

In a Shade of Blue

Pragmatism and the
Politics of Black America

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6

The Eclipse of a Black Public and the Challenge of a Post-Soul Politics

Have the past struggles succeeded!
What has succeeded? yourself? your nation? Nature?
Now understand me well—it is provided in the essence of things
that from any fruition of success, no matter
what, shall come forth something to make a greater
struggle necessary.

WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more
democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by
introducing more machinery of the same kind. . . . But the phrase
may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, and of
employing our sense of its meaning to criticize and remake its
political manifestations.

JOHN DEWEY, *The Public and Its Problems*

Do we have to begin consciousness with a battle heroines and
heroes like you have already fought and lost leaving us with
nothing in our hands except what you have imagined is there?

TONI MORRISON, *Nobel Acceptance Speech*

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Ours is a complicated historical moment, marked by enormous progress and by profound setbacks. We have witnessed over the last few decades a rapid expansion of the black middle class, the emergence of African American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and the inauguration of an African American woman as president of an Ivy League institution.¹ Moreover, with the appointments of Colin Powell and Condeleezza Rice as secretaries of state, we have even become the face of America to the world, rep-

resenting our nation's foreign policies to the majority of black and brown peoples around the globe. By some measures, African Americans have finally found their place within mainstream American society. We no longer, some argue, need to retreat to racial enclaves for comfort and security. No longer, they might add, do we need to appeal to race in matters of politics. We have, for the most part, arrived.

But the tremendous progress evident in black America stands alongside the bleak reality that many African Americans have fallen beyond the pale. We have witnessed over the last few decades an expansion of the black "underclass." Large numbers of African American men and women find themselves caught within the intricate networks of the prison industrial complex: from 1954 to the present day the black prison population has grown by 900 percent.² Many African American children suffer from the chronic ills that attend growing up in poverty. Black babies, for example, are two and a half times more likely than white infants to die before their first birthday.³ To be sure, a substantial number of African Americans are caught within a vicious cycle of poverty and violence that betrays any claim that all is well in black America.⁴ These realities, some argue, demand continued struggle; we can ill afford to ignore the relevance of race in matters of politics, because America remains fundamentally shaped by white supremacy.

Hurricane Katrina seemingly affirmed the importance of race to American politics. The storm literally washed up and into our field of vision the black poor of New Orleans. Despite its yearly bacchanal, most knew New Orleans was a city deeply in trouble. The hundred thousand residents unable to evacuate the city lurked in the shadows—as the poor often do in such tourist locations—while visitors reveled in the unbridled freedom symbolized by the city. That ostensible freedom, however, obscured the fact that the poverty rate in New Orleans was 23 percent, that in some parishes the average adult income was less than eight thousand dollars a year, that most of these people lived in low-lying areas especially susceptible to flooding, and that the city struggled to breathe under the toxic effects of a not-so-underground drug economy.⁵ In other words, we had in New Orleans before Katrina, as in many urban spaces throughout our country, a profound convergence of racial poverty and violence (hyperconcentrated in some areas), which the nation refused to address substantively beyond the standard calls for "getting tough on crime" and building more prisons. The response (or lack of response) to the disaster simply continued a policy of neglect—a willful ignorance about the conditions of living among poor people, especially black and brown poor people, in this country.

What was striking about this moment involved, among other things, the fact that many groped for a language to describe the horrible images they saw. And as they searched what was revealed with remarkable clarity was a startling inability on the part of many people, including black leaders, to avoid the easy trap of thinking about racism solely in terms of intentional prejudice. The structural dimensions of racism that revealed themselves in the very material conditions of poor black New Orleanians could not be captured in a sound bite or in the traditional language of the civil rights establishment. Nevertheless, the easy formulation was ready at hand. Katrina was evidence of explicit, intentional racism. As Kanye West put it, "George W. Bush doesn't care about black people." Although this is probably true, it is a difficult claim to sustain, and it does not account for the tragedy as a whole.

Katrina revealed that the many challenges confronting black America require an imaginative and immediate shift in our political lexicon—that our traditional "vocabularies of struggle" require recalibration in light of the particular conditions of our current circumstances. This effort goes far beyond the narrow debate between those who would deny or accept the relevance of race to political matters. The question instead is how we address the actual problems African American communities confront, realizing that those communities fracture and fragment in varying ways and along different fault lines. What are our mobilizing tropes in light of this differentiation? How do they inspire us to respond passionately and intelligently to the problems at hand? Of course, these questions require a closer examination of what we mean by "our" and "us"; Katrina, after all, revealed the extraordinary class cleavages among African Americans.

I have tried to show, on pragmatic grounds, that there are ways to imagine "us" without falling into the trap of racial essentialism or succumbing to what Adolph Reed rightly decries as a misguided view of corporate racial interests. My aim has been to turn our attention to the actual "doings and sufferings" of black folk. There we find richly textured experiences that trouble any reductive account of the lives of African Americans. Time and again, appeals to racial identity and unity, or to notions of black history and agency, have masked, often to the detriment of the most vulnerable, the competing interests informing the political and moral choices of African Americans. Competing interests are ignored in favor of a form of racial politics that presumes, dangerously, that black individuals see themselves as *necessarily* in solidarity with other black individuals solely on the basis of race. This assumption, more often than not, results in a form of racial politics that relies heavily on a set of tropes that signal to those willing to

listen that black interests, whatever they may be, are in jeopardy. We need only invoke the images of our past, or the many persons who gave their lives in the struggle for black freedom, to orient ourselves appropriately to any political matter. For some, these tropes stand in for democratic deliberation; they, in effect, do our thinking for us. But such invocations blind us to a crucial insight:

that democratic and participatory value must be the cornerstone of credibility for the notion of black politics; group consensus must be constructed through active participation. Even then, it is important to realize that often there will be no universal racial consensus on key issues; that some conflicts derive from irreconcilable material differences. Unity is always on specific terms and in pursuit of specific objectives.⁶

By my pragmatic lights, African American politics, if they are to be genuinely democratic, must, like the nation in general, embrace the full complexity of the racialized experiences of black folk (and not succumb to what I termed in chapter 3 the descriptive, theoretical, and existential problematic). That complexity will give the lie to any facile racial politics that fails to exemplify the black democratic energies necessary for a fundamental transformation in this nation.

In chapter 5, for example, I sought to unsettle a common characterization of the black power era and its attendant politics. For many, “black nationalism” signals a worrisome set of political commitments that requires condemnation, no matter the many ways in which that politics was articulated. This rejection habitually takes the form of a caricature of black nationalists and the era of black power. Such caricatures, however, block the way to a more nuanced understanding of the political choices of African Americans during this historical moment and, perhaps more importantly, conceal the ways that period and its various approaches to African American politics inform our current political choices. The phrase “black nationalism” and the emotions it carries in tow, I argued, get in the way of this sort of analysis.

My intention in this chapter involves an attempt, not so much to chart the various influences of black power on contemporary forms of African American politics, as to encourage a more imaginative and intelligent politics for the twenty-first century. I hold the view, and it is admittedly controversial, that the post-soul generation has lost its way politically, in part because our political imaginations have been captured by the symbolic significance of the black freedom struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. This state of affairs is all the more troubling given that the conditions that

shaped and informed this historical period have been fundamentally transformed by the movement’s successes.

In making this claim, I rely on John Dewey’s account of publics in his book *The Public and Its Problems*. Dewey’s view avoids some of the more troublesome aspects of the account of publics in the early work of the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.⁷ He does not assume, for example, that deliberation in the public sphere requires that we bracket the fact that some of us are wealthy and others are poor; that we are diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race; and that, in some cases, individuals are differentially treated because of these identities. These differences and the problems that may arise from them in a society like ours may even call into existence multiple publics that challenge restricted conceptions of the common good. For Dewey, this does not undermine democratic life but, instead, is a reflection of its vibrancy.

Dewey argued that publics come in and out of existence all the time. As we confront new social problems, as economic shifts and technological innovations transform our lives, the way we have traditionally gone about our business—including the way we have typically addressed problems—may no longer be effective and may even lapse into incoherence. Forces impact the form and content of our public deliberation and often lead to a disconnect between the way we talk about problems and the actual problems we face. Under these conditions, Dewey maintained, an eclipse of a public has taken place. Our task as social critics during such moments is to ask hard questions about the public under such conditions, to ascertain the various forces behind its eclipse, and to devise means and methods of organizing an emergent public into effective political action relevant to current social needs.

I suggest that Dewey’s account of the eclipse of publics has special relevance to the contemporary challenges of post-soul politics. More specifically, I argue that the conditions that called the civil rights movement into existence have been fundamentally transformed by that very movement, and that continued uncritical reference to it as a framework for black political activity blocks the way to innovative thinking about African American politics. In pursuing this view, I begin with a brief account of the challenges confronting post-soul politics. I argue in particular that invocations of the trope of the black freedom movement functions in at least three ways: (1) as an indication of black piety, (2) as a characterization of the continuity between current and past racial realities, and (3) as a means to justify and authenticate the authority of a black political class. Each function is backward-looking in its orientation and, in some cases,

inhibits the organization of an emergent public. I then turn to a more detailed discussion of John Dewey's account of publics. I give specific attention to Dewey's account of the emergence of the "great society" and the centrality of the "great community" to his view of democracy as a way of life. I suggest that conceptions of community that have informed African American politics in the past have given way to a fractured and fragmented public unable to identify itself. I argue for a conception of a great community colored a deep shade of blue, a view of community and democracy that takes seriously the complexity of racialized experiences in the United States and instantiates new forms of communication aimed at producing democratic dispositions capable of addressing the challenges of our current moment. I end by exhorting young African Americans to involve themselves actively in defining the contours of a post-soul politics without succumbing to the temptation of nostalgic longing for a past period of black political action. I urge them instead to take up the tools of their moment, to identify an emergent public, and to confront directly the social needs and opportunities it presents.

The Challenges of Post-Soul Politics

I should say a few words about what I mean by post-soul politics. On the one hand, the term simply refers to the period after the civil rights movement and black power era. It includes the political activity of persons born after the major legislative victories of the civil rights movement (the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act), the first of whom came of age during the Reagan years. On the other hand, "post-soul" references conditions and sensibilities. As Nelson George writes, the term "defines the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when black America moved into a new phase of its history."⁸ That new phase was marked both by many African Americans' experiencing unprecedented inclusion in American society, which altered the nature of their political commitments and actions, and by heightening levels of poverty and unimaginable violence, which circumscribed the life chances of large numbers of African American men, women, and children. The post-soul generation, as Mark Anthony Neal notes, experienced "the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past, but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world."⁹ As this generation of African Americans addressed these changes—which gave their

politics a different tone and timbre, their art a particular resonance—it also struggled to come to terms with the legacy of the civil rights movement and black power era. Indeed, this struggle with the past has in some ways overwhelmed the post-soul generation. It to this that I now turn.

BLACK PIETY

During and after Hurricane Katrina, Jesse Jackson and a host of other civil rights leaders likened the struggle over New Orleans to the mass movements of the 1960s. New Orleans demonstrated that African Americans remained second-class citizens in the United States and thus required continued struggle in relation to questions of citizenship. New Orleans, like the black freedom movement, constituted a struggle over black political empowerment, as elite whites attempted to seize the political reins of the city and remake New Orleans in an image quite different from its past. Indeed, New Orleans represented a threat to the tangible gains of "the movement"; it foreshadowed the looming battle over renewal of the Voting Rights Act. Jackson went so far as to claim that New Orleans is our era's Selma, Alabama, likening the struggle over the future of the city to the bloody crossing of the Edmund Pettis Bridge and the fight against segregation in the South.

Jackson's comparison was not that unusual. After the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, we heard over and over again from a host of civil rights leaders how African Americans had died for the right to vote, and how the victories of the civil rights movement were being turned back. The tragic death of Martin Lee Anderson, a teen who died after a brutal beating at a boot camp in Florida, drew analogies to the civil rights movement as well. Students, legislators, and black leaders likened his death to that of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old whose brutal murder is often viewed as the spark of the civil rights movement. Students protesting Anderson's death even wore T-shirts comparing the two events. But how are we to understand such analogies? What kind of work do they perform in galvanizing black constituencies to address effectively their circumstances?

For many, invocations of the black freedom movement and its exemplars situate our efforts in a tradition of struggle and sacrifice. That tradition, to the extent that the trope of the black freedom movement carries with it a certain conception of character, also encourages us to act justly toward our fellows as we struggle for a more inclusive democracy. When civil rights leaders invoke "the movement" they refer, in effect, to a story—a political and ethical narrative—about black America's sojourn in the United States. That story ostensibly narrates the political and ethi-

cal lives of African Americans by establishing a tangible connection between the kinds of beliefs we currently hold and choices we now make and a history of black political action in the face of white supremacy in the United States.

This history often provides a set of interpretive tools for making sense of racialized experiences in America. Most young African American men, for example, have been told how to behave in the presence of police officers. We are told to speak respectfully, to appear nonthreatening, and to keep our hands in full view at all times. Most young African Americans have also been told of the importance of voting, usually by reference to the fact that people, African Americans in particular, have died for the right to vote and that participation in the electoral process honors their sacrifice. In both instances, knowledge acquired from past experiences orients the young and provides them with a kind of common sense aimed at securing desirable ends and avoiding certain consequences. Invocations of the story of the black freedom movement and its central characters also seek to orient us to continue the fight against racism in the United States.

From Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer to Jesse Jackson, these figures exemplify—as the story is told—the courage and moral fortitude necessary to confront racial apartheid in America and to secure the demands of a long-suffering people. References to the black freedom movement thus serve two simultaneous purposes: First, they often seek to call forth a particular political orientation; the listener is urged to take up a calling, to fight for, or at least to support, civil rights. That support shapes the person's choices and guides her actions. She, in effect, dedicates her life to fighting for justice or, minimally, supports those who do so. Second, they refer to loss and sacrifice. Many died for our current freedom, and recognition of this fact obligates us to act so as to honor their sacrifice. In calling upon us to show fidelity to the dead, invocations of the black freedom movement involve appeals to a conception of piety in which African American individuals are indebted to the black freedom struggle as an undeniable source of their being. This loyalty is expected to include not just expressions of gratitude to those sources but also displays of appropriate habits and character in confronting unjust practices.

I should distinguish this use of black piety from my earlier formulation in *Is it Nation Time?* There I argued that one of the distinguishing features of the black power era was a conception of black piety grounded in a particular understanding of blackness, which bound African Americans to one another, oriented them to a past in need of recovery, and provided a ballast for their lives by way of a reverent attachment to the sources of

their individual identities. My use of black piety here, however, locates obligation not in the idea of blackness as such but, rather, in the notion of struggle on behalf of African Americans and principles of justice. The distinction matters. For some, the differences in the conception of black piety point to the substantive differences between the civil rights movement and the black power era. One version of the story holds that the latter represents a turn away from universal principles of justice that had previously informed African American struggle, toward a problematic black ontology that easily slips into a form of racial chauvinism.

Despite this difference, however, I want to describe both as instances of black piety, because both views can end up disciplining the political choices of African Americans (though they do not necessarily do so) by reference to the putative sources of African American existence. When Kenneth Blackwell, Shelby Steele, or John McWhorter put forward a view that runs counter to some notion of racial common sense, they are condemned for somehow betraying black people—or simply labeled Uncle Toms or race traitors. They are in effect being impious, turning their backs on the heroes and heroines who sacrificed and made possible their success. Whether the standard of judgment involves a tradition of black struggle or a more specific and troublesome conception of blackness, however, it threatens to constrain our ability to reimagine black political action, precisely because it presumes what that action ought to entail prior to experience. Our eyes remain fixed on the past and its exemplars who have already charted the path for us. Indeed, the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (and those who claim a direct connection to them) tower over our political imaginations, making us seem small and insignificant.

Members of the post-soul generation need not diminish the greatness of King, Malcolm, and all of those who sacrificed for our current freedoms to assert our own significance to the struggle for democracy. Their lives, with all of their power and limitations, model a standard of excellence that encourages excellence in our own lives. But we cannot be overwhelmed by the power of their presence to the point that we deny our own voice. Exemplars are a curious lot. They both inspire and potentially enslave. We must therefore be careful to strike the right balance between admiration and self-trust, not succumbing to the temptation of idolatry, which blinds us to our own unique excellences and potential greatness.¹⁰ Instead, our orientation to the past and its exemplars must consist in a lively relation, one in which our thinking remains open-ended and imaginative recovery of the past does not obstruct efforts to invade successfully the future. All, as I argued in chapter 3, is not settled.

CONTINUITY WITHIN CHANGE

An appropriate conception of black piety presumes the importance of tradition to the formation of individual character, and that this tradition offers useful resources for the successful invasion of the future. But too often invocations of the black freedom movement proceed on the basis of a one-to-one correspondence between the political realities addressed by the freedom struggles of the 1960s and the current experiences of African Americans. When Jesse Jackson, for example, likened the struggles over the mayoral election in New Orleans to Selma, Alabama, he deployed the moral and symbolic weight of that historic moment to mobilize African Americans to turn out and vote in massive numbers. And they did. But what happens to the uniqueness of the situation in New Orleans in the analogy or translation? How do we account for the fact that the district judge who denied the petition to delay the 2006 mayoral election was an African American appointed by Bill Clinton? How are we to think about the 2000 presidential election and the debacle in Florida? Amid the justifiable outrage, one irony was lost on many: that the Supreme Court's reasoning was based on the very laws that helped secure many of the victories of the civil rights movement. In these instances, analogies with the 1960s obscure the nuances of the contemporary scene, thus affecting our descriptions and, by extension, our responses.

One might hold the view that racism—whether evidenced in *de jure* segregation or in schemes to “whiten” New Orleans—is always essentially the same and warrants a similar response. One might further argue that the most efficacious form of struggle against racism remains that of mass demonstrations. We know that when large numbers of African Americans “took to the streets” in the 1960s to challenge racial segregation, the nation, aided by television and print media, took notice and matters changed significantly. Descriptions of our contemporary problems as continuous with the black freedom struggle of the 1960s aim then, in most cases, to encourage us to act in a manner consistent, in both form and content, with that struggle. A wide range of black leaders constantly urges us—reasonably, given prior successes—to march and march again.

I should not be too glib. Mass mobilization of citizens publicly protesting government policies remains a crucial feature of American democratic life, and much has been achieved as a result. But too often African American communities find themselves encouraged to take to the streets not so much because of its efficacy, but because our descriptions of the problems demand that we do so. When we liken an event to Selma or in-

voke the death of Emmett Till, we in effect prescribe our response: we must act as black folk have always acted in the face of such terror. And the standard characterizations of responses all involve marching. But such a position tends to constrain the exercise of intelligent inquiry, precisely because we find ourselves habitually oriented to talk about and respond to the varied problems of African Americans in certain ways.

We forget that the power of marching in the civil rights era stemmed, in part, from the organization of public space. In the South, for example, Jim Crow ordered public space so as to reflect prevailing racial norms. Segregated restrooms and water fountains, back-door entrances to restaurants and stores, established customs regarding use of sidewalks—all of these prescribed how African Americans could navigate public space. To ignore these rules and restrictions was to risk one's life. In such a context, organized marching constituted a subversive act: it directly challenged the prevailing laws and norms of southern communities. In our current moment marching is not so powerful. The sight of black bodies marching in Washington, D.C., or in communities across the country, does not jolt the imagination as it once did. Were a large number of young black males in baggy jeans and long white T-shirts with platinum grills to march through communities' business districts demanding employment, they might unsettle some. But they would challenge black and white alike.

I am not suggesting that marching ought no longer to be a mode of political action. I simply insist that when we do march, we do so because it presents the most efficacious means of redressing a particular problem. We must not march simply because some black leader has declared the moment consonant with the struggles of the 1960s. To act in this way would be to shun one's responsibility to respond imaginatively to the specific conditions of one's living. Moreover, it reveals, as I argued in chapter 2, an inability to make the delicate distinctions requisite for both genuine political and moral progress.

A recent demonstration in Trenton, New Jersey, captures fully, I believe, this point. In June 2006 a thousand or so young African Americans, ranging from elementary school to high school age, gathered to protest a spate of gang-related violence terrorizing their neighborhoods. The children complained of pressures to join gangs and expressed deeply felt fears about playing outside with the constant threat of stray bullets. They simply desired peace. As these courageous young folk marched, they crossed a bridge at Mill Hill Park and were addressed by Trenton's mayor, Douglass H. Palmer. Palmer spoke of the civil rights activists in Alabama in 1965 who were attacked as they crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge. “This is our Pettis Bridge,”

Palmer declared. "We're here together because we want peace in our city. We want people to put down the guns and put down the violence. It's not civil rights. We're talking about human rights."¹¹ Palmer's remarks, although heartfelt, revealed a profound inability to speak to the moment. The fact that many, if not most, in the audience knew more about the death of Biggie Smalls or Tupac Shakur than they did of the Edmund Pettis Bridge escaped him. Rather than finding the language to speak to the children and the issue in front of him, he relied on a confused array of clichés, invoking the civil rights movement, then awkwardly echoing the words of Malcolm X ("not an issue of civil rights, but of human rights"). Palmer's political imagination, like so many others, appeared exhausted. After he spoke, the children were clear about neither the nature of their problem nor what to do about it. As often happens, the need to locate and interpret a unique political reality and to articulate a way of dealing with it—the imperative of political and moral diagnosis and prognosis—was overshadowed by bad analogies and worn images. And the gangs still ride.

AUTHORITY OF A BLACK POLITICAL CLASS

Analogies based on current and past racial realities can serve to orient us more intelligently to the problems we face. When appropriate, they aid us in our efforts to make sense of racialized experiences by assimilating the unfamiliar to the familiar. An analogy may reveal something that would otherwise remain hidden, it may provide examples of courage or some other virtue, or it may clarify a dimension of a problem that enables us to resolve it more effectively. In any of these instances, the work of the analogy is forward-looking; it tells us something about our particular situation and about the kinds of action required to address it, orienting us such that we can address the problem without relying solely on luck. But too often analogies that purport to link the 1960s and our current moment obscure matters rather than clarify them. Perhaps Mayor Palmer simply wanted to urge the children of Trenton to be courageous, but his words offered little or no account of the context within which that courage would need to be exercised. Black leaders who frequently use these analogies may simply want to connect our current struggles with a tradition that offers resources that might aid us in our efforts, but too often the analogies are nonspecific and work only to justify the speakers' presence at the front of the march. The trope is thus used to authenticate a black political class: many national black leaders base their claims to authority to represent African American communities either on appeals to their having participated in the struggles of the 1960s or on their connection to

someone who did. Such appeals, of course, narrow the range of who can be considered a national black leader. Unless a member of the post-soul generation, for example, bears the imprimatur of someone who was a part of the black freedom movement (or is a child of an established member of the black political class), she will have to struggle mightily to acquire the gravitas needed to be taken seriously as a leader.

The problem, however, runs deeper. Invocations of the black freedom movement to justify the authority of a black political class reveal a much more troubling conception of African American politics: what Adolph Reed powerfully calls a politics of racial custodianship.¹² This politics presumes that there exists within black communities a viable distinction between the "masses" of African Americans, who need representation, and elites, whose role is to represent them. Reed rightly notes that "the term 'the masses' does not refer to any particular social position or constituency."¹³ It does not help us understand the actual interests of those who are underemployed or those who describe themselves as hip-hop heads. And it does little to capture the commitments of those who struggle over high rents or those who are home owners. Indeed, as Reed writes, "the category assumes a generic, abstract—and thus mute—referent. It therefore reproduces the nonparticipatory politics enacted by the mainstream black political elite. The masses do not speak; someone speaks for them."¹⁴

This form of politics has not emerged simply because of the nominal elites' selfishness. The realities of Jim Crow shaped the form and content of black political activity in determinate ways. The denial of the vote and the real threat of violent reprisal for any public opposition to prevailing racist norms exerted enormous pressures on the form of public deliberation within African American communities: compromise and silence became, for some, tools of the political trade. Moreover, the realities of white supremacy helped generate a conception of the group in which, without substantive deliberation, black elites defined the political agenda of black America and, without constraint or accountability, acted on it. The politics of racial custodianship, then, emerges out of a political context shaped by civic exclusion, the threat of racial violence, and the assumption of racial corporate interests represented by black elites who were not held accountable.¹⁵

Of course, de jure segregation is no more, and the threat of violent reprisal for publicly held positions is no longer sanctioned by the state. Yet the politics of racial custodianship remains, and its central trope is the black freedom movement. African American political leaders continue to invoke "the movement" to mobilize African American constituencies. In

doing so, they often rely on a conception of black piety that obligates African Americans to act politically in certain ways and not in others; they sometimes presume a generic politics of racial advancement predicated on a correspondence between African American experiences then and now; and many continue to justify their place as representatives or brokers of black interests to the state. In each instance, the diversity of African American life is obscured, and the democratic values of accountability and open debate are denied. This makes it more difficult to imagine the formation of the dispositions so necessary for a vibrant democratic life—dispositions that appreciate, as Dewey argued, “the values of social life, to see in imagination the forces which favor our effective cooperation with one another, to understand the sorts of character that help and that hold back.”¹⁶ Instead, we find ourselves, time and again, urged to follow uncritically those who would have us believe that they represent the African American community.

Many, however, have come to see that such a politics simply fails to speak to our current moment and the complexity of African American conditions of living. What does such a moment signal? How are we to understand it in relation to the way we conceive of a post-soul politics? These questions, I believe, require an understanding of a national black public. What is this black public? And how are we to understand it under present conditions? Pragmatism, and specifically John Dewey, offer some resources to begin an answer.

John Dewey and the Eclipse of a Public

In 1927 John Dewey wrote that “optimism about democracy is today under a cloud.”¹⁷ He was responding, in part, to prevailing sentiments about participatory democracy. Walter Lippmann, in his important books *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), had expressed the view that participatory democracy was not viable, because the opinions of everyday, ordinary citizens could be easily manipulated and consent manufactured by elites. To assume that ordinary Americans could engage in genuine deliberation about their conditions of living and the workings of government, given the quantity of information needed to do so effectively, was to fall into the worst kind of romantic thinking. Ordinary Americans simply did not have the time to become politically informed, which meant that deliberative democracy was a pipe dream. Lippmann suggested in its place a technocracy in which disinterested experts—persons who did not suffer from the irrationality so painfully evident among politicians—

represented the best interests of American citizens too caught up in the daily demands of modern living.

Dewey acknowledged that the technological, economic, and bureaucratic developments of modern American life had fundamentally transformed the nature of social interaction among citizens. Americans were busy working, shopping, and pursuing the American dream. He conceded Lippmann’s claim that the public in light of these developments seemed lost or bewildered. But Dewey rejected Lippmann’s conclusions. The problem was not with the incapacities of everyday, ordinary people, nor was the problem inherent to the very notion of democracy. Matters were bad but not hopeless. What was required was a better understanding of the emergence of American democracy and a more intelligent pursuit of conditions that would enable it to flourish under continuously changing conditions. As Dewey put it, many “assume that democracy is the product of an idea, of a single and consistent intent.”¹⁸ The challenge involves recognizing the various ways ordinary Americans, in response to their environment, have forged the democratic way of life that we now associate, mistakenly, with liberal institutions. In other words, shifting attention from abstractions associated with democracy to the actual doings and sufferings of those who provide its content. Democracy, in Dewey’s view, is not reducible to universal suffrage, free and frequent elections, or congressional and cabinet government. Instead, “political democracy has emerged as a kind of net consequence of a vast multitude of responsive adjustments to a vast number of situations, no two of which were alike, but which tended to converge to a common outcome. Much less is democracy the product of democracy, of some inherent *nisus*, or immanent idea.”¹⁹ When seen in this light we come to understand democracy as a historical phenomenon that is continuously reenvisioned, and it is here that Dewey’s account of publics takes on added significance.

Dewey asserted that publics “consist of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”²⁰ Say we find ourselves directly affected by a particular transaction. We work diligently, perhaps with the aid of friends, to secure consequences that favor us and to rid ourselves of others that do not. This mode of action is principally pre-political in the sense that it illustrates what we, as social creatures, do when faced with problematic situations. Such transactions are direct and their effects are primarily local. But when transactions affect people indirectly, Dewey argued, a more general public emerges and, in some cases, designated individuals (“officials”) and agencies (the state)

assume the task of conserving and protecting the interests of those affected. Both officials and the state emerge in response to human needs. As Dewey writes:

Men have looked in the wrong place. They have sought for the key to the nature of the state in the field of agencies, in that doers of deeds, or in some will or purpose back of the deeds. They have sought to explain the state in terms of authorship. Ultimately all deliberate choices proceed from somebody in particular; acts are performed by somebody, and all arrangements and plans are made by somebody in the most concrete sense of somebody.²¹

In this view, the state is denied transcendental status. Instead, it is the consequence of efforts to protect the shared interests of those similarly situated. Officials are not disinterested elites or professional representatives. They are “indeed public agents, but agents in the sense of factors doing the business of others in securing and obviating consequences that concern them.”²²

Everyday people, however, are not mute; their representatives do not speak entirely for them. Everyday Americans speak insofar as they are committed to democracy as a way of life, which goes beyond liberal institutions to the very way in which individuals evidence certain values in their interactions with their fellows. Dewey insisted that we can only escape the reduction of democracy to a form of government, an *external* way of thinking as he called it, when “we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life.”²³ Such an orientation entails embracing our responsibility to share in forming and aiding the activities of the various groups or associations within which we find ourselves; it demands “liberation of the potentialities of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are in common.”²⁴

Obviously, Dewey rejected any view of American political life that would deny the centrality of everyday, ordinary people to the viability and vibrancy of American democracy. His was an unshakable faith in the possibilities and potentialities of ordinary people engaged in intelligent action.

For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in the formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective communication? I am willing to leave to upholders of totalitarian states of the right and the left the view that faith in the capacities of intelligence is utopian.²⁵

Lippmann was right in stating that the fundamental transformations in the conditions of American life threatened American democracy, but he failed to exhibit the requisite faith in the intelligence of common folk to respond effectively to those conditions.²⁶

For Dewey, inventions in technology, industrialization, and urbanization and the ascendance of a new aristocracy made up of bankers and captains of industry radically transformed the quality and scope of indirect consequences. Yet the political forms of government that had developed under earlier and qualitatively different conditions persisted. As a result, Dewey argued, a new public remained inchoate and unorganized, and this public had “to break existing political forms” if it was to take shape.²⁷ These forms had developed in the context of communal living, as the habits of England and its legal institutions were adapted under pioneer conditions. In other words, American democratic life took shape in mutual comprehension experienced in face-to-face communities.

The machine age changed matters. It expanded and intensified the scope of indirect consequences, splintered and fragmented established forms of association, and formed “immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis.”²⁸ Personal communal life gave way to the impersonal Great Society, which left us with abstract and highly mediated forms of social interaction. Americans *felt* indirect consequences but, under these conditions, failed to *perceive* them. As Dewey noted, “they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them.”²⁹ The challenge was to move from impersonal, shallow interactions to more meaningful forms of association: from the Great Society to what he called the Great Community.

New technologies did eclipse prior communal formations, but they could also, if intelligently utilized, aid in forging more meaningful forms of social interaction. Communication across various divides was necessary if genuine communal life, something so central to democracy, was to take shape. But again, this necessitated breaking through established political forms. It required the sort of undertaking that human beings engage in when confronted with problems. Dewey’s view of the public foregrounds this sort of undertaking and keeps us mindful that our democracy is in constant need of attention and care.

Two features of Dewey’s account of publics are particularly relevant to my discussion of the challenges of a post-soul politics. First, Dewey contextualizes the emergence of publics. He maintains that publics are historical phenomena that emerge in the context of specific attempts to address particular problems. As such, he avoids the tendency to reify political formations and to think of them as existing apart from the interests and habits

that call them into being. Instead, Dewey urges us to situate historically political formations in the activity of groups as they seek to address indirect consequences. Contextualizing is particularly important in those moments when emergent publics cannot be identified because of the recalcitrance of extant political forms that block the way to more imaginative and intelligent political action. Second, Dewey's view conveys a profound faith in the capacities of everyday people. Although he agrees with much of Lippmann's position, he never gives up on the importance of participatory democracy. Instead, he argues for a more appropriate form of education that would aid in the formation of individuals with democratic character and that would equip them with the tools necessary for substantive and intelligent civic action. The answer to a bewildered public, then, is not to adopt a form of custodial politics but, rather, to expand democratic life and broaden the ground for individual self-development.³⁰ We must contextualize and historicize publics, and we must insist on the importance of the voices of everyday, ordinary Americans to democratic flourishing.

The Eclipse of a Black Public

Given the persistent legacies of white supremacy in the United States, the actions of many American whites in relation to African Americans have had far-reaching implications and have necessitated conjoint action on the part of African Americans to secure some consequences and avoid others. In short, a *national* black public has everything to do with responding to the persistence of racism in American society. From the national black convention movement of the early nineteenth century to recent responses to Hurricane Katrina, African Americans have sought forms of and created forums for political redress in light of the perceived effects of actions that extend beyond those immediately involved.

There have been, at least, three national black publics since the dawn of the twentieth century. The first involves what I call *mass migration and the problem of the color line*, in the period between 1903 and 1935 (from the publication of W. E. B. DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk*, the beginning of the Great Migration, to the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy). This period of black political activity was marked by the immediate effects of the consolidation of the white South and the subsequent mass migration of large numbers of African Americans from rural areas to urban centers, from south to north. This public was eclipsed as international pressures and domestic retrenchment (the Great Depression and World War II) fundamentally impinged on the form and content of black political engagement. The sec-

ond national black public, which I call *black internationalism and forgotten radical possibilities*, emerged between 1937 (with the Spanish Civil War) and was eclipsed by the onslaught of the cold war and a change in black politics corresponding with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions in 1954 and 1955. This period, one that involved the emergence of the United States as a global power and the beginnings of "third world" decolonization, was characterized by political languages reflective of broad global political patterns and economic crises, as well as pressures to limit the scope of black protest to the domestic domain. The third national black public, *civil rights, black power, and the age of Reagan*, emerged with the mass mobilization of African Americans to protest legal segregation in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, the murder of Emmett Till, and the defiance of Rosa Parks in 1955, and was eclipsed in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. This late period was characterized obviously by the successful challenge of Jim Crow, the rise and decline of the black power era, and a subsequent white backlash.³¹ The boundaries of all three national publics were defined by the legality of white supremacist practices, which necessitated conjoint action and involved a wide range of discourses about collective racial advancement. In each instance, African American conjoint action changed, because of demographic shifts, international conflict, mass mobilization of black citizens, and the changing nature of race and racism in our country. Struggle remained a consistent feature of these publics, but that struggle looked different under different conditions.

During no other period in African American history was a national black public as active and vibrant as that of the 1960s and 1970s. This period resulted in the end of legal segregation, unprecedented growth in the black middle class, and the powerful expression of black cultural pride. It was also a moment marked by cities burning, violent encounters between the state and black citizens, and a palpable sense of white fatigue with regards to matters of race and civil rights. Indeed, the successes and failures of this moment stand alongside the tremendous transformations within African American communities and American society that have so complicated and intensified contemporary racial politics in the United States that a national black public cannot currently identify and distinguish itself. Some even ask whether there is such a thing as a black public under present conditions.

In his brilliant work *Black Visions*, Michael Dawson isolates a number of developments that impacted the form and content of the black public during this period. Intensified state repression and internal ideological fragmentation contributed to the ruin of many civil rights and black power or-

ganizations. COINTELPRO, among other federal programs, systematically targeted and harassed black leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and organizations like the Black Panther Party. This program also sought to fuel internecine conflicts between black militant organizations, resulted in the arrest of many local and national leaders on trumped-up charges, and in some cases was involved in the assassination of targeted individuals. State repression often resulted in wholesale paranoia among many black activists. Black nationalist and leftist organizations increasingly experienced substantive internal rifts, which involved ideological consolidations and purgings that left many organizations weak; in some instances, it destroyed them outright. This contestation took place as much of what was left of the civil rights movement began to transform itself into what now can be called the civil rights establishment, an effective lobbying organization whose sole purpose was (and continues to be) to secure the gains of "the movement." A vast cadre of black elected officials (BEOs) also emerged as "a buffer class that helped delegitimize protest and circumscribe acceptable political discourse within the black community."³²

Transformations in the political economy, Dawson maintains, also eroded the institutional basis of the black public. The shift in the U.S. economy from manufacturing to low-wage service industries adversely affected black laborers, as the shift to flexible accumulation weakened labor unions (just one in seven employed African Americans currently belongs to a union), transformed work forces, and increased the likelihood that African Americans would experience discrimination in labor markets.³³ Manufacturing losses in many northern cities were particularly devastating. William Julius Wilson notes that "between 1967 and 1987, Philadelphia lost 64 percent of its manufacturing jobs; Chicago lost 60 percent; New York City 58 percent; and Detroit, 51 percent."³⁴ Of course, global economic competition exacerbated matters in that the increasing demand for highly skilled labor left low-skilled African American workers on the margins of a new economy driven by technological innovation and the transition from hard to soft goods.

Dawson rightly notes that these transformations in political economy, in tandem with the successes of the civil rights movement, deepened class divisions within African American communities throughout the nation. The decline in manufacturing jobs—the primary vehicle for many African Americans to achieve middle-class status—destabilized the black working class. Indeed, "from the fourth quarter of 1974 through the fourth quarter of 1992, there were only five quarters in which black unemployment was

below 10 percent."³⁵ Long-term unemployment among African Americans is now at its highest in twenty years, a phenomenon what William J. Wilson powerfully describes as the disappearance of work, and has left many African Americans living in concentrated poverty. The collapse of the civil rights coalition in the aftermath of the dismantling of legal segregation revealed white America's fatigue with regards to racial matters as well as the deep economic divisions within African American communities. To be sure, the internal fissures had always been present within African American communities, and now, without the unifying challenge of legal segregation, they began to evidence themselves in powerful and poignant ways. Class cleavages, strident criticisms of patriarchy and homophobia, and mainstream aspirations on the part of many black leaders all illustrated the difficulty of presuming a set of issues that define *the* black agenda. Moreover, the impact of that other important piece of 1965 legislation, the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which eliminated country-specific quotas on immigration, complicated the very idea of a "black" community. Between 1960 and 1984 some 604,104 immigrants from the Anglophone Caribbean and 141,109 from Haiti would come to the United States, greatly affecting the form and content of black cultural expression. Among the new arrivals was DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant, who introduced us to the "break beat" and aided in the creation of the genre of music called rap. Dawson goes as far as to say that "taken together, the disintegration of the institutional bases of the black counterpublic since the early 1970s and increasing black skepticism regarding the existence of a bundle of issues and strategies that define a black agenda should lead us to question whether we can assert that a subaltern counterpublic exists—and if it does, how healthy is it?"³⁶

This question, however, reveals more about the limitations of Dawson's approach than the actual problems faced. The concern is not whether a public exists but, rather, in what ways conjoint actions under present conditions might call a new public into existence and what blocks its emergence. Dawson is closer to the mark when he writes:

The dismantling of the formal structures of segregation . . . combined with the increasing importance of identities based on other structures of stratification require that a black subaltern counterpublic would have to be reconstituted on a new understanding of the issues, including those of patriarchy and economic oppression. . . . Without such a broadening of what is understood to be the "black agenda," a unifying set of discourses and political agenda will not come to be.³⁷

I am not so sure the aim should be a unifying set of discourses apart from particular problems that may necessitate broad-based political action. But I do agree, and here I would prefer to use Deweyan language, that we have witnessed the eclipse of a black public and need to devise means and methods of organizing an emergent public.

Economic realities (both local and global), technological developments (the computer age), identity formations (based on class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity), and political transformations (the end of Jim Crow) have splintered and fragmented established forms of association among African Americans. We find ourselves instead awash in the Great Society, where the conception of “black community,” which once informed notions of racial obligation and ideas about general racial advancement, persists primarily in nostalgic longings for a time past or in invocations of a politics formed in a context in which such notions of community actually made sense. But under present conditions this idea of black community and its attendant notions of group interests obscure the complex experiences that inform the varied political commitments and interests of African Americans, blocking the way to the formation of a black public more reflective of current conditions of living.

The challenge involves moving from a conception of black community that orients African Americans politically prior to experience—a view that often entails bad conceptions of black identity, history, and agency—to an understanding of black community consonant with an idea of Great Community. This view of community orients African Americans in such a way that democratic dispositions are forged, through new information and communication technologies, in intelligent and meaningful interaction with others. These interactions are, of course, colored a deep shade of blue. They are genuinely informed by the stories of a blues people whose mere presence reveals the remarkable irony at the heart of our way of life, stories that shape our character as a nation and orient us to others in particular ways. In other words, the idea of great community has as a constitutive feature the tragedy of race, and the idea of black community reflects deep commitments to expanding democratic life and enlarging the possibilities for individual self-development.

This view of community will require breaking existing political forms. That is to say, it will require a reconceptualization of “black political activity as a dynamic set of social relations and interests that converge on some issues as consequential for broad sectors of the black population and that diverge from others, based on other identities and interest aggregations.”³⁸ To achieve this will require a new orientation toward the

black freedom movement, one that will free us to engage our contemporary problems imaginatively, intelligently, and in full view of the variety of African American political interests.

A Post-Soul Politics for the Twenty-first Century

The 1960s stand, negatively or positively, as a point of reference for all forms of political activity in our contemporary moment. Like the American Revolution, the Great Depression, and World War II—events that defined a generation—the black freedom struggle of the 1960s represents a defining moment for black America against which all other attempts at political insurgency are measured. In some ways, this is apt: the successes of the civil rights movement fundamentally changed the racial landscape in America. An emergent black middle class found greater access to America’s wealth, and black America discovered a new sense of self-worth as its mass struggles produced tangible, though highly qualified, results. On one level, black America had never really experienced anything like the mass struggles of the sixties. The abolitionism of the antebellum period was relatively limited. The movement of Marcus Mosiah Garvey during the early twentieth century had a different ideological orientation: Garvey could care less about the soul of America. Yet, ironically, the historical anomaly of the struggles of the 1960s has become the standard model of political engagement for black America (and for a generation of white Americans who were also defined by that period).

The sixties occupy, and I mean this in its military sense, our political imaginations. This is the case not only because of the significance of the events, but also because of its *proximity* to our contemporary moment. African Americans who have battle scars from living in and fighting against racial apartheid in the United States are still alive. Mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts who remember Jim Crow are reminded of those experiences by living memories of humiliation. They have raised us and imparted to us their wounds and a reasonable skepticism about the moral capacity of some of their fellow white citizens. Leaders who came of age during that time of struggle also continue to lead black America and draw on the basic precepts and strategies that defined the period. They remain a vital force in American politics and, in some cases, a profound obstacle to innovative thinking. In the end, my point is simply this: those who struggled in the 1960s did not have the symbolic weight of “the 1960s” to contend with. We do. Old strategies and personalities continue to define how we engage in race-based politics. Yet, these old strategies and leaders stand

alongside new problems and personalities that are not reducible to that moment of struggle. We live in a different time, a moment made possible by the extraordinary efforts of past generations. But our task is different because the conditions have changed. We must imagine a politics that revels in the diversity of African American life and esteems the democratic virtue of free and open debate, and insists on the capacities of everyday, ordinary folk to engage fully in what the rap artist Talib Kweli so brilliantly calls the beautiful struggle. What this politics will look like will depend on the particular problems faced and the specific forms of solidarity forged in efforts to secure some consequences and avoid others.

In accepting the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature, Toni Morrison spoke of the continuous task of the next generation of writers to possess language and to tell stories of the grandness of life. She told a story of an old, wise blind woman, a daughter of a slave, who was confronted by a few young people. One of them asked her, with the insolence of youth, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." After a period of silence and prodding, the blind woman responded, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."³⁹ I recall again what Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated in "The American Scholar," his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard. Among other things, he urged a new kind of thinking among Americans: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." I want a new kind of thinking regarding African American politics and democracy. And if this new thinking is to be emancipated it requires of the post-soul generation a declaration of independence. Then, to extend Emerson's remarks in a slightly different direction, the sluggish intellect of this generation will look from under its past successes and efforts and fill the postponed expectations of a people with something better than false promises and piecemeal victories. And the generations of old can truly say, with Morrison's wise woman, "Finally, I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together."

Epilogue: The Covenant with Black America

Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; . . . its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems, and conditions of social life.

JOHN DEWEY, "Democracy and Education in the World of Today"

I see a place where little boys and girls
Are shells in the oceans not knowin' they a pearl
No one to hold 'em while they growin'
They livin' moment to moment without a care in the whole world

TALIB KWELI, "Where Do We Go"

We have come to the end of a language and are now about the business of forging a new one. For we have survived, children, the very last white country the world will ever see.

JAMES BALDWIN, "Notes on the House of Bondage"

I have attempted to demonstrate over the course of this book how pragmatism helps sort out some of the more troublesome conceptual problems confronting African American politics. In doing so, I have emphasized the importance of experimentalism, asserted a profound faith in the capacities of everyday folk, and insisted that democracy be understood as a way of life. But my principle aim has been to clear the underbrush—to open the way for a more inspired form of African American politics animated by a profound commitment to democracy. I hold the view, and perhaps

this reflects that I was born in 1968 and came of age during the Reagan years, that much of contemporary African American politics suffers from a woeful lack of imagination. We simply find ourselves, more often than not, imitating the methods of struggle forged in the 1960s and 1970s, and waiting, as if for Godot,¹ for the next great leader, the next Martin or Malcolm, to deliver us to yet another promised land. It reminds me of what Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* about Hegel's claim that "all great historic-facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."

Since February 2006, however, I have had the opportunity to be intimately involved in a moment that exemplifies what I mean by post-soul politics. Over the past eight years, Tavis Smiley, the powerful and prophetic African American media personality, has convened what he calls the State of the Black Union, a major discussion among various African American experts, thought leaders, policy makers, and activists about the conditions of African American living. The event airs on C-Span every February and draws regularly a viewership of over fifty-five million people worldwide. What is particularly striking about this gathering is that it has constituted a sort of yearly ritual. Folks gather around their televisions for an entire day literally glued to the discussion. The discussions take place live in front of large audiences who are invited to ask questions and to take the panelists to task. In short, the State of the Black Union constitutes a kind of public deliberative space, if only for a day, in which many African Americans (and others) throughout the nation sit and reflect with one another about their circumstances and, by extension, about the nation. It is a powerful illustration of democracy at work. But, again, the event is only one day.

In 2006, in conjunction with the State of the Black Union in Houston, Texas, Smiley released a book entitled *The Covenant with Black America*, a text that takes up ten important issues confronting African Americans in this country.² The book emerged out of discussions about defining the agenda of black America. Smiley had been challenged to deliver something more than an annual one-day series of panels. But the book turns out to be more than another top-down attempt to define the interests of African Americans; it is not a textual representation of custodial politics. Instead, Smiley (who perhaps is the first African American with a social conscience to have a substantial presence in television, radio, and print) went on *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, a black radio show with an audience of ten million people, and asked African Americans to write in and list the most compelling problems they experienced. Issues ranging from health to education to criminal justice to the digital divide emerged, and Smiley convened a group of experts to write on these issues, collected a body of facts about

them, listed best practices in response to the issues, and insisted that individuals hold themselves as well as politicians accountable in relation to them. The book materializes, then, out of a communicative space mediated by radio; its content reflects a broad-base consensus about particular problems faced and the need for conversation and debate about how best to respond to them.

On February 25, 2006, Smiley walked on stage, book in hand, to thunderous applause and proceeded to engage in this yearly rite of black democratic action. The difference, however, was that the deliberative space made possible by the State of the Black Union was now between the covers of a book and could move beyond a single day. In fact, Smiley organized what he called the Covenant Tour, in which town-hall meetings in local churches were held in twenty cities throughout the country to localize *The Covenant with Black America*. I had the privilege to participate in most of these meetings and witnessed firsthand the power of participatory democracy. Thousands of people gathered to discuss the content of the book and its relevance to their daily lives. In Baltimore and Washington, D.C., the issue of gentrification came to the fore. In Indianapolis, concerns over the state of African American children emerged as a central preoccupation. In Los Angeles, the issue of homelessness was important. In each city, some issue particular to the members of the community shaped the discussion of the Covenant, giving it special resonance and relevance to the participants.

Moreover, sustained criticisms of black leadership emerged. African Americans across the United States voiced a deep displeasure with the current black political class and demanded more accountability and responsibility. But the demands for accountability went beyond electoral processes; they involved a set of commitments, as evidenced in the Covenant meetings, to democracy as a way of living together. In each city, Smiley would say, quoting Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), that "we are the leaders that we've been looking for." He would go on to paraphrase Ella Baker about not needing a strong, saviorlike leader. In each instance, the crowds erupted with applause. *The Covenant with Black America* affirmed that each individual indeed had the capacity to transform his or her circumstances. In fact, the orientation of the book and of those of us who support it is based on a profound trust that everyday black folk can in fact engage in intelligent action if proper conditions are furnished. It assumes, with John Dewey, that democracy is "the road which places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number of human beings."³ As such, the book rejects outright the politics of racial custodianship and approximates the post-soul politics I commend in chapter 6.

While on tour we also acknowledged the generational divide—that

many of us struggle with the burden of the symbolic weight of the 1960s. Smiley and I talked of our feelings of being born out of place and out of time: we did not march with Martin or organize with the students of SNCC; we did not stand post for Malcolm or serve breakfasts with the Black Panthers. Many young people nodded their heads in agreement and expressed their dismay with the challenge of asserting their own voice. But *The Covenant with Black America* offers an occasion to reimagine African American politics. A book stands at the center of this effort. That in itself is unusual. Moreover, the innovative ways information and communication technology have been deployed to forge solidarities around specific issues is unique in African American politics. But perhaps more important is the insistence on the centrality of the deliberative process. *The Covenant with Black America* exhibits “the faith that the process of experience is more important than special results attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process.”⁴ This is what I mean by a post-soul politics: a form of political activity that exemplifies, in its very doing, a commitment to participatory democracy—that ensures, as far as possible, that everyday people, with varied interests, aims, and ends, engage one another in efforts to secure goods that are commonly shared.

The meetings also occasioned moments of dissent. In Harlem, a young woman, about twenty-five years of age, stepped to the microphone and declared in a powerful voice that people her age were not reading *The Covenant with Black America*; that the book was not a “how-to guide” for getting paid and thus was of little interest to many young people; and, perhaps most startling to the people in the room, that she would not vote in the upcoming election. The crowd moaned. What followed, however, was a remarkable exchange. The young woman explained herself. She did not care to vote, because she believed her vote would not count. The panel, which included Marc Morial of the Urban League and Bruce Gordon of the NAACP, offered counterarguments. I believed her conclusions represented an intelligible and reasonable judgment that our democracy was dysfunctional. Tavis Smiley then made an amazing gesture. He had announced earlier, as he did in every city, that the Republican and Democratic parties had agreed to host a conversation about the covenant with their presidential candidates. Now he not only offered her tickets for the events but proposed to fly her to them. The young woman ran back to the microphone and declared with amazing confidence, “I will do you one better. If you get me tickets to the events I will fly myself.” She was not out to “hustle” her way into the forums or looking for some handout from Smiley; instead, like so many young African Americans, she simply wanted to participate

meaningfully in a genuine process. This moment, for me, illustrated the power of the deliberative space afforded by the Covenant.

What I experienced throughout black America over the course of the tour was an extraordinary expression of civic energy, something very unusual in these dark political times. To be sure, we have witnessed over the past few decades a civic power outage in our country. Many of our fellow citizens are too busy trying to make ends meet or too preoccupied with their own selfish pursuits to engage in public matters. Moreover, moralists who are seemingly not committed to the democratic virtues of open and free exchange have sought to hijack American public life. They want to cultivate instead a pernicious provinciality that results not in the formation of democratic character but in blind dogmatism. I am reminded of the powerful words of William James: “A mind too narrow has room but for one kind of affection.” This one kind of affection is often wrapped in the garments of piety. But as James says, “Piety is the mask, the inner force is tribal instinct.”⁵

These realities should not lead us to retreat into separatist enclaves. Instead, those of us, few though we may be, must find the energy to draw on the resources of this powerful but fragile experiment in democracy, to save our country. The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson come to mind:

The existing world is not a dream, and cannot with impunity be treated as a dream; neither is it a disease; but it is the ground on which you stand, it is the mother of whom you were born. Reform converses with possibilities, perchance with impossibilities; but here is sacred fact. This was also true, or it could not be: it had life in it, or it could not have existed; it has life in it, or it could not continue.⁶

We must believe, not in a naïve way, that our nation has life in it. *The Covenant with Black America* demonstrates that this is so and, in our current moment, constitutes a space where democratic hope can be found.

The Covenant with Black America stands within a particular tradition of struggle, a struggle of a blues people who found resources for democratic hope in the extraordinary capacities of ordinary people in spite of a wicked nation committed to wicked practices. The ideals of democracy inspired those who had been denied freedom and education to dream dreams, to imagine possibilities, and to hold on in the face of the withering storm—to will themselves into a new day. This tradition never believed the lie that this country was an example of democracy achieved but, rather, understood intimately its failures and shortcomings, its blindnesses and deformities. This tradition saw nevertheless not simply disease but possibility—understanding that the nation could have life if it would only learn to

swing Duke Ellington style. It is a tradition that, at its best, cultivated democratic dispositions in the face of strange fruit dangling from poplar trees, insisted on effective freedom as African Americans imagined a day that their children and children's children would be able to actualize their capacities and potentialities, and struggled to ensure that every child would have access to the opportunity and skills to make good on the promise that is America. It is in these dark and trying times that we must turn to the power of Emerson's insight and the enduring purchase of traditions of struggle to muster the democratic hope and courage to challenge our nation and insist on a better future for our children—to educate them *and* ourselves into the habits of democracy so that this nation can be saved. I am convinced that the Covenant provides such an occasion—one not mired in the nostalgic longing of a glorious past but, rather, one that looks into a distant future to ensure a better life for those yet unborn.

In "Notes on the House of Bondage," James Baldwin reflected, among other things, on the challenges that young African American children face. He wrote, "What we see in the children is what they have seen in us—or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us."⁷ Baldwin understood fully the task before him: to raise his children in such a way as to make certain that "the American guile and cowardice [could not] destroy them."⁸ His was a form of piety that was attuned to the lessons of tragedy in American life *and* forward-looking in its orientation, even until his last days. The epigraph to *The Covenant with Black America* reflects this orientation. The words of Terry Tempest Williams frame the ambition of the book: "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time." *The Covenant* instantiates a form of piety that begins with the dark side of American life; it confronts candidly the racialized experiences of this fragile experiment in democracy that cut short the lives of so many of our fellow citizens. The piety it commends is also forward-looking in its commitment to participatory democracy, in its insistence on speaking to the particulars of our current moment in a language informed by the past but shaped by the present, and in its steady resolve to secure a better world for our children and our children's children. This sentiment was given powerful expression in a town-hall meeting in Baltimore. The last question was from a young shy girl, about eight years of age. She asked timidly, "What can I do to help the Covenant?" Some answered to stand proud and never let anyone threaten her spirit. Others said make being smart cool. I simply said, in the democratic spirit of the Covenant, "Keep asking that question and tell us what you hear."

16. See W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 258-59. Also quoted in Jeffrey Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?" *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 2. Much of my thinking about this matter has been shaped by Stout and this essay.

17. Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?," 2.

18. Cornel West, *Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race and Power in America* (New York: Common Courage Press, 1993)

19. Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?," 5.

20. Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 20.

21. *Ibid.*, 467.

22. *Ibid.*, 5.

23. *Ibid.*, 7.

24. Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 85-86.

25. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 3.

26. See Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

27. Nikhil Singh, "The Black Panthers and the 'Undeveloped Country' of the Left," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 83.

CHAPTER 6

1. The CEOs are Richard Parsons of Time Warner, E. Stanley O'Neal of Merrill Lynch, and Kenneth Chenault of American Express. Dr. Ruth Simmons is the first African American president of an Ivy League institution (Brown University).

2. Of the 2.1 million inmates in American prisons, 910,000 are African American. One out of every three black males born today will spend time in prison, as will one out of eighteen black females (six times the rate for white women). See Tavis Smiley, ed., *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2006), 53-54.

3. W. Parker, "Black-White Infant Mortality Disparity in the United States: A Society Litmus test," *Public Health Reports* 118 (July-August 2003): 336. Also quoted in Smiley, *Covenant with Black America*, 8.

4. In the United States, 12.7 percent of the population lives below the poverty line—about thirty-seven million people. As of 2004, 9.4 million African Americans live in poverty. See David Wessel, "Changing Attack in Poverty Tactics. An Old Debate: Who Is at Fault," *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2006.

5. Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books/Civitas, 2006), 5.

6. Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 49.

7. I am aware that Habermas revisits his conception of the public in his book,

Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy, and corrects many of the mistakes evident in his earlier formulation. In fact, he comes to a position much like that of John Dewey's. But African American theorists, in the main, continue to refer to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and offer criticisms of the view put forward there. Nancy Fraser's important criticisms of Habermas loom large in this regard. See her insightful essay, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* (London: Routledge, 1997).

8. Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and before That Negroes)* (New York: Viking, 2004), ix.

9. Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

10. This point was greatly influenced by my colleague Jeffrey Stout's work. See his *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 173.

11. *Princeton Metro Times*, June 15, 2006.

12. The main argument of this section is indebted to the work of Adolph Reed Jr. See his *Stirrings in the Jug*, p. 18 and chaps. 2-3.

13. *Ibid.*, 16.

14. *Ibid.*, 16.

15. *Ibid.*, 18-20.

16. John Dewey, "The Moral Significance of the Common Schools Studies," in Dewey, *Middle Works*, 4:208.

17. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 110.

18. *Ibid.*, 110.

19. *Ibid.*, 84.

20. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

21. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

22. *Ibid.*, 19.

23. John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task before Us" (1939), in Dewey, *Later Works*, 14:226.

24. Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 147.

25. Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 14:227.

26. I do not want to give short shrift to Lippmann's criticisms. His pessimism about the capacities of ordinary people extends beyond a simple judgment about their intelligence and amounts to a realistic assessment of the structural obstacles to its application. How do we, for example, acquire the requisite information to act intelligently when Rupert Murdoch and a small number of others own the major media outlets? What are we to make of genuine political participation when corporate money has so sullied the political process? Systemic problems do block the way to intelligent action on the part of everyday people. I am not so sure, however, that Lippmann's appeal to technocrats remedies the problems. Dewey insists, and I agree, that any remedy to the structural maladies in our democracy must include

the genuine participation of everyday folk. Our challenge is to figure out how to ensure this under present conditions.

27. Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 31.
28. *Ibid.*, 126.
29. *Ibid.*, 131.
30. Dewey's understanding of the importance of education to democracy underscores the fact that his "faith" in the capacities of ordinary folks isn't naïvely utopian. We are able to act intelligently because we have been (or should be) equipped to do so. This is why Dewey believed *Democracy and Education* was the best account of his overall moral and political philosophy.
31. A wonderful book charting the confluence of African American political activism and white backlash is Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
32. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 40.
33. *Ibid.*, 38.
34. William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 31.
35. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 38.
36. *Ibid.*, 41.
37. *Ibid.*, 42.
38. Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 50.
39. Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Acceptance Speech* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

EPILOGUE

1. I am indebted to my dear friend and intellectual confidante, Melvin Rogers, for the Samuel Beckett reference.
2. Houston was a particularly meaningful site for the annual symposium and the launching of the book. Hurricane Katrina had left many African Americans angry as the nation sat back and allowed its own citizens, dark though they may be, to be cast as refugees. Many displaced New Orleanians had made their way to Houston, trying to put together the pieces the storm left in its wake. The symposium and the book then were framed by a palpable sense, once again, of national betrayal.
3. John Dewey, "Democracy and Education in the World Today" (1938), in Dewey, *Later Works*, 13:154.
4. Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 14:228-29.
5. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1994), 370.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Conservative," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 177.
7. James Baldwin, "Notes on the House of Bondage," in *Price of the Ticket*, 667.
8. *Ibid.*, 668.

Index

- abolitionism, 149
- action: completely historical existence
 arresting, 80; Dewey on the pinch as constitutive feature of, 22-23; ethical import of, 8; intelligently guided, 96; James on the pinch as constitutive feature of, 20-21; pragmatism as making thought a weapon for, 5; reflection as not opposed to, x; satisfactory outcomes not guaranteed, 25, 32, 45. *See also* agency
- Address to the Slaves* (Garnet), 72-73
- African American Christianity, 89-110; black nationalist criticism of, 73-74; as central to constructions of black identity, 9; conversion of slaves, 101-3, 107-8, 109; preachers allying themselves with Republicans, 125-26; as slave agency, 91-92, 98, 104-5, 106-10; in slavery period, 99-110. *See also* black theology
- African American politics: black elected officials, 146; black identity and, 56-64; imagination lacking in, 152; pragmatism for redefining, ix-xii, 8; of racial custodianship, 139; recalibrating vocabularies of struggle, 129; religious language in, 67-68; variety of positions in, 61-62; voting, 134, 139, 154. *See also* black nationalism; black political class; civil rights movement; post-soul politics
- African Americans: black quest for certainty, 112; bleak reality for many, xi, 128; blocked grief in, 16; CEOs, 127, 174n1; competing interests among, 129; eclipse of a black public, 144-49; loss as central to story of, 14-16; middle class, 48, 127, 145, 149; national myth rejected by, 11, 158n21; pragmatic tradition among, 3-5; pragmatic tradition of racial advocacy, 50, 57-59; as problem people, 90; progress made by, 127-28; underclass, 128; uneasy relationship to America, 47-48; unity assumed for, x, 95; violence as problem for, 38, 128, 137, 139; working for American democracy, 13, 155-56. *See also* African American Christianity; African American politics; black agency; black freedom struggles of the 1960s and 1970s; black history; black identity; black piety; slavery
- Afrocentrism, 53, 70
- agency: as emergent property, 98-99, 112. *See also* black agency
- American Evasion of Philosophy, The* (West), 2, 5
- American innocence, myth of, 11
- Amiri Baraka: *The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (Watts), 121-23
- Anderson, Martin Lee, 133
- Anderson, Victor, 70, 71, 72, 73, 78
- Anglo-Saxonism, 2
- antifoundationalism, 6, 170n16
- antihumanism, 97, 170n16