Antiblackness Core

1NC/1AR Top Level

No Ontology - Core

Afropess presumes a closed system which is an innacurate description of contingent social systems, conflates THE anti-black world with AN anti-black world, and ignores a history of resistance—vote aff if I win a risk of defense to ontology.

Gordon 15 --- Lewis, Afro-Jewish philosopher, political thinker, educator, and musician, Professor at the University of Connecticut in Philosophy and Africana Studies, European Union Visiting Chair in Philosophy; Nelson Mandela Visiting Professor of Politics and International Studies at Rhodes University, South Africa; and Chairman of the Frantz Fanon awards committees of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, transcribed from https://youtu.be/UABksVE5BTQ, presenting and discussing his book "What Fanon Said"

***Theonaturalism – religion based difference

-Gordon: debate about proof of pessimism is red herring b/c no way to know, even based on history, to project 10 years in the future what social systems will look like, no metaphysical basis to say that things will never change, functions as a tiebreaker

-Impact turn: no inherent trajectory or arc to how things happen, fact this debate is messy and examples on both sides proves shouldn't invest mental energy in debating these theoretical endpoints, sort out contingent applications

-Answers ontology: ontological structures themselves are inherently paradoxes, to say that anti blackness is ontological imposes the condition itself, persons marked by political systems, justifications they've made for ontology rely on a flawed premise that ignores that systems of power can only be relational and contingently imposed

The first thing to bear in mind you may wonder why in the beginning of the talk I talked about philosophical anthropology. And many people when they are trying to talk about social change they never think about *what a human being is* and this is something Fanon pays attention to. **Many people want to have closed conceptions of human beings because then human beings can be predicable**. In fact, in fanons writing he gave an example. One of the problems is that when he would walk in reason seems to walk out. One problem we have to bear in mind when we try to look at the question of human beings **in terms of rigid closed systems** is that we often are trying to get as a model of how we work as theorists on issues of social change that are actually based on what we can call **law like generalizations**. Now what is a law like generalization? It is when you make sure that whatever you say has no contradiction down the line. So if you are to say this much [gestures with hand] the next stage must be consistent with that, and the next stage until you are maximally consistent. Do you get that? But here is the problem – and I can just put it in a nut shell- nobody, nobody in this room would like to date, be married to, or be a best friend with a maximally consistent person. You know what that is. Its hell. And this tells you something, because if somebody where maximally consistent, you know what you would say that person is not reasonable. And we have a person here who does work on Hegel that can point out this insight, that a human being has the ability to evaluate rationality. Now why is that important? Because you see the mistake many of us make is **many of us want to push the human being into that maximized law like generalization model**. So when we think about our philosophical anthropology, some people, our question about intersectionality for instance, what some people don't understand is nowhere is there ever a human being who is one identity. People talk about race – do you ever really see a race walking? You see a racialized man or woman, or transman or transwoman. Do you ever see a class walking? Class is embodied in flesh and blood people. And we can go on and on. So if we enrich our philosophical anthropology we begin to notice certain other things. And one of the other things we begin to realize is that **we commit a serious problem when we do political work.** And the problem is this. The question about **Wilderson** for instance. There is this discussion going on (and allot of people build it out of my earlier books). I have a category I call, as a metaphor, an antiblack world. You notice **an indefinite article** – **an anti-black world**. The reason I say that is because **the world is different from an anti-black world**. The project of racism is to create a world that would be **completely anti-black or anti-woman.** **Although that is a project, it is not a fait accompli**. People don't seem to understand how recent this phenomenon we are talking about is. A lot of people talk about race they don't even know the history of how race is connected into theonaturalism. How, for instance, Andalucia and the pushing out of the Moors. The history of how race connected to Christianity was formed. A lot of people don't understand – from the standpoint of a species whose history is 220,000 years old, what the hell is 500 years? **But the one thing that we don't understand to is we create a false model for how we study those last 500 years**. We study the 500 years as if the people who have been dominated **have not been fighting and resisting.** Had they not been fighting and resisting we wouldn't be here. And then we come into this next point because you see the problem in the formulation of **pessimism** and **optimism** is they are both based on forecasted knowledge, a prior knowledge. **But human beings don't have prior knowledge.** And in fact – what in the world are we if we need to have guarantees for us to act. You know what you call such people? Cowards. The fact of the matter is our ancestors – let's start with enslaved ancestors. The enslaved ancestors who were burning down those plantations, who were finding clever ways to poison their masters, who were organizing meetings for rebellions, none of them had any clue what the future would be 100 years later. Some had good reason to believe that it may take 1000 years. But you know why they fought? Because they knew it wasn't for them. **One of the problems we have in the way we think about political issues is we commit what Fanon and others in the existential**

tradition would call a form of political immaturity. Political immaturity is saying it is not worth it unless I, me, individually get the payoff. When you are thinking what it is to relate to other generations – remember Fanon said the problem with people in the transition, the pseudo postcolonial bourgeois – is that they miss the point, you fight for liberation for other generations. And that is why Fanon said other generations they must have their mission. But you see some people fought and said no I want my piece of the pie. And that means the biggest enemy becomes the other generations. And that is why the postcolonial pseudo-bourgeoisie they are not a bourgeoisie proper because they do not link to the infrastructural development of the future, it is about themselves. And that's why, for instance, as they live higher up the hog, as they get their mediating, service oriented, racial mediated wealth, the rest of the populations are in misery. The very fact that in many African countries there are people whose futures have been mortgaged, the fact that in this country the very example of mortgaging the future of all of you is there. What happens to people when they have no future? It now collapses the concept of maturation and places people into perpetual childhood. So one of the political things – and this is where a psychiatrist philosopher is crucial – is to ask ourselves what does it mean to take on adult responsibility. And that means to understand that **in all political action it's not about you**. **It is what you are doing for a world you may not even be able to understand**. Now that becomes tricky, because how do we know this? **People have done it before**. There were people, for instance, who fought anti-colonial struggles, there are people (and now I am not talking about like thirty or forty years ago, I am talking about the people from day one 17th 18th century all the way through) and we have no idea what we are doing for the 22nd century. And **this is where developing political insight comes in.** Because **we commit the error of forgetting the systems we are talking about are human systems**. They are not systems in the way we talk about the laws of physics. A human system can only exist by human actions maintaining them. **Which means every human system is incomplete. Every human being is by definition incomplete**. Which means you can go this way or you can go another way. The system isn't actually closed.

Empirics flow aff--Loving v Virginia, Strauder v. West Virginia, Dempsey v. Moore, Powell v. Alabama the civil rights act, the 14th Amendment, desegregation of the armed forces, demographic shifts all prove progress is possible make them answer all of these examples—empirics o/w on verifiability: otherwise the judge just intervenes for whichever side they personally side with which destroys debate

No Libidinal Economy

Framing issue: they need a libidinal economy argument to win ontology—otherwise there is nothing intrinsic to civil society or white ppl that necessitates anti-blackness. Libidinal economy arguments are wrong – implicit bias is socially produced and materially mediated, not a pre-social phenomenon – that means it's linked to particular social and political conditions – And therefore subject to change

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(Alan, "Humanism, race and the colonial frontier," Trans Inst Br Geogr NS 37 132–148)

-even if antiblack violence is unique and gratuitous, that doesn't speak to whether that's a permanent condition or how it might be altered

The processes of racial objectification on colonial frontiers involved **much more than language**. As Saldanha argues, when race is understood as merely 'an ideology, a narrative, a discourse', it 'refers to the cultural representation of people, not to people themselves'. Race needs, rather, to be approached 'ontologically, as a real **process** demanding **particular concepts** and commitments. Not so much representations, but bodies and **physical events'** are foregrounded in his analysis, with the phenotype of humans playing 'an active part in the event called race' (Saldanha 2006, 9). This is not to say that narrative and discourse can simply be set aside, however. As DeLanda writes,

words are simply one component entering into relations of exteriority with a **variety of other material and expressive components**, and the processes of coding and decoding based on these specialized lines of expression operate side by side with . . . non-linguistic processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. (2006, 26)

The problem of this decentring of language for the historian of racial thought is, however, that words are usually the only trace that we have of past human agency. We have to find ways of indicating the affective and the material, as well as the expressive, within the expressive itself. British settler communities were **not uniformly involved** in violent relations with phenotypically different people, even those located on the very frontiers of colonial expansion. But those who 'pioneered' the dispossession of indigenous peoples' land during the period of mass emigration to frontiers in North America, southern Africa, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1820s to the 1840s were uniformly subject to immediate and continual fears of violent resistance. As Peter Wade points out,

bodily appearance is often taken to be the **raw material** on which concepts of race are built . . . But, as analysts such as Haraway . . . have argued . . . **there can be no pre-discursive encounter with biology or nature**. Thus the phenotype that is taken to underlie race is itself a **social construction** . . . After all, phenotype includes all aspects of appearance . . . so why do specific aspects come to signify race: particular variations in skin colour rather than height; particular types of hair rather than eye colour; specific facial features rather than muscularity? The answer is that only some aspects of phenotype are worked into racial signifiers and they are the aspects that were originally seen to be ways of distinguishing between Europeans and those they encountered in their colonial explorations (2002, 4)

and, above all, I would add, frontier wars. As

Wade concludes, 'Phenotype is thus **linked to a particular history'** (2002, 4) – one in which invading British settlers distinguished themselves from those likely to resist their very presence.

The role of colonial frontier violence in determining those aspects of phenotype that signify race was critical. I think that Rachel Standfield is right when she argues that we need to accompany Stoler's call for a new attention to relations of intimacy between coloniser and colonised in the domains of 'sex, sentiment, domestic arrangement and child rearing' (Stoler 2001, 829) with an appreciation of 'the brute realities of violence' and an examination of 'the cultural and intellectual consequences of conflict' (Standfield 2009, 31–2). We need to recognise that besides hurting the body, the experience [and threat] of violence shapes thought-patterns (generating fears, anxieties, memories and fantasies), and affects the ability to **form, or not to form,** relationships – dynamics crucial in thinking about processes of 'othering', colonial or otherwise. (Cleall 2009, 215; see also Bourke 1999; Scarry 1985)

Locating the origins of innatism among settler communities engaged in relations of violence emphasises the point made by Saldanha that, Far from being an arbitrary classification system imposed upon bodies, race is a nonnecessary and irreducible effect of the ways those bodies themselves interact with each other. (2006, 10)

Even if they're right about the libidinal economy, psychoanalysis is non falsifiable, pseudo-scientific garbage – none of their cards are peer reviewed or accepted within academia as legitimate explanations for behavior. Even if they're right, this doesn't scale up to analyzing societies or groups of individuals, just individual psyches.

Neuroscience Disproves

Outgroup bias exists, but isn't inevitable --- neuroscience confirms that different attributes can be more or less salient, and aren't fixed around race, but malleable Sapolsky 19

Robert Sapolsky, American neuroendocrinologist and author, currently a professor of biology, and professor of neurology and neurological sciences and, by courtesy, neurosurgery, at Stanford University, "This Is Your Brain on Nationalism," Foreign Affairs. March/April 2019.

TURBANS TO HIPSTER BEARDS

For all this pessimism, there is a crucial difference between humans and those warring chimps. The human tendency toward in-group bias runs deep, but it is relatively value-neutral. Although human biology makes the rapid, implicit formation of us-them dichotomies virtually inevitable, who counts as an outsider is not fixed. In fact, it can change in an instant.

For one, **humans belong to multiple, overlapping in-groups at once, each with its own catalog of outsiders—those of a different religion, ethnicity, or race; those who root for a different sports team; those who work for a rival company; or simply those have a different preference for,** say, **Coke or Pepsi**. Crucially, **the salience of these various group identities changes all the time. Walk down a dark street at night, see one of "them" approaching, and your amygdala screams its head off**. But **sit next to that person in a sports stadium, chanting in unison in support of the same team, and your amygdala stays asleep.** Similarly, **researchers at the University of California**, Santa Barbara, **have shown that subjects tend to quickly and automatically categorize pictures of people by race**. Yet **if the researchers showed their subjects photos of both black and white people wearing two different colored uniforms, the subjects automatically began to categorize the people by their uniforms instead, paying far less attention to race. Much of humans' tendency toward in-group out-group thinking**, in other words, **is not permanently tied to specific human attributes, such as race.** Instead, **this cognitive architecture evolved to detect any potential cues about social coalitions and alliances—to increase one's chance of survival by telling friend from foe. The specific features that humans focus on to make this determination vary depending on the social context and can be easily manipulated.**

Even when group boundaries remain fixed, the traits people implicitly associate with "them" can change—think, for instance, about how U.S. perceptions of different immigrant groups have shifted over time. Whether a dividing line is even drawn at all varies from place to place. **I grew up in a neighborhood in New York with deep ethnic tensions, only to discover** later that **Middle America barely distinguishes between my old neighborhood's "us" and "them**." In fact, some actors spend their entire careers alternating between portraying characters of one group and then the other.

This fluidity and situational dependence is uniquely human. In other species, in-group/out-group distinctions reflect degrees of biological relatedness, or what evolutionary biologists call "**kin selection**." Rodents distinguish between a sibling, a cousin, and a stranger by smell—fixed, genetically determined pheromonal signatures—and adapt their cooperation accordingly. Those murderous groups of chimps are largely made up of brothers or cousins who grew up together and predominantly harm outsiders.

Humans are plenty capable of kinselective violence themselves, yet human group mentality is often utterly independent of such instinctual familial bonds. Most modern human societies rely instead on cultural kin selection, a process allowing people to feel closely related to what are, in a biological sense, total strangers. Often, this requires a highly active process of inculcation, with its attendant rituals and vocabularies. Consider military drills producing "bands of brothers," unrelated college freshmen becoming sorority "sisters," or the bygone value of welcoming immigrants into "the American family." **This malleable, rather than genetically fixed, path of identity formation also drives people to adopt arbitrary markers that enable them to spot their cultural kin in an ocean of strangers—hence the importance various communities attach to flags, dress, or facial hair**. The hipster beard, the turban, and the "Make America Great Again" hat all fulfill this role by sending strong signals of tribal belonging.

Moreover, **these cultural communities are arbitrary when compared to the relatively fixed logic of biological kin selection. Few things show this arbitrariness better than the experience of immigrant families, where the randomness of a visa lottery can radically reshuffle a child's education, career opportunities, and cultural predilections. Had my grandparents and father missed the train out of Moscow** that they instead barely made, **maybe I'd be a chain-smoking Russian academic** rather than a Birkenstockwearing American one, **moved to tears by the heroism during the Battle of Stalingrad rather than that at Pearl Harbor. Scaled up from the level of individual family histories, our bigpicture group identities—the national identities and cultural principles that structure our lives—are just as arbitrary and subject to the vagaries of history.**

Brain studies prove racial bias is flexible, and that orienting groups around institutional change best breaks them down.
Cikara and Van Bavel 15

(Mina Cikara is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Intergroup Neuroscience Lab at Harvard University. Her research examines the conditions under which groups and individuals are denied social value, agency, and empathy. Jay Van Bavel is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Social Perception and Evaluation Laboratory at New York University. The Flexibility of Racial Bias: Research suggests that racism is not hard wired, offering hope on one of America's enduring problems. June 2, 2015. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-flexibility-of-racial-bias/)

The city of Baltimore was rocked by protests and riots over the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man who died in police custody. Tragically, Gray's death was only one of a recent in a series of racially-charged, often violent, incidents. On April 4th, Walter Scott was fatally shot by a police officer after fleeing from a routine traffic stop. On March 8th, Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members were caught on camera gleefully chanting, "There Will Never Be A N***** In SAE." On March 1st, a homeless Black man was shot in broad daylight by a Los Angeles police officer. And these are not isolated incidents, of course. Institutional and systemic racism reinforce discrimination in countless situations, including hiring, sentencing, housing, and even mortgage lending. **It would be easy** to see in all this powerful evidence

that racism is a permanent fixture in America's social fabric and even, perhaps, an **inevitable aspect of human nature**. Indeed, the mere act of labeling others according to their age, gender, or race is a reflexive habit of the human mind. Social categories, like race, impact our thinking quickly, often outside of our awareness. Extensive research has found that these implicit racial biases—negative thoughts and feelings about people from other races—are automatic, pervasive, and difficult to suppress. Neuroscientists have also explored racial prejudice by exposing people to images of faces while scanning their brains in fMRI machines. Early studies found that when people viewed faces of another race, the amount of activity in the amygdala—a small brain structure associated with experiencing emotions, including fear—was associated with individual differences on implicit measures of racial bias. This work has led many to conclude that racial biases might be part of a primitive—and possibly hard-wired—neural fear response to racial out-groups. There is little question that categories such as race, gender, and age play a major role in shaping the biases and stereotypes that people bring to bear in their judgments of others. **However**, research has shown that how people categorize **themselves** may be just as fundamental to understanding prejudice as how they categorize others. When people categorize themselves as part of a group, their self-concept shifts from the individual ("I") to the collective level ("us"). People form groups rapidly and favor members of their own group even when groups are formed on arbitrary grounds, such as the simple flip of a coin. These findings highlight the remarkable ease with which humans form coalitions. **Recent research confirms** that **coalition**-based **preferences trump race**-based **preferences**. For example, both Democrats and Republicans favor the resumes of those affiliated with their political **party** much **more than** they favor those who share their **race**. These coalition-based preferences remain powerful even in the absence of the animosity present in electoral politics. Our **res**earch has shown that the simple act of placing people on a **mixed-race team** can **diminish** their **automatic racial bias.** In a series of experiments, White participants who were randomly placed on a mixed-race team—the Tigers or Lions—showed little evidence of implicit racial bias. Merely belonging to a mixed-race team trigged positive automatic associations with all of the members of their own group, irrespective of race. Being a part of one of these seemingly trivial mixed-race groups produced similar effects on brain activity—the **amygdala responded** to **team** membership **rather than race**. Taken together, these studies indicate that momentary changes in group membership can override the influence of race on the way we see, think about, and feel toward people who are different from ourselves. Although these coalition-based distinctions might be the most basic building block of bias, they say little about the other factors that cause group conflict. Why do some groups get ignored while others get attacked? Whenever we encounter a new person or group we are motivated to answer two questions as quickly as possible: "is this person a friend or foe?" and "are they capable of enacting their intentions toward me?" In other words, once we have determined that someone is a member of an out-group, we need to determine what kind? The nature of the relations between groups—are we cooperative, competitive, or neither?—and their relative status—do you have access to resources?—largely determine the course of intergroup interactions. Groups that are seen as competitive with one's interests, and capable of enacting their nasty intentions, are much more likely to be targets of hostility than more benevolent (e.g., elderly) or powerless (e.g., homeless) groups. This is one reason why sports rivalries have such psychological potency. For instance, fans of the Boston Red Sox are more likely to feel pleasure, and exhibit reward-related neural responses, at the misfortunes of the archrival New York Yankees than other baseball teams (and vice versa)—especially in the midst of a tight playoff race. (How much fans take pleasure in the misfortunes of their rivals is also linked to how likely they would be to harm fans from the other team.) Just as a particular person's group membership can be flexible, so too are the relations between groups. Groups that have previously had cordial relations may become rivals (and vice versa). Indeed, **psychological and biological responses** to out-group members **can change**, depending on whether or not that out-group is perceived as threatening. For example, people exhibit greater pleasure—they smile—in response to the misfortunes of stereotypically competitive groups (e.g., investment bankers); however, this malicious pleasure is reduced when you provide participants with counter-stereotypic information (e.g., "investment bankers are working with small companies to help them weather the economic downturn). Competition between "us" and "them" can even distort our judgments of distance, making threatening out-groups seem much closer than they really are. These distorted perceptions can serve to amplify intergroup discrimination: the more different and distant "they" are, the easier it is to disrespect and harm them. Thus, not all out-groups are treated the same: some elicit indifference whereas others become targets of antipathy. Stereotypically threatening groups are especially likely to be targeted with violence, but those **stereotypes can be tempered** with **other info**rmation. If perceptions of intergroup relations can be changed, individuals may overcome hostility toward perceived foes and become more responsive to one another's grievances. The **flexible nature** of both group membership and intergroup relations offers reason to be cautiously **optimistic** about the potential for greater cooperation among groups in conflict (be they black versus white or citizens versus police). **One strategy is to bring multiple groups together around a common goal**. For example, during the fiercely contested 2008 Democratic presidential primary process, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama supporters gave more money to strangers who supported the same primary candidate (compared to the rival candidate). Two months later, after the Democratic National Convention, the supporters of both candidates coalesced around the party nominee—Barack Obama—and this bias disappeared. In fact, merely creating a sense of **cohesion** between two competitive groups can increase empathy for the suffering of our rivals. These

sorts of strategies can help reduce aggression toward hostile out-groups, which is **critical for creating more opportunities for constructive dialogue addressing greater social injustices.** Of course, instilling a sense of common identity and cooperation is extremely difficult in entrenched intergroup conflicts, but when it happens, the benefits are obvious. Consider how the community leaders in New York City and Ferguson responded differently to protests against police brutality—in NYC political leaders expressed grief and concern over police brutality and moved quickly to make policy changes in policing, whereas the leaders and police in Ferguson responded with high-tech military vehicles and riot gear. In the first case, multiple groups came together with a common goal—to increase the safety of everyone in the community; in the latter case, the actions of the police likely reinforced the "us" and "them" distinctions. Tragically, these types of conflicts continue to roil the country. Understanding the psychology and neuroscience of social identity and intergroup relations cannot undo the effects of systemic racism and discriminatory practices; however, it can offer insights into the psychological processes responsible for escalating the tension between, for example, civilians and police officers. Even in cases where it isn't possible to create a common identity among groups in conflict, it may be possible to blur the boundaries between groups. In one recent experiment, we sorted participants into groups—red versus blue team—competing for a cash prize. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to see a picture of a segregated social network of all the players, in which red dots clustered together, blue dots clustered together, and the two clusters were separated by white space. The other half of the participants saw an integrated social network in which the red and blue dots were mixed together in one large cluster. Participants who thought the two teams were interconnected with one another reported greater empathy for the out-group players compared to those who had seen the segregated network. Thus, reminding people that individuals could be connected to one another despite being from different groups may be another way to build trust and understanding among them. A mere month before Freddie Gray died in police custody, President Obama addressed the nation on the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma: "We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, or that racial division is inherent to America. To deny…progress – our progress – would be to rob us of our own agency; our responsibility to do what we can to make America better." The president was saying that we, as a society, have a responsibility to reduce prejudice and discrimination. These recent **findings from psychology and neuroscience indicate that we, as individuals, possess this capacity**. Of course this capacity is not sufficient to usher in racial equality or peace. Even when the level of prejudice against particular out-groups decreases, it does not imply that the level of institutional discrimination against these or other groups will necessarily improve. Ultimately, only **collective action** and **institutional evolution** can address systemic racism. The science is clear on one thing, though: **individual bias and discrimination are changeable**. Race-based prejudice and discrimination, in particular, are **created and reinforced by** many **social factors,** but they are **not inevitable consequences of our biology**. Perhaps understanding how coalitional thinking impacts intergroup relations will make it easier for us to affect real social change going forward.

History Disproves

Their theory actively misreads history --- whiteness was invented out of contingent relations, and viewing it as transhistorical is weaponized to fracture resistance Haider 18

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We will set aside what appears to be a lack of familiarity with the history of American popular music. **What is significant is the equation of skin color, the category of "race," and discrete groupings of human beings**. With this equation, w**hite guilt reproduces the founding fiction of race: that there is a biological foundation, expressed in physical phenotypes, for separate groups of human beings who have separate cultures and forms of life**. The "white race" as a specific historical formation is obscured by the metaphor of the knapsack. McIntosh writes: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks."3 The knapsack is carried by an individual navigating an entirely open social field. It contains tools that enable the individual to navigate this field with greater effectiveness than those whose knapsacks are comparatively empty. The resources contained in the knapsack constitute whiteness as privilege, because the knapsack is carried by an individual who belongs to the white identity. If the knapsack of privileges is carried by an individual already identifiable as white, then whiteness must necessarily be understood as a biological trait. The falseness of this notion is evident: the people who are currently described as white have a wide and complex range of genetic lineages, many of which were previously considered to be separate "races" of their own. As Nell Irvin Painter points out in her revelatory The History of White People, "For most of the past centuries—when race really came down to matters of law—educated Americans firmly believed in the existence of more than one European race."4 We might conclude that there has only been a minor error of description: in reality, whiteness itself is constituted by the contents of the knapsack. The constitution of whiteness as identity and its constitution as privilege are simultaneous: the knapsack's provisions confer not only advantages but also identity upon its bearer. **But how do we know, then, that the content of the identity conferred has something to do with "whiteness"?** Surely, in addition to the specific items conferring a privilege, **one would find in any knapsack of identity an infinity of arbitrary details: hair length, gait, dietary preference, computer skills, etc**. That is, **in order to describe an individual's identity, the knapsack would have to contain everything constituting the this-ness of that particular individual. It would offer us no insight as to the organizing principle that constitutes these traits as something which can be called "white**." There would be no way to distinguish "white" characteristics from human ones, Pennsylvanian ones, or heavy-metal ones. **This is the failure of liberal thought. A political formation such as whiteness cannot be explained by starting with an individual's identity—the reduction of politics to the psychology of the self. The starting point will have to be the social structure and its constitutive relations, within which individuals are composed.** And it is too often forgotten that decades before McIntosh's knapsack, the term white privilege originated with such a theory. **The theory of "white-skin privilege" was advanced by members of an early antirevisionist split-off from the Communist Party USA** (the Provisional Organizing Committee), **and would come to have an enormous influence on the New Left and the New Communist Movement**. A series of essays by Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev, collected as the pamphlet White Blindspot, offered the initial formulation. Ignatiev and Allen's argument was that **the legacy of slavery was the imposition of white supremacy by the ruling class as an instrument of class division and social control. But this was a political theory, not a cultural or moral one, and it**

held that "white chauvinism" was actually detrimental to white workers, preventing unity with black workers. So fighting against white supremacy was in fact a central part of a political program that favored the self-organization of all workers. Ignatiev argued vehemently that "the ending of white supremacy is not solely a demand of the Negro people, separate from the class demands of the entire working class." **It could not be left to black workers to fight against white supremacy as their own "special" issue, while white workers did little more than express sympathy and "fight for their 'own' demands**." **The fight against white supremacy was central to the class struggle at a fundamental level: The ideology of white chauvinism is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers**. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the entire proletariat. Therefore, **its elimination certainly qualifies as one of the class demands of the entire working class.** In fact, considering the role that this vile practice has historically played in holding back the struggle of the American working class, the fight against white supremacy becomes the central immediate task of the entire working class.5 As this language was taken up by the New Left, however, it went through considerable ideological transformations. The manifesto, "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows," circulated at the turbulent Students for a Democratic Society conference of 1969, proposed a politics centered on white guilt rather than proletarian unity. The Weather Underground used the language of "privilege" to reject the working class as a force for revolutionary change, writing, "Virtually all of the white working class also has short-range privileges from imperialism, which are not false privileges but very real ones which give them an edge of vested interest and tie them to a certain extent to the imperialists."6 In practice, this meant that the Weather Underground equated political struggle with vanguard groups like itself, who attacked their own privilege by adopting a revolutionary lifestyle. What this amounted to was the self-flagellation (with explosives) of white radicals, who substituted themselves for the masses and narcissistically centered attention on themselves instead of the black and Third World movements they claimed to be supporting—reducing those movements to a romantic fantasy of violent insurrection. In other words, the project of black autonomy and self-liberation—which implied the overall self-liberation of the poor and the working class—was effectively ignored by the Weather Underground's race thinking. Ignatiev ruthlessly attacked the Weatherman problematic in a paper called "Without a Science of Navigation We Cannot Sail in Stormy Seas," which is today a jarring discovery: **White supremacy is the real secret of the rule of the bourgeoisie and the hidden cause behind the failure of the labor movement in this country**. **White-skin privileges serve only the bourgeoisie, and precisely for that reason they will not let us escape them, but instead pursue us with them through every hour of our life, no matter where we go. They are poison bait.** This view of white supremacy entailed a very different conception of the politics of white privilege, as Ignatiev elaborated: **To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish. To argue that repudiating these privileges is a "sacrifice" is to argue that the fish is making a sacrifice when it leaps from the water, flips its tail, shakes its head furiously in every direction and throws the barbed offering**.7 Today's privilege politics cannot possibly permit a position of this kind. We are instead left with endless variations on the Weatherman position, though without the appeals to armed struggle, bank robberies, and Lenin's theory of imperialism. When contemporary white liberals adapt the Weatherman position, they often end up claiming that a new wave of "pro-white" socialists has arisen to defend the "white working class." **But their caricature obscures the important point, made by black revolutionaries throughout American history, that the project of emancipation requires overcoming the ideology of race**. Although he characterized the material advantages of whiteness as a "psychological wage," W.E.B. **Du Bois did not reduce whiteness to an effect of individual psychology. In fact, immediately preceding the passage on the psychological wage, Du Bois wrote: The theory of race was**

supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.8 When Du Bois suggested that white and black workers have "practically identical interests," he was not making an appeal to some mythical "white working class." Still less was he guilty of some kind of "class reductionism," which decides in the abstract that class is more fundamental than race. Of course, some people really do make this argument—and they play right into the hands of identitarian liberals, who ask how the young woman seeking an abortion and the evangelical protester, the undocumented immigrant and the salaried worker, can possibly have the same "interests." But this challenge is afflicted by the same condition it claims to diagnose. It mistakes the casual description of a shared trait for a claim about identity. **We all have numerous interests that are related to our identities but also to where we work and where we live**. To say that these different spheres of life interact and intersect is a banal truism which explains neither how our society is structured and reproduced nor how we might formulate a strategy to change this structure. Du Bois was recognizing the lived reality of the working class, which contains white people and people of color, people of all genders and sexualities, the employed and the unemployed—a multitude of people irreducible to any single description. A meaningful common interest between them does not somehow exist by default. **We cannot reduce any group of people and the multitudes they contain to a single common interest, as though we were reducing a fraction. A common interest is constituted by the composition of these multitudes into a group**. **This is a process of political practice**. **White supremacy is the phenomenon whereby the plurality of interests of a group of people is reorganized into the fiction of a white race whose very existence is predicated on the violent and genocidal history of the oppression of people of color. The self-organized struggles of oppressed people against white supremacy have managed to significantly undermine**, though by no means eliminate, **this kind of organization. It was no accident that these struggles ultimately put forward the insight that it was necessary to constitute a common interest through class organization, which extends to an opposition to the whole capitalist system—because it is the structure of the capitalist system that prevents all people who are dispossessed of the means of production, regardless of their identities, from having control over their own lives** and thus from pursuing whatever interests they may have, in all their particularity. This does not mean, however, that a "class reductionist" argument is a viable position. As long as racial solidarity among whites is more powerful than class solidarity across races, both capitalism and whiteness will continue to exist. In the context of American history, the rhetoric of the "white working class" and positivist arguments that class matters more than race reinforce one of the main obstacles to building socialism. Allen and Ignatiev turned to this question in their further research, inspired by the insights of Du Bois. In the process they presented an exemplary model of a materialist investigation into the ideology of race, one that went from the abstract to the concrete. This work emerged alongside that of Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, David Roediger, and many others as a body of thought devoted to exposing race as a social construct. All of this research, in varying ways, has examined the history of the "white race" in its specificity. The guiding insight that must be drawn from it is that this racial phenomenon is not simply a biological or even cultural attribute of certain "white people": it was produced by white supremacy in a concrete and objective historical process. As Allen put it on the back cover of his extraordinary vernacular history The Invention of the White Race: "**When the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no white people there**." At the most immediate level, Allen was pointing to the fact that **the word white didn't appear in Virginia colonial law until 1691**. Of course, this doesn't mean that there was no racism before 1691. Allen's argument was to show that **racism was not attached to a concept of the white race. There were ideas of the superiority of European civilization, but this did not**

correspond to differences in skin color. The clearest example is that of the Irish, whose racial oppression by the English precedes their racial oppression of Africans by several centuries. Today white nationalists distort this history, attempting to use the racial oppression of the Irish to try to dismiss the history of white supremacy. Yet this example actually demolishes their entire framework. What the example of the Irish illustrates is a form of racial oppression that is not based on skin color and that in fact precedes the very category of whiteness. Indeed, the early forms of English racial ideology represented the Irish as inferior and subhuman, and this ideology was later repeated word for word to justify both the genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas and the enslavement of Africans. Nor was it only a matter of words: the very practices of settler colonialism, land seizures, and plantation production were established in Ireland. Allen demonstrates this with reference to specific laws: If under Anglo-American slavery, "the rape of a female slave was not a crime, but a mere trespass on the master's property," so, in 1278, two Anglo-Normans, brought into court and charged with raping Margaret O'Rorke were found not guilty because "the said Margaret is an Irishwoman." If a law enacted in Virginia in 1723, provided that, "manslaughter of a slave is not punishable," so under Anglo-Norman law it sufficed for acquittal to show that the victim in a slaying was Irish. Anglo-Norman priests granted absolution on the grounds that it was "no more sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute."9 So racial oppression arises in the Irish case without skin color as its basis. We are forced to ask how we end up with a racial ideology revolving around skin color that represents African people as subhuman and that considers both Irish and English to be part of a unitary "white race." The historical record quite clearly demonstrates that white supremacy and thus the white race are formed within the American transition to capitalism, specifically because of the centrality of racial slavery. However, we have to resist the temptation, imposed on us by racial ideology, to explain slavery through race. Slavery is not always racial. It existed in ancient Greece and Rome and also in Africa, and was not attached specifically to a racial ideology. Slavery is a form of forced labor characterized by the market exchange of the laborer. But there are various forms of forced labor, and its first form in Virginia was indentured labor, in which a laborer is forced to work for a limited period of time to work off a debt, often with some incentive like land ownership after the end of the term. The first Africans to arrive in Virginia 1619 were put to work as indentured servants, within the same legal category as European indentured servants. In fact, until 1660 all African American laborers, like their European American counterparts, were indentured servants who had limited terms of servitude. There was no legal differentiation based on racial ideology: free African Americans owned property, land, and sometimes indentured servants of their own. There were examples of intermarriage between Europeans and Africans. It was only in the late seventeenth century that the labor force of the American colonies shifted decisively to African slaves who did not have limits on their terms of servitude. As Painter points out in The History of White People, these forms of labor and their transformations are fundamental in understanding how racial ideology comes about: Work plays a central part in race talk, because the people who do the work are likely to be figured as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of laboring status. It is still assumed, wrongly, that slavery anywhere in the world must rest on a foundation of racial difference. Time and again, the better classes have concluded that

those people deserve their lot; it must be something within them that puts them at the bottom. In modern times, we recognize this kind of reasoning as it relates to black race, but in other times **the same logic was applied to people who were white**, especially when they were impoverished immigrants seeking work.10 "In sum," Painter writes, "**before an eighteenth-century boom in the African slave trade, between one-half and two-thirds of all early white immigrants to the British colonies in the Western Hemisphere came as unfree laborers, some 300,000 to 400,000 people.**"11 The definitions of whiteness as freedom and blackness as slavery did not yet exist. It turns out that defining race involves answering some unexpected historical questions: How did some indentured servants come to be forced into bondage for their entire lives rather than a limited term? How did this category of forced labor come to be represented in terms of race? Why did the colonial ruling class come to rely on racial slavery when various other regimes of labor were available? **The first economic boom of the American colonies was in Virginia tobacco production in the 1620s, and it was based on the labor of primarily European indentured servants. African Americans were only about a fifth of the labor force: most forced labor was initially European**, and the colonial planter class relied on this forced labor for its economic growth. **But they couldn't just rely on European indentured labor because it was based on voluntary migration, and the incentive to participate in a life of brutal labor and die early was not sufficient to generate a consistently growing workforce**. As Barbara Fields puts it, "**Neither white skin nor English nationality protected servants from the grossest forms of brutality and exploitation.** The only degradation they were spared was perpetual enslavement along with their issue in perpetuity, the fate that eventually befell the descendants of Africans."12 **African Americans, on the other hand, had been forcibly removed from their homelands. So the ruling class began to alter its laws to be able to deny some laborers an end to their terms of servitude, which they were only able to accomplish in the case of African laborers. What really changed everything was Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. This began as a conflict within the elite planter class, directed toward a brutal attack on the Indigenous population. But it also gave rise to a rebellious mob of European and African laborers, who burned down the capital city of Jamestown and forced the governor to flee. The insurrectionary alliance of European and African laborers was a fundamental existential threat to the colonial ruling class, and the possibility of such an alliance among exploited peoples had to be prevented forever. Here we see a watershed moment in the long and complex process of the invention of the white race as a form of social control. The ruling class shifted its labor force decisively toward African slaves, and thus avoided dealing with the demand of indentured servants for eventual freedom and landownership. It fortified whiteness as a legal category, the basis for denying an end to the term of servitude for African forced labor.** By the eighteenth century the Euro-American planter class had entered into a bargain with the Euro-American laboring classes, who were mostly independent subsistence farmers: it exchanged certain social privileges for a cross-class alliance of Euro-Americans to preserve a superexploited African labor force. This Euro-American racial alliance was the best defense of the ruling class against the possibility of a Euro-American and African American working-class alliance. **It is at this point**, Nell Painter concludes, t**hat we see the "now familiar equation that converts race to black and black to slave."**13 **The invention of the white race further accelerated when the Euro-American ruling class encountered a new**

problem in the eighteenth century. As **the colonial ruling class began to demand its independence from the divinely ordained executives and landed wealth of the English nobility, they made claims for the intrinsic equality of all people and the idea of natural rights**. As Barbara Fields puts it: **Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights**, and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in which all but a minority lived. Only when the denial of liberty became an anomaly apparent even to the least observant and reflective members of Euro-American society did ideology systematically explain the anomaly.14 In other words, **the Euro-American ruling class had to advance an ideology of the inferiority of Africans in order to rationalize forced labor, and they had to incorporate European populations into the category of the white race,** despite the fact that many of these populations had previously been considered inferior. This racial ideology developed further as the new American nation encountered the phenomenon of the voluntary migration of free laborers from Europe, many of whom came from populations that were viewed as distinct European races: the Italians, Eastern Europeans, and Jews, but especially the exemplary case of the Irish, whose emigration to the US spiked with the famines of the mid-nineteenth century produced by English colonialism. The Irish, among the most oppressed and rebellious groups in Europe, were offered the bargain that had protected the American ruling class. Frederick Douglass pointed this out very clearly in 1853, at the anniversary meeting of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in New York: The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro. They are taught to believe that he eats the bread that belongs to them. The cruel lie is told them, that we deprive them of labor and receive the money which would otherwise make its way into their pockets. Sir, the Irish-American will find out his mistake one day.15 Douglass had gone to Ireland to avoid being returned to slavery and said he was for the first time in his life treated as an ordinary person, exclaiming in a letter to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, "I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man … I meet nothing to remind me of my complexion."16 Of course, this was not because of some intrinsic kindness of the Irish. It was rather because, at this stage in history, there were no white people there. This was clear to Douglass because he arrived during the Great Famine. Writing in his memoirs of the songs sung by slaves on the American plantations, he added: "Nowhere outside of dear old Ireland, in the days of want and famine, have I heard sounds so mournful."17 But what Irish immigrants realized after immigrating to the United States is that they could ameliorate their subjugation by joining the club of the white race, as Ignatiev has recounted.18 They could become members of a "white race" with higher status if they actively supported the continuing enslavement and oppression of African Americans. So the process of becoming white meant that these previous racial categories were abolished and racialized groups like the Irish were progressively incorporated into the white race as a means of fortifying and intensifying the exploitation of black laborers. It was the great insight of Frederick Douglass to describe this as the Irish-American's mistake. Douglass clearly emphasized the novelty of the very description of people as white: "The word white is a modern term in the legislation of this country. It was never used in the better days of the Republic, but has sprung up within the period of our national degeneracy."19 Let us be clear on what the invention of the white race meant. It meant that Euro-American laborers were prevented from joining with African American laborers in rebellion, through the form of social control imposed by the Euro-American ruling class. In exchange for white-skin privilege, the Euro-American workers accepted white identity and became active agents in the brutal oppression of African American laborers. But they also fundamentally degraded their own conditions of existence. As a consequence of this bargain with their exploiters, they allowed the conditions of the Southern white laborer to become the most impoverished in the nation, and they generated conditions that blocked the development of a viable mass workers' movement. This is why the struggle against white supremacy has in fact been a struggle for universal emancipation—something that was apparent to African American insurgents. As Barbara Fields points out, these insurgents did not use a notion of race as an explanation for their oppression or their struggles for liberation: It was not Afro-Americans … who needed a racial explanation; it was not they who invented themselves as a race. Euro-Americans resolved the contradiction between slavery and liberty by defining Afro-Americans as a race; Afro-Americans resolved the contradiction more straightforwardly by calling for the abolition of slavery. From the era of the American, French and Haitian revolutions on, they claimed liberty as theirs by natural right.20 However, this was not always recognized by socialist movements. Early American socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sometimes failed to recognize that the division between white and black workers prevented all workers from successfully emancipating themselves. We should not oversimplify this point or use it to discredit the whole history of the labor movement. The early socialist parties were largely composed of immigrants who were often not yet fully incorporated into the white race, and there were very significant black socialists—including, for example, Hubert Harrison, who played an important role in connecting black nationalism to socialism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The majority of the early American socialists were not racists, and in fact openly and vigorously opposed racism. However, most of these early socialist organizations failed to recognize that there was anything unique about the demands of black workers. They were also willing to work with craft unions that discriminated against black workers, and they did not attempt to recruit black members. Without an analysis of white supremacy, these socialist organizations did not address the fact that black workers were often excluded from jobs available to whites, that they were subjected to racist violence beyond the workplace, and that they could not expect racist employers to extend increasing wages to them. The cost of this indifference to race was that socialism was always competing for recruitment with whiteness. New European immigrants were often very radical and prepared to join militant labor struggles. But they were also being invited to join the white race. Once again, in the case of the Irish, this meant finally leaving behind the racial oppression that had become familiar to them in Europe. This began to change with the reconfiguration of American socialists into the Communist Party in 1919. By the 1920s the CP had incorporated not only many immigrant socialists but also the clandestine organization called the African Blood Brotherhood, which included many important black Communists, such as Cyril Briggs, Claude McKay, and Harry Haywood. These black Communists were absolutely central to Communist organizing, because they argued that the party would have to directly attack whiteness if it wanted to build a labor movement. As a result of their work, the CP threw itself into antiracist organizing in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This meant, first of all, placing a heavy emphasis on educating white members to reject white chauvinism, and organizing some of the only interracial social events that were held in the segregated US. The party worked to eliminate the influence of whiteness from the ranks of the party itself. But it also sent its organizers down South and into the black neighborhoods of Northern cities to work on political projects. These included unions for sharecroppers, tenant farmers, miners, and steelworkers; armed defense against lynching; legal defense for black victims of the racist justice system; and movements against unemployment, evictions, and utility shut-offs. Robin D.G. Kelley describes some of these initiatives in Hammer and Hoe: Representatives of the unemployed councils often dissuaded landlords from evicting their tenants by describing the potential devastation that could occur once an abandoned house became a free-for-all for firewood. When a family's electricity was shut off for nonpayment, activists from the unemployed council frequently used heavy-gauge copper wires as "jumpers" to appropriate electricity from public outlets or other homes. Council members also found ways to reactivate water mains after they had been turned off, though the process was more complicated than pilfering electricity. And in at least one instance, a group of black women used verbal threats to stop a city employee from turning off one family's water supply.21 Unfortunately, the complicated history of political disputes within the CP, along with the state repression of the Communist movement, led to this work being cut short. As an increasingly conservative party leadership distanced itself from the project of black liberation, white chauvinism was on the rise in the CP. It had previously been most effectively combated through mass antiracist organizing: by joining different people and disparate demands in a common struggle. But now that this practice had been abandoned, the party launched what Harry Haywood called a "phony war against white chauvinism." In Haywood's analysis, this phony war only ended up strengthening the material foundations of white chauvinism, now uprooted from its structural foundations and seen as a free-floating set of ideas. Instead of mass organizing, opposing white chauvinism was now seen as a matter of policing the language of those who were ostensibly comrades, thus strengthening the party bureaucracy and introducing a climate of paranoia and distrust among members. As Haywood wrote: It was an atmosphere which was conducive to the development of a particularly paternalistic and patronizing form of white chauvinism, as well as to a rise in petty-bourgeois narrow nationalism among blacks. The growth of the nationalist side of this distortion was directly linked to the breakdown of the basic division of labor among communists in relation to the national question. This division of labor, long ago established in our party and the international communist movement, places main responsibility for combating white chauvinism on the white comrades, with Blacks having main responsibility for combating narrow nationalist deviations.22 In other words, in the absence of mass organizing, racial ideology rushes to the fill the vacuum. And without the political division of labor that Haywood describes, the struggle against racism is reduced to the redress of individual injuries. Of course, this is why reactions to the critique of identity politics can be so abrasive. When there is no other practical organizational effort to combat racism, any questioning of the framework of identity seems like an attempt to deny the validity of the antiracist struggle. In fact, it goes even deeper than this—questioning racial ideology itself seems to be a denial of the agency of the oppressed. In his landmark book Against Race, Paul Gilroy describes how this defensive reaction emerges from the ambivalent relationship oppressed people form with their identities: People who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily color-coded) have for centuries employed the concepts and categories of their rulers, owners, and persecutors to resist the destiny that "race" has allocated to them and to dissent from the lowly value it placed upon their lives. Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture. By classifying these traditions within the categories of "race," their role in the formation of our global modernity has been marginalized, relegated "to the backwaters of the primitive and prepolitical." Claiming and defending these traditions reinforces racial ideology but also provides a form of defense and protection. The experiences of "insult, brutality, and contempt" are "unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength." This reversal, as Gilroy goes on to explain, is a powerful factor in the tenacity of racial ideology: "When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, 'race' and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up."23 But this dynamic is not only a matter of the conscious self-defense of the oppressed. It is rooted in the unconscious, as ideology always is, and it takes us back to the paradoxical relation between subjectivation and subjection that Judith Butler has shown is so central to ideology and the modern forms of politics. A fundamental aspect of this paradox of the subject, Butler argues, is that it is tied up with a "passionate attachment" to power. This is the kind of attachment that children display toward their parents, who are an arbitrary repressive authority but also the models of selfhood and the first sources of recognition, and therefore the objects of love. We are constituted as subjects within the individualization that is characteristic of state power; we are activated as political agents through the injuries that are constitutive of our identity. Consequently, our identities attach us to this power in a basic and foundational way. This complicated and unconscious aspect of our political experience is what Butler tries to capture: Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. The self-colonizing trajectory of certain forms of identity politics are symptomatic of this paradoxical embrace of the injurious term.24 As we try to understand the specific form of passionate attachment to racial identity, we have to pass into the nebulous terrain of the unconscious—the terrain of poetry, fantasy, and illusion.

Hope Good

Rage is a counterproductive response to anti-blackens – it only internalizes violence re-creating psychological violence – but political hope is good – and is distinct from certainty and optimism

Rogers, Associate Professor of Political Science at Brown University, **'17**

(Melvin, "Keeping the Faith," November 1, http://bostonreview.net/race/melvin-rogers-keeping-faith)

But when the United States selects its eloquent spokesperson on the "race issue"—as it always does—all other voices become mere noise, and the complexity of our political traditions and our lived experiences are flattened out. In Coates's view, for instance, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and Martin Luther King Jr. **were all failures**. They performed the **same script,** they failed to move their audience to action, and they never reshaped U.S. life and culture. "All of these heroes," Coates insists, "had failed to cajole and coerce the masters of America." In Coates's telling, **fine historical distinctions disappear**, **time stands still**, and the past and future **collapse** into the political **horrors of the present**.

This is what happens when we listen only to a single voice; no conversation is possible. We are disabled from speaking thoughtfully and accurately about political and cultural transformation on racial matters.

But there is a sleight of hand in Coates's "black atheism"; **it conflates hope with certainty**, and hope becomes our **fatal flaw**. Yet we **don't need to believe that progress is inevitable** to think that, through our efforts, we may be able to **move toward a more just society**. We can, however, be sure that **no good will come of the refusal to engage in this work.**

There is much in this that should concern us. Coates describes the pain visited on black bodies and engenders white guilt. He erodes the idea that **who we are need not determine who we may become**. He **obstructs** rather than opens any attempt to reckon with our racial past and present in the **service of an inclusive future**. And he participates in a politics where words and actions can **never aspire to change** the political community in which we live, and for that reason they only **fortify our indignation** and **deepen our suspicion**—namely, that as black Americans, we are as alien to this polity as it is alien to us. The aspiration to defend a more exalted vision of this country's ethical and political life is taken as the hallmark of being asleep, dreaming in religious illusions. To be alive to an unvarnished reality, **to be woke**, is to recognize that no such country is possible.

This runs rough**S**hod over that thread in the grand tradition of U.S. struggles for justice—a tradition in which hope and faith are forged through political darkness. Hope involves attachment and commitment to the possibility of realizing the goods we seek. Faith is of a broader significance, providing hope with content. Faith, the black scholar Anna Julia Cooper suggested in 1892, is grounded in a vision of political and ethical life that is at odds with the community one inhabits. It is a vision that one believes ought to command allegiance, for which one is willing to fight, and in which one believes others can find a home. Faith looks on the present from the perspective of a future vision of society, and uses the vision as a resource to remake the present. And so faith, the philosopher and psychologist William James explained in 1897, is "the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance." In other words, faith has never been exhausted by the political reality one happens to be living in.

Political faith has always rested on the idea that **we are not finished**, a thought that Coates rejects out of hand. In the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson called this capacity for human renewal "ascension, or the passage of the soul into higher forms." In our political life this means, as James Baldwin well knew, that both our liberal democratic institutions and its culture "depends on choices one has got to make, for ever and ever and ever, every day."

Faith has always been a loving but difficult commitment precisely because it makes politics **about maybes** rather than **certainties**. One of the greatest **dangers of U.S. exceptionalism**, for instance, is that it has habituated us to think

about the structure of political life as **necessarily progressing**. Writing in the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott—a successful nonviolent campaign against racial segregation—King sought to chasten the obvious excitement: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability."

Yet Coates appears simply to **invert U.S. exceptionalism**, replacing it with the **equally fatalistic idea** that the United States is **fundamentally broken**. In a world where the good or bad is fated to happen, **faith and hope have no foothold**. This ultimately **weakens our resolve** and undermines our ability to take seriously the idea of an "American experiment."

Black activists have not forged their faith with the stone of U.S. exceptionalism. Rather, they have used their darkest hours to **"make a way out of no way"**—to address the triple crises of **exclusion**, **domination**, and **violence**. Abolitionists such as David Walker faced it in the form of the enslavement of black folks. Frederick Douglass encountered it with the rise and crash of reconstruction. Wells faced it as she confronted the horror of lynching and the disposability of black life. And in our own time, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists are reminded of a similar disposability of black life that goes unpunished.

And yet, they are keepers of the faith, **recognizing that its vitality is not exhausted** by the reality they struggle against. In her recent New York Times article, "Black Lives Matter Is Democracy in Action," Barbara Ransby narrates a powerful account of BLM activists creating **contexts for collective leadership** and using those opportunities to transform the power of voice into actions that meet the needs of ordinary people. This effort would be **impossible** for people who accept Coates's perspective. Their efforts may not win the day, but they **certainly won't win the day without the faith that winning is a possibility**.

Faith does not deny the present, but **refuses to be defined by it and sink into it**. We now face a president who seeks to colonize every waking moment of our lives **with feelings of dread**, thus arresting our ability to imagine a reality beyond television, social media feeds, and newspapers. The illusion of our present moment is not expressed in political faith, but in the belief that we **can respond constructively** without such faith. Political faith is fully realistic about the present disasters and rejects illusions about assured future progress, while also insisting that **we are not certain to fail**. **It is hopeful without being optimistic**.

We may **falter**, and the material, psychological, and political goods of white supremacy may deplete our desire to transform. We know the history—from the 1880s to the 1960s—of white backlash in response to a more expansive racial justice. In fact, we are living through one such backlash given the ascendancy of Trump. But our political community is what it is because we have made it this way. **It is not fated to be.** Believing otherwise makes **white supremacy** something **more than a collection of choices**, habits, and practices—**it makes it part of human nature itself.** Coates wants us to face the facts and embrace black atheism. But throughout the book he often slides from working in the historical register to speaking in the idiom of philosophical metaphysics—at one moment he stands in time and at another he stands outside of it, confidently telling us how history will end. For this reason, Coates doesn't dismantle white supremacy; he ironically provides it with support.

Please understand my concern. Coates is right: he doesn't have a "responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world." We must, as he has often done, speak the truth. But we **must not claim to know what we cannot possibly know**. **Humility creates space for hope**.