proletariat, remaining relatively dormant and muted.²⁸

Against this nihilistic trend, West offers some “recommendations for a revolutionary

future”: specifically, he argues that the primary task for Afro-American philosophers

is “to keep alive the idea of a revolutionary future” by preserving “the crucial

Hegelian (and deeply Christian) notions of negation and transformation of what is in

light of a revolutionary not-yet.”²⁹ West seems to suggest that it is only through the

resurrection of the revolutionary potential of Hegel and Marx that we can overcome

the despair, nihilism, and hedonism characteristic of our tragic post-philosophical

present. This effort, combined with a “concrete grounding in the indigenous

prophetic and progressive practices of Afro-Americans,” can provide a way out of

the seeming dead end of the present as Afro-American philosophers take their place

“alongside, not above, other committed Afro-Americans who continue to hold up the

²⁷ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 16.

²⁸ West, “Philosophy, Politics, and Power,” 56; emphasis added.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

blood-stained banner, a banner that signifies the Afro-American struggle for freedom.”³⁰

Of course, as Cornel West makes clear, this sense of despair is not unique to contemporary black politics in thought and action; it is, rather, “symptomatic of fundamental cultural transformations in the modern West,”³¹ or, as Du Bois might say, it is “simply the writhing of the age translated into black” (*SBF* 154). Wendy Brown captures our contemporary predicament quite well:

Moving at such speed without any sense of control or predictability, we greet both past and future with bewilderment and anxiety. As a consequence, we inheritors of a radically disenchanted universe feel a greater political impotence than humans may have felt before, even as we occupy a global order more saturated by human power than ever before. Power without purpose, power without lines of determination, power without end in every sense of the word.³²

Not surprisingly, the disorienting sense of powerlessness Brown identifies as characteristic of the political present is exacerbated and intensified with respect to black political culture. First, it may indeed be true that we live in “a global order more saturated by human power than ever before,” but it is also true that the structure of that global order has been premised on the large-scale exclusion of peoples of color from that power. Second, as we shall see at greater length below, pervasive disorientation and political impotence within the broader *demos* often concentrates the object of resentment on black communities themselves, leading to further violence, dispossession, and marginalization.

³⁰ Ibid., 58.

³¹ Ibid., 51.

³² Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139.

Paul Gilroy examines black diasporic political cultures in the context of these ongoing structural transformations, situating his analysis “in the midst of a political and technological sea-change that somehow strengthens ethnic absolutism and primordialism.”³³ According to Gilroy, the changing politico-economic conditions of the “nominally postcolonial period” we inhabit necessitate a critical reflection that “confronts the historical and philosophical limits of the idea of liberation and promotes a reevaluation of those fundamental modern notions: freedom and revolution.”³⁴ For Gilroy, these observations serve as the backdrop for a series of ruminations on some dangerous developments in contemporary transnational black political culture: the deployment of the trope of the family as part of the rhetoric of black nationalism, the rise of “revolutionary conservatism,” and the persistence of various forms of racial unanimism, all of which Gilroy sees as related to general trends in modern life toward the aestheticization of politics and the growing appeal of authoritarian irrationalism. Gilroy aims to push back against these fundamentalizing tendencies by elaborating a “pragmatic, planetary humanism” that is also a “radically nonracial humanism... most powerfully articulated where it has been accompanied by a belated return to the consideration of the chronic tragedy, vulnerability, and frailty that have defined our species.”³⁵ Leaving behind the “anti-anti-essentialism”³⁶ he had previously endorsed, Gilroy rejects the validity of any form of race thinking in modern life—even purely “pragmatic” or “strategic” appeals

³³ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 99-103.

to racial commonality—and calls upon us to resist “the allure of automatic, prepolitical uniformity”³⁷ as we seek to construct solidarity through ongoing political engagements and the cultivation of democratic sensibilities informed by an appreciation for the tragic “predicament of fundamentally fragile, corporeal existence.”³⁸

David Scott’s groundbreaking book, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, responds to the same types of concern that animate the works discussed above. At the same time, it charts a path distinct from the work of both Gilroy and West. Scott agrees with Gilroy that structural transformations require theorists and practitioners alike to rethink the meaning of freedom and revolution, but Scott uses this insight to articulate a form of postcolonial criticism that is sympathetic to but distinct from the work of Gilroy. Scott also concurs with West that the present is characterized by a widespread sense of despair and disillusionment, and, like West, Scott believes that it is of the utmost importance to develop “an imagined idiom of future futures that might reanimate this present and even engender in it new and unexpected horizons of transformative possibility.”³⁹ However, Scott breaks with West when the latter urges the resurrection and revitalization of the romantic hopes of a revolutionary not-yet. Scott suggests that romantic narratives of this sort no longer have the critical purchase they once did because they can only be understood as responding to a set of questions and concerns relevant to the “conceptual-ideological problem-spaces” (i.e., discursive

³⁷ Gilroy, *Against Race*, 8

³⁸ Ibid., 17.

³⁹ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, Duke University Press: 2004) 1.

contexts of argument and action) of an anti-colonial present “in which transformative horizons were still visible—and not only visible, but plausible. For better or worse, we no longer inhabit that present, and consequently Romance no longer answers a critical demand.”⁴⁰

Ultimately, *Conscripts* represents a fascinating attempt to articulate the inventive and transformative possibilities provided by a tragic vision, particularly as it pertains to postcolonial politics. In this text Scott pursues a creative re-interpretation of C. L. R. James’s classic text of romantic anticolonialism, *The Black Jacobins*, by focusing on the 1963 reissue of the book in which James incorporated a number of tragic themes that unsettle the book’s dominant romantic narrative.⁴¹ Scott’s primary theoretical concern is with what he calls historical time—our phenomenal experience of time-as-succession, of past-present-future—and how different conceptions of historical time (e.g. dialectical, teleological, non-regressive, circular, or tragic) affect our sociopolitical imagination. To that end, much of the text focuses on the role of historical narration as constitutive of community and generative of sociopolitical imagination. In particular Scott examines the ways in which hoped-for futures reflect particular cognitive problem-spaces and particular understandings of the obstacles and problems to be overcome. Within this context, Scott convincingly shows that romantic anticolonial narratives of redemption, vindication, and liberation no longer have the critical purchase they once did. He therefore suggests that we ought to rethink the way we conceptualize the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 168.

⁴¹ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, Vintage Books, 1989).

relationship between past, present, and future in light of the changed problem-space(s) and “horizons of expectation” characteristic of the post-colonial present. More specifically, he urges postcolonial theorists to adopt a tragic view of history, one that corresponds to the sense of dislocation and uncertainty characteristic of the contemporary condition in which, much like the characters in Sophocles’ tragic dramas, we find ourselves compelled to act in a world “in which values are unstable and ambiguous” and “human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck.”⁴²

Scott develops two contrasting ways of thinking about the past in relation to the present and future; these amount to two ways of posing questions that animate our theoretical and practical pursuits. The first, which has been the dominant narrative form of anti-colonialism, is romance. As Scott shows, one of the interesting features of *The Black Jacobins* is that it simultaneously participates in a number of diverse and seemingly incompatible traditions that can be brought together under the rubric of romanticism; James combines elements of black romantic anti-slave discourses, Great Man theories, Marxist radicalism, and Victorian Romanticism to shape the narrative of *The Black Jacobins* as an “allegory of emancipationist redemption that embodies in a compelling and inspiring way the great longing for black and anticolonial revolutions.”⁴³ As a historical narrative, romance posits a progressivist/teleological historicity, assumes a sovereign, transcendental subject, carries with it a vindicationist moral and a horizon of revolutionary overcoming,

⁴² Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 13.

⁴³ Ibid., 30

and conceives of political struggles in dualistic terms of success or failure.

“Romance, in short, is a drama of redemption.”⁴⁴

The alternative narrative form that Scott commends, which has played at best a minor role in post-colonial discourse thus far, is that of *tragedy*. As Scott deftly shows, tragedy, as a mode of narrative emplotment, employs a recursive or disjunctive historicity: it rejects evolutionary or teleological accounts of historical development; it posits the intransigence of failure within success; it is self-critical and reflexive; it is skeptical of the notion of total Revolution; and it conceives of a ‘detranscendentalized’ subject—as West would put it—that is historically constituted in and by the forms of power that organize the social field in which the subject must act. “Above all,” Scott explains, “tragedy is troubled by the hubris of enlightenment and civilization, power and knowledge,” and, as such, encourages us “to honor the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs.”⁴⁵ Moreover, because a tragic vision suggests that history should be understood as contingent, constitutive, and consequential, it is skeptical of both organic interpretations of historical development and the idea of radically transcending the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment. Importantly, from the standpoint of a tragic vision, the various victories won by racialized populations in the struggle against racism and inequality are understood to be both vitally important and potentially reversible. Tragic wisdom informs us that no gains are ever final, for every victory is haunted by the intransigence of defeat. For Scott, this

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

is the appropriate narrative form for thinking about historical time because it enables “a critical rethinking of the present we inhabit.”⁴⁶ I agree.

Scott makes it clear that “we live in tragic times” *not* “merely because our world is assailed by one moral and social catastrophe after another” but, rather, “because, in Hamlet’s memorable phrase, our time is ‘out of joint.’”⁴⁷ To use terms supplied by Greek tragedy and Tiresias’s memorable warning to Creon in *Antigone*—“beware, you’re standing once again upon the razor’s edge”—we could say that we live in tragic times because we find ourselves today perched perilously on the razor’s edge of time where the disjunction of the moment and the uncertainty of the future become palpable.⁴⁸ The claim that we live in tragic times cannot be reduced to the insight that many awful and horrible things happen, though they surely do. Instead, tragedy denotes the realization that we are not the masters of our own destinies and that we lack the secure grounding of transcendental subjectivity or universal moral codes (‘categorical imperatives’) that can tell us in each instance what we ought to do: “the old languages of moral-political vision and hope are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize.”⁴⁹

Moreover, tragedy extends our attention to unforeseen forces (gods or natural ends) and the contingency of timing in its explanation of what happens. In a tragic world we often find ourselves compelled to act under conditions not of our

⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2

⁴⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *The Oedipus Plays of Sophocles*, trans. Paul Roche (New York: Penguin, 1991).

⁴⁹ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2.

own choosing and to expose ourselves to unforeseen dangers and unexpected developments:

In short, tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck.⁵⁰

Whereas romantic visions dream of harmonious reconciliation or revolutionary overcoming, tragedy has recourse to neither. Rather than seeing History as either a single timeline that carries us forward or a providential system of differential organic growth, the tragic vision posits multi-directional and open-ended historical processes lacking inherent purpose in which dynamic networks periodically struggle over the meaning and terms of existence within and between themselves, even as new values, forces, and relations surge into being. In this sense tragedy resonates with the critical genealogies of Nietzsche and Foucault, for “whereas theories and traditional histories seek unity and stability and speak in evolutionary or teleological terms, genealogies look to and for disruptions and struggle, variety and difference, contingency and surprise.”⁵¹

I am worried, however, that Scott’s account of the tragic does not provide enough ammunition for the skirmishes ahead—that it may have the unintended effect of fostering resignation and diminishing the will to struggle. This is a risk because Scott tends to designate the tragic negatively; that is, he defines it by what it is not and understands it as the negation of the romance-form. I read a hint of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁵¹ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 23.

nostalgia or disappointment in Scott's general argument that romance is *no longer* relevant to the contemporary world, and that now, "for better or worse," we must turn to tragedy in order to respond to our collective sense of temporal dissonance and lost hope. In other words, a disappointed romanticism pervades Scott's text in that his account of tragedy can be read as expressing a longing for a simpler world of the past in which romance was still viable. In this sense Scott can be read as a disillusioned romantic. The problem with this nostalgia is that if we start from the perspective of a romantic vision and a redemptive narrative of emancipation and overcoming, taking the assumptions implicit in this worldview as a starting point, and *then* see the tragic in terms of *what is lost from the romantic vision*, it is tempting to allow the tragic to issue in despair. Indeed, someone skeptical of the tragic tradition might reasonably ask at this point: "What exactly keeps the tragic vision from slipping into hopelessness and resignation? You claim that tragedy does not preach resignation, but if we accept the 'tragic vision of a world divided against itself and rent with contradictions,'⁵² how are we to generate affirmative political projects? If our best efforts to forge a better future are always limited, what's the point?"

In order to formulate a theoretical account of the tragic that can help sustain an affirmative, productive, and (potentially) transformative politics, I ultimately turn to Nietzsche's philosophy of the tragic. Nietzsche draws inspiration from Sophocles' tragic worldview and extends it to articulate a vision of the tragic that emphasizes existential affirmation, the productive element in becoming, and the

⁵² Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 113.

creative, artistic potential of the will to power. *This factor of elemental affirmation is crucial in preventing tragic wisdom from sliding into passive resignation, or, worse, into the very ressentiment it seeks to surmount.* Nietzsche's affirmation of tragic possibility can, in turn, only be understood within the general context of his vision of a world of becoming with multiple forces in conflict in which new events occur in the element of chance and uncertainty. For Sophocles, Nietzsche, and Baldwin alike, the tragic entails an awareness of the contingent, time-bound nature of existence, of the ways in which we are caught up in the inexorable flux of creation and destruction that gives shape to the world, and of the constitutive power of the past we cannot hope to escape entirely. Thus, what is at stake in thinking about the relationship between time and the tragic is not just the structure of our historical narratives, but rather an active examination of the nature of time itself and its fundamental role in unsettling any ultimate principle of harmony in the universe. Foregrounding the importance of time and its creative-destructive powers in Sophocles' tragic worldview leads us to consider the ways in which his tragic vision of "a world marked by multiple gods who do not place human welfare high on their list bears an uncanny affinity to a world of becoming composed of multiple, open force-fields of numerous types."⁵³ By focusing on time in this way, we acquire a richer appreciation of both the profound existential challenges posed by the tragic vision of the world and of how we might come to terms with these challenges and embrace the most fundamental terms of existence as we try to transform parts of it. Through these engagements, then, we will gain a better sense of why the tragic

⁵³ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 155.

vision “has been found intolerably painful by certain ambitious rational beings”⁵⁴
and of how we might learn to affirm such a vision nonetheless.

The Tragic World of Sophocles

*Men of the House of Cadmus and of Amphion, how rash it is to envy others or despair!
The luck we adulate in one today, tomorrow is another's tragedy. There is no stable
horoscope for man... So stands the case. Make of it what you will.*

—Sophocles⁵⁵

In what follows we will not explore the Aristotelian account of tragedy, in which the primary function of tragedy is to provide a means for catharsis; instead we will examine the tragic dramas of Sophocles with an eye to apprehending the philosophical vision or worldview informing these works. Following Aristotle, who famously argued in the *Poetics* that tragedy consists in the dramatic *mimesis* or imitation of human actions, organized in such a way as to arouse emotions of fear and pity, “wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions,”⁵⁶ it is often presumed that the essence of a tragic vision consists in tragic outcomes—Ajax impaled on his sword, Oedipus blinded and expelled from Thebes, Antigone buried alive—and, to be certain, such outcomes are a crucial and defining aspect of the poetics of tragedy. But the significance of tragedy—and here we are concerned primarily with Greek tragedy and Sophocles in particular—cannot be reduced solely to the dramatic structure of reversal and misfortune, culminating in a tragic

⁵⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 50.

⁵⁵ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 243. Hereafter cited in text as *Antigone*. These lines are delivered by the Messenger after he has delivered the news of the deaths of Antigone and Haemon.

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), chapter 6.

dénouement, which Aristotle took to be its defining aspect. This is the case in part because some of Sophocles' plays examine a tragic vision without being tragedies (e.g. *Philoctetes*). Indeed, each of his extant plays depicts a tragic vision of a world composed of diverse forces that do not always harmonize or correspond with human purposes. "In exploring our relation to uncontrollable forces, both within and beyond ourselves, these plays create a sense of cosmic consciousness" and ultimately articulate a distinctive "philosophical anthropology" and interpretation of the human condition.⁵⁷ Perhaps, then, we should distinguish between *tragedy*, understood as a distinct narrative and literary form, and *the tragic*, by which we mean to designate a fundamental worldview and perspective on the human predicament in an unbalanced world that eludes our best efforts for mastery or control and is thus suffused with tragic possibilities—possibilities, *not* inevitabilities.⁵⁸

Sophocles portrays man as occupying a fundamentally ambiguous place in the cosmos: "He is neither above the processes of nature, as are the gods, nor a passive unquestioning participant in those processes, as are the beasts."⁵⁹ Man can neither passively enjoy existence, as Kant's Arcadian sheep do, nor fully master it to satisfy his needs and desires, as the gods might, at least *sometimes*. The human being is not a sovereign but a subject, in two senses: subject in the sense of being capable of choice and attached to an identity through awareness and knowledge of self, and subject in the sense of being subjected to forces and conditions beyond one's

⁵⁷ Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, xii, xv.

⁵⁸ As I read them, all of Sophocles' plays contain this tragic vision, but not all of them contain a tragic outcome: there is nothing particularly tragic about the outcome of *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example.

⁵⁹ Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 40.

control. "All of Sophocles' extant plays are concerned with the tension between man's autonomy and his dependence, between his power to transcend the physical and biological necessities that surround his life and his immanent position within those necessities."⁶⁰ Ambiguously situated, man must make his way in a world he is neither fully at home in nor entirely in harmony with, "a world in which our prospects are not fully under the control of reason, and in which we are exposed to fortune on a large scale."⁶¹

In order to try to create a home in this world, man pursues various schemes for simplifying its complexity and imposing human order on its volatilities. This is the "civilizing power" of humanity that is responsible for "the totality of man's achievements in shaping his distinctively human life."⁶² Through our ambition and reason we attempt to fashion a life worth living, perhaps even a good life, amidst the elemental uncertainty that surrounds and threatens us. But the sense of pride such achievements elicit can also lead man to take his civilizing powers 'too far,' to disregard the enigmatic character of the world and his ambiguous place within it and become overly enamored with the quest for mastery and rational autonomy. When that happens, when we forget that we are not the sovereign masters of our own destinies, when we transgress our human limitations, then disaster (i.e., a tragic outcome) is most likely to occur: our best efforts to build a better world come crashing down around us as we sit among ruined monuments to our vanity.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁶¹ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, xxxii-xxxiii.

⁶² Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 2.

The human struggle to master a world not of our own making and the consequences of pursuing that project too far are foundational themes in Greek tragedy, and “no figure in Greek drama more powerfully and tragically embodies the paradoxes of man’s civilizing power than Oedipus,” that tragic hero whose imperious quest for self-mastery and self-certainty ends in self-destruction and self-immolation.⁶³

Oh the generations of man!
His life is vanity and nothingness.
Is there one, one
Who more than tastes of, thinks of, happiness,
Which in the thinking vanishes?
Yours the text, yours the spell,
I see it in you Oedipus:
*Man’s pattern of unblessedness.*⁶⁴

Oedipus exemplifies the dilemma of acting and living in a world composed of diverse forces (or “gods”) that do not always harmonize with one another or correspond to human intentions. All of his achievements “come to reflect the ambiguity of man’s power to control his world and manage his life by intelligence.”⁶⁵ Oedipus is a man of insoluble contradictions—a self-professed knower who in fact does not know the truth about himself, a physician unable to diagnose his own unspeakable disease, a hunter whose relentlessly tracked prey is himself. He organizes, divides, and categorizes with supreme confidence and yet in the end violates natural boundaries and the most fundamental principles of order, “collapses what should be distinct and plural into a perverse singularity. He is one where he should be many and many where he should be one, out of place and too

⁶³ Ibid., 207.

⁶⁴ Sophocles, “Oedipus the King,” in *The Oedipus Plays*, 68, emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 232.

much in the same place.”⁶⁶ Indeed, he shows that all the good things we would like to fit in one order may not be compossible in it.

What the case of Oedipus suggests is that it is not just that human action is always susceptible to forces beyond its control or comprehension, or that the world contains a plurality of incommensurable values which periodically come into conflict with one another, but also that the very impulse which leads humans to simplify the complexity of the world and to shield themselves from contingency may also lead them to deeply resent and even hate the very terms and conditions of existence itself—the complexity and contingency that thwart human sovereignty. When left unchecked, therefore, this otherwise laudable impulse to construct a reasonable world conducive to human flourishing can be transmuted into a tyrannical insistence on eliminating or subduing any (human and non-human) forces that stand in the way. Man’s civilizing power and destructive capacity are in this sense one and the same: “the impulse toward tyranny comes not simply from what is basest in us, but from what is most admirable—our drive for political and intellectual order, our power to define and bound the world in ways that provide both certainty and security.”⁶⁷ That is not to say that wicked motives are not also responsible for a great deal of the suffering humans inflict on one another—clearly they are—but to leave it at that, to presume that injustice stems only from baseness, is too simplistic and, ultimately, is an evasion of tragedy’s profound challenge on this score.

⁶⁶ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 98.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

In his efforts to build a livable world for himself and others, man is susceptible to many forces—both internal and external—beyond his control, any of which may threaten the structures he builds. But it is perhaps the uncontrollable forces within himself—his desire for security, simplicity, and sovereignty, as well as the resentments that arise if and when these desires are thwarted—that are the most potentially destructive of all.

Humans are, at one and the same time, powerful and inventive beyond all other creatures, and destroyers as they create and of what they create, killers of what they love most, out of harmony with themselves and out of keeping with their surroundings. Awesome and terrifying, in control yet uncontrollable, they are masters of nature but unable to master themselves.⁶⁸

The “choral ode to man” in *Antigone* explores the profound ambiguity at the heart of man’s civilizing prowess. After observing Creon’s angry denunciation of the mere idea that the gods may have had a hand in or approved of the burial of Polyneices, the chorus reflects on the perilous power of man’s ambition, both praising his achievements and foreshadowing the tragic consequences of his tendency—now epitomized in Creon—to insist on being the authoritative center of things:

Creation is a marvel and
Man its masterpiece. He scuds
Between the southern wind, between
The pounding white-piling swell.
He dives his thoroughbreds through Earth
(Great goddess inexhaustible)
And overturns her with the plow
Unfolding her from year to year

The light-balanced light-headed birds
He snares; wild beasts of every kind.
In his nets the deep sea fish
Are caught. Oh, mastery of man!
The free forest animal

⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

He herds; the roaming upland deer.
The shaggy horse he breaks to yoke
The unflagging mountain bull.⁶⁹

Man's dominion over nature testifies to his greatness and is the most visible indicator of his civilizing power, his ability to order life through the use of reason and thereby to shield himself from the blind instinct of nature. It is from this point of departure that he begins to construct a truly human world:

Training his agile thoughts
volatile as air
He's civilized the world
of words and wit and law
With a roof against the sky,
the javelin crystal frosts
The arrow-lancing rains,
he's fertile in resource
Provident for all,
healing all disease:
All but death, and death—
death he never cures.⁷⁰

Mortality is an inescapable part of the human condition, and death marks the ultimate limit of man's control and power. It is not just that death brings an end to man's projects, but also that it embodies a force—time itself—over which man can have no ultimate control. Indeed, "Life is tragic," James Baldwin writes, "simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time."⁷¹ Man cannot master death and in this sense it symbolizes his powerlessness over time, from which he cannot extricate himself. Yet this is precisely what he attempts when his ambition oversteps its bounds and demands a simple and stable world free from ethical conflict and

⁶⁹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 205-206.

⁷⁰ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 206.

⁷¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 91.

dramatic change. As we shall see at greater length below, both Nietzsche and Baldwin urge us to affirm death—“the fact of death, which is the only fact we have,” says Baldwin—as a condition of the vitality of life in order to counter the human tendency to resent mortality and the passage of time.⁷²

The choral ode to man in *Antigone* continues, reaching a foreboding crescendo that issues in a warning: in struggling to ward off death, insulate themselves from external forces, and remove sources of danger and uncertainty from the world, humans are also liable to forget, efface, or even destroy key sources of beauty and vitality in their lives. The desire for permanence and security—urges seemingly built into the very terms of the human estate—is fundamentally a (futile) desire to control time; it is hubris, and hubris portends disaster:

Beyond imagining wise:
 his cleverness and skills
Through labyrinthine ways
 for good and also ill.
Distinguished in his city
 when law-abiding, pious
But when he promulgates
 unsavory ambition,
Citiless and lost.
 And then I will not share
My hearth with him; I want
 no parcel of his thoughts.⁷³

The same human who is the object of praise and adoration at the beginning of the ode is, by the end, an object of concern and even contempt; “the human being, who appears to be thrilling and wonderful, may turn out at the same time to be monstrous in its ambition to simplify and control the world. Contingency, an object

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 206.

of terror and loathing, may turn out to be at the same time wonderful, constitutive of what makes a human life beautiful or thrilling.”⁷⁴

There is, then, an elemental tension in our relationship to time laid bare by the tragic plays performed at the festival of Dionysus, that god of revelry, wine, and chaos who stands in for the element of real creativity in life. “The ode helps indicate that the subject of this, as perhaps of all, tragedy is not just a specific event or a specific character, but the world itself, the permanent factors in the very makeup of the universe, the irreconcilable opposites between which all life is lived.”⁷⁵ From this perspective, Greek tragedy councils us to take joy in, or at the very least acknowledge, the element of wildness in Being: first, because it is inescapable, and second, because it is the source not just of danger but also of much of the beauty, creativity, and richness in our lives.

There is in Sophocles, as well as in Greek tragedy in general, a persistent concern with time and its consequences, for, as Jacqueline de Romilly has shown, Greek tragedy was “born precisely when the consciousness of time became ripe and the idea of time important.”⁷⁶ Tragedy plunges us into the time of the event, “and obliges us to live along with it,” experiencing the continuity and rupture, protraction and dissonance, of time itself.⁷⁷ For Sophocles the time of the event is not reducible to our experience of *chrono-time*: “time is no longer a coherent sequence, in which we painfully achieve the designs of transcendent justice: it becomes a series of rough, startling changes, which may occur in any manner, affecting both people’s

⁷⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 52-3.

⁷⁵ Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 205.

⁷⁶ Jacqueline de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

fortunes and their feelings.”⁷⁸ In following the unpredictable non-linear flow of time in the crisis-event, Sophocles draws our attention to those fugitive junctures in time—“the razor’s edge”—out of which fortunes change, heroes are destroyed, and the new surges into being. Time as that which sometimes brings about abrupt change and dislocations is seen as the very mark of the human condition, as that which distinguishes us from the gods and limits our sovereignty: “only to the gods is given not to age or die,/ All else disrupts through disposing time... Soon or late, the sweet will sour,/ the sour will sweet to love again.”⁷⁹ Time as that which produces the new and the unexpected in an unruly cosmos: time as destruction, time as creation, *time as becoming*.

But there is another theme in Sophocles concerning the nature of time that seems to contradict the first: Sophocles draws our attention not only to the unpredictability and disordered character of time on the razor’s edge (‘time out of joint’), but also to the eternal regularity of time in which the perpetual modification of the world we live in takes place. So, for example: “Time takes the form of steady regularity and continuity just when its discontinuity is to be so decisive for Oedipus.”⁸⁰ Here, it is the time of orderly succession, the time-past of the Shepherd, with the uneventful alteration of seasons and the infinite repetition of the cycles of nature, that provides the temporal backdrop against which the discontinuity of time, as embodied in Oedipus himself, will be exposed. In response to the Shepherd’s

⁷⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 124

⁸⁰ Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 231.

attempt to evade recognition and avoid revealing the horrifying truth about Oedipus, the Messenger insists on setting the record straight:

And no wonder, sire! But let me jog his memory.
I'm sure he won't forget the slopes of Cithaeron
 where for three half-years we were neighbors,
 he and I; he with two herds, I with one:
 six long months, from spring to early autumn.
And when at last winter came,
 we both drove off our flocks,
 I to my sheepcotes, he back to Laius's folds...⁸¹

This is the orderly, 'eternally recurring,' time of the *cosmos*, and it is explored multiple times throughout Sophocles' plays. In *Oedipus at Colonus* the chorus reflects on the enormity of time upon hearing Polyneices (Oedipus' brother/son) declare his determination to attack Thebes and Oedipus' angry denunciation of him ("So, leave my sight. Get gone and die: you trash—no son of mine"):⁸²

So do we see fresh sorrows strike
Fresh strokes of leaden doom
From the old blind visitor
Or is it Fate unfolding
Supernal in her workings which
I dare not say can fail—
Watched, yes watched,
By never failing Time
Shuffling fortunes from the top to bottom?
[*a clap of thunder*]
The sky is rift. Great Zeus defend us!⁸³

Time shows itself through change, but does not itself change. Considered in this way, time is a structure rather than a movement: it is the unchanging form of that which changes. Rather than see this as contradicting the chaotic, disjointed image of time discussed above, we may do better to see them as coexisting, as giving us a

⁸¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 63; ellipses in the original.

⁸² Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 163.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 168.

glimpse into the terrifying enormity and power of time itself. Taking a cue from Deleuze, we might say that “these are two different states of time, time as perpetual crisis and, at a deeper level, time as primary matter, immense and terrifying, like universal becoming.”⁸⁴ Time as becoming in a relatively open cosmos: the infinitely re-played throw of the dice.

And yet Sophocles’ texts seem to be as marked by ruminations on Fate (*dike*) as they are by the nature and unpredictability of time. Was not Oedipus’s fate sealed from the start? “Make no mistake,” the Shepherd tells Oedipus, “you are a doom-born man.”⁸⁵ So what are we to make of this? One way of understanding this is to see that for Sophocles, fate and necessity *may be functions of contingency and chance* and the concurrence/confluence of events in an unbalanced world with “forces of different types set on different temporal trajectories, periodically forming chancy conjunctions, for better or worse.”⁸⁶ As William E. Connolly explains, there are two ways of understanding the gods of Greek tragedy: as *beings* participating in the world, “or as *figures* whose names condense a variety of forces that impinge upon human life.”⁸⁷ C. L. R. James suggests a similar reading of tragic fate in his discussion of Toussaint L’Ouverture’s defeat and his cruel, untimely death in France:

The Greek tragedians could always go to the gods for a dramatic embodiment of fate, the *dike* which rules over a world neither they nor we ever made. But not Shakespeare himself could have found such a dramatic embodiment of fate as Toussaint struggled against, Bonaparte himself; nor could the furthest

⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 115.

⁸⁵ *Oedipus the King*, 67.

⁸⁶ William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 120-1

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

imagination have envisaged the entry of the chorus, of the ex-slaves themselves, *as the arbiters of their own fate*.⁸⁸

Fate may not be the product of some transcendent decree; it may issue from the immanent interaction of diverse forces, events, beliefs, and actions, *in which we take part*. We may not be the masters of our own fate, but nor are we slaves to the pre-ordained: on the razor's edge, when things are in disequilibrium, strategic action taken at the right time might alter events and avoid a tragic outcome otherwise in the offing. This, at any rate, is one way to work on Sophocles while appreciating the rapid turns and dislocations he narrates so powerfully.

As we sit on the razor's edge of time, our actions may turn events in one direction or the other, for better or for worse; or, it may be the case that various forces have already formed an assemblage determined to push events in a particular direction regardless of our actions. We cannot be certain in advance, but we must act nonetheless. Fate does not govern us all the way, and it does not issue from some divine purpose. Rather, it is that which gets 'locked in' due to the multiplicity of acts and processes operating at different levels of time, which overlap and come together as *dike*. As Jocasta pleadingly asks Oedipus, "How can a man have scruples; when *it's only Chance that's king? There's nothing certain, nothing preordained*."⁸⁹

In a world where Chance is king—in at least the sense that periodic dislocations may happen rapidly—we would be well advised to recognize the limits of human action and understanding, and, indeed, again and again we encounter characters in Sophocles' plays who counsel modesty and warn of the dangers of

⁸⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 292; emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 52; emphasis added.

hubris. *Oedipus the King* ends with two such statements, both of which at the very least pose problems for those who interpret Greek tragedy entirely through the lens of an implacable fate determined in advance. First, Oedipus' parting advice to his daughters:

My darling little ones, if you could only understand,
I'd tell you, of, so many things!
Let this suffice, a simple prayer:
Abide in modesty so you may live
the happy life your father did not have."⁹⁰

Second, and perhaps more telling, is Creon's parting advice for Oedipus:

Stop this striving to be master of all.
The mastery you had in life has been your fall.⁹¹

In a world of uncertainty that exceeds our efforts at control, hubris and the single-minded insistence that one is capable of mastery or that we are following the right moral course, 'consequences be damned,' can lead to disaster. The irony of Creon's advice is that in *Antigone*, Creon, now himself ruler of Thebes, will directly contribute to the realization of another tragic outcome through his own intractable insistence on mastery and control.

A world composed of a plurality of forces that do not harmonize automatically with one another is also a world with a plurality of human goods, values, and beliefs. Because there is no single source of the good, not every good thing is compossible in the same world; values periodically come into conflict with one another, posing real ethical dilemmas for practical reason. What tragic wisdom

⁹⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁹¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 79. Creon, of course, is not very good at following his own advice, for in *Oedipus at Colonus* it is his striving to complete mastery over the Thebes which contributes to *his* downfall.

teaches us about such conflicts is that not only are values often incompatible with one another, such that we *must choose* between them, but also that they can be incommensurable, which means that there is no common measure between them for determining their relative merit. No society can contain or accommodate all of the valuable things in the world, and so we must choose nonetheless: some values must be sacrificed to preserve others. In moments of conflict between incompatible values, then, there may be no tidy resolution, no dialectical reconciliation that preserves them both; there is only tragic choice and tragic loss. As we saw in chapter 1, Herder has a relatively good sense of this, but what he did not adequately grasp, because of his assumption of harmonious communality, are the tragic fissures and value-conflicts that run through and *within* every society (or “people”) as power relations shift and transform, time eats away at established conventions, and new constituencies and values surge into being. Yet another reason to approach the world with a modicum of modesty, an appreciation for the profound contestability of our most cherished values and beliefs, and some forbearance in our dealings with those who support and are supported by existential faiths different from our own.

To say that conflict between different notions of the good or spheres of value cannot be entirely eliminated does not mean that we should not strive to reduce the amount of conflict in the world, but it does suggest that projects which aim to completely eliminate conflicting obligations by establishing a singular, universally valid conception of the good are apt to exacerbate, not alleviate, conflict. In the *Oedipus* trilogy tragic outcomes are produced, at least in part, precisely through such an insistence. In *Antigone* the tragic outcome is largely the result of Antigone

and Creon each pursuing in a single-minded way noble moral laws that are incompatible with one another in that setting. Neither party is willing to acknowledge the validity of the goods the other prizes or to consider revising their vision of the world to make space for other values and priorities; each seeks a world free from practical conflict. Similarly, in *Oedipus the King* Oedipus is driven towards his tragic fate by his categorical attachment to the moral law and the value of truth as such; in insisting on making his own destiny and on his ability to escape his past, Oedipus seals his own doom and blindly acts out his own fate. On the other hand, his solution to the riddle of the Sphinx early in the play indicates that *sometimes* boldness is needed. The issue is *when*, and the question of timing remains always and forever undetermined. "That is the Riddle of the Sphinx. We are but darkened groping souls, that know not light often because of its very blinding radiance. Only in time is truth revealed."⁹² It is only after the fact that the role our actions played in contributing to the realization of our fate is revealed; this is the limitation all action must confront and the tragic predicament it must negotiate: the world calls upon us to act, but it does so in many tongues, whose messages are obscure, hard to hear, and frequently contradictory. Listen to one voice only, and we run the risk of hubristic impudence; listen to them all, and we run the risk of paralyzing hesitation.

In the end, Oedipus realizes that mortals cannot control their fate in the sense of taking it into their own hands and making it anything they wish. This does not mean that his fate is simply given or passively received... It does mean that his fate becomes real only through the action of his character, that he is made by destiny he helps fashion.⁹³

⁹² W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 202.

⁹³ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 105.

Tragic wisdom does not so much solve problems as reveal the unsolvable paradoxes we must negotiate as embodied subjects called upon to act in a world where we are pulled by competing demands and subject to forces and factors beyond our control or predictive power.

Between Us Friends (and Enemies)

The spiritualization of sensuality is called love: it is a great triumph over Christianity. A further triumph is our spiritualization of enmity. It consists in profoundly grasping the value of having enemies: in brief, in acting and thinking in the reverse of the way in which one formerly acted and thought. The Church has at all times desired the destruction of its enemies: we, we immoralists and anti-Christians, see that it is to our advantage that the Church exists... In politics, too, enmity has become much more spiritual—much more prudent, much more thoughtful, much more forbearing.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁹⁴

As I have been arguing, tragic wisdom seeks to dislodge us from stubborn narcissism and to vouchsafe a saving knowledge of the complexity and fragility of a world we never made, a world best approached with modesty and critical responsiveness. Thus, although tragedy is predominantly marked by the presence of seemingly insoluble conflicts and irreparably fractured communities, Sophocles' plays also suggest that tragic wisdom may give rise to a noble ethic of solidarity and care for the world through an attachment to being that exceeds one's own life or identity. For example, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus commits to helping Oedipus not just out of an expectation of gain (Oedipus promises that his burial at Colonus will protect Athens) but also out of a tragic sensibility:

I was a child of exile too,
fighting for my life in foreign lands—
and none so dangerously

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *TI* "Morality" 3.

So never could I turn my back on some poor exile
such as you are now
and leave him to his fate.
For I know too well that I am only man.
The portion of your days today
could be no less than mine tomorrow.⁹⁵

Tragic insight into the inherent fragility of the human estate can urge us to adopt a presumptive disposition of generosity in our orientation towards the world and others. To fail to heed this call for modesty and forbearance, insisting instead on the categorical authority of our own beliefs, priorities, and values, is to increase the likelihood of fostering a vengeful orientation towards existence when, for whatever reason, the world does not conform to our desires. We see this with particular clarity in *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*; in both cases, as the situation begins to spiral out of control and the tragic dénouement nears, we observe the tragic protagonists (Oedipus and Creon, respectively) becoming increasingly tyrannical, accusatory, and insistent. Importantly, however, these behaviors and attitudes “are not simply manifestations of desire for more but are, also, rage at the vulnerability and passivity that thwart human power.”⁹⁶ As both plays make evident, this existential rage typically takes as its target those peoples or groups who in one way or another represent or embody the unruly complexity of life and thought that refuses to be tamed: “one reproaches those who are different,” Nietzsche suggests, “for one’s feeling vile, sometimes even with one’s being vile.” What is particularly “unworthy” about this, according to Nietzsche, “is that someone has to be to *blame* for the fact that one suffers...that the sufferer prescribes for himself the honey of

⁹⁵ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 120.

⁹⁶ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 37.

revenge as a medicine for his suffering" (*TI* "Expeditions" 34). This, for Nietzsche, is one of providentialism's most pernicious features: instead of accepting the fundamental ineluctability of suffering in a world of becoming, it leads us to believe that *someone* must be responsible for our suffering, must be responsible for the dissatisfactory condition we find ourselves in, and thus it sets us on the path of vengeance and recrimination. "For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering: more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a *guilty* agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy."⁹⁷ Consider, for example, Creon.

One of Creon's notable flaws in *Antigone* is his tendency to attribute base motives to anyone who disobeys his sovereign commands. When he confronts Antigone, she is protecting full obedience to what she takes to be a moral absolute, one in conflict with Creon's demand that the priorities of the polis—civic virtue, obedience, productivity—be placed above all others, in fact that they be recognized as the only true standard for determining and praising human excellence. Neither is willing to 'budge'—until, that is, it is too late. Creon demands "unswerving submission" and refuses to change his decision even after he has been warned of the tragic outcome on the horizon by Tiresias.⁹⁸ For her part, Antigone is equally insistent upon the absolute nature of the older divine law she is following. Neither will yield until it is too late and the play of Chance has been locked into the wheels of

⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), III: 15. Hereafter cited as *GM*.

⁹⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 221.

Necessity. But in fact, Creon does not simply ignore the warnings of the ‘seer’ Tiresias that he “stands upon the razor’s edge”; he accuses the seer of lying for financial reasons, suggesting that his ‘prophecy’ has been purchased with a bribe.⁹⁹

When Tiresias first arrives, Creon greets him warmly—“What news, venerable Tiresias? ... Have I ever failed to listen to you?”¹⁰⁰ But upon hearing the news Tiresias has come to deliver, and the warning he bears, Creon’s attitude quickly changes—“How so? Your words and aspect chill,” he says suspiciously.¹⁰¹ The more Creon hears from Tiresias, the more he insists on attacking the blind seers’ motives and cursing him as a partisan, a moneygrubber, or a doddering old fool—anything to discredit this challenge to his sovereignty. Indeed, in Sophocles’ texts seers such as Tiresias are often the target of malice, scorn, and derision because they expose those aspects of existence which trouble and question the assumptions that hubristic, all-too-hubristic individuals rely on to maintain stable, ordered, and coherent worldviews. This is one way of understanding the conclusion of *Oedipus the King*: Oedipus must leave Thebes the moment he becomes a seer (i.e., the moment he blinds himself) and reveals the protean disorder beneath the seemingly ordered and stable life of the city, thereby bringing forth profound anxiety in those attached to that order. The seer often reveals something about the cosmos that is too much for most people to bear: the volatility of time in a world governed neither by providence nor susceptible to human mastery. In this sense, seers disrupt complacency, reminding us that a great deal of the things we assume

⁹⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 235.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 236.

to be natural, fundamental, and definitive in this world are in fact artificial, contingent, and ambiguous.

James Baldwin suggests that black Americans play a social, political, and spiritual role in American life similar to the seer's role in Greek tragedy. To be clear, this is not because black people are "inherently" spiritual or sensual—Baldwin does not truck with racial mysticism of any sort,¹⁰² particularly not one that would mimic the old Hollywood trope of the "magical Negro" who gives to white people that bit of soul they are so dearly missing (but it is always the *only* thing they are missing!). No, on the contrary, he asserts that this prophetic role is a product of their refusal to remain in their assigned place in America's racial hierarchy:

And therefore when the country speaks of a 'new' Negro, which it has been doing every hour on the hour for decades, it is not really referring to a change in the Negro, which, in any case, it is quite incapable of assessing, but only to the fact that it encounters him (again! again!) barring yet another door to its spiritual and social ease. This is probably, hard and odd as it may sound, the most important thing that one human being can do for another—it is certainly *one* of the most important things; hence, the torment and necessity of love—and this is the enormous contribution that the Negro has made to this otherwise shapeless and undiscovered country. Consequently, white Americans are in nothing more deluded than in supposing that Negroes could ever have imagined that white people would 'give' them anything. It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.¹⁰³

What Baldwin means by spiritual ease is, in effect, a condition derived from a refusal to acknowledge the fundamental terms of existence, a refusal to acknowledge, that is, the "fact of death, which is the only fact we have." Baldwin depicts the rigid,

¹⁰² "For the sake of one's children, in order to minimize the bill that *they* must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of this skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion" (Baldwin 104).

¹⁰³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 85-86.

categorical attachment to whiteness and racial hierarchy as a kind of ontological compensation for contingency in a world replete with paradox, uncertainty, and ceaseless change—a safe harbor where white Americans can feel secure and at home in the world, confident in their sense of self-worth and moral superiority.¹⁰⁴ But it is telling that the maintenance of whiteness requires not just a constitutive relationship to difference and various forms of otherness, which all identities require, but a *relation of domination and subjugation*, for the material and spiritual “benefits” of whiteness—very real in the first case and entirely illusory in the second—only accrue if the degradation and derogation of blackness is maintained. And that helps to explain the vengefulness with which America’s racial categories are so vigilantly maintained.¹⁰⁵ At a subterranean level many whites suspect that their views of progress, mastery, and harmony are bankrupt; they resent that very suspicion and they seek targets upon whom to vent that resentful energy—targets to blame for a deeper disappointment they cannot acknowledge. Hence, a Baldwin/Nietzschean understanding of racism.

“Try to imagine,” Baldwin writes to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*’s opening essay,¹⁰⁶ “how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun

¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, from one of its first articulations in Kant’s racial schema, “whiteness” as an identity category has always been premised on racial hierarchy; it rests on and is supported by the racialization of others. Whiteness is not simply one (racial) identity among others, it is, as George Shulman puts it, “a form of domination entwining every aspect of ordinary life” (*American Prophecy*, 166).

¹⁰⁵ “In addition to this I lived in an environment which I came to call the white world. I was not an American; I was not a man; I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds” (Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 135).

¹⁰⁶ “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” in *The Fire Next Time*, 1-10.

shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened,” as would we all, for “any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one’s sense of one’s own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.”¹⁰⁷ Baldwin thus suggests that anti-black racism is really about white fear and anxiety, which prevents (many) white Americans from accepting the time-bound, fragile character of existence. Unable to confront the tragic reality of life, “such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes” and beliefs—e.g. racial stereotypes—through which he establishes a (false) system of reality.¹⁰⁸ When the reality-ordering attitudes and assumptions we depend on are challenged, there is an opportunity for either reassessment or retrenchment. By and large white America seems to have chosen retrenchment, and, as such, its public attitude toward black America is similar to the way Creon treats Tiresias: defensive, accusatory, and vengeful, willing to try any excuse, no matter how offensive, insipid, or absurd, to justify the current state of affairs—“black on black crime!” “black culture of poverty!” “absent fathers!” “gangsta rap!”—and to avoid taking responsibility for supporting it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ In a particularly glaring and disturbing example of this, the city of Cleveland, in response to a wrongful death lawsuit filed by the family of Tamir Rice against the city and the police officers responsible for his death, blamed Rice for his own death. “In a 20-item defense, Cleveland argues that the Rices [*sic*] ‘injuries, losses and damages ... were directly and proximately caused by the acts of the Plaintiff’s decedent (Rice), not this Defendant.’” The city of Cleveland further claims that the 12-year-old failed to “‘exercise due care to avoid injury’ and blames ‘the conduct of individuals or entities other than Defendant’ for the shooting,” Caroline Bankoff, “Cleveland Blames Tamir Rice for His Own Death,” *New York Magazine* (March 1, 2015):

And yet, again, as we have seen, in revealing the fundamental fragility and fallibility which are the hallmarks of the human predicament, the tragic wisdom of the seer can also teach us about the importance of cultivating presumptive generosity and care for the world—if, that is, we are willing to listen. “And if the word *integration* means anything,” Baldwin tells his nephew, “this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”¹¹⁰ This is where Baldwin lodges his hope: that the white man may finally be shaken out of his spiritual ease (which is, in fact, really a disease) and come to realize that he is “himself in in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once more in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being.”¹¹¹ Baldwin hopes that by stripping away the distorting mirrors through which we interact with ourselves and others, cross-racial relations of receptivity and generosity might begin to take hold, leading to a re-working of the identificatory bonds traversing America and, ultimately, to the broader realization that “we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.”¹¹²

Like Baldwin, I too find a message of hope here in the tragic vision, and I think that at the very least this dimension of tragic thought should give pause to those who think of tragedy solely in terms of hubris, fate, and, ultimately, the

<<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/03/cleveland-blames-tamir-rice-for-his-own-death.html>>

¹¹⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9-10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

destruction of communal bonds. It would be a mistake, however, to equate this tragic sensibility with a Christian ethic of universal love; even less is it compatible with the Christian counsel to love one's enemies:

An *ekhthros*... is the opposite of a *philos*—an 'enemy'. As much as *philos* implies positive ties and obligations, *ekhthros* implies equally binding requirement to be disobliging... Athene herself expresses to Odysseus in Sophocles' *Ajax* a far from strange and unpleasant sentiment [for the time] when she says 'But to laugh at your enemies (*ekhthros*), what sweeter laughter can there be than that'? *Philos* and *ekhthros*, then, are key terms for expressing in Greek the conjunctions and disjunctions of social intercourse, the interplay of relationships between people... For unlike the Judaeo-Christian notion of loving one's neighbour or turning the other cheek, perhaps the most basic and generally agreed position with regard to correct behaviour in the ancient world was 'to love one's friend and to hate one's enemy,' that is, *philein philous ekhthairein ekhthrous*.¹¹³

Though Nietzsche would, I think, dispute the notion that the most noble Greeks *hated* their enemies—for that is too much the way in which the man of *ressentiment* thinks about and treats his enemies—let us set that issue to the side for the moment.¹¹⁴ The point here is not so much that one *ought* to have enemies but rather that one certainly *will* have enemies; enmity is a basic, inescapable part of life—even more so of political life in a pluralistic universe. In this way, tragedy calls our attention to the friend-enemy distinction and asks us to think about its role in the formation of collective identities and patterns of allegiance and conflict.

Importantly, however, "the tragic text also resists the stability of such oppositions,"¹¹⁵ seeing them as rather unstable and subject to the same reversals,

¹¹³ Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 83.

¹¹⁴ "In contrast to [the noble man], picture 'the enemy' as the man of *ressentiment* conceives him—and here precisely is his deed, his creation: he has conceived 'the evil enemy', '*the Evil One*', and this is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pendant, a 'good one'—himself!" *GM* I: 10. In any case, it is probably a mistake to write about "the Greeks" as if there were no tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities in ancient Greek culture.

¹¹⁵ Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 105.

uncertainties, and disruptions as everything else of human importance in a tragic world of becoming. In this way the tragic vision acknowledges the constitutive importance of the friend-enemy distinction to political life without reifying that distinction or reducing politics to it. Tragic wisdom thereby recognizes the significance of and gives space to identity as a key factor in political life while simultaneously warning of its inherent instability as an organizing principle for political communities and of the vengefulness it may produce if it is not practiced with sensitivity to its own partiality and contestability—things identity is often loath to admit of itself. Moreover, the tragic vision alerts us to the ways in which identificatory bonds may be initially shaped and imposed through domination and subjugation—the separation and classification of groups so as to mark them out as suitable for mistreatment, exploitation, and repression. Even so, the communities that result from systems of domination and ascriptive identification may come to have real value and significance for the oppressed, who are, of course, not simply passive victims in this matter but actively struggle against racialization and racial hierarchy. Baldwin captures this dynamic beautifully in his depiction of the life in Harlem which so terrified him as a teenager and from which he felt so fortunate to have escaped:

In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare. Perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we somehow achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love. I remember, anyway, church suppers and outings, and... rent and waistline parties where rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we

ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about the man.¹¹⁶

Those of us informed by a tragic vision today neither make a fetish of identity nor naively dismiss its importance for the everyday lives of people and the formation of political movements. Such an approach is exemplified by the way in which Baldwin critiques, but “does not deny identification as African American,” instead making “it a culturally paradoxical rather than racially authentic act,” thereby allowing him to model “a black subject that affirms its impurity and provokes whites to accept what they disavow by shifting prophecy from transcendence to immanence.”¹¹⁷ Without such a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics infusing patterns of affiliation and conflict and the role these can play in shaping collective identities, I suspect the tragic vision will have real difficulties gaining critical purchase on contemporary political life, especially insofar as race is involved.

In any case, from this perspective the friend-enemy distinction is revealed to be both constitutive of the primary modes of identification and affiliation that shape a polity and inherently unstable, meaning that the patterns it gives rise to are themselves unstable, periodically being transformed, re-worked, and contested. Given the inescapability and ambiguity of enmity, however, the question is: How shall we treat our enemies? Well, certainly not as we would treat our friends! But neither should we demonize our enemies as bearers of absolute evil who must be condemned and defeated once and for all. Such an attitude is anathematic to the social ethos of agonistic respect across creedal differences which I believe is

¹¹⁶ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 41.

¹¹⁷ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 154.

necessary for the health of democratic life in contemporary, highly imperfect pluralistic societies. Moreover, we know that succumbing to the temptation to hate will make us bitter and resentful, so while we may view our adversary's conduct or policies as real sources of evil in the world—which we define as “extreme undeserved human suffering”¹¹⁸—we also strive to maintain the democratic ethos, affirmative orientation, and general attitude of presumptive generosity that are vital to fashioning non-vengeful modes of political engagement and struggle. For example, the war on drugs and racially biased sentencing guidelines and incarceration policies are real sources of evil in this world in the sense that they generate a great deal of unnecessary and undeserved suffering, and so I oppose these with vociferous militancy. But it is the policies and effects that I focus my most forceful critical energies on, and even as I do so, I remain mindful of the importance of working on myself to resist the temptation to demonize my adversaries or resent the most fundamental terms of human existence for the suffering they entail. I am fairly certain *my* position is just and right, but I suspect my opponents believe theirs is too.

In this sense I aim to heed Nietzsche's call to seek a “spiritualization of enmity” between diverse constituencies infused with different values, priorities, and orientations to being (*TI* “Morality” 3). It is often not an easy thing to do, particularly when one's adversaries contribute an inordinate amount of suffering to the world in order to support and perpetuate their self-aggrandizement through the domination of others, that is, when “organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and

¹¹⁸ Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 121.

physical power, legal enactment and intellectual training are limiting with determination and unflagging zeal the development of other groups.”¹¹⁹ But I think it is necessary. And, after all, it is not really *that* difficult for me: my skin color does not mark me out as inferior in the eyes of most Americans. Du Bois addresses the immense challenges that come with being black in an environment structured by white supremacy:

It is hard under such circumstances [as racial segregation] to be philosophical and calm, and to think through a method of approach and accommodation between castes. The entombed find themselves not simply trying to make the outer world understand their essential and common humanity but even more, as they become inured to their experience, they have to keep reminding themselves that the great and oppressing world outside is also real and human... All my life I have had continually to haul my soul back and say, “All white folk are not scoundrels nor murderers. *They are, even as I am, painfully human.*”¹²⁰

Du Bois reminds us that the task of pursuing agonistic respect for your opponents, if they will allow it, is much, much more difficult when your adversary is actively oppressing you or refuses to acknowledge your humanity. More difficult indeed, but perhaps even more necessary for all that. Du Bois sees clearly the corrosive and dehumanizing effects that anti-black racism has on those who live within “the white world” itself. He believes that successfully navigating and, hopefully, transforming this racialized environment requires an affirmative, non-vengeful disposition.

We see a similar approach in Baldwin’s thought as well; throughout *The Fire Next Time* he performs two simultaneous operations: explaining to his white readers the very real causes (including their own conduct) behind the hatred epitomized by the Black Muslims *and* urging his black readers to resist racial hatred

¹¹⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 137-8.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 131-2; emphasis added.

and the spiritual degradation that comes with it: “I think I know—we see it around us every day—the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads.”¹²¹ Thus, while Baldwin understands and even sympathizes with the racial hatred he finds in the Nation of Islam—“And if I were a Muslim, I would not hesitate to utilize—or, indeed, to exacerbate—the social and spiritual discontent that reigns here, for, at very worst, I would merely have contributed to the destruction of a house I hated, and it would not matter if I perished too. One has been perishing here so long!”¹²²—he also declares that he “must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them.”¹²³ Baldwin makes clear his belief that racial animus corrupts democratic life and “all the American efforts to build a better world, here, there, or anywhere.”¹²⁴ But he is equally insistent that this animus derives from “white men with far more political power than that possessed by the Nation of Islam”¹²⁵ and that “as long as we in the West place on color the value we do, we make it impossible for the great unwashed to consolidate themselves according to any other principle.”¹²⁶

George Shulman raises an important point regarding the pursuit of pluralism and an ethos of critical responsiveness and openness to difference within the context of a racist polity. “White supremacy is not a valid identity to reconcile with others,” he warns, “but a social practice empowering some by subordinating

¹²¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 83, see also 8-9, 68-70, and 88-90.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103-4.

others.”¹²⁷ Indeed, Baldwin’s diagnoses of American society in the letter to his nephew suggests as much:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a country which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how* you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry.¹²⁸

The systematic articulation of white supremacy cuts across and through all facets of American life. It is in fact constitutive of its basic social, economic, and political arrangements, including its “democratic” institutions, which were co-emergent with and developed alongside racial slavery and domination. As such, Shulman suggests that confronting the racial state of exception requires us to “focus political energy differently than do theorists of ethos and cultivation,” proceeding “less by advancing an ethos of receptivity to difference and more by calling for decision and conflict about constitutive practices we must end, not prioritize, learn to appreciate, or work to pluralize.”¹²⁹ I would certainly agree that different political contexts call for different emphases, modes of action, and registers of enunciation and that racial politics in America, precisely because it does entail domination, subjugation, and

¹²⁷ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 241.

¹²⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 7-8. Elsewhere Baldwin is even more forceful. In “The Price of the Ticket,” he declares, “The will of the people, or the State, is revealed by the State’s institutions. There was not, then, nor is there, now, a single American institution which is not a racist institution,” James Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket,” in *Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 839.

¹²⁹ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 241.

rule, requires a more militant theoretical and practical approach. But I would also add that I believe our prospects for successfully forging political coalitions and movements capable of contesting racial hierarchy through the more confrontational, judgmental, and *antagonistic* approach Shulman commends will be greatly enhanced, and indeed, may in no small measure depend upon, cultivating an affirmative orientation toward existence, of which presumptive forbearance and receptivity are necessary elements. That certainly does not mean that forbearance and receptivity must be applied equally in all cases; I am in no way interested in telling racialized communities that they must forever turn the other cheek. Rather, what I have in mind is something more akin to Deleuze's discussion in *Cinema 2* of belief in this world: "Restoring our belief in the world—this is the power of modern cinema... Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world...as it is."¹³⁰

The goal here is to think critically about how to develop an affirmative political ethos grounded in an attachment to the earth and to life itself, which always exceeds the particularities of any faith, interest, identity, philosophy, theology, or location, and to ask how and to what extent existential affirmation can help sustain a militant anti-racist politics capable of creating the conditions of possibility for genuine racial pluralism (as opposed to racial hierarchy). In short, every pluralist politics must have an anti-pluralist moment or limit in order to create or maintain its conditions of possibility, but for pluralism to survive and flourish an ethos of agonistic respect for difference must take hold among its various constituencies as

¹³⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 172.

well. It is in the liminal space between these competing imperatives that our search for a new politics is conducted.

Tragedy and Second Sight

I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. The man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind words... It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate. The Negro boys and girls who are facing mobs today come out of a long line of improbable aristocrats—the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced.

—James Baldwin¹³¹

White supremacy fosters a hostile social environment wherein many of the existential pressures that already weigh upon and tug at us in various ways, and which are liable to make us vengeful and bitter, are intensified and magnified for the racially marginalized and dispossessed. But this situation has also left those groups uniquely well positioned to *potentially* acquire a more incisive, profound, and comprehensive understanding of the nature of society and, indeed, of existence itself. It has created, in other words, fertile grounds for tragic insight and wisdom through the imposition of profound estrangement. “Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me,” Du Bois writes in *Dusk of Dawn*, “I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social

¹³¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 98-99.

order and economic development into which I was born.”¹³² But since race was (and is) a fundamental part of that order, Du Bois was not fated for spiritual ease but rather tragic wisdom. Ralph Ellison calls attention to the fraught relationship between racial oppression and tragic insight in some of his essays on African American culture and politics and in an interview with Walter Penn Warren for Warren’s compendium, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*¹³³ Unfortunately, as perceptive and illuminating as Ellison’s insights on race and tragedy are in these scattered comments, they are relatively brief, and he does not delve deeply enough into the complex dynamics between the two. Still, his remarks are fascinating for the way they highlight the mutual affinities between tragic wisdom and black politics in thought and action, and we will use them here as a theoretical staging post before embarking on the final leg of our journey.

At the outset of their conversation, Ellison, in response to a prompt from Warren regarding “Du Bois on the split in the Negro psyche,”¹³⁴ dismisses Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness, suggesting that it is insufficiently nuanced to capture the complex interactions between racial identity, cultural pluralism, and political exclusion—“It’s a little bit more complicated than Dr. Du Bois thought it.”¹³⁵ However, later in the same interview Ellison implicitly endorses something very much like Du Bois’s notion of second-sight, the idea that black folks have access to a unique angle of vision and perspective on American society by virtue of their ambiguous position within it—“Integrally a part of it and yet, much more significant,

¹³² Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 27.

¹³³ Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 325-54.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹³⁵ Ralph Ellison in Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 327.

one of its rejected parts,"¹³⁶ as Du Bois put it in *Dusk of Dawn*. With the concept of second-sight, which is largely free of the romantic and Hegelian metaphysical baggage associated with double consciousness, Du Bois

indicates how the vantage of the marginal affords possibilities for recognizing injustice and distortion that may not be readily available to the privileged. It is only a possibility, though, as Thomas Holt remarks, "*The insight of the oppressed is neither innate nor inherent; it must be worked for, struggled for.*"¹³⁷

This, I suggest, provides a particularly apt way of defining and making sense of the distinctiveness of modern black political thought. It immediately calls attention to the political fabrication of race and how racialization works to mark, divide, and set aside certain populations for exploitation and domination; it reminds us that race is a product of distinct political technologies, not innate spiritual essences or genetic traits. Furthermore, this framework importantly calls attention to the fact that these populations also contest and challenge white supremacist logics and systems and that the knowledge derived from these engagements and the reflections thereon may contain valuable insights into the fundamental conditions and contours of political life in the so-called West.

I'm referring to the basic, implicit heroism of people who must live within a society without recognition, real status, but who are involved in the ideals of that society and who are trying to make their way, trying to determine their true position and their rightful position within it. *Such people learn more about the real nature of that society, more about the true character of its values than those who can afford to take their own place in society for granted.* They might not be able to spell it out philosophically but they *act* it out. And as against the white man's indictments of the conduct, folkways, and values which express their sense of social reality, their actions say, "But you are

¹³⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 3. In this passage Du Bois locates his liminal status within the context of European civilization, whereas in *Souls* the discussion of second-sight is situated in a domestic context. In both cases it is the critical possibilities to be found in alienation that is emphasized.

¹³⁷ Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, emphasis added.

being dishonest. You know that our view of things is true. We live and act out the truth of American reality, while to the extent that you refuse to take these aspects of reality, these inconsistencies, into consideration—you do not live the truth.” *Such a position raises a people above a simple position of social and political inferiority and it imposes upon them the necessity of understanding the other man and, while still pressing for their freedom, they have the obligation to themselves of giving up some of their need for revenge.*

...
This places a big moral strain upon the individual, and it requires self-confidence, self-consciousness, self-mastery, insight, and compassion. In the broader sense it requires an alertness to human complexity. *Men in our circumstances simply cannot afford to ignore the nuances of human relationships. And although action is necessary, forthright action, it must be guided—tempered by insight and compassion. Nevertheless, isn’t this what civilization is all about? And isn’t this what tragedy has always sought to teach us?*¹³⁸

Ellison indicates that black Americans have become something like seers and acquired tragic wisdom because they are “allowed no easy escape from experiencing the harsh realities of the human condition.”¹³⁹ As a result, they exemplify an appreciation for the reality upon which American society rests, an appreciation that can form the basis for a radical reconstruction of the American polity into a truly pluralistic democracy.

Here are two more formulations from Ellison which take up the same themes, with slightly different inflections and emphases. The first is from “The World and the Jug,” in which he explores African American life as a source of creative strength and inspiration in contrast to the common tendency, epitomized by Irving Howe, to reduce it to an endless series of sufferings, deprivations, and brutalizations with no redeemable features; the second is from “Blues Peoples,” Ellison’s moving celebration of the capacity of black folks to withstand suffering and

¹³⁸ Ellison in Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 342-3; emphasis added.

¹³⁹ Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” in *Going to the Territory*, Kindle Edition 33%; emphasis added.

injustice and to transform those experiences into beautiful forms of art which are celebratory of life itself.

Howe makes of “Negroness” a metaphysical condition, one that is a state of irremediable agony which all but engulfs the mind. Happily, the view from inside the skin is not so dark as it appears to be from Howe’s remote position, and therefore my view of “Negroness” is neither his nor that of the exponents of *negritude*. It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that “concord of sensibilities” which the group expresses through historical circumstances and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture... *It has to do with a special perspective on the national ideals and the national conduct, and with a tragicomic attitude toward the universe...* It involves a rugged initiation into the mysteries and rites of color which makes it possible for Negro Americans to suffer the injustice which race and color are used to excuse *without losing sight of either the humanity of those who inflict that injustice or the motives, rational or irrational, out of which they act. It imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world.*¹⁴⁰

The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and *whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences.*¹⁴¹

According to Ellison, black second sight (or “double vision”) elicits a critical perspective on American society and values; it suggests (or even “imposes”) a tragic ethos of finitude and critical responsiveness as the appropriate means for navigating life in modern pluralistic societies. He also indicates that this tragic ethos must be augmented with or contain an additional affirmative (i.e., “comic”) element that helps one resist racial dehumanization through laughter and joy for life. Nietzsche

¹⁴⁰ Ralph Ellison, “The World and The Jug,” in *Shadow and Act*, Kindle Edition (41%); emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ Ralph Ellison, “Blues People,” in *Shadow and Act*, Kindle Edition (74%); emphasis added.

agrees with Ellison on the importance of laughter as a means of sustaining an affirmative orientation to being,¹⁴² but he thought that it was a mistake to assume that one must look outside or beyond a tragic vision for sources of joy. For Nietzsche, a tragic vision does not need a comic supplement: it contains within itself sufficient resources for existential affirmation—in fact, he argues that the tragic, properly understood and internalized, *is* fundamentally joyful and affirmative.

The Tragic Joy of Friedrich Nietzsche and James Baldwin

I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any “Epicurean delight” is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient: I have been the first to discover the tragic.

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁴³

What are we to make of this outrageous claim? Shall we set it aside as an amusing piece of nonsense, a symptom of Nietzsche’s arrogance? Perhaps. But I would like to suggest that unpacking the sense of this claim (for it is not simply a piece of non-sense) can help us to see what is original in Nietzsche’s philosophy of the tragic. Nietzsche draws inspiration from Sophocles’ tragic worldview and articulates his own account of the tragic, emphasizing the importance of existential affirmation, the disruptive force of becoming, and the creative, artistic potential of the will to power. Accordingly, I read Nietzsche along much the same lines as William E. Connolly, that is, “as a modern prophet of the tragic” and a “modern descendant of Sophocles” who “embraces both gratitude for the abundance of being

¹⁴² See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Book IV, 13.20, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). Hereafter cited as *Z*.

¹⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House), 531 [§1029]. Hereafter cited as *WP*.

and a tragic vision, belying those fools who equate a philosophy of abundance with 'optimism' and calling into question those who automatically link a tragic vision to the temper of resignation."¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche's ruminations on the tragic are inseparable from his image of Being as becoming and his critique of *ressentiment*, which establish the basic philosophical coordinates in which we can situate his notion of the tragic. Through his depiction of the tragic artist, Nietzsche presents us with a mode of action animated neither by prideful disavowal nor bitter resignation, but rather by gratitude for an abundant world without divinity in which suffering is so very possible. In order to adequately grasp the sense of Nietzsche's "discovery," however, we must quickly trace the evolution of his notion of the tragic within the context of the development and trajectory of his thought as a whole.

Nietzsche's first book was *The Birth of Tragedy*, but it is important to note at the outset that the theory of the tragic presented in this early text is different from the sense the tragic would come to assume in Nietzsche's later, more mature philosophical writings. It is this later conception that will primarily interest us here. Much to his chagrin years later, Nietzsche wrote the *Birth of Tragedy* when he was very much under the sway of dialectics and Schopenhauer, which contributed to his conception of tragic art as that which justifies life and redeems it from suffering and contradiction, reconciling man and nature in a primordial unity—tragedy as reconciliation and redemption. This is why Nietzsche later came to say of *The Birth of Tragedy* that it "smells offensively Hegelian."¹⁴⁵ This is no small self-criticism: few

¹⁴⁴ Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 134.

¹⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books, London: 2004), P 48 ["Books" *BT*: 1]. Hereafter cited as *EH*.

things could be worse for the mature Nietzsche than smelling offensively Hegelian. But sounding Schopenhauerian might have been one of them. Schopenhauer's view was that

Everything tragic, regardless of the form in which it appears, receives its characteristic tendency toward the sublime from the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and are therefore not worth our attachment to them. In this the tragic spirit consists; accordingly, it leads to resignation.¹⁴⁶

Nietzsche had set out to challenge this view in *The Birth of Tragedy* by arguing that tragedy in fact redeemed and justified life. But as he later came to recognize, he had attempted to articulate ideas that “fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer” with fundamentally “Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations.”¹⁴⁷ Indeed, in conceiving of life as something which in fact needed to be justified and redeemed, Nietzsche was still operating within the gambit of Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism: in order to be redeemed, life must first be accused and found guilty.¹⁴⁸ And yet even in this early text, “a thousand pointers

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1958), Vol. 1, 253.

¹⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), P 10 [P 6]. Hereafter cited as *BT*.

¹⁴⁸ According to Schopenhauer, the world we live in, the entire realm and history of human experiences, is in fact nothing more than a representation, a manifestation of the ceaseless metaphysical entity he terms “the Will.” The universe thus consists of gradations of the Will's objectification, but the Will is divided against itself; its diverse manifestations are constantly battling against one another, and the very nature of the universe is such as to preclude the possibility of lasting human happiness or the satisfaction of emotional, physical, and (especially) sexual desires. The best that we can hope for, then, are brief moments of reprieve from the constant pulsing of the Will and the frustration of desire through the contemplation of art because aesthetic experience, by its very nature, is “disinterested” and extracts us, if only for a moment, from the strife of willing. From this perspective, what is significant about Greek tragedy is that it dramatizes “the antagonism of the will with itself” and thereby conveys to the audience the knowledge that life, understood as the objectification of the will, is not worth our attachment to it.

make us sense the approach of a new conception which has little to do with this schema” of contradiction and reconciliation.¹⁴⁹

What is this new conception? We can find the seeds of it in the character of Dionysus, who, even in the *Birth of Tragedy*, is figured as the suffering god who is *affirming* and *affirmative*. After the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche replaced the notion of reconciling life with the idea of affirming life: Dionysus is the god who affirms life, the god for whom life is not justified or reconciled in a higher unity but is affirmed *as such*: “A highest state of affirmation of existence is conceived from which the highest degree of pain cannot be excluded: *the tragic-Dionysian state*” (WP §853 III). In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche notes a second ‘discovery’ in the *Birth of Tragedy* (in addition to that of Dionysus) that he will develop fully only later: the opposition between Socrates and Dionysus. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies “Socrates as the opponent of Dionysos... who, although fated to be torn apart by the maenads of the Athenian court of justice, nevertheless forces the great and mighty god [Dionysos] to flee” (BT 12). As his thoughts on the tragic continued to take shape, however, Nietzsche came to displace this opposition with another, more significant one:

Dionysus versus the “Crucified:” there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it... One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich, and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it. The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption

¹⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press), 13.

from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction. (WP §1052)

According to Nietzsche, we make a mistake when we respond to the tragic with resignation, pessimism, seriousness, or dramatic pathos, and as such he repeatedly sets his conception against those of Schopenhauer and Aristotle (cf. WP §821, §851; TI “Expeditions” 24, “Ancients” 5; EH “Books” BT: 1-4). To see the tragic in terms of resignation is, Nietzsche thinks, to betray a deep dissatisfaction with the essence of life itself, for tragedy “only calls forth the fear and pity of the obtuse spectator, the pathological and moralising listener.”¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche urges us to change the way we typically think about tragic art and to consider its significance not primarily from the spectator’s point of view but, rather, from the artist’s. What does it mean for an artist to create a work of art that praises¹⁵¹ the most painful and difficult aspects of life through tales of catastrophic destruction? Nietzsche answers succinctly: “The tragic artist is *not* a pessimist—it is precisely he who *affirms* all that is questionable and terrible in existence, he is *Dionysian*” (TI “Reason” 6).

Now we are perhaps better positioned to make sense of what Nietzsche means when he says that he is the “first to discover the tragic.” Let us consider the passage in full:

I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any “Epicurean delight” is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient: *I have been the first to discover the tragic*. The Greeks, thanks to their moralistic superficiality, misunderstood it. Even resignation is *not* a lesson of tragedy, but a misunderstanding of it! Yearning for nothingness is a *denial* of tragic wisdom, its opposite!” (WP §1029)

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 17.

¹⁵¹ “An artist chooses his subject; that is his way of praising” (GS §245).

In effect, what Nietzsche means by this is that he is the first to *understand* the tragic. Plato and Aristotle approached tragedy ‘moralistically’ and saw in it a lesson of pessimism and resignation. They therefore did not understand the tragic. Schopenhauer followed them in their mistakes and compounded them as only he could. As for what Sophocles and other Hellenistic Greeks thought of tragedy, Nietzsche is, I think, purposely elusive and paradoxical; but it *is* clear nonetheless that Nietzsche sees the ancient Greeks’ predilection for tragedy as a sign of their strength, courage, and affirmative outlook—“Precisely tragedy is the proof that the Greeks were *no* pessimists: Schopenhauer blundered in this as he blundered in everything” (*EH* “Books” *BT*: 1; see also, *TI* “Expeditions” 24).

Nietzsche’s discovery, then, is of the secret message of affirmation found at the heart of the tragic vision:

According to Nietzsche it has never been understood that the tragic = the joyful. This is another way of putting the equation: to will = to create. We have not understood that the tragic is pure and multiple positivity, dynamic gaiety. Affirmation is tragic because it affirms chance and the necessity of chance; because it affirms multiplicity and the unity of multiplicity. The dicethrow is tragic. All the rest is nihilism, Christian and dialectic pathos, caricature of the tragic, comedy of bad conscience.¹⁵²

Affirmation here means existential affirmation—the affirmation of the most fundamental terms of human existence. To affirm these terms is to affirm chance, multiplicity, and becoming. As Zarathustra proclaims, “Verily, it is a blessing and not a blasphemy when I teach: ‘Over all things stand the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Frankishness.’ ‘By Chance’ – that is the most ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things” (*Z* III: 4).

¹⁵² Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 36.

Likewise, we can say that the tragic is joyful because “all joy wants the eternity of all things... so rich is joy that it thirsts for woe, for hell, for hatred, for disgrace, for the cripple, for *world* – this world, oh, you know it!” (Z IV: 19.11). At one level, the tragic artist is able to affirm everything—even the most terrible and questionable—because she is filled with joy, affirmation, and gratitude for the abundance of being in a world of becoming without divine purpose. This is the first enunciation. The second is that she draws upon this elemental affirmation to provide energy to fight the injustices that have seeped into the world. “It demands great force and great cunning,” Baldwin remarks, “continually to assault the mighty and indifferent fortress of white supremacy, as Negroes in this country have done so long.”¹⁵³

Ultimately, Nietzsche’s understanding of the tragic as joyful affirmation of chance and multiplicity must be placed in the general context of his philosophy of becoming in which “there is no quantity of reality, all reality is already quantity of force. There are nothing but quantities of force in mutual ‘relations of tension.’”¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche conceives of Being not as a substance but rather as multiple processes of becoming: he sees the world as “a monster of energy, without beginning, without end... that does not expand but only transforms itself... as a play of forces and waves of forces... as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness” (WP §1067). The world is composed of forces in interaction with other forces; no force can exist in isolation—they are all interconnected and the character of ‘things’ is determined by and consists only in “their relation to all other quanta, in their ‘effect’ upon the same” (WP §635). According to this relational-force ontology what we take

¹⁵³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 99.

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 39-40.

to be the substance of Being—the body—is the result of the confrontation between multiple expressions of active and reactive forces, for “every relationship of force constitutes a body—whether it is chemical, biological, social, or political.”¹⁵⁵ But if bodies, substances, and materiality are compositions resulting from the play of forces, then there are no enduring substances or essences, only short or durable assemblages of forces in interaction with other forces:

That “force” and “rest,” “remaining the same,” contradict one another. The measure of force (as magnitude) as fixed, but its essence in flux. “Timelessness” to be rejected. At any precise moment of a force, the absolute conditionality of a new distribution of all its forces is given: it cannot stand still. ‘Change’ belongs to the essence, therefore also temporality: with this, however, the necessity of change has only been posited once more conceptually. (*WP* §1064)

Nietzsche posits a world of becoming in which events occur through chance, uncertainty, and the concatenation of forces. There are no enduring substances or eternal properties—“The properties of a thing are effects on others ‘things’” (*WP* §557). Thus the only true essence we can speak of in this world is change. However, this is not to say that experience is in a constant state of chaotic flux. There are periods of relative stability and calm where the forces in a given assemblage have reached a state of (temporary) equilibrium, and then there are periods of rapid change and uncertainty where forces are in a state of disequilibrium and new interpretations emerge and vie for dominance. Ultimately, what Nietzsche is suggesting here is that the world does not have an underlying structure, inherent purpose, or transcendental bannister.¹⁵⁶ For Nietzsche, then, the world is *always out*

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁶ This is why Nietzsche writes, “I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to system is a lack of integrity” (*TI* “Maxims” 26).

of joint to one degree or another. But this is a condition to be affirmed, not bemoaned as constituting some kind of lack. For it is this disjointed condition itself which allows for the possibility of the new and unforeseen—"Away from God and gods this will [to beget] has lured me; what could one create if gods existed?" (Z II: 2).

Indeed, Nietzsche thought that far from attaching us to the world and committing us to intervene resolutely in it through notions of purpose, meaning, and hope, faiths involving providential images of time are likely to diminish our interest in political struggle because "the faith that a good meaning lies in evil means to abandon the struggle against it" (WP §1019). Accordingly, "the whole religio-moral interpretation is only a form of submission to evil" because it finds a 'true meaning' behind evil as just punishment or it dismisses "malice and harmfulness as mere appearance," and in both cases provides a justification for not struggling to mitigate pain, suffering, and misfortune by engaging their true sources: "chance, the uncertain, the sudden" (WP §1019). This is part of the reason why Nietzsche found his earlier notion of tragedy as that which justifies life to be so unsatisfactory. And it was also one of the things Baldwin most objected to about the time he spent in the clutches of the church as a young preacher: "I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. Were only Negroes to gain this crown? Was Heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?"¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 39. This is not the only similarity between Baldwin's their assessments of church and Nietzsche's; in the same passage, Baldwin continues thusly, "Perhaps I might have been able to reconcile myself even to this if I had been able to believe that there was any loving-kindness to be found in the haven I represented. But I had been on the pulpit too long and I had seen too many monstrous things. I don't refer merely to the glaring fact that the minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their

Nietzsche contrasts the anesthetizing effects of providential religion with the attitude of the tragic artist acting from a position characterized by a “pessimism of strength”—that is, from a position sufficiently strong enough to affirm life’s tragic possibilities—in which one “establishes the possibility of entering into a kind of treaty with [evil] and in general to exercise influence over it in advance—to forestall it” (*WP*: §1019). Likewise, Baldwin urges us to confront “with passion the conundrum of life” and “negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.”¹⁵⁸ However, in working to attenuate and forestall the *realization* of tragic possibilities, the tragic artist must work on herself to avoid developing existential *ressentiment* against the very conditions of existence that produce the tragic possibilities she struggles against—“chance, the uncertain, the sudden”—for these are the very things Nietzsche also tells us we must affirm. This is perhaps one of the most difficult (and important!) ideas to grasp in Nietzsche. It is central to Baldwin’s tragic vision as well: while working against the pain and suffering that existence can inflict, the tragic artist does not seek to justify the ills of this world via appeals to another, ‘better’ world but instead continues to affirm unruliness in the cosmic conditions of existence:

Let us dwell a moment on this symptom of highest culture—I call it the pessimism of strength. Man no longer needs a “justification of ills”; “justification” is precisely what he abhors... If he formerly had need of a god, he now takes delight in a world disorder without God, a world of chance, to whose essence belong the terrible, the ambiguous, the seductive... This pessimism of strength also ends in a *theodicy*, i.e., in an absolute affirmation of the world—but for the very reason that formerly led one to deny it—and

dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate. I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair.”

¹⁵⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 92.

in this fashion to a conception of this world as the actually-achieved highest possible ideal. (*WP* §1019)

“This world” means the cosmos in which we are now set, not another world beyond it: “Even the ‘Beyond’—why a Beyond if not as a means of befouling the Here-and-Now?” (*TI* “Expeditions” 34). So, against those who would depreciate life by judging it according to or against ‘higher values,’ Nietzsche posits his own faith in “this world as the actually-achieved highest possible ideal.” But we must also be careful here, for we make a grave error if we assume that this means that Nietzsche is supporting a form of political quietism. What Nietzsche means—or at least what he can mean *for us*—is that attempts to redeem existential suffering through faith in providence (of God, of the Revolution, etc.) not only disparage this world but are apt to be sources of existential *ressentiment* when things do not go as planned.

This is why Nietzschean affirmation is not a form of conservatism or crude conventionalism that accepts existing values or the ‘real’ as such. We must keep in mind that the logic of existential affirmation provides the basis for Nietzsche’s project of ethical transvaluation: it is through affirmation that we create new values and possibilities of life. “To esteem is to create: hear this you creators!” (*ZI*: 15). Ultimately, affirmation that is not preceded by an immense negation is a false affirmation: “affirmation conceived of as acceptance, as affirmation of that which is, as truthfulness of the true or positivity of the real, is a false affirmation. It is the yes of the ass.”¹⁵⁹ The affirmation of the ass in the fourth book of *Zarathustra* is “false” not only because the ass does not know how to say ‘no’ but also “because he says yes

¹⁵⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 184.

to everything which is no.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, the ass affirms everything which says ‘no’ to life: the spirit of gravity, the ascetic ideal, the demand for heaven, the will to revenge, bad conscience, *ressentiment*—in short, all those reactive forces that seek to condemn, deny, or restrict life’s dynamism and creativity. “*This kind of affirming is nothing but bearing, taking upon oneself, acquiescing in the real as it is, taking reality as it is upon oneself.*”¹⁶¹ Nietzschean affirmation is an affirmation of life itself and its fundamental conditions, but, as such, it posits an aggressive ‘no’ to all that itself says ‘No’ to life.

But this is the concept of Dionysos himself... The psychological problem in the type of Zarathustra is how he, who to an unheard-of degree says No, does No to everything to which one has hitherto said Yes, can none the less be the opposite of a spirit of denial; how he, a spirit bearing the heaviest of destinies, a fatality of task, can none the less be the lightest and most opposite—Zarathustra is a dancer—: how he who has the harshest, the most fearful insight into reality... none the less finds in it no objection to existence... rather one more reason to be himself the eternal Yes to all things... But that is the concept of Dionysos once more. (EH “Books” Z: 6)

It should not go unnoted that racism, with its violent imposition of fixed identity categories and its forceful suppression of entire groups of peoples,¹⁶² is one of the most damaging and insidious, reactive, life-denying forces in the world today. It is anathematic to human flourishing. Thus, in advocating existential affirmation, I certainly do not suggest that we blindly affirm the hierarchical distribution of power and resources currently in place; even less do I want to suggest that it is somehow inappropriate to resent one’s place within that current distribution or to act

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁶² Nietzsche’s politics are equally problematic and difficult to categorize, and his views on race are ambiguous at best. But it is to his eternal credit that he despised no groups more than anti-Semites and racists.

resolutely to try to alter it.¹⁶³ I very much doubt that is what Nietzsche had in mind, since he opposed *ressentiment* and *not* resentment. Crucial, then, is the distinction between resentment and *ressentiment*. Resentments are inescapable and, indeed, indispensable motivational forces in political life, and Nietzsche urges us to act on our resentments so that they will be “consumed and exhausted in an immediate reaction” and “not *poison*” our character (*GM* I: 10). *Ressentiment*, in contrast, “is stored resentment that has poisoned the soul and migrated to places where it is hidden and denied.”¹⁶⁴ *Ressentiment* is best understood as a seething existential disposition that inscribes a debilitating desire for revenge into our very way of being-in-the-world; it becomes folded into our political and ethical practices, diminishing our belief in the world, draining the existential resources needed to engage in active struggle, and ultimately preventing us from formulating and embarking upon affirmative, forward-looking projects.

Nietzsche saw *ressentiment* as an ever-present danger stalking the human estate because he knew that the temporal structure of existence creates real existential suffering for people. It is difficult and painful indeed to watch loved ones suffer and pass away, to experience our bodies age and begin to break down, and to have the vicissitudes of time disrupt or destroy the things we cherish most deeply. Nietzsche thought that one of the key benefits of accepting the tragic vision of a purposeless world of becoming was that doing so helps us to reconfigure our relationship to both time and suffering. Within the cult of Dionysus,

¹⁶³ Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 66.

¹⁶⁴ William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 213 fn. 17

pain is sanctified: the ‘pains of childbirth’ sanctify pain in general—all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain... For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the ‘torment of childbirth’ *must* also exist eternally... All this is contained in the word Dionysos: I know of no more exalted symbolism than this *Greek* symbolism, the symbolism of the Dionysian. (*TI* “Ancients” 4, ellipses in original)

The recognition afforded by the tragic vision that pain and suffering are linked to joy and creation helps us begin to translate our vulnerability to contingency and unforeseen circumstances into a condition we affirm, rather than resent, so that we may participate in the creative force of becoming with less existential rancor. In a similar vein, Baldwin contends that suffering is a fundamental condition of life and growth itself: “I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, people who refuse to suffer, who resent suffering in whatever form it appears and *always* seek a guilty party for the suffering that does befall them, end up imprisoning themselves through the fictions and false worlds they create, for “to live within such fictions secures not flourishing but a death-in-life.”¹⁶⁶ Baldwin and Nietzsche thus encourage us to see pain and suffering not as blameworthy disorders to be resented but as preconditions of the vitality of life itself. “Have you ever said Yes to a single joy?” asks Zarathustra, “O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored” (*Z* IV: 19.10).

The awareness that “openness and multiplicity in a universe without overarching providence promote vulnerability and creative possibility alike” can

¹⁶⁵ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 98.

¹⁶⁶ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 134.

thus have a potentially powerful impact on our ethical sensibilities and political engagements, encouraging us to adopt presumptive generosity for the diversity of life itself.¹⁶⁷ But our vulnerability to contingency and unforeseen developments beyond our control is not the only temporal source of human resentment in a world of becoming. “We bear the weight of the past in us as we project ourselves into the mystery of the future,”¹⁶⁸ and it is that weight of the past we cannot hope to change or escape, perhaps even more than the anxiety engendered by an uncertain future, that Nietzsche thinks truly ensnarls us in the grips of *ressentiment*:

Man... braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy. That is why it affects him like a vision of a lost paradise to see the herds grazing or, in closer proximity to him, a child which, having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future. Yet its play must be disturbed; all too soon it will be called out of its state of forgetfulness. Then it will learn to understand the phrase 'it was': that password which gives conflict, suffering and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is—an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one. (*HL* 1)

Man resents the past (the “it was”) he did not create and cannot fully shake off because he feels as if it prevents him from starting anew and creating himself as he imagines he would truly like to be, for “however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him” (*HL* 1).

In his analysis of some Nietzschean motifs in the writings of Frantz Fanon, Ross Posnock touches upon the relationship between the weight of the past and our

¹⁶⁷ Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 155.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

attempts to create a new future. Insofar as his comments link Nietzsche to the concerns of racial politics via Fanon, they are of particular interest to us here.

Fanon describes his leap of invention as Nietzschean in its effort ‘to educate man to be *actional*’ rather than reactionary, and it approximates Nietzsche’s dissolution of the subject into action: “The deed is everything” – “‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added after the deed.” Making the deed everything, in Nietzsche and Fanon, demands that the past be evacuated, for history’s humiliations viscerally weigh upon one in the present. The “Negro is the slave of the past,” says Fanon, and “like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment.”¹⁶⁹

While it may be true for Fanon that the past can be evacuated in this way—indeed, it is probably necessary at least as a possibility for the type of revolutionary program of radical historical overcoming Fanon envisions to be viable¹⁷⁰—nothing could be less possible in Nietzsche’s tragic world than jettisoning the past. As noted above, Nietzsche believes that everything in the world is inextricably connected and that these interconnections determine the properties or characteristics of things—“everything is bound to and conditioned by everything else” (*WP* §584). Followed to its conclusion, such an idea implies that Nietzsche believes that “the history of the whole world, or, in more modest terms, the history of each person, is totally involved in every moment: ‘Don’t you know that? In every action you perform the

¹⁶⁹ Ross Posnock, “How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the ‘Impossible Life’ of the Black Intellectual” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (Winter, 1997): 335.

¹⁷⁰ I explore the constitutive tension in Fanon’s thought between his appreciation for Nietzsche’s warnings about the dangers of existential resentment and his belief in the need for radically overturning and transcending historical circumstances in a forthcoming essay, “Becoming-Active, Becoming-Revolutionary: Fanon’s Creative Appropriation of Nietzsche.” Posnock’s essay is one of the best to address the Fanon-Nietzsche connection (admittedly, there are not many), but his argument falters badly on the above point. Posnock misconstrues, I think, the significance of Nietzsche’s rejection of the substantial subject, that is, the belief that the “deed is everything”—for every deed carries with it the previous ones and cannot be detached or abstracted from them.

history of every event is repeated and abridged.”¹⁷¹ To evacuate the past would thus be to obliterate the subject, to empty it entirely of its “content.” In other words, it would only be possible to free ourselves from the past if we were something *more than* the totality of our experiences and actions; if, that is, there were some part of us that remained beyond (or “transcended”) these. But this is precisely what Nietzsche denies.

For Nietzsche, everything is entangled; “every atom affects the whole of being” (*WP* §634). This could be taken to mean that each later thing or event is determined by what preceded it. Indeed, Nietzsche himself sometimes seems to suggest as much: “Every individual consists of the whole course of evolution” (*WP* §373). Again, however, we must be careful here, for Nietzsche is also highly critical of mechanical causation, and his “philosophy of creative processes,” which “projects relations that exceed mechanical cause without reducing the excess *entirely* to chance” suggests that we should not think of events as following a serial logic.¹⁷² According to Nietzsche, when we try to determine causality we are not actually looking for “causes” but rather for “something familiar to hold on to—As soon as we are shown something old in the new, we are calmed. The supposed instinct for causality is only fear of the unfamiliar and the attempt to discover something familiar in it—a search, not for causes, but for the familiar” (*WP* §551). Moreover, Nietzsche is also a panexperientialist, which means that nonhuman processes, too,

¹⁷¹ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985): 149.

¹⁷² William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press), 167.

have searching and agential capacities and thus play a role in the creative processes of becoming:

My idea is that every specific body strives to become master of all space and to extend its force (—its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an agreement (“union”) with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on— (*WP* §636)

The real creativity and uncertainty in the world stem from these dynamic relations between multiple forces set at different trajectories in which both organic and inorganic processes take part. This is why the interconnectedness of things need not translate into a rigidly deterministic logic of mechanical causation and succession. Indeed, Nietzsche himself asserts “that the concept of causality is completely useless. —A necessary sequence of states does not imply a causal relationship between them (—that would mean making their effective capacity leap from 1 to 2, to 3, to 4, to 5)” (*WP* §551). To see the world only in this way would be to rob it of the capacities for change and transformation that Nietzsche thinks are central to it. Everything is connected, but the nature of these connections is inherently indeterminate, and radically new connections emerge from time to time in what is essentially an open system of interrelations.

Keeping in mind “the active force, the creative force in the chance event” (*WP* §673), perhaps we should say that things are entangled in the sense of being seriously inter-involved, but not totally determined. You may be entangled with your lover, entangled in a criminal conspiracy, or entangled in local debates about law enforcement and police conduct. You *are* entangled in an indifferent world that neither you nor anyone else created. “The world exists... it becomes, it passes away,

but it has never begun to become and never ceased from passing away—it maintains itself in both.—It lives on itself: its excrements are its food” (*WP* §1066). It is this second view of entanglements as inter-involvement that I think better captures Nietzsche’s eventual view of things and the perspective he ultimately endorses in *Zarathustra*. In any case though, in advancing this interpretation I am trying to work modestly on Nietzsche’s thought on my own terms so as to better show the connections and resonances between a tragic vision and contemporary racial politics in thought and action.

On this second view of entanglements you can’t eliminate or reverse the “it was,” but you can work modestly upon the residues it has left in you through various practices of self-formation and “arts of the self.” This is what Nietzsche refers to as the attempt to “give style” to one’s character—a mode of aesthetic self-creation that he thinks is vital to fashioning an affirmative existential disposition:

One thing is needful.—To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has to be added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime... For one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims. (*GS* §290)

The past becomes lodged in various parts of our lives—it leaves its traces on our bodies, in passive syntheses that operate below the level of conscious thought, in emotional tonalities, existential faiths, articulated traditions, ongoing social practices, and intimate relationships—but we can change the significance of at least

some of these deposits by working on them and on the whole of which they now constitute a part. On an individual level, this means attaining satisfaction with one's self. By transforming ("overcoming") the self in the process of acquiring "style" the traces of the past may be turned into material for the future; we find it easier to take joy in life, which we now feel ourselves more connected to through our co-participation in creative processes of becoming. The bitterness left by the traces of the past begins to sweeten. "And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them" (Z II: 3).

In this sense, Posnock is right to call our attention to the transformative potential of the will to power in Nietzsche's thought. Zarathustra presents willing or esteeming (they are essentially the same) as a mode of liberation through which we create new values and forms of life, thus saving us from the hollow and sterile repetition of the past-present. There is a catch, however—an important qualification or limitation to the will's liberating power that Posnock elides:

Will – that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was' – that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. *The will cannot will backwards*; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy... That time does not run backwards, that is his wrath; 'that which was' is the name of the stone he cannot move. And so he moves stones out of wrath and displeasure, and he wreaks revenge on whatever does not feel wrath and displeasure as he does. Thus the will, the liberator, took to hurting; and on all who can suffer he wreaks revenge for his inability to go backwards. *This, indeed this alone, is what revenge is: the will's ill will against time and its 'it was.'* (Z II: 20; emphasis added)

The will cannot will backwards: we cannot change the past, cannot change the awful things that have happened to us, the terrible mistakes we have made, and the

chances we have squandered for this reason or that. We cannot undo our deepest regrets, which we drag with us like a chain, no matter how fast and how far we may run. And indeed, the faster we try to run and the more we deny the inescapability of the past, the heavier its chains become.

For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. (HL 3)

As George Shulman has suggested, for Baldwin, this was one the most important lessons that tragedy could teach us: that “freedom begins only in recognizing that the past is not past or dead: We trap ourselves if we deny its power; we repeat it by efforts to escape.”¹⁷³ Indeed, this was precisely what Baldwin believed white Americans had done: “They are,” Baldwin tells his nephew, “in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”¹⁷⁴ They remain trapped in that history out of fear, fear of losing their status, safety, and identity; instead of grappling with that history and coming to terms with the historically conditioned reality of American life, they cling to idols, distorting mirrors, and “chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears.”¹⁷⁵ But like Nietzsche, Baldwin also believes in human capacities for self-overcoming and transformation. “And like Nietzsche, he does not give up redemption as an

¹⁷³ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 148.

¹⁷⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 8.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

emancipatory practice. He, too, redefines it to mean coming to terms with a problematic history, to make ‘an illness into a pregnancy,’ as Nietzsche puts it.”¹⁷⁶ Indeed, if the past is neither truly past, nor dead, then that means that it can be worked upon as it works upon us. *Pace* Posnock, then, affirmation and creation in Nietzsche (and Baldwin) stem not from escaping the past but from accepting its constitutive power and grappling with the particular history that has made us who we are. “I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, *once* we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is.”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, fantasies of escape and dreams of sovereign self-making only ensure that we will come to be dominated by our resentment of the past and the ‘it was’.

“To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption” (Z II, 20). But how can we accomplish this, since it is precisely the will’s incapacity to will backwards (‘thus I willed it’) that seems to be at issue? If we keep in mind, again, that for Nietzsche, “all things are entangled, ensnared, enamored” (Z IV, 19.10) and that every event is inextricably connected to all the others, we can get a sense of what redemption means here: by accepting the past, working upon the investments it has left in us, and making of them a condition of action, we can create a suitable future and thereby redeem and justify all that made this future possible. In other words, we are not redeemed from history, but rather we redeem it ourselves through the creation of a worthwhile future. “In your children you shall make up for being the children of

¹⁷⁶ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 136.

¹⁷⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 91; emphasis added.

your fathers: thus shall you redeem all that is past" (Z III, 12.12). Thus spoke Zarathustra.

You cannot eliminate the "it was," but you *can* work strategically upon its investments in you and thereby change its significance for your life. An example: say you are diagnosed with a serious chronic illness, one that will pose significant difficulties for the rest of your life and result in quite a good deal of pain and anguish. You may now have to rethink your life plans and perhaps even let go of some of your ambitions, which you feel (or are told by doctors) are no longer feasible. You may have to give up activities that previously brought you joy and helped you maintain an affirmative disposition and outlook. The limitations your new illness imposes on you causes you to grow distant from some of your friends who do not quite understand the new challenges in your life and the toll they take. You are liable to resent this particularly fateful role of the past in the present, which you had no control over, but which now irreparably shapes your life nonetheless; indeed, it is hard to imagine how you would *not* be resentful, at least initially. But now let's say that during the long process of educating yourself about your illness, experimenting with various treatments, making significant lifestyle changes and generally learning how to cope and manage your symptoms, you come to discover a strength of will you did not previously know you had; you begin to build new habits, attributes, and dispositions, and these now become a part of your identity, become embedded in your fundamental disposition toward the world and others. They become a defining part of your "style," as it were. You find, much to your surprise, that you are now more caring towards yourself, more focused on what truly matters

in your life, and more compassionate in your dealings with others. Reflecting on these experiences, you decide that you like this “new” version of yourself better than the “old” one. But if Nietzsche is correct that every one of your past actions and experiences is a necessary condition for being what you are in the present, then you must be able to affirm your chronic illness as that which has made this new self you affirm possible. You are now what Nietzsche calls a “redeemer of accidents”:

I taught them all *my* creating and striving, to create and carry together into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident; as creator, guesser of riddles, and redeemer of accidents, I taught them to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all that *has been*. To redeem what is past in man and to re-create all “it was” until the will says, “Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it” – this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption. (Z III, 12.3)

Your resentment toward the past and the lingering presence of the “it was” begins to drain away. “By creating, on the basis of the past, an acceptable future, we justify and redeem everything that made this future possible; and that is everything.”¹⁷⁸ You work on yourself to accept the fatality of a past you cannot escape, making it a condition of new action so that you may fashion a future self you are capable of affirming. By accepting and grappling with the painful past in which you are entangled, you are able to revise who you might become in the future and to create the conditions for new possibilities. “To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it: it is learning how to use it.”¹⁷⁹ Thus spoke James Baldwin.

We cannot change the past, but we can change our relationship to it and the effects it has on us through careful self-work and participation in creative forces and

¹⁷⁸ Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 160.

¹⁷⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 81.

processes that exceed our control but are not entirely inaccessible. "For Baldwin, as for Nietzsche, we must 'redeem' the past because we cannot change or escape it; we must change our relationship to it, its meaning for us, to make it a condition of action. Both insist on the haunting power of the past, not to produce despair, but as the only way to open a possibility for new possibilities."¹⁸⁰ Indeed, for Baldwin this is a key part of the difficult work of achieving the conditions of possibility for human freedom, and it speaks to the broader ethical imperative he establishes to acknowledge the fundamentally tragic character of existence. I suggest that both Nietzsche and Baldwin believe that the refusal to acknowledge tragedy, and the existential resentment this disavowal fosters, is one of the profound and fundamental human-generated sources of (unnecessary) suffering in the world.

Behind what we think of as the Russian menace lies what we do not wish to face, and what white Americans do not face when they regard a Negro: reality—*the fact that life is tragic*. Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.¹⁸¹

Substitute "Islamist" for "Russian" and you have a distressingly apt description of contemporary American life. Baldwin's central theoretical claim is that America's race problem stems largely from a refusal among white Americans to acknowledge

¹⁸⁰ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 140.

¹⁸¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 91-92.

the tragic character of life. Like Nietzsche (see Z I: 21; *TI* “Expeditions” 36), Baldwin urges us to affirm death as a necessary condition of the vitality of life; he hopes that by reconfiguring our relationship to death we may be able to embrace life without projecting a fundamental unfairness into being. To earn one’s death, Baldwin suggests, is to embrace and affirm the whole of life.

And in a sense, the converse is true as well: those who cannot accept mortality cannot deeply embrace the sweetness and sorrows of life in a tragic world of becoming. Indeed, Baldwin suggests that white Americans no longer understand or know how to be “sensual,” that is, how “to respect and rejoice in the force of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”¹⁸² Unable to affirm the vitality of life in a universe of tragic possibility, they become truly “joyless”—detached from reality and incapable of renewing “themselves at the fountain of their own lives.”¹⁸³ A primary consequence of this spiritual poverty, then, is manifested in a failure among white Americans to create values that correspond to life and respond to the demands of the present:

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears. And by destruction I mean precisely the abdication by Americans of any effort really to be free.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

Baldwin warns America that it has two options: first, we could simply continue to perpetuate the chimeras and racial fictions that have thus far dominated our collective unconscious; if this is the route we choose, we thereby “condemn ourselves... to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves *as we are*, we might bring new life to the Western achievements and transform them.”¹⁸⁵

Are we up to the task? Thus far we appear not to have been, for “the price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has been so long rejected, must now be embraced, and no matter what psychic or social risk.”¹⁸⁶ In a country where it has become necessary to disrupt or shut down airports, highways, subway systems, universities, and public schools simply for the message “Black Lives Matter” to be heard at all, it can hardly be said that we have lived up to Baldwin’s challenge. Indeed, the continued relevance of Baldwin’s works and their power to illuminate the contemporary condition testify to our profound denials on this score.

The “Negro” must be embraced because he stands in for the Dionysian element in Being that white Americans have refused to acknowledge. In a strategy both self-perpetuating and self-defeating,¹⁸⁷ white Americans, instead of facing their fears and confronting the tragic reality of existence, have continued to create fabricated pasts and stereotyped representations of black people upon which they project their fears, anxieties, and longings.

All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits there. It is for this reason that

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 93, 94.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The white man's unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. The only way he can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark.¹⁸⁸

In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin shows us what happens to a polity and a people when it disavows the tragic, when a tragic vision is not permitted to actively compete with other visions in public life, and how the denials of acknowledgment and mutuality that result destroy the possibilities for democratic pluralism. But like all great instances of tragic insight, Baldwin also suggests a possible way out of our predicament: embrace the tragic nature of existence with existential affirmation and gratitude for the abundance of being over and beyond one's own identity and self-interests.

We must face our fears, Baldwin warns: "To defend oneself against a fear is simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced."¹⁸⁹ How are we to do this? How will white Americans, in particular, find the courage to finally reject the delusions of race and let go of "that collection of myths to which

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 95-6.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

white Americans cling”¹⁹⁰ and which prevent them from facing reality as it is and from undertaking the arduous task of transforming it *and* themselves? What can be done to bring about a much needed moment of clarity among a people with no apparent spiritual ‘rock bottom?’ There are no easy answers here, and I do not pretend to offer any. So I will end with a suggestion and a parable of sorts from Nietzsche, who similarly wondered where people would find the strength and courage to accept the death of God:

Excelsior.—“You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you do not permit yourself to stop before any ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend for your seven solitudes... man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for them? Nobody yet has had this strength!”

There is a lake that one day ceased to permit itself to flow off; it formed a dam where it had hitherto flown off; and ever since this lake is rising higher and higher. Perhaps this very renunciation will also lend us the strength needed to bear this renunciation; perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to *flow out* into a god. (*GS* §285)

Nietzsche suggests that we may discover the strength of will needed to overcome ourselves and transcend the need for God and other life-denying fictions by (re)committing ourselves to this life, *here and now*. Likewise, Baldwin acknowledges that in calling for (nay, demanding) the “transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of alters” he is calling for something that seems “impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history, in general, and American

¹⁹⁰ These myths include among the following, “that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world’s most direct and virile, that American women are pure” (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 101).

Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”¹⁹¹ The fortress of white supremacy may seem unassailable and the mirrors of prejudice unbreakable, but Baldwin tells us that this does not change the fact that these walls *must* be scaled, that these mirrors *must* be smashed.

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in slave song, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the first next time!*¹⁹²

Baldwin’s prophetic warning is a call to action and a demand that we resist what seems to be our nation’s tragic racial destiny with all the strength and resources at our disposal. There will be no guarantees in this endeavor; indeed, we must be willing to risk everything. And this is why we must cultivate and practice love for one another; justice will not come from elsewhere—for there is no other place, only this world and the values, communities, and identities we must take responsibility for. As Dr. Cornel West says, “*Justice is what love looks like in public.*”¹⁹³

This dissertation has been my own humble, limited, and no doubt flawed attempt to contribute to the urgent task Baldwin sets before us. It expresses my hope that while life certainly seems to be tragic, it may not always have to end in tragedy.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 82, 104.

¹⁹² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105-6.

¹⁹³ *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Interview with Dr. Cornel West, part 2. March 16, 2015.

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University (expected May 2015)

Dissertation: "Race and Romantic Visions: A Tragic Reading"

Committee: Dr. William E. Connolly (first reader), Dr. Michael Hanchard (second reader)

Certificate in Comparative Racial Politics, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, May 2011

M.A., Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, 2007

Examination Fields: Political Theory, Comparative Politics

B.A., Political Science, Grinnell College, 2005

TEACHING

Maryland Institute College of Art, Humanistic Studies

Instructor

"Political Violence and Modernity" (Mid Level), Spring 2015

"Nietzsche in His Time and Ours" (Upper Level), Fall 2014

"Human Nature in Political Thought" (Mid Level), Fall 2014

"Relativism in American Thought" (Upper Level), Spring 2014

"Nietzsche in His Time and Ours" (Upper Level), Fall 2013

"Modern Political Theory" (Mid Level), Spring 2013

Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, Department of Humanities

Instructor

"Humanities Core III: Critical Methods; Political Theory: What Is Power?" (Mid Level), Fall 2014

"Humanities Core II: Research and Writing Methods; Political Theory: *The Souls of Black Folk*" (Lower Level), Spring 2014

Johns Hopkins University, Center for Africana Studies

Instructor

"Black Nationalism and Its Critics" (Upper Level), Spring 2013

"Black Political Thought and the Enlightenment" (Upper Level), Fall 2010

Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science

Teaching Assistant

"Introduction to American Politics" (Lower Level), Fall 2012

"The Politics of Good and Evil" (Upper Level), Fall 2011

"Introduction to Comparative Politics" (Lower Level), Spring 2010

"Classics of Political Thought" (Lower Level), Fall 2009

"Race and Racism in Comparative Perspective" (Mid Level), Fall 2008

"American Foreign Policy" (Lower Level), Spring 2007

"Capitalism and Christianity" (Upper Level), Fall 2006

"Justice, Rights, and Utility" (Upper Level), Fall 2005

CONFERENCES AND COLLOQUIA

"Kant *contra* Herder: Race, Reason, and Universal History." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington DC, August 27-31

"Becoming-Active, Becoming-Revolutionary: Fanon's Creative Appropriation of Nietzsche." A Time and a Place: Race and Racism in Comparative Perspective, an Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, May 2, 2014

"Becoming-Active, Becoming-Revolutionary: Fanon's Creative Appropriation of Nietzsche." Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, April 17-19, 2014

Discussant. Michael Hanchard, "Edward Augustus and the Dawn of Comparative Politics." Department of Political Science Department Seminar, Johns Hopkins University, December 5, 2013

"Johann Herder's Romantic Vision: Organicism, Pluralism, and Belonging." Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Hollywood, CA, March 28-30, 2013

"Race and the Tragic Vision: Sophocles, Nietzsche, Baldwin." Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Portland, OR, March 22-24, 2012

Panel Chair. "Racial Construction and Mobilization." A Time and a Place: Race and Racism in Comparative Perspective, an Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Friday December 2, 2012

"Kant, Herder, and the Race Concept." Department of Political Science Graduate Student Colloquium, Johns Hopkins University, October 2011

Panel Discussant. "Immigration and Racial Hierarchy." Racism, Immigration, and Citizenship in Plural Societies. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, May 2009

Discussant. Tim Hanifan, "Swift and Habermas on Early Modern Time-Consciousness." Department of Political Science Graduate Student Colloquium, Johns Hopkins University, March 2009

"Becoming-Active, Becoming-Revolutionary: Nietzsche, Deleuze, Fanon." Department of Political Science Graduate Student Colloquium, Johns Hopkins University, March 2007

Discussant. Stefanie Fishel, "Theocratic War Machine." Department of Political Science Graduate Student Colloquium, Johns Hopkins University, November 2006

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Center for Africana Studies Dean's Teaching Fellow, Johns Hopkins University, Spring 2013

James Hart Fellowship, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, Spring 2011

Africana Studies Prize Teaching Fellow, Center for Africana Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2010

Paula A. McCoy Award for Most Distinguished Political Science Graduate Seminar Paper for the Academic Year, Johns Hopkins University, 2008

Graduate Fellowship, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, 2005-2010