

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Aspirational Exceptionalism: Rhetoric, Politics, and the Pursuit of American Greatness

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8cd2f165>

Author

Williams, Lucy

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Aspirational Exceptionalism:

Rhetoric, Politics, and the Pursuit of American Greatness

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Political Science

by

Lucy Williams

2018

© Copyright by

Lucy Williams

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Aspirational Exceptionalism:
Rhetoric, Politics, and the Pursuit of American Greatness

by

Lucy Williams

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science
University of California, Los Angeles, 2018
Professor Joshua F. Dienstag, Co-Chair
Professor Melvin L. Rogers, Co-Chair

American exceptionalism—i.e., the belief that the United States is chosen, superior to other nations, and tasked with a unique responsibility or mission—is often analyzed, studied, and critiqued as a singular and unified rhetorical tradition. In this dissertation, though, I argue that the American exceptionalist tradition is in fact conveyed through multiple and distinct rhetorical modes. More specifically, I distinguish between two types of American exceptionalism: *accomplished* exceptionalism, which is self-celebratory, complacent, and un-critical, and *aspirational* exceptionalism, which is self-critical, forward-looking, and ameliorative.

Because most citizens, politicians, and thinkers understand and deploy exceptionalism in the accomplished sense, this dissertation focuses primarily on the form, substance, and effects of the lesser-known aspirational mode. The dissertation analyzes the political thought of Frederick

Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Baldwin—three figures who are not normally considered to be part of the American exceptionalist tradition. Through close readings of their speeches and writings, I show that each thinker articulates a philosophy and politics of aspirational exceptionalism. I also highlight the distinct aspirational citizenship practices that each thinker encourages and enables. In so doing, I challenge the widespread assumption that thinkers who criticize or condemn the American polity are, *ipso facto*, ineligible for exceptionalist status. Put differently, I show that America’s radicals, critics, and apologists can (and do) speak in exceptionalist registers and may perhaps be exceptionalism’s most sophisticated defenders.

More broadly, though, I challenge and re-define what it means to be a “good” American citizen. If, as Charles Taylor argues, language shapes and influences individuals’ orientation toward the world, then America’s tendency to privilege accomplished exceptionalism while excluding aspirational exceptionalism threatens to create and shore up a society in which the accomplished mode’s backward-looking, self-celebratory, and uncritical disposition is seen as the most correct and laudable way to enact citizenship. By identifying another form of exceptionalism (namely, aspirational exceptionalism) and re-claiming its title as such, I shed light on—and, by extension, activate—a different mode of American citizenship: one that is critical and reflective but equally (or perhaps more) commendable.

The dissertation of Lucy Williams is approved.

Anthony R. Pagden

Davide Panagia

Melvin L. Rogers, Committee Co-Chair

Joshua F. Dienstag, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

For Rex.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The Problem of Exceptionalism(s) in American Political Thought	1
I. Theorizing American Exceptionalism.....	8
A. (Re)Defining Exceptionalism.....	9
B. Accomplished Exceptionalism	15
C. Aspirational Exceptionalism	23
II. Methods and Stakes.....	26
III. Literature Review and Points of Intervention	30
A. Contributions to Literature on American Exceptionalism	30
B. Contributions to Literature on Rhetoric and Politics.....	35
IV. Outline of the Dissertation	39
V. Bibliography.....	45
Chapter 1: False to the Past, False to the Present: Frederick Douglass and America’s Exceptional Hypocrisy	50
I. Douglass’ Aspirational Rhetoric	52
II. “False to the Future”: America’s Exceptional Hypocrisy	74
III. “Roused to Virtuous Indignation”: Douglass’ Aspirational Citizenship	82
A. Propositional Arguments	84
B. Affective/Performative Arguments	91
IV. Conclusion.....	97
V. Bibliography.....	99
Chapter 2: A Place to Think Alone: Ralph Waldo Emerson and America’s Exceptional School for Self-Trust	102
I. Emerson the Exceptionalist.....	106
A. Exceptionalism in Emerson’s “Small Canon” and Beyond	110
B. “We Will Walk on Our Own Feet”: America as a School for Self-Reliance.....	116
II. “Unattained but Attainable”: Emerson’s Aspirational Exceptionalism	123
III. Emerson’s Aspirational Citizenship: Ceaseless Striving in a Community of Friends .	144
IV. Conclusion.....	157
V. Bibliography.....	159

Chapter 3: Where “Nothing is Fixed”: James Baldwin and America’s Exceptional Indefiniteness	163
I. Baldwin the Exceptionalist.....	168
II. “A Lover’s War”: Baldwin’s Aspirational Exceptionalism	179
A. Baldwin’s Accomplished Exceptionalism Antipathy	180
B. Aspirational Tropes in <i>The Fire Next Time</i>	184
1. Structural Aspirational Exceptionalism.....	184
2. Substantive Aspirational Exceptionalism.....	190
C. Aspirational Tropes in “We Can Change the Country”	200
III. Baldwin’s Aspirational Citizenship: Reflective, Interconnected, Involved	208
IV. Conclusion.....	219
V. Bibliography.....	221

Conclusion: This is America: Aspirational Exceptionalism in the Contemporary American State	225
I. Colin Kaepernick’s Aspirational Exceptionalism	228
II. Barack Obama’s Aspirational Exceptionalism.....	244
III. Conclusion.....	260
IV. Bibliography.....	265

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have often heard graduate students speak of their dissertations the way a parent speaks of her child—as a beautiful creation, the source of both incomparable fulfillment and complete exhaustion, that is brought into the world through long and hard labor. As one who does not have children of my own, I cannot say whether this comparison is justified. But if it is, then the old adage—*It takes a village to raise a child*—must be equally true of a dissertation. Here, then, I offer some brief (and woefully inadequate) thanks to the village that made my dissertation possible.

I first owe a great deal of thanks to my outstanding doctoral committee: Joshua Dienstag, Melvin Rogers, Davide Panagia, and Anthony Pagden. For the last two years, these men have patiently read drafts, offered feedback, and steered me away from dead-ends. They have gently but candidly told me when my ideas have been bad, and when my ideas have been good (or, at least, not bad), they've offered measured praise. They have coached me through malaise and writing blocks, have bought me lunches, and have contributed their personal research funds to allow me to focus on this project. They've believed I could finish and have done all in their power to help me do so.

I am especially grateful to my excellent Co-Chairs, who supported me in different and complementary ways. Though Melvin has been across the country for much of my dissertation process, he played an instrumental role in the project's earliest stages and was one of the first to express interest in my ideas. This project would not have gotten off the ground without his support. Joshua, meanwhile, has been an integral part of the writing process and has played a key role in bringing this dissertation to fruition. I have benefitted greatly from his uncanny ability to concisely and quickly diagnose flaws in my thinking; my writing is always markedly

stronger after it has passed across his desk. I have also been grateful for his unfailing willingness to read drafts, answer questions, and make himself available to discuss this project.

I have been fortunate to be part of a remarkable theory community at UCLA, and I am deeply grateful to the theory graduate students who have inspired me, challenged my work, and offered valuable comments and recommendations. In particular, I am indebted to Libby Barringer, who has patiently provided guidance, feedback, friendship, gardening tips, and informal therapy sessions. I am also grateful to John Branstetter, a colleague and cycling companion who never complains when our bike ride conversations turn to the subject of American exceptionalism.

I am also thankful for my non-theory colleagues, who have accepted me as a friend despite my lack of statistical training. I am especially grateful for Adria Tinnin, who has asked about my research, listened to my complaints, and buoyed me up through challenging times. I also thank Angela Ocampo, who was my roommate during UCLA's preview weekend and has been my idol ever since.

Of course, I am also indebted to my many friends outside of academia, particularly Sara Hughes-Zabawa, Diana Zivich, Hilary Cannon, Ginny Smith, Terra Laughton, Darian Tibbitts, Austin Murphy, Thomas Stone, and David Osborn. These remarkable people have taken me to restaurants, persuaded me to go to the beach, and have generally reminded me to enjoy and appreciate life. They have provided impeccable research assistance (Austin), have willingly endured my company, and have only occasionally complained (or fallen asleep) when I've talked about my research. Thank you, friends, for keeping me sane.

Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful for the unwavering support of my incredible family. Tom: Eleven years ago, during a discussion about my post-high school plans, you

suggested that I should not choose between a J.D. and an Ph.D., because I could do both. If you had not expressed such faith in my abilities, I might not have tried. Thank you for believing in me and for encouraging me (and all of your daughters) to do big and hard things. Amy: It has been an inexpressible privilege to experience graduate school with you—not many people get to complete a Ph.D. at the same time as their mother! Thank you for forging the path and for showing me what it means to be a dedicated, diligent, and successful graduate student. And, of course, thank you for the edits, revisions, and pep talks. I could not have survived without them. Cate: You have been my biggest cheerleader and have bragged about me, celebrated my accomplishments, and expressed sincere joy when I've succeeded. I am not sure that I deserve such high esteem, but I am grateful for it nonetheless. Thank you for always treating me like a rock star—even (especially) when I have not felt like one. Sam: You came to my rescue when I needed you the most and have faithfully and consistently been here for me ever since. Thank you for listening to practice job-talks, mock conference presentations, and general philosophical musings. Thank you also for talking me off ledges, for patiently enduring my stressed writing days, and for accepting the fact that our kitchen table is constantly covered in books. Above all, thank you for being my loyal wingman. This dissertation would not exist without you. And Sophie: You have been a constant ray of sunshine in the otherwise bleak existence that is graduate school. Thank you for adding much-needed levity to my life and for making me laugh after long days of writing. You are, and will always be, the only person who I will stop writing to take a FaceTime call from.

In the words of the inimitable Jenna Maroney, “You guys are the real stars.”

VITA

Lucy Williams graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Utah in 2012 with a bachelor's degree in political science. In 2014, she earned her M.A. in political science from UCLA. She then attended the UCLA School of Law, where she was a podcast editor for the UCLA Law Review and received the Masin Family Academic Silver Award for Constitutional Law II. She earned her J.D., Order of the Coif, in 2017.

During fall semester of the 2018-2019 academic year, Lucy will be an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Brigham Young University. In January of 2019, she will begin a one-year judicial clerkship on the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit. After completing the clerkship, she will return to the faculty at BYU.

Introduction: The Problem of Exceptionalism(s) in American Political Thought

“We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

—John Winthrop¹

“Americans [...] appear impatient at the least censure and insatiable for praise. The slimmest eulogy is agreeable to them and the greatest is rarely enough to satisfy them; they pester you at every moment to get you to praise them; and if you resist their entreaties, they praise themselves. [...] One cannot imagine a more disagreeable and talkative patriotism. It fatigues even those who honor it.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville²

American exceptionalism is a sentiment deeply embedded in the history, rhetoric, and culture of the United States. Despite its prevalence, however, most scholars agree that American exceptionalism is a problematic concept. To begin with, there is little consensus as to when the term originated—whether it was first articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville, Joseph Stalin, Ronald Reagan, or someone else entirely.³ Moreover, few agree on what the term actually *means*—whether it is simply a form of national pride, for example, or whether it carries more complex religious and political undertones. Also, as James Ceaser notes, “there is that annoying little suffix ‘ism’” which accompanies many vague and contested concepts (e.g., liberalism, feminism,

¹ John Winthrop, “Model of Christian Charity,” in *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought, Vol. I: Origins Through the Civil War*, ed. Scott J. Hammond, Kevin R. Hardwick, and Howard L. Lubert (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007).

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 585.

³ In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.” 36. Many scholars identify this as the first articulation of American exceptionalism. Others suggest that the term originated with Ronald Reagan who, in his farewell address, described America as “a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace [...]” “Farewell Address to the Nation,” speech, January 11, 1989, transcript <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650>. Still others insist that Joseph Stalin invented the term, though only to condemn a communist faction (the Lovestoneites) who believed that America’s social and historical conditions differed from those in Europe. Donald E. Pease, “Exceptionalism,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 108-112.

realism, positivism).⁴ In Ceaser's words, "Exceptionalism constitutes one small step for abstraction, one giant leap for abstractionism. Not much good ever comes from airy concepts of this kind."⁵

More significantly, though, there is little consensus as to what American exceptionalism denotes for and about the United States. Is American exceptionalism a positive concept—one that inspires patriotism and engenders national unity? Is it merely a descriptive, empirical claim⁶ that implies some duty or obligation to act as an exemplar?⁷ Does it mean that the United States is and ought to be a "redeemer nation," a country responsible for spreading virtue and combatting injustice throughout the world?⁸ Does it authorize (or perhaps obligate) the United States to undertake conquest, pre-emptive warfare, imperialism, and other interventionist

⁴ James Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," *American Political Thought* 1, No. 1 (2012): 6.

⁵ Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," 6.

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996).

⁷ Winthrop, "Model of Christian Charity"; Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," 6.

⁸ See, for example, Nathaniel Cadle, "America as 'World-Salvation': Josiah Strong, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Global Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism," in *American Exceptionalisms*, ed. James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011): 125-146. See also Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). A common variation on this theme is the idea that America is responsible for spreading democracy or free institutions throughout the globe. See, for example, William T. Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 3, No. 2 (2006): 264-266; Mitt Romney, "Romney's Foreign Policy Speech," speech, October 7, 2011, transcript <http://www.weeklystandard.com/romneys-foreign-policy-speech/article/595152?page=2>.

policies?⁹ Or is it, as many argue, a pernicious, anti-progressive state fantasy that conceals and perpetuates patterns of discrimination, exclusion, and inequality?¹⁰

Although scholars and commentators disagree about its origins, definition, significance, and political implications, American exceptionalism remains a prominent part of American political thought—so prominent, in fact, that one scholar has described it as an “uncontested assumption [that] structure[s] the political consciousness of the American people.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, then, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism plays a central role in much—if not all—of America’s politics. Consider, for example, one of the more memorable feuds of the 2012 presidential race. On October 7, 2011, presidential candidate Mitt Romney accused Barack Obama of being insufficiently exceptionalist—that is, of endorsing the “profoundly mistaken view [that] there is nothing unique about the United States.”¹² The President, Romney claimed, “derisively said [that America is exceptional] in the way that the British think Great Britain is

⁹ The following quote, taken from Senator Albert Beveridge’s aptly-titled speech “In Support of an American Empire,” exemplifies this view: “God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our races He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: ‘Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things.’” Speech, January 9, 1900, transcript <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/in-support-of-an-american-empire/>.

For further discussion of this quotation and of this interpretation of American exceptionalism, see Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” 8-12.

¹⁰ See, for example, Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). I discuss Pease’s thought in greater detail below.

¹¹ Joyce Appleby, “Recovering America’s Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism,” *The Journal of American History* 79, No. 2 (1992): 419. Donald Pease characterizes American exceptionalism in a similar manner, calling it “an academic discourse, a political doctrine, and a regulatory ideal assigned responsibility for defining, supporting, and developing U.S. national identity.” “Exceptionalism,” 109.

¹² Romney, “Romney’s Foreign Policy Speech.”

exceptional or the Greeks think Greece is exceptional.”¹³ Romney pledged to be different. “I will never, ever apologize for America,” he insisted, “[and] will not surrender America’s role in the world [...] If you do not want America to be the strongest nation on Earth, I am not your President.”¹⁴

Romney’s accusation was remarkably effective—so effective, in fact, that Obama felt compelled to vigorously defend his committed belief in America’s greatness. “My entire career,” Obama asserted, “has been a testimony to American exceptionalism.”¹⁵ But despite Obama’s insistence that he too celebrated American superiority, Romney remained unconvinced. “[Obama] doesn’t have the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do,” Romney explained to his supporters in Pewaukee, Wisconsin.¹⁶ “I think over the last three or four years, some people around the world have begun to question that.”¹⁷

This feud—about which of the two candidates was the *true* American exceptionalist—persisted throughout the 2012 presidential race¹⁸ and continued (albeit to a lesser degree) throughout Obama’s presidency.¹⁹ And during the 2016 presidential race, the topic bubbled up

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Amie Parnes, “Obama: ‘My Entire Career is Testimony to American Exceptionalism,’” *The Hill*, April 2, 2012, <http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/219581-obama-my-career-is-testimony-to-american-exceptionalism->.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The topic was also salient during Obama’s first presidential campaign. See, for example, “Obama Fights Back on Questions About his Patriotism,” *CNN Politics*, February 24, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/02/24/obama.patriotism/index.html?iref=topnews>.

¹⁹ For example, during Obama’s second term, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani said, “I do not believe—and I know this is a horrible thing to say—but I do not believe that the president loves America.” Lindsay Bever, “Report: Rudy Giuliani Tells Private Dinner ‘I Do Not Believe That the President Loves America,’” *Washington Post*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/19/report-rudy-giuliani-tells-private-dinner-i-do-not-believe-that-the-president-loves-america/>. Just months later, presidential candidate Marco Rubio suggested that Obama “has demonstrated a disregard for our moral purpose that at times flirted with disdain.” Greg Jaffe, “Obama’s New Patriotism,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/>.

yet again.²⁰ Within and across the two major political parties,²¹ presidential candidates eagerly jockeyed for the American exceptionalist title, and each candidate sought to prove to his or her party, to voters, and to the world that he or she alone understood and was committed to American exceptionalism.²²

²⁰ According to one source, “just about every Republican presidential candidate is condemning Obama for a failure to grasp America’s exceptional nature.” Jaffe, “Obama’s New Patriotism.” Even the briefest survey of campaign rhetoric suggests that this was, in fact, the case. In February of 2016, for example, Senator and presidential candidate Marco Rubio repeatedly stressed the importance of exceptionalism, his commitment to it, and President Obama’s failure to preserve it. In his words, “Let’s dispel with this fiction that Barack Obama doesn’t know what he’s doing. He knows exactly what he’s doing. He is trying to change this country. He wants America to become more like the rest of the world. We don’t want to be like the rest of the world, we want to be the United States of America. And when I’m elected president, this will become once again, the single greatest nation in the history of the world, not the disaster Barack Obama has imposed upon us.” Ryan Teague Beckwith, “Read the Full Transcript of the Eighth Republican Debate in New Hampshire,” *Time*, February 6, 2016, <http://time.com/4210921/republican-debate-transcript-new-hampshire-eighth/?xid=homepage>. Other candidates did not criticize Obama so directly but nonetheless tried to ground their campaigns in exceptionalist principles. For example, Senator Ted Cruz announced his 2016 presidential bid by noting that “American exceptionalism [...] has made this nation a clarion voice for freedom in the world, a shining city on a hill.” “Transcript: Ted Cruz’s Speech at Liberty University,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-ted-cruzs-speech-at-liberty-university/2015/03/23/41c4011a-d168-11e4-a62f-ee745911a4ff_story.html.

²¹ Democratic presidential candidates were also caught up in the tide of American exceptionalism. See, for example, Peter Beinart, “Sanders, Trump, and the War Over American Exceptionalism,” *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/sanders-trump-and-the-war-over-american-exceptionalism/462267/>, and “Hillary Clinton: I Still Believe in American Exceptionalism,” *CBS News*, June 15, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/hillary-clinton-i-still-believe-in-american-exceptionalism/>.

²² Interestingly, Republican Donald Trump largely refused to enter the exceptionalist fray and vocally criticized the idea of American exceptionalism, saying:

I don’t like the term. I’ll be honest with you. People say, “Oh he’s not patriotic.” Look, if I’m a Russian, or I’m a German, or I’m a person we do business with, why, you know, I don’t think it’s a very nice term. We’re exceptional; you’re not. First of all, Germany is eating our lunch. So they say, “Why are you exceptional? We’re doing a lot better than you.” I never liked the term.

And perhaps that’s because I don’t have a very big ego and I don’t need terms like that. Honestly. When you’re doing business—I watch Obama every once in a while saying “American exceptionalism,” it’s [Trump makes a face]. I don’t like the term. Because we’re dealing—first of all, I want to take everything back from the world that we’ve given them. We’ve given them so much. On top of taking it back, I don’t want to say, “We’re exceptional. We’re more exceptional.” Because essentially we’re saying, “We’re more outstanding than you. By the way, you’ve been eating our lunch for the last 20 years, but we’re more exceptional than you.” I don’t like the term. I never liked it.

When I see these politicians get up [and say], “the American exceptionalism”—we’re dying. We owe 18 trillion in debt. I’d like to make us exceptional. And I’d like to talk later instead of now. Does that make any sense? Because I think you’re insulting the world. And you, know, if you’re German, or you’re from Japan, or you’re from China, you don’t want to have people saying that I never liked the expression. And I see a lot of good patriots get up and talk about Amer—you can think it, but I don’t think we should say it. We may have a chance to say it in the not-too-distant future. But even then, I wouldn’t say it because when I take back the jobs, and when I take back

As with most feuds, there is a widespread assumption that in the battle of exceptionalism, there can be only one victor—that there is a singular definition of what it means to be an exceptionalist, and that only *one* candidate, either Romney *or* Obama, Clinton *or* Trump, satisfies that definition. In this dissertation, however, I argue that this assumption is mistaken and that American exceptionalism is not, in fact, a unified tradition. More specifically, I suggest that American exceptionalism is expressed and conveyed through at least two distinct rhetorical modes: the *aspirational* mode, which is self-critical and ameliorative,²³ and the *accomplished* mode, which is self-celebratory, complacent, and un-critical.²⁴ These two modes share similar features and tropes but enable and encompass different (and often conflicting) models of citizenship. Because of this, two individuals who, like Obama and Romney, utilize different types of exceptionalist rhetoric may find themselves locked in deep political and philosophical conflict, even though both are profoundly committed to American exceptionalism *writ large*.

In this dissertation, I define and characterize these two strands of American exceptionalist rhetoric and, through close readings of various theoretical texts, provide examples and analyses of each. But because most citizens, politicians, and thinkers understand and deploy exceptionalism in the accomplished sense,²⁵ I devote most of the project to study and analysis of

all that money and we get all our stuff, I'm not going to rub it in. Let's not rub it in. Let's not rub it in. But I never liked that term.

Greg Sargent, "Donald Trump's Revealing Quote About 'American Exceptionalism,'" *Washington Post*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/06/07/donald-trumps-revealing-quote-about-american-exceptionalism/>.

²³ And was exemplified by Obama in the 2012 presidential race.

²⁴ In this dissertation, I focus only on two modes of exceptionalist rhetoric—the accomplished and the aspirational. However, there may be (and likely are) additional varieties, also. While I do not address these varieties in this dissertation, I hope to consider their rhetorical tropes, structures, and effects in future research.

²⁵ For a brief review of the many studies that treat accomplished exceptionalism as American exceptionalism's only type, see Section III.A, below.

The Obama/Romney exchange, described both above and below (in Section I.A) suggests that accomplished exceptionalism is equally dominant outside of academic circles. That Obama, who often utilizes the aspirational

aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric. In so doing, I intend to show that exceptionalist rhetoric, which is often treated as flat-footed and anti-progressive, has a more variegated form and can be (and has been) put to work multiple different and contested ways. More importantly, though, I intend to challenge and re-define what it means to be a “good” American citizen. If, as Charles Taylor argues, language shapes and influences individuals’ orientation toward the world, then America’s tendency to celebrate and strive for accomplished exceptionalism while excluding (and, in some cases, refusing to recognize) aspirational exceptionalism threatens to create and shore up a society in which the accomplished mode’s backward-looking, self-celebratory, and uncritical disposition is seen as the most correct and laudable way to enact citizenship. By identifying another form of exceptionalism (namely, aspirational exceptionalism) and re-claiming its title as such, I hope to shed light on—and, by extension, activate—a different mode of American citizenship: one that is more critical and more reflective, but equally (or perhaps even more) commendable.

In this dissertation, then, I march squarely into the messy territory of American exceptionalism—an area that, because of its “airiness”²⁶ and ambiguities, is oft-explored yet poorly mapped. Because I am armed with the knowledge of those scholars who have gone ahead of me, I enter this terrain well aware that my journey will be difficult, even “annoying.”²⁷ Still, I venture forward in hopes of recovering and reviving American exceptionalism’s aspirational mode—a forward-looking, thoughtful, and reflective mindset that has performed (and may still perform) equalizing, liberating, and transformative work within the American polis. Sketched

mode, has been critiqued for a lack of exceptionalism suggests that like the academy, the general public recognizes only accomplished exceptionalism.

²⁶ Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

narrowly, then, this is a dissertation about American exceptionalism, a problematic concept that remains poorly defined. Sketched broadly, though, it is an attempt to identify and revitalize the tradition's aspirational principles and, in so doing, to challenge the hegemonic conception of "good" American citizenship.

In what follows, I sketch the dissertation's main argument, describe the stakes of the project, and review the methods used throughout. I then position the project within two existing literatures—namely, the literature on American exceptionalism and the literature on rhetoric and politics—and highlight my interventions in and contributions to each. Finally, I offer a short sketch of the remainder of the dissertation and describe, briefly, the arguments of the remaining chapters.

I. Theorizing American Exceptionalism

Much of the existing literature treats American exceptionalism as a unified tradition—one that utilizes the same tropes and has the same rhetorical effects whenever it is invoked. This dissertation's most fundamental argument is that the American exceptionalist rhetorical tradition is not, in fact, unified, but can rather be divided into at least two strains, which I call accomplished exceptionalism and aspirational exceptionalism. Though both strands have long been present in American political thought, accomplished is the variety that most scholars and citizens recognize and celebrate as exceptionalism. I argue, however, that aspirational exceptionalism is equally exceptionalist and shares the same fundamental philosophical commitments that define accomplished thought. To defend this claim, I analyze the political thought of several unlikely exceptionalists—thinkers who are not, traditionally, considered to be part of the American exceptionalist tradition—and show how each articulates a philosophy and politics of aspirational exceptionalism.

But what do we gain by differentiating between aspirational and accomplished exceptionalisms? And why ought we identify and recognize aspirational exceptionalism as a separate strain of exceptionalist thought? At present, individuals, politicians, citizens, and political theorists who speak of and celebrate American exceptionalism refer only to the accomplished variety—a type of exceptionalism which, as I will explain below, is uncritical, complacent, and self-celebratory. But by limiting the definition of exceptionalism in this way, we inadvertently construct a political society in which the accomplished demeanor is, for better or for worse, the only acceptable and appropriate way to enact American citizenship. If, however, we recognize and celebrate exceptionalism’s aspirational strand, we create space for a citizenship that is thoughtful, self-critical, and ameliorative and, in so doing, construct a society that accepts, allows, and enables multiple forms of “good” citizenship.

In the remainder of this section, I offer a working definition of American exceptionalism. I then conceptualize and define accomplished and aspirational exceptionalism, respectively. I also describe the modes and forms of citizenship that each type of exceptionalism enables.

A. (Re)Defining Exceptionalism

As noted previously, American politicians, citizens, and political thinkers frequently discuss, study, and reference American exceptionalism. Despite its prevalence, however, the concept remains ill-defined, and leading scholars in the field endorse competing (and often conflicting) understandings.²⁸ Before I proceed with my analysis, then, I offer a more concrete

²⁸ The following examples are illustrative. Patrick Deneen argues that there are three distinct *types* of American exceptionalism, each of which corresponds to a distinct moment or period in American history. The first, “communal perfectionism,” is the belief that “America is [...] a unique example for the rest of the world to follow, and that example is to be fulfilled by means of a particularly difficult attainment of virtue within the context of a political community.” “Cities of Man on a Hill,” *American Political Thought* 1, No. 1 (2012): 34. This type of exceptionalism, Deneen argues, emerged during America’s Puritan colonial era (i.e., before the United States existed as such) and is best exemplified in the writings of early Puritan settlers like John Winthrop. The second, which Deneen calls “liberal isolationism,” arose in the nineteenth century and “places stress on individual liberty, domestic

and streamlined definition of American exceptionalism, which I will use throughout the dissertation. Specifically, I define American exceptionalism as the belief that the United States is a superior and exemplary nation tasked with performing a unique and critical role in global affairs. Put more schematically, American exceptionalism is a belief made up of three component parts: 1) a claim of national superiority, 2) a belief (usually couched in religious terms) that the nation is somehow chosen and 3) a sense of responsibility or an awareness of some role that America—and only America—can perform.

economic prosperity, and a strong but defensive military stance toward the world.” *Ibid.*, 37. This form of exceptionalism, which emphasizes America’s exemplary character but denies the need to interfere in the politics of other nations, is typified in George Washington’s “Farewell Address,” wherein Washington praises America’s “good laws” and “free government” while admonishing citizens to “have with [foreign nations] as little political connection as possible.” *Ibid.*, 37-40. The third and final form, “liberal expansionism,” stresses that America is unique and exemplary and must, therefore, spread its beliefs and institutions throughout the world. *Ibid.*, 41-46. According to Deneen, this type of exceptionalism emerged in the era of manifest destiny and has remained the dominant form of American exceptionalism ever since; presidents as recent as George W. Bush, Deneen suggests, embody this type of exceptionalism.

Other scholars provide similar, if less formal, definitions. Nathaniel Cadle, for example, defines American exceptionalism as the notion that America is and ought to be “world-salvation”—that it is America’s privilege, duty, and mission to “reshape the world in the mold of western civilization.” “America as ‘World-Salvation,’” 127 (quoting Walter La Feber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1869-1898* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963, 76-77]). Carl J. Bon Tempo, however, argues that exceptionalism refers to America’s unique abundance of natural resources, its superior economic and political systems, its special virtue and innocence (qualities made possible by the nation’s relative lack of class conflict), and its “duty [...] to bring these political and economic institutions and ideals to the less advantaged and pitiable world.” “American Exceptionalism and the Immigration Debates in the Modern United States,” in *American Exceptionalisms*, ed. James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 150. Anthony Stewart provides yet another definition, claiming that American exceptionalism is ultimately “white American exceptionalism, since the political ability to stand as a beacon to the world has historically resided in the hands of America’s white and, for the most part, male, citizens.” “Giving the People What They Want: The African American Exception as Racial Cliché in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*,” in *American Exceptionalisms*, ed. James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 167. Peter Onuf, by contrast, rejects the urge to define the concept altogether; per Onuf, there *is* no single definition of American exceptionalism because there is—and always has been—a set of “dueling exceptionalisms” in the United States. “American Exceptionalism and National Identity,” *American Political Thought* 1, No. 1 (2012): 80. Of these, my understanding of American exceptionalism is most comparable to Onuf’s, because I, too, believe that American exceptionalism exists in dueling and contested forms. However, while Onuf distinguishes between liberal cosmopolitan exceptionalism and conservative essentialist exceptionalism, idealist exceptionalism and realist exceptionalism, I draw the line somewhat differently. See Sections I.B and I.C, below.

For further discussion of American exceptionalism’s definitional vagueness and ambiguities, see Justin B. Litke, *Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 1-21.

This definition differs slightly from the conventional understanding of American exceptionalism. In the existing scholarship, American exceptionalism is most often understood to mean American *distinctiveness*.²⁹ Thus, most scholars often suggest America is unique (and, therefore, exceptional) insofar as it has a distinctive political, religious, or legal culture which has grown “out of its peculiar social, political, and economic history.”³⁰ Sometimes, this distinctiveness is positive, as when scholars cite America’s unique social egalitarianism³¹ or its distinctive and pervasive religiosity.³² Oftentimes, though, scholars cite neutral or even negative traits as evidence of the country’s distinctiveness: for example, some argue that America is “exceptional” because of its high crime rates,³³ high divorce rates,³⁴ and tendency to flout well-established international rules.³⁵

²⁹ Litke describes this trend as follows: “Nearly all [...] scholarship to date contains an important common thread. [...] All of these scholars understand the term *American exceptionalism* to be a claim in the idiom of comparative political science or comparative history. At the core of the term, it is thought, American exceptionalism means that there is either some standard from which America deviates [...] or that America deviates from an empirical pattern set by similar countries. These scholars’ primarily comparative tack means that the question of American exceptionalism is usually taken to be an empirical one, answerable by survey analysis and the cataloging of various other measurable phenomena.” *Twilight of the Republic*, 6.

³⁰ Harold Hongju Koh, “On American Exceptionalism,” *Stanford Law Review* 55, No. 5 (May 2003): 1483. For examples of this understanding of exceptionalism, see Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1955). Also see Steven G. Calabresi, “‘A Shining City on a Hill’: American Exceptionalism and the Supreme Court’s Practice of Relying on Foreign Law,” *Boston University Law Review* 86, No. 5 (December 2006): 1373, who argues that “the distinctively American faith in liberty, religious freedom, and patriotism has caused the United States to become really quite different from all the other nations of the world. Not only does the United States differ from the nations of Western Europe, including Great Britain from which it sprang, but it is also exceptional among the countries of the New World, differing markedly from the nations of Central and South America and even from its northern cousin Canada.”

³¹ Calabresi, “‘A Shining City on a Hill,’” 1378.

³² *Ibid.*, 1380.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1375.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Michael Ignatieff suggests that American exceptionalism is composed of three distinct elements, none of which is particularly praiseworthy: “exemptionalism” (America’s tendency to exempt itself from humanitarian laws and conventions), “double standards” (the nation’s practice of judging “itself and its friends by more permissive criteria than it does its enemies”), and “legal isolationism” (the country’s habit of separating its domestic laws from international human rights law and of denying the latter jurisdiction within the United States). *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-4. Harold Koh makes a

Contra these scholars, I suggest that American exceptionalism entails an assertion of national superiority, not merely an acknowledgement of difference. This point is crucial because it reflects and is consistent with the ways in which Americans discursively deploy the term. American politicians seem to understand American exceptionalism as something more than mere acknowledgment of the nation’s distinctive features. After all, when, during the 2012 presidential elections, Mitt Romney accused Barack Obama of failing to express appropriate exceptionalist spirit, he did so by suggesting that the President thought America to be exceptional “in the way that the British think Great Britain is exceptional or the Greeks think Greece is exceptional” (i.e., he suggested that the President saw the nation as distinctive, but not necessarily superior).³⁶ By attributing to Obama this exceptionalism-as-distinctiveness perspective, Romney successfully undermined the President’s patriotism and sent Obama scrambling to convince the American public that he, too, believed in America’s superiority. If the candidates and American public understood American exceptionalism as merely an acknowledgment of distinctiveness, Romney’s accusation would have reaffirmed the President’s reputation as an exceptionalist. That it had the opposite effect suggests a tacit understanding that American exceptionalism requires a claim to supremacy, an assertion that America’s uniqueness is *better than* that of Greece, England, or any other nation.

As I define it, then, American exceptionalism is characterized in part by the belief that the United States is greater than other nations. But, as mentioned above, my definition also

similar claim and suggests that America is exceptional in part because of its “double standards”—that is, its tendency to flout well-established rules that clearly apply to the rest of the world. “On American Exceptionalism,” 1483. For both Ignatieff and Koh, these practices are part and parcel of American exceptionalism because they represent ways in which the United States is distinct from (though not necessarily superior to) other nations.

³⁶ Mitt Romney, “Romney’s Foreign Policy Speech.”

includes two additional components: a belief in America's chosenness and a unique sense of responsibility. I am not the first to identify these elements as important aspects of American exceptionalism but instead borrow these concepts from scholars who have written extensively about the relationship(s) between chosenness,³⁷ mission,³⁸ and American exceptionalism. I do, however, depart from these scholars in one crucial respect: whereas others argue that chosenness and mission are *sufficient* conditions of American exceptionalism, I will argue that they are only *necessary*. On my account, then, American exceptionalism requires at once a sense of national superiority *and* of chosenness *and* of unique national responsibility; if all three components are not present, then neither is American exceptionalism.

By chosenness, I refer to the belief or conviction that the United States has been selected or set apart by God (or, less commonly, by nature³⁹ or history⁴⁰). This sentiment is related to, and perhaps a direct descendent of, the notion of Judeo-Christian chosenness, and it operates in much the same fashion as its religious counterpart.⁴¹ Judeo-Christian chosenness, for example,

³⁷ See, for example, Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation," 262, who argues that "in its original form," American exceptionalism is "an explicitly theological notion, based in the doctrine of election" or divine chosenness. Sacvan Bercovitch similarly notes that the early American settlers considered themselves "a 'peculiar people,' a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design." *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 8.

³⁸ See, for example, Bercovitch, who identifies the "rhetoric of mission" as an important component of early Puritan political thought and identity. *The American Jeremiad*, 8. See also Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation"; Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism"; and Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*.

³⁹ *À la* Charles Darwin. Darwin, of course, did not suggest that nature had selected the Americans as a chosen people, but thinkers who *do* make that argument (e.g., Josiah Strong) defend their beliefs using Darwinian reasoning. Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," 19-20.

⁴⁰ *À la* Hegel, who, in *The Philosophy of History*, argues that "America is [...] the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of World History shall reveal itself." Trans. J. Sibree (New York: American Home Library Company, 1902), 142. This comment is not a reference to the United States (it is rather an articulation of Hegel's anticipation of the westward course of human civilization), but it nonetheless illustrates the belief that a nation or society might be chosen by history. William T. Cavanaugh articulates a similar view, which he calls "enlightenment exceptionalism." "Messianic Nation," 266.

⁴¹ Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation," 261. Arnold M. Eisen argues that early American colonists self-consciously identified themselves with the Israelites—God's chosen people—in order to give meaning to their lives and trials. "The Rhetoric of Chosenness," *Society* 28, No. 1 (November/December 1990): 28. According to Eisen, this

involves the belief that “God chose the Israelites to accomplish God’s special purposes on earth” and that, because of their preferred status, the Israelites will receive unique blessings.⁴² These same features—namely, a unique relationship with God and an expectation of blessings—are operative in and characteristic of American chosenness, as well. Like descendants of Abraham, who feel privileged and favored by God, American exceptionalists often suggest, as John Winthrop did, that “the Lord [...] delight[s] to dwell among us.”⁴³ And like the Israelites, who expected and awaited the delivery of God’s promised blessings (a promised land,⁴⁴ a descendancy of kings,⁴⁵ and innumerable offspring⁴⁶), the chosen American people anticipate that their country will always be a “tall, proud city, [...] God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace.”⁴⁷

By mission, I refer to the idea that the United States is responsible for fulfilling a distinct role or purpose. This mission can take several forms.⁴⁸ A chosen people might, for example, feel it their duty to spread a spiritual message or to ensure “the world’s salvation.”⁴⁹ In such instances, the mission is religious and fulfills divine fiat. In other cases, the chosen people might feel called to act as a “*political* Messiah”—that is, to spread certain political values or practices

identification, this imitation of Jewish chosenness, allowed “Puritans [to] leave their preacher’s election-day addresses further convinced that their travails had been prefigured in the biblical saga of Israel.” *Ibid.*

⁴² Cavanaugh, “Messianic Nation,” 262. In its first articulation (namely, at the moment when God selected Abraham), Judeo-Christian chosenness involved the promise of special benefits, including the promise to make Abraham a “great nation,” to give his people a “new land.” *Ibid.* This association (i.e., the anticipation of unique rewards for Abraham’s descendants) has persisted throughout history.

⁴³ Winthrop, “Modell of Christian Charity,” 18.

⁴⁴ Genesis 17:8.

⁴⁵ Genesis 17:6, 17.

⁴⁶ Genesis 17:2, 5, 6.

⁴⁷ Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

⁴⁸ Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” 11-26.

⁴⁹ Cadle, “America as ‘World-Salvation.’”

throughout the earth.⁵⁰ This civic mission entails propagating America's political values and institutions globally, "by peaceful means if possible, but by military means if necessary."⁵¹ John Winthrop's "Modell of Christian Charity" illustrates yet another variant of mission or calling: the exemplifying mission. Less aggressive than other versions of the mission, this variant can be fulfilled without missionary work, warfare, or political intervention. The exemplifying mission requires simply that the chosen people "consider [themselves] as a city upon a hill"; recognize that "the eyes of all people are upon [them]"; and use the force of their example to influence others.⁵²

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is more important that the mission exists than that it be of a particular type. American exceptionalism, as I define it, does not require that a person feel called to spread the Christian gospel, but it *does* require that he or she feel called (and uniquely qualified) to do *something*. Among the ranks of American exceptionalists, then, one might find religious zealots, enlightenment philosophers, political isolationists, and global expansionists, all of whom merit the exceptionalist label (assuming they meet the other two criteria of the definition). One would not, however, consider as exceptionalist a person who, persuaded of America's superiority and possessing a sense of chosenness, does not also feel burdened with some unique calling or responsibility.

B. Accomplished Exceptionalism

⁵⁰ Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation," 264 (quoting Herman Melville).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 266. This is exemplified by Mitt Romney's assertion that "it is [America's] duty to steer [this century] onto the path of freedom, peace, and prosperity." "Romney's Foreign Policy Speech."

⁵² Winthrop, "Modell of Christian Charity," 18. See also Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation," 264 (quoting Herman Melville): "The Past is the text-book of tyrants; the Future the Bible of the Free. Americans are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard sent through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New world that is ours." Winthrop's exceptionalism actually combines two types of mission, because he also has a sense of divine calling. For an excellent review of these and other forms of "mission" in American political thought, see Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism."

When I use the term “American exceptionalism,” then, I invoke it as defined above—namely, to refer a constellation of beliefs about the United States as chosen, superior to other nations, and tasked with a unique responsibility or mission. But though I have offered a new, more streamlined definition, I do not treat American exceptionalism as a unified tradition, and I do not, like other scholars, suggest that the term looks the same whenever it is invoked. On the contrary, I argue that American exceptionalism—defined as a commitment to American greatness, chosenness, and mission—can be (and is) deployed in multiple ways and toward various ends. More specifically, I suggest that American exceptionalism is expressed and conveyed through at least two distinct rhetorical modes: an *aspirational* mode, which is self-critical and ameliorative, and an *accomplished* mode, which is self-celebratory, complacent, and un-critical.

As discussed above, most scholars, politicians, and citizens recognize accomplished rhetoric as the primary (if not sole) type of American exceptionalism. Accordingly, this dissertation does not spend much space discussing or analyzing the accomplished mode. Still, aspirational exceptionalism is perhaps best understood in comparison with its more dominant accomplished counterpart. Because of this, I here offer a brief typology of accomplished rhetoric and its tropes. Specifically, I define accomplished exceptionalism as a backward-looking, self-congratulatory discourse that assumes America was, is, and always will be chosen, superior, and tasked with a unique mission.

Accomplished exceptionalism (and the rhetoric used to articulate it) is characterized by several defining tropes. First, accomplished exceptionalism is generally couched in certain or at least probable terms. Thus, accomplished exceptionalists do not discuss America’s greatness in the conditional mood (e.g., “America *could* be great again...”); instead, they use the indicative

mood to convey America's greatness as fact, its destiny as inalterable. Second, accomplished exceptionalism is historically amnesiac⁵³ and emphasizes the nation's triumphs while glossing over its failures. This exceptionalism does not draw attention to America's faults or weaknesses, and it rarely acknowledges the possibility that the nation has drifted off-course. Third, accomplished exceptionalism generally takes a self-congratulatory posture: it praises the nation for a job well done and leaves its audience feeling comfortably content with the country's status in the world. Finally, accomplished exceptionalism portrays the nation as a united, undivided whole: it obscures individual differences and instead intimates that Americans are singularly and unitedly committed to a common project or goal.

Accomplished exceptionalism thus shares many of the features that John Bodnar attributes to what he calls the "official culture" of commemoration and memorialization.⁵⁴ According to Bodnar, most public monuments and memorials reflect "a common interest in social unity, the continuity of existing institutions, and loyalty to the status quo."⁵⁵ To secure these interests, official monuments portray the past as "timeless[] and sacred[]"; they also "promot[e] interpretations of past and present reality that reduce the power of competing

⁵³ This term—"historical amnesia"—is borrowed from Ali Behdad. According to Behdad, historical amnesia occurs when a society consciously "denies certain historical facts" (often those that are most unpleasant and regrettable) and, in so doing, disavows any awareness of—or responsibility for—the nation's shortcomings. *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 3-5. Simon Stow argues that official monuments and memorials are often historically amnesiac as well. "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, No. 3 (2012). Quoting political theorist Jenny Edkins, Stow writes, "[T]he predominant form of national memorialization frequently 'constitutes a form of forgetting' that seeks to empty traumatic events of their political content and suppress oppositional narratives." *Ibid.*, 687.

⁵⁴ According to John Bodnar, public memorials "emerge[] from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions." *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13. I argue that accomplished exceptionalism shares many features with official memorial culture, whereas aspirational exceptionalism is comparable to vernacular memorial culture.

⁵⁵ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13.

interests” and “restate[] reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms.”⁵⁶ In so doing, the official memorial culture creates “a nationalist, patriotic culture of the whole”—one that “seldom [...] seek[s] mediation at the expense of ascendancy.”⁵⁷ In this way, public memorials function rhetorically to promote a particular understanding of an event or location.

Accomplished exceptionalism functions in much the same way. Like many official memorials, accomplished exceptionalism suppresses, disavows, or forgets conflicting narratives in order to stress social unity and adherence to the status quo. It presents America’s greatness as an unquestionable fact, and it discourages meaningful self-reflection or self-critique.

Accomplished exceptionalism thus perpetuates a “comfort culture” of self-satisfaction and complacency. While it sometimes yields positive increases in nationalism and patriotism, it often results in politically regressive attitudes and policies.⁵⁸

Ronald Reagan’s Farewell Address—a speech he delivered just days before ceding the Oval Office to his successor George H.W. Bush—exemplifies the accomplished exceptionalist mode. From beginning to end, Reagan’s address is thoroughly accomplished.⁵⁹ However, Reagan relies most heavily on accomplished tropes as he nears the end of the speech. This synecdochial segment reads, in pertinent part, as follows:

[T]here is a great tradition of warnings in Presidential farewells, and I've got one that's been on my mind for some time. But oddly enough it starts with one of the things I'm proudest of in the past 8 years: the resurgence of national pride that I

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁵⁸ Simon Stow, “Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning,” *American Political Science Review* 101, No. 2 (2007): 687-688 (quoting Marita Sturken).

⁵⁹ Consider, in particular, Reagan’s story about the refugee who greeted an American sailor as “freedom man.” According to Reagan, “that’s what it was to be an American in the 1980’s. We stood, again, for freedom.” “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

called the new patriotism. This national feeling is good, but it won't count for much, and it won't last unless it's grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge. [...]

So, we've got to teach history based not on what's in fashion but what's important—why the Pilgrims came here, who Jimmy Doolittle was, and what those 30 seconds over Tokyo meant. [...] If we forget what we did, we won't know who we are. I'm warning of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit. Let's start with some basics: more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual. [...]

The past few days [...] I've thought a bit of the “shining city upon a hill.” The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. [...] I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

We've done our part. And as I walk off into the city streets, a final word to the men and women of the Reagan revolution, the men and women across America who for 8 years did the work that brought America back. My friends: We did it. We weren't just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger, we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands. All in all, not bad, not bad at all.

Even in this short excerpt, Reagan repeatedly speaks of (or alludes to) America's chosenness, superiority, and unique mission. Reagan also employs many of the accomplished tropes described above. Consider, for example, the beginning of the excerpt. For a brief moment, it seems that Reagan is about to critique or advise his country: he alludes to the “great tradition of warnings in Presidential farewells” and suggests that he has been contemplating a

particular warning for some time. But as Reagan continues, it becomes clear that his “warning” is not, in fact, a warning at all. It is, rather, explicit and exaggerated praise of the nation’s deep patriotism. Unlike George Washington, whose presidential farewell contained an emphatic and sharp critique of the nation’s political parties,⁶⁰ Reagan simply praises his listeners for their “new patriotism” and encourages them to cultivate more of it. He is not actually in the business of critiquing; rather, he aims to comfort, congratulate, and commend.

After his pseudo-critique of America’s patriotism—which, he admits, is “one of the things [he’s] proudest of in the past eight years”—Reagan encourages his listeners to take care that their patriotism is “grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge.”⁶¹ To do this, he suggests that Americans must “teach history based not on what’s in fashion but what’s important.”⁶² Here, again, it seems that Reagan might provide an honest or even critical account of America’s past—one that evenhandedly acknowledges America’s successes *and* failures. But when Reagan

⁶⁰ Consider, for example, this forceful warning—one of *many* of its kind—from Washington’s farewell address:

Let me now [...] warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of [political] part[ies], generally. This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty. Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind, (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight,) the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

“Washington’s Farewell Address,” speech, 1796, transcript http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

⁶¹ Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

⁶² *Ibid.*

gives a brief example of the sort of teaching he envisions, it becomes clear that, in true accomplished fashion, his history is selective, even amnesiac. Consider the three historical events Reagan chooses to emphasize: “why the Pilgrims came here, who Jimmy Doolittle was, and what those 30 seconds over Tokyo meant.”⁶³ It is striking that, with nearly 200 years of history to choose from, Reagan picks three events that most Americans consider valorous. There is no mention of America’s challenges—not even of those the nation overcame (e.g., the Civil War, the Great Depression)—and there is no mention of the country’s current problems. Instead, Reagan’s history, which he characterizes as “grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge,” is deeply rose-colored, a *very* selective remembrance of things past.⁶⁴

This historical amnesia continues throughout the next paragraph, where Reagan describes America as a “shining city on a hill.”⁶⁵ Here again, Reagan paints a romantic and idealized portrait of America, calling the nation a “tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept [and] God-blessed [...]”⁶⁶ Reagan also disavows the conflicts and contention of his own era: He insists that America is “open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here,” but he omits any conversation of the Cold War or communism, two political phenomena to which Reagan’s America was anything *but* “open.”⁶⁷

Reagan then employs a new accomplished trope—a portrayal of the nation as a united, undivided whole. Although he speaks during a time of much political conflict and division,⁶⁸

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Consider that in the years immediately preceding Reagan’s presidency, the United States experienced conflict over Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. The American citizenry remained divided during Reagan’s administration, albeit due to different causes—namely, communism, race, class, gender, and the Cold War.

Reagan claims that there are no factions or cleavages within American society. In fact, Reagan instead suggests that America is “teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace.”⁶⁹ Reagan also speaks as if the nation’s unity and excellence are constants—unchanging (and, perhaps, unchangeable) features in an otherwise dynamic world. “I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life,” he explains. “That’s how I saw it, and see it still.”⁷⁰

In the final two paragraphs, the very last of his speech, Reagan employs yet another accomplished trope: a contented, self-congratulatory posture. Pausing to consider the state of the nation, Reagan *again* shies away from the opportunity to warn, admonish, or critique.⁷¹ Instead, he offers unconditional and glowing praise, calling the nation “more prosperous, more secure, and happier” than before. Reagan praises the American citizens who have “made a difference [...], made the city stronger, [...] made the city freer, and [...] left her in good hands.”⁷² He then concludes with what is, in effect, a presidential pat-yourself-on-the-back: “All in all,” he says, “not bad, not bad at all.”⁷³

This brief rhetorical analysis highlights the primary tropes of accomplished exceptionalism and illustrates how those tropes operate within American political speech. Typical of accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric, Reagan’s farewell address is amnesiac and presents only a selective, idealized account of the past. It conveys a strong, though perhaps misleading, sense of national unity, and it describes America’s greatness as a well-established fact. Most importantly, the speech’s self-congratulatory tone illustrates accomplished

⁶⁹ Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Other presidents have *not* turned down the opportunity to deliver parting criticisms and warnings. See, for example, Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address.” See also footnote 60, above.

⁷² Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*

exceptionalism and highlights its probable effects. Though Reagan gestures toward critique, his speech is, ultimately, a celebration of America's successes. Because of this, the speech does not encourage or inspire change (and why would it, given that America is, on the accomplished exceptionalist account, *always already* great?). Instead, Reagan lulls listeners into a supercilious state of complacency.

C. Aspirational Exceptionalism

The second type of exceptionalist rhetoric, which I call aspirational exceptionalism, is just the opposite. Unlike accomplished exceptionalism, aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric treats American greatness as a *possibility*, but not a guarantee. Aspirational exceptionalism is also self-critical and attentive to history: it acknowledges and considers America's failings—as well as its successes—and is willing (even eager!) to explore ways in which American can be better. Aspirational exceptionalism does not consist of smug self-praise. Rather, this exceptionalism involves honest, bold, and sometimes biting critique, which is often perceived as un-patriotic or even un-American.

Articulations of aspirational exceptionalism typically share several defining features. First, aspirational exceptionalism usually involves some form of warning or self-critique and is often accompanied by a transparent account of America's shortcomings and flaws. Second, aspirational exceptionalism draws attention to the nation's cleavages and fractures. It does not, like accomplished exceptionalism, pretend that America is one unified whole but rather acknowledges and highlights diverse interests and groups within society. Third, aspirational exceptionalism is couched in language of admonition and possibility; it suggests that America *can* be great, but doesn't assume that it is already so. Finally, aspirational exceptionalism can

feel raw, even unpleasant; it motivates and inspires change, to be sure, but it does so through uncomfortable and sometimes harsh language.

Thus defined, aspirational exceptionalism shares many features of the American jeremiad, a rhetorical tradition that, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, “join[s] social criticism to spiritual renewal.”⁷⁴ Named after Jeremiah, a biblical prophet who criticized his kingdom’s moral and religious failings, a jeremiad is a speech that identifies and draws attention to a society’s flaws in order to revitalize or reignite that society’s mission, purpose, or potential.⁷⁵ In early America, Puritan colonists regularly employed this rhetorical form and, in so doing, developed a distinctly *American* jeremiad—a particular rhetorical tradition that applies jeremiadic tropes to the American situation.⁷⁶ According to Bercovitch, America’s jeremiads are characterized by a sense of errand, a belief that America has a “peculiar mission” to act “as instruments of a sacred historical design.”⁷⁷ These jeremiads also denounce the nation’s defects while simultaneously identifying and describing its potential. By thus combining “lament and celebration,” America’s jeremiads “direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny [and] guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, xi.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁶ For further discussion of this American Jeremiad, see Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984) and Andrew Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 7-8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9. This is not to suggest that aspirational exceptionalism is identical to the American jeremiad. On the contrary, the two rhetorical traditions bear some important distinctions. For Bercovitch, the American jeremiad is a progressive story about the very arc of history. Aspirational exceptionalism is not committed to this story—that is, it does not adopt Bercovitch’s metaphysics—though it does share his concerns with progress and improvement.

Aspirational exceptionalism is also comparable to what John Bodnar calls the “vernacular memorial culture.”⁷⁹ According to Bodnar, vernacular culture “conveys what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like,” and it highlights “views of reality derived from firsthand experience.”⁸⁰ Vernacular culture is not, in other words, unduly idealistic but instead honestly acknowledges the realities of social and political life. Vernacular culture also recognizes that any nation is simply an “imagined” community made up of “an array of specialized interests that are [...] diverse and [...] can even clash with one another.”⁸¹ Vernacular culture acknowledges the importance of this “imagined community” but is nonetheless “preoccupied [...] with defending the interests and rights of [...] social segments.”⁸² Because of this, vernacular culture is sometimes characterized as un-patriotic, despite the fact that “there is certainly patriotism in much of what [it] honor[s].”⁸³

Aspirational exceptionalism shares many of these features. Like the American jeremiad, aspirational exceptionalism accepts the premise that the United States has a distinct role or errand to fulfill. And like vernacular culture, aspirational exceptionalism is grounded in social and political reality rather than in an idealized conception of the nation. It also attends to the existence and needs of various and competing groups within society (it does not, in other words, pretend that the United States is a unified, homogeneous whole), and it “acknowledges the idea of loyalty [to the polity] and agree[s] to defend the symbol of the nation.”⁸⁴ Finally, aspirational

⁷⁹ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

exceptionalism, like both vernacular culture and the American jeremiad, encourages and invites critique and is thus is often thought to be un-patriotic.

Aspirational exceptionalism's unique features yield distinct rhetorical effects. Unlike accomplished exceptionalism, which typically cultivates feelings of assurance and contentment, aspirational exceptionalism often leaves audiences feeling rebuked and chastened. If accomplished rhetoric yields complacency or self-satisfaction, aspirational rhetoric may provoke honest reflection and self-assessment. Aspirational exceptionalism forces audiences to face and acknowledge their shortcomings, and it draws attention to areas the nation can (and, perhaps, must) improve. Because of this, aspirational language can be experienced as grave, dire, and severe: it is not the type of rhetoric that is engraved on monuments or recited by school children, but is instead the sort that is written off and condemned as sacrilegious, unpatriotic.⁸⁵

II. Methods and Stakes

In recent years, a host of contemporary scholars have begun thinking and writing about the relationship between language and politics. In general, though, scholars who study how language shapes and influences politics have done so by focusing on either a particular genre, a specific author, or a discrete text or set of texts. Simon Stow, for example, takes the genre-centric approach and explores the language of mourning and memorialization through analyses of funeral orations, public monuments, and public mourning practices.⁸⁶ Danielle Allen, by contrast, anchors her analysis around Plato and studies the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, and other

⁸⁵ See, for example, Steven Johnston, *The Truth About Patriotism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). According to Johnston, many people mistakenly believe that self-reflection and criticism are incompatible with "true" patriotism.

⁸⁶ Simon Stow, "Agonistic Homegoing: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of African American Public Mourning," *American Political Science Review* 104, No. 4 (November 2010); Stow, "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan"; Stow, "Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero."

Platonic works for clues about and insight into the relationship between language and politics.⁸⁷

Garry Wills takes an even narrower approach, focusing exclusively on the political import and effects of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.⁸⁸ Unlike either Stow or Allen, then, Wills focuses on a specific rhetorical text and uses that text—and only that text—to draw conclusions about the relationship between language and politics more generally.

Rather than use a particular genre (*a la* Stow), author (*a la* Allen), or text (*a la* Wills) to explore the linkages between language and politics, this dissertation focuses on the political import of a particular rhetorical tradition. Specifically, this dissertation explores the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and considers how this tradition has shaped and influenced American politics. Like Stow, Allen, and Wills, then, this dissertation identifies and analyzes the political effects of a particular type of language. It also, like Stow, Allen, and Wills, uses close readings of particular texts as ways to understand the broader relationship between language and politics.

To be sure, other rhetorical traditions could provide interesting insights about American citizenship and the relationships between language and politics. However, I focus on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism for several reasons. First, American exceptionalism is one of the most prevalent rhetorical traditions in the American state. It has been a part of American political speech since before the nation's founding, and much of America's political speech can be appropriately classified beneath its umbrella. Second, American exceptionalism is a complicated tradition and is more nuanced than is sometimes thought. It thus presents a fruitful field for study and exploration. Third, American exceptionalist rhetoric is often used by contemporary American politicians, leaders, and citizens and will thus be familiar and relevant to

⁸⁷ Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

⁸⁸ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1992).

most American readers. Finally, the tradition remains popular and prevalent in American life. If, then, language influences citizenship behaviors and other political practices, American exceptionalist rhetoric might represent an opportunity to intervene in, and shape the course of, America's political trajectory.

Unlike other studies of American exceptionalism, this dissertation does not focus on America's obvious exceptionalists—John Winthrop, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, and the like.⁸⁹ Instead, the dissertation analyzes the speech and writings of thinkers who are not typically associated with the American exceptionalist tradition: Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Baldwin. Through close readings and analyses of these unlikely exceptionalists, the dissertation shows that American exceptionalism is not always self-celebratory, complacent, and backward-looking. The dissertation thus uncovers a new and previously unrecognized type of exceptionalist rhetoric (i.e., aspirational exceptionalism) and, in so doing, shows that citizens can be critical and thoughtful while still remaining committed to America's greatness.

But all of this raises some important questions: Why study rhetoric at all? Does it really matter that some exceptionalists use accomplished rhetoric while others use aspirational? At the end of the day, isn't the *ideology* of American exceptionalism more important than the words that people use to convey it? Why, then, dedicate an entire study to the *rhetoric* of American exceptionalism, specifically?

My response to these objections is reflected in the linguistic philosophy of Charles Taylor, a philosopher who explicitly rejects the notion that language is merely a referent, note,

⁸⁹ See notes 102-106 and accompanying text, below.

sign, or encoded thought.⁹⁰ According to Taylor, “language is not just a set of words which designate things” but is rather “the vehicle of [...] reflective awareness.”⁹¹ Put differently, language allows human beings to become fully conscious of the things they experience and to recognize, rather than merely react to, external phenomena.⁹² By allowing human beings to experience this deeper awareness, language also makes possible *new* forms of awareness, and it allows human beings to “relate to things in new ways [...] and to have new emotions, goals, relationships, as well as being responsive to issues of strong value.”⁹³ Language is thus the medium in which meaning is generated, and it allows humans to attach significance to the objects, people, and ideas in the external world. It is, in sum, a “pattern of activity by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world,” and it allows us to constantly shape and re-shape the way we experience our existence.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 103. Hans-Georg Gadamer articulates a similar theory of language, arguing that “language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world.” “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge, trans. David E. Linge (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

⁹¹ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 229.

⁹² To illustrate this idea, Taylor uses the example of a rat that has been trained to pass through a door marked with a triangle. The rat, of course, does not have language, but still it recognizes and reacts to the triangle’s shape. A human being, by contrast, can recognize the shape *and* understand that ‘triangle’ is the proper descriptor. According to Taylor, “only beings [like the human in this example] who can describe things as triangles can be aid to recognize them as triangles, at least in the strong sense.” Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 228. This ability—which is made possible through language—to recognize and reflect on the world makes linguistic beings “conscious of the things they experience in a fuller way.” *Ibid.*, 229.

⁹³ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 37. In an earlier essay, Taylor explains this idea as follows: “If language serves to express/realize a new kind of awareness; then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things; an ability to describe them, but also new ways of feeling, of responding to things. If in expressing our thoughts about things, we can come to have new thoughts; then in expressing our feelings, we can come to have transformed feelings.” Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 233.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 232.

Like Taylor, I claim that language is a force that constructs reality and creates (and perpetuates) relationships of power and dominance. Because of this, it is imperative that America's political theorists study the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. If language shapes the world in which it operates, then surely American exceptionalist rhetoric—one of the nation's most prevalent and abiding rhetorical traditions—has influenced (and can yet influence) America's culture, citizenship practices, and politics. Anyone invested in the nation's past, present, or future thus ought to take the language of American exceptionalism very seriously, for it is in and through this language that America creates its identity and constructs its continued existence.

III. Literature Review and Points of Intervention

This project lies at the intersection of two vibrant and related literatures: that of American exceptionalism, and that of rhetoric and politics. In this section, I summarize my contributions to and interventions into each. I first discuss the project's relationship to the existing conversations on American exceptionalism and identify three distinct ways the project enhances that literature: by offering a more concrete, formal definition of American exceptionalism; by characterizing American exceptionalism as a multiple and differentiated (rather than monist) rhetorical tradition; and by identifying and studying several thinkers whose aspirational works have been discounted and/or overlooked by previous scholars of American exceptionalism. I then explain the project's contributions to existing literature on rhetoric and politics by analyzing how the rhetoric of American exceptionalism influences and impacts modes of citizenship in the United States.

A. Contributions to Literature on American Exceptionalism

As discussed in Section I.A, the current literature on American exceptionalism is messy and conflicted, largely because there is little (if no) consensus as to what American exceptionalism actually means. This dissertation's first contribution to the existing literature is thus to offer a clear and streamlined definition of the term. As I outlined in greater detail above, I define American exceptionalism as an orientation toward the country that is made up of three component parts: an assertion of America's superiority, a belief that America has been chosen, and a conviction that America has a unique mission or role to fulfil. This definition draws upon and synthesizes those offered by other scholars of American exceptionalism and thus provides a new and more focused way of conceptualizing this highly contested concept.

In addition to providing a formalized, tri-part definition of American exceptionalism, this dissertation claims that American exceptionalism is best understood as a non-unitary rhetorical tradition.⁹⁵ The dissertation thus refutes the prevailing view of American exceptionalist rhetoric—namely, that it is monist, flat-footed, and conservative—and instead suggests that expressions of American exceptionalism exist at least two forms: accomplished, which is

⁹⁵ In his 2013 study of American exceptionalism, Justin B. Litke similarly argues that American exceptionalism can be understood in two distinct ways. However, Litke's division is quite different from my own. In this project, I argue that there is a singular definition of American exceptionalism but that rhetoric which satisfies that single definition can be (and is) deployed in multiple ways. According to Litke, by contrast, there are two distinct *types* (i.e., two different definitions) of American exceptionalism: comparative exceptionalism and unique exceptionalism. The first type Litke identifies—comparative exceptionalism—is ultimately an empirical claim that “a normal pattern has been established in some way . . . and that . . . America deviates from this normal pattern”; such claims involve an assertions of distinctiveness but not necessarily of superiority and thus would not, under my definition, qualify as American exceptionalist. *Twilight of the Republic*, 8. Litke's second type—unique exceptionalism—is closer to my understanding yet still differs in a key way: Litke argues that unique exceptionalism can involve a belief *either* that America has been chosen by God, *or* that the nation has distinct institutional and cultural origins, *or* that the nation has a “mission to civilize, educate, or otherwise dominate the world politically or economically,” whereas I argue that exceptionalism requires a belief in American's superiority, *and* its chosenness, *and* its unique mission. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

Patrick Deneen, “Cities of Man on a Hill,” and Peter Onuf, “American Exceptionalism and National Identity,” also identify multiple strains of American exceptionalism, but again, their categories differ from my own. See note 68, above.

backward-looking, self-celebratory, and complacent; and aspirational, which is forward-looking, self-critical, and ameliorative.

In the existing literature, American exceptionalism is often characterized and condemned as a conservative, complacent, and self-celebratory rhetorical tradition. Joyce Appleby, for example, describes American exceptionalism as a “one-sidedly celebratory account of the nation’s origins” and argues that the concept, though useful in unifying America’s revolutionary generation, has served as a major hurdle for multiculturalism and other diversifying agendas.⁹⁶ Edmund Fong similarly characterizes American exceptionalism as inherently conservative and regressive and argues that America’s racial tensions and inequalities “may perhaps be impossible to resolve given the way American exceptionalism has been conceived and configured.”⁹⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese criticizes American exceptionalism for its tendency to “deny the existence of systematic or structural inequalities” and to “exclude those who do not fit the subjective model.”⁹⁸ Others, including Donald E. Pease, suggest that American exceptionalism is an ideological tool that has been used to conceal and/or justify America’s racist, sexist, and violent history;⁹⁹ to “solicit [the American] citizenry’s assent to [the state’s] monopoly over the legitimate use of violence;”¹⁰⁰ and to deflect and discourage critical thought.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Appleby, “Recovering America’s Historic Diversity.”

⁹⁷ Edmund Fong, *American Exceptionalism and the Remains of Race: Multicultural Exorcisms* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender,” *American Quarterly* 42, No. 1 (1990): 28.

⁹⁹ Pease identifies American exceptionalism as the “state fantasy” that made possible the Indian Removal Act, Operation Wetback, Japanese internment camps, and other “shameful” American policies. *The New American Exceptionalism*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Or, in Pease’s words, to “supplant critical observation with the spectacle of consensus.” *Ibid.*, 42.

Some scholars do not explicitly characterize American exceptionalism this way, but even these typically accept (albeit implicitly) the proposition that American exceptionalism is inherently conservative, self-celebratory, and uncritical. In many cases, scholars of American exceptionalism betray their acceptance of and commitment to this characterization by focusing their studies on thinkers who are white, male, and conservative;¹⁰² by thus excluding minorities, progressives, apologists, critics, and other non-conservative thinkers, these scholars create and convey the impression that the American exceptionalist tradition is necessarily self-gratified, backward-looking, and uncritical. In other instances, scholars of American exceptionalism study and analyze conservative and progressive thinkers alike but do so only to fulfil a decidedly conservative objective: to revive America's faith in itself, for example, or to restore its sense of national identity. Such is true of Justin Litke's recent study of American exceptionalism, which includes an analysis of progressive politician and thinker Albert Beveridge but has nonetheless been praised as a book that belongs "in all collections that feature a sampling of contemporary conservative thought."¹⁰³

This study departs from this literature by insisting that American exceptionalist thought and rhetoric is not, in fact, inherently conservative, self-celebratory, and backward looking. On

¹⁰² Almost always, studies of American exceptionalism include some discussion of John Winthrop and Ronald Reagan (see, e.g., Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," and Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*). Other oft-analyzed exceptionalist figures include America's founding fathers, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Quincy Adams, and George W. Bush (see, e.g., Deneen, "Cities of Man on a Hill").

¹⁰³ Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*. Though Litke analyzes the thought of both liberal and conservative figures, his stated goal is thoroughly conservative: to remind American citizens—who, according to Litke, "have forgotten who they were"—of who they are and what they stand for. *Ibid.*, 1. Litke thus writes in his introduction, "We stand at a fork in the road. Whether remain on our current path—which leads farther and farther away from the American political tradition *as it was* even as we pay lip service to that tradition and its founders—will be known only in time. If we are to resist the inertia of the present moment and actively choose a better way ahead, the best first step is a reflective inquiry into the nature of the American political tradition. [...] [I]f republicanism is still the aim of American politics, we need to take a long look into the mirror of our own political tradition, to regain a sense of who we are as a country and as a people, and to begin living up to the high examples of our past." *Ibid.*, 3.

the contrary, this study identifies instances where American thinkers have configured and employed the tropes of American exceptionalism in an aspirational manner that is neither conservative nor supercilious. By identifying and describing this alternate form of American exceptionalism, this dissertation responds and contributes to the many studies that treat American exceptionalism as a monist, unitary tradition. The dissertation also expands the ranks of the American exceptionalist tradition by identifying a number of exceptionalist thinkers who have not hitherto been treated as such.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to existing literature by analyzing the rhetoric and political thought of several aspirational thinkers. Nearly every existing study of American exceptionalism discusses the thought and works of John Winthrop,¹⁰⁴ the American founders,¹⁰⁵ and Alexis de Tocqueville,¹⁰⁶ Abraham Lincoln,¹⁰⁷ or Ronald Reagan,¹⁰⁸ but few, if any, acknowledge that other thinkers also contribute to the American exceptionalist tradition. Even fewer studies take seriously the possibility that America's most vocal critics might themselves embody an exceptionalist ethos, and most assume that thinkers who criticize or condemn the American polity are, *ipso facto*, ineligible for exceptionalist status. This dissertation challenges

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism"; Deneen, "Cities of Man on a Hill"; Emily Garcia, "'The Cause of America is in Great Measure the Cause of Mankind': American Universalism and Exceptionalism in the Early Republic," in *American Exceptionalisms*, ed. James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 51-70; Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 29; and Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Deneen, "Cities of Man on a Hill"; Garcia, "'The Cause of America is in Great Measure the Cause of Mankind'; Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 34; and Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism"; Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*; Onuf, "American Exceptionalism and National Identity"; and Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 98-128.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism" and Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism" and Sylvia Soderlind, "The Shining of America," in *American Exceptionalisms*, ed. James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1-15.

this assumption by offering close readings and analyses of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Baldwin—thinkers who are regularly excluded from the annals of American exceptionalism.¹⁰⁹ By identifying and analyzing this new line-up of exceptionalist thinkers, this dissertation shows that America’s radicals, critics, and apologists can (and do!) speak in exceptionalist registers and may, perhaps, be exceptionalism’s most sophisticated defenders.

In sum, this dissertation offers three contributions to the existing literature on American exceptionalism. First, the dissertation provides a more streamlined and formalized definition of American exceptionalism, a highly contested concept that has never been clearly or adequately defined. Second, the dissertation suggests that American exceptionalism (defined as chosenness, superiority, and mission) is not a monist tradition but has rather been put to work in different and contested ways. Specifically, the dissertation argues that American exceptionalism can be formulated as backward-looking, complacent, and self-celebratory (accomplished) or as forward-looking, ameliorative, and self-critical (aspirational), and it explores the modes of citizenship that each formulation enables. Finally, the dissertation identifies and analyzes three figures (Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin) who embody the spirit and values of aspirational exceptionalism. In so doing, the dissertation expands the corpus of American exceptionalist thought and demonstrates that these aspirational thinkers, who have previously been excluded from the ranks of American exceptionalism, in fact act as the tradition’s defenders and spokespeople.

B. Contributions to Literature on Rhetoric and Politics

¹⁰⁹ And are even, in some instances, considered antithetical to it! See, for example, Litke’s assertion that Obama is “chief among current opponents of American exceptionalism.” *Twilight of the Republic*, 5.

Over the past fifteen years, political theorists have become increasingly interested in the relationship(s) between language, rhetoric, and politics. There is thus a large body of recent theoretical work exploring how language shapes and influences political realities. Some of this scholarship defends rhetoric against its early modern critics by arguing that language and persuasion are fundamental and productive aspects of political life.¹¹⁰ Some, like Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers*, explores the various ways that speech and rhetoric mould relationships between citizens.¹¹¹ Some is inspired by the values of deliberative democratic theory and aims to identify if and under what conditions rhetoric enhances political discussion.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ In *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), for example, Bryan Garsten reconstructs Hobbes', Rousseau's, and Kant's arguments against rhetoric. Conceding that these thinkers have some valid concerns about the corrupting and coercive effects of rhetoric, Garsten nonetheless argues that these early modern attempts to discredit rhetoric and avoid rhetorical controversy in fact produce "new and more dogmatic forms" of political discourse. *Ibid.*, 175. Garsten thus suggests that political societies ought to celebrate and encourage rhetoric and persuasion and should acknowledge and appeal to citizens' private commitments and opinions.

¹¹¹ In *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Danielle Allen argues that citizens can (and should) use rhetoric to generate trust and cultivate political friendships. According to Allen, rhetoric equips citizens with the ability to make logical arguments, to convey character, and to appeal to the emotions of an audience. *Ibid.*, 143-144. These three abilities, in turn, enable citizens to cultivate political friendship and overcome distrust. Allen lists several ways that citizens can use their rhetorical abilities to generate camaraderie and trust, and she encourages citizens to listen to each other, judge political arguments, and invite others to assess and respond to political arguments. *Ibid.*, 157-158. Allen thus insists that rhetoric has the power create and enhance relations within a polity: "Rhetoric," she writes, "is relevant not only in the halls of the legislature and in the courtrooms but wherever any stranger has to convince another of anything. Any interaction among strangers can generate trust that the polity needs in order to maintain its basic relationships." *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹² The essays in Fontana, Nederman, and Remer's *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004) fall into this category. As the editors explain, *Talking Democracy* examines "how deliberation and rhetoric inform each other and, in turn, together influence democratic politics." *Ibid.*, 2. The book thus contains essays that explore how ancient political theorists conceptualized the relationship between speech and politics (Benedetto Fontana, "Rhetoric and the Roots of Democratic Politics," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, ed. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004], 27-56), how ancient histories embody and illustrate a deliberative ethos (Arlene Saxonhouse, "Democratic Deliberation and the Historian's Trade: The Case of Thucydides," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, ed. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004], 57-86), why it is crucial that democratic citizens engage both in deliberation and listening (John Uhr, "Auditory Democracy: Separation of Powers and the Locations of Listening," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, ed. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004], 239-270), etc.

And some, like Charles Taylor's *The Language Animal*, offers broad, theoretical understandings of how words shape human experience and structure political life.¹¹³

Though different in focus, scope, philosophical orientation, and method, these studies share a fundamental set of concerns about language and its role within contemporary political life. In fact, all recent scholarship on language and politics seems, at some level, to contemplate the following questions: How is language used to generate political power? How does language facilitate or impair democratic governance? Does language influence (or limit) citizens' ability to enact their membership in a political society? And can rhetoric be a productive, generative force within political society, or does it always lead to conflict, irrationality, and demagoguery? Though each contribution to the literature approaches these questions from a different and unique angle, all represent a general effort on the part of political theorists to better understand how language influences modes of citizenship, affects practical change, and facilitates just politicking.

This dissertation furthers this effort by examining how one particular rhetorical tradition—that of American exceptionalism—has influenced the political landscape in the United States. More specifically, the dissertation explores how exceptionalist rhetoric is and has been utilized to define and limit American citizenship practices. Unlike much of the existing literature, then, this dissertation does not consider abstract questions about the nature of

¹¹³ In *The Language Animal*, Taylor rejects the Hobbesian and Lockean notion that language merely describes, identifies, and characterizes objects in the external world. Instead, Taylor argues that language shapes and constitutes human experience: it “introduces new meanings in our world” and makes possible “new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language.” 37, 4. Put differently, Taylor argues that language plays a key role in constituting human existence and is not, as many thinkers suggest, simply a method of encoding or conveying information.

speech,¹¹⁴ nor does it mine the thought of ancient philosophers to uncover hidden truths about the relationship between rhetoric and politics.¹¹⁵ It does, however, borrow general questions from the extant literature (questions such as how language structures social practices, how rhetoric generates or fortifies power, and how words affects interactions between citizens) and uses these questions to explore the contours, complexities, and consequences of American exceptionalist rhetoric. By borrowing from and appropriating the existing literature in this manner, the project advances political theorists' efforts to understand the relationship between language and politics while simultaneously providing a novel and focused analysis of the contours, consequences, and complexities of American exceptionalism.

As discussed above, the dissertation also builds on existing literature by explicitly adopting the linguistic theory of Charles Taylor. In this way, the dissertation speaks to the broader philosophical debate about whether language is properly understood as designative, a tool for describing the physical world, or expressive and constitutive, a means of shaping the conditions of existence. Ultimately, I do not, like Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, or John Locke, assume that language is grounded in and intrinsically related to the physical world, nor do I suggest that language is derived from and dictated by the essence of things.¹¹⁶ Rather, I follow

¹¹⁴ As do Taylor, *The Language Animal*; J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem"; and others.

¹¹⁵ As do Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*; Joy Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Fontana, "Rhetoric and the Roots of Democratic Politics"; Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*; Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Eugene Garver, *For the Sake of Argument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Gary Remer, "Cicero and the Ethics of Deliberative Rhetoric," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, ed. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 135-162; Saxonhouse, "Democratic Deliberation and the Historian's Trade"; Gary Shiffman, "Deliberation v. Decision: Platonism in Contemporary Democratic Theory," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, ed. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); and others.

¹¹⁶ Charles Taylor calls these "designative theories" of language—that is, theories that "account[] for meaning by correlating signs to bits of the world." *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 221. According to Taylor, these theories treat language as "the mere external clothing of thought," and thus do not treat words as being particularly

Charles Taylor and claim that language is significant because and insofar as it structures human relationships and makes possible new modes of thinking, feeling, and understanding. The dissertation thus falls squarely within the constitutive linguistic camp and lends support to the notion that language does far more than merely reference the physical world.

III. Outline of the Dissertation

In the chapters that follow, I give life to the category of aspirational exceptionalism by exploring the words and writings of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Baldwin—three figures who, though typically excluded from the American exceptionalist canon, are paradigmatic representatives of aspirational exceptionalist thought. More specifically, I consider how each of these thinkers enhances and complicates the tradition of American exceptionalism.

I begin, in Chapter 1, with Frederick Douglass. Through close readings of two of Douglass' most acclaimed works—"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July" and "To My Old Master"—I show that Douglass employs rhetorical and stylistic techniques that are characteristic of aspirational American exceptionalist rhetoric. More specifically, I show that Douglass is at once highly critical of America's politics, culture, and religious practices *and* deeply committed to its greatness; his predilections for self-critique, historical transparency, admonition, and progress thus suggest a hope in, but not a certainty of, America's possible excellence.

important. *Ibid.*, 222. In addition to the ancient and early modern thinkers named above, Tyler Burge and Saul Kripke understand language in this way. See, for example, Tyler Burge, "Reference and Proper Names," *Journal of Philosophy* 70, No. 14 (1973); and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

For a more nuanced discussion of (and response to) this "designative" understanding of language, see the essays in Andrea Bianchi's *On Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

In addition to analyzing the aspirational elements in his works, I explore the content and substance of Douglass' thought to determine why, precisely, he is preoccupied with and committed to the betterment of the United States. I ultimately conclude that Douglass finds America exceptional not because it is inherently better than any other nation, but because it, unlike other countries, has promised to provide equality, freedom, and the like. But Douglass also finds America exceptional for its blatant hypocrisy—that is, for its inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to make good on its bold, sweeping assurances. Douglass' exceptionalism is thus grounded both in America's extraordinary vow to defend freedom and equality *and* in its perpetual failure to fulfill its exceptional pledges.

I conclude the chapter by discussing the unique citizenship practices that Douglass' aspirational rhetoric enables. After reviewing both his explicit, propositional claims and his affective, performative arguments, I suggest that Douglass endorses a citizenship that is engaged, active, hopeful, non-dogmatic, *parrhesiac*, and committed to liberty and equality. I thus show that Douglass' exceptionalism activates a distinct mode of citizenship—one that is more progressive and proactive than the citizenship behaviors endorsed and enabled by more traditional (i.e., accomplished) exceptionalist thinkers.

In Chapter 2, I turn to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Though he is known more for his contributions to the American transcendentalist movement than for his exceptionalism, I argue that Emerson embodies an aspirational exceptionalist ethos. More specifically, I claim that Emerson accepts the notion that America is special, set apart, and perhaps superior to other countries and that he expresses this exceptionalism using aspirational tropes—critique of current conditions, celebration of dissent, attention to social fractures and cleavages, admonition for change and improvement, etc. I highlight these aspirational tropes as they appear in four

Emersonian speeches: “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” “The Fugitive Slave Law,” and “Fortune of the Republic.” In so doing, I show that, like Douglass, Emerson is critical and reproachful but nonetheless committed to America’s exceptional potential.

As with Douglass, I also explore the nature of Emerson’s exceptionalist sentiments and consider why, exactly, he believes America is great. After briefly reviewing Emerson’s concept of self-reliance, I suggest that Emerson reveres the United States because it provides the ideal political environment for individuals to develop and practice philosophical self-governance and autonomy. Put differently, Emerson believes the United States is exceptional because and insofar as it serves as a school for self-reliant souls. I thus claim that Emerson’s exceptionalism is fundamentally wrapped up with his transcendental individualism, and that he is devoted to America precisely because he is committed to the development of courageous, independent souls.

Lastly, I describe the citizenship practices that Emerson’s aspirational exceptionalism enables. Using evidence from his speeches and writings, I suggest that Emerson calls for citizens who consistently seek to improve themselves and their communities, who are actively involved in political affairs, and who are resilient in the face of failure or defeat. I also argue that Emerson endorses a politics of love and compassion, and that he expects citizens to be loving and charitable toward one another. I thus offer a portrait of the ideal Emersonian citizen and claim that Emerson’s distinctive aspirational exceptionalism activates an equally distinctive mode of American citizenship.

In Chapter 3, I analyze and explore James Baldwin’s aspirational exceptionalism. As in the previous two chapters, I offer close readings and textual analyses to highlight Baldwin’s

aspirational commitments. In particular, I focus on Baldwin's use of aspirational tropes in *The Fire Next Time* and the short essay "We Can Change the Country." In so doing, I show that Baldwin regularly draws upon aspirational techniques and conventions. I also show that Baldwin is deeply and explicitly critical of accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric, and that he condemns its self-celebratory historical amnesiac tendencies. I thus suggest that Baldwin is, like Douglass and Emerson, an aspirational exceptionalist thinker who is simultaneously critical, disappointed, and optimistic—painfully aware of America's shortcomings but also profoundly committed to its future.

I then explore the substance of Baldwin's exceptionalism and argue that Baldwin believes the United States is special because of its unlimited and unparalleled social and political fluidity. Unlike other nations, which are burdened with centuries of traditions and social hierarchies, the United States is, for Baldwin, a place of extreme flexibility—an environment where individuals have limitless liberty to (re)define themselves and their positions in society.¹¹⁷ According to Baldwin, this unique fluidity provides opportunities for development, discovery, and growth that are not available anywhere else in the world. Baldwin thus claims that America is exceptional precisely because it is variable, and because its culture of confusion and instability offers endless opportunities for self-definition.

Lastly, I describe Baldwin's unique mode of aspirational citizenship. Using textual evidence from his essays and writings, I show that Baldwin challenges citizens to engage in candid self-assessment and to honestly acknowledge their shortcomings and flaws. He also admonishes citizens to recognize their bounded interconnectedness and to politick in ways that maximize the well-being of all. Finally, Baldwin calls for active political involvement and asks

¹¹⁷ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 11.

citizens to engage with their political system. His citizenship is thus deeply aspirational: engaged, reflective, and attentive to the needs of all.

In the final chapter, I offer some concluding meditations on the role and place of aspirational American exceptionalism in today's American polis. I begin by describing two contemporary aspirational exceptionalists—NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and President Barack Obama. Through analysis of Kaepernick's national anthem protests and Obama's memorial speeches, I show that both Kaepernick and Obama are committed to, yet critical of, the United States. I further show that both speak and act in ways that expose America's internal cleavages, draw attention to its flaws, and encourage self-assessment and critical thought. I thus suggest that, like Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin, Colin Kaepernick and Barack Obama work within the aspirational exceptionalist tradition, and I cite them as proof that the aspirational tradition has contemporary spokespeople and adherents.

Although I suggest that both Kaepernick and Obama qualify as aspirational figures, I also note that both have been condemned for their aspirational words. Both Kaepernick and Obama regularly insist that they love their country, and yet both are regularly accused of lacking patriotism or national pride. And though they both clearly articulate their affection for and hope in their country's future, they have also both been criticized for being disrespectful, rude, and anti-American. That Kaepernick and Obama have met such resistances suggests that American audiences are still largely wedded to accomplished exceptionalism—they cannot (or perhaps will not) acknowledge that aspirational exceptionalism and patriotism can coexist. Though the aspirational tradition persists, then, it remains imperiled, misunderstood, and maligned.

Because aspirational exceptionalism occupies such a vulnerable position in America's political discourse, I close with a defense of its value and import. I argue that aspirational

exceptionalist speech plays an important role in offsetting the effects of accomplished exceptionalism. Further, aspirational exceptionalism has the power to yield a more thoughtful and self-critical politics and a more pluralistic and inclusive society. If citizens are invested in America's future, then, they ought to embrace and defend aspirational exceptionalism, because to ignore it is to foreclose and forego all the rich possibilities it entails.

Bibliography

- Allen, Danielle. 2004. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2013. *Why Plato Wrote*. Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Appleby, Joyce. 1992. "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism." *The Journal of American History* 79 (2): 419-431.
- Austin, J.L. 1962. *How to Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baldwin, James. 1993. *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Beckwith, Ryan Teague. 2016. "Read the Full Transcript of the Eighth Republican Debate in New Hampshire." *Time*. February 6. <http://time.com/4210921/republican-debate-transcript-new-hampshire-eighth/?xid=homepage>.
- Behdad, Ali. 2005. *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Beinart, Peter. 2016. "Sanders, Trump, and the War Over American Exceptionalism." *The Atlantic*. February 11. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/sanders-trump-and-the-war-over-american-exceptionalism/462267/>.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. 1978. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bever, Lindsay. 2015. "Report: Rudy Giuliani Tells Private Dinner 'I Do Not Believe That the President Loves America'." *Washington Post*. February 19. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/19/report-rudy-giuliani-tells-private-dinner-i-do-not-believe-that-the-president-loves-america/>.
- Beveridge, Albert J. 1900. "In Support of an American Empire." *Speech*. January 9. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/in-support-of-an-american-empire/>.
- Bianchi, Andrea, ed. 2015. *On Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bodnar, John. 1992. *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bon Tempo, Carl J. 2011. "American Exceptionalism and the Immigration Debates in the Modern United States." In *American Exceptionalisms*, edited by James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind, 147-166. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Burge, Tyler. 1973. "Reference and Proper Names." *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (14): 425-439.
- Cadle, Nathaniel. 2011. "America as 'World-Salvation': Josiah Strong, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Global Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism." In *American Exceptionalisms*, edited by James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind, 125-146. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Calabresi, Steven G. 2006. "'A Shining City on a Hill': American Exceptionalism and the Supreme Court's Practice of Relying on Foreign Law." *Boston University Law Review* 86 (5): 1335-1416.

- Cavanaugh, William T. 2006. "Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism." *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 3 (2): 261-280.
- Ceaser, James. 2012. "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism." *American Political Thought* 1 (1): 3-28.
- Connolly, Joy. 2007. *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cruz, Ted. 2015. "Transcript: Ted Cruz's Speech at Liberty University." *Washington Post*. March 23. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-ted-cruzs-speech-at-liberty-university/2015/03/23/41c4011a-d168-11e4-a62f-ee745911a4ff_story.html.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2012. "Cities of Man on a Hill." *American Political Thought* 1 (1): 29-52.
- Eisen, Arnold M. 1990. "The Rhetoric of Chosenness." *Society* 28 (1): 26-33.
- Fong, Edmund. 2015. *American Exceptionalism and the Remains of Race: Multicultural Exorcisms*. New York: Routledge.
- Fontana, Benedetto. 2004. "Rhetoric and the Roots of Democratic Politics." In *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, edited by Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer Benedetto Fontana, 27-56. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Fontana, Benedetto, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer. 2004. *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. 1990. "Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender." *American Quarterly* 42 (1): 7-34.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2008. "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem." In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, by Hans-Georg Gadamer, edited by David E. Linge, translated by David E. Linge, 3-17. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Garcia, Emily. 2011. "'The Cause of America is in Great Measure the Cause of Mankind': American Universalism and Exceptionalism in the Early Republic." In *American Exceptionalisms*, edited by James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind, 51-70. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Garsten, Bryan. 2006. *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Garver, Eugene. 1994. *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2004. *For the Sake of Argument*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. 1902. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New York: American Home Library Company.
2014. "Hillary Clinton: I Still Believe in American Exceptionalism." *CBS News*. June 15. <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/hillary-clinton-i-still-believe-in-american-exceptionalism/>.

- Hughes, Richard T. 2003. *Myths America Lives By*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 2005. *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jaffe, Greg. 2015. "Obama's New Patriotism." *Washington Post*. June 3.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/>.
- Johnston, Steven. 2007. *The Truth About Patriotism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Koh, Harold Hongju. 2003. "On American Exceptionalism." *Stanford Law Review* 55 (5): 1479-1527.
- Kripke, Saul. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- La Feber, Walter. 1963. *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1869-1898*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1996. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Litke, Justin B. 2013. *Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Miller, Perry. 1984. *Errand Into the Wilderness*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Murphy, Andrew. 2009. *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2008. "Obama Fights Back on Questions About his Patriotism." *CNN Politics*. February 24.
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/02/24/obama.patriotism/index.html?iref=topnews>.
- Onuf, Peter. 2012. "American Exceptionalism and National Identity." *American Political Thought* 1 (1): 77-100.
- Parnes, Amie. 2012. "Obama: 'My Entire Career is 'Testimony to American Exceptionalism'." *The Hill*. April 2. <http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/219581-obama-my-career-is-testimony-to-american-exceptionalism->.
- Pease, Donald E. 2007. "Exceptionalism." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 108-112. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2009. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Reagan, Ronald. 1989. "Farewell Address to the Nation." *The American Presidency Project*. January 11. Accessed August 8, 2016. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650>.
- Remer, Gary. 2004. "Cicero and the Ethics of Deliberative Rhetoric." In *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, edited by Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman and Gary Remer, 135-162. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Romney, Mitt. 2011. "Romney's Foreign Policy Speech." *Weekly Standard*. October 7.
<http://www.weeklystandard.com/romneys-foreign-policy-speech/article/595152?page=2>.

- Sargent, Greg. 2016. "Donald Trump's Revealing Quote About 'American Exceptionalism'." *Washington Post*. June 7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/06/07/donald-trumps-revealing-quote-about-american-exceptionalism/> .
- Saxonhouse, Arlene W. 2004. "Democratic Deliberation and the Historian's Trade: The Case of Thucydides." In *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, edited by Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman and Gary Remer, 57-86. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Shiffman, Gary. 2004. "Deliberation v. Decision: Platonism in Contemporary Democratic Theory." In *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, edited by Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman and Gary Remer, 87-114. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Soderlind, Sylvia. 2011. "The Shining of America." In *American Exceptionalisms*, edited by James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind, 1-15. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Stewart, Anthony. 2011. "Giving the People What They Want: The African American Exception as Racial Cliche in Percival Everett's Erasure." In *American Exceptionalisms*, edited by James Taylor Carson and Sylvia Soderlind, 167-190. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Stow, Simon. 2010. "Agonistic Homegoing: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of African American Public Mourning." *American Political Science Review* 104 (4): 681-697.
- . 2012. "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss." *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (3): 687-700.
- . 2007. "Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning." *American Political Science Review* 101 (2): 195-208.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2016. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1990. *Democracy in America*. Vol. II. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tuveson, Ernest Lee. 1968. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Uhr, John. 2004. "Auditory Democracy: Separation of Powers and the Locations of Listening." In *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, edited by Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman and Gary Remer, 239-270. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Washington, George. 1796. "Washington's Farewell Address." *Speech*. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.
- Wills, Garry. 1992. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Winthrop, John. 2007. "Model of Christian Charity." In *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought, Volume 1: Origins Through the Civil War*, edited by Scott J. Hammond, Kevin R. Hardwick and Howard L. Lubert, 13-18. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

False to the Past, False to the Present: Frederick Douglass and America's Exceptional Hypocrisy

"It is an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea."

—James McCune Smith, on Douglass' *My Bondage My Freedom*¹

A man of many titles, Frederick Douglass has been variously described as author, abolitionist, publisher, editor, escaped slave, orator, and hero. Rarely, though, is Douglass described as an American exceptionalist—a term that, at least traditionally, has been reserved for more conservative (and typically white) thinkers.² Douglass' reputation for scathing criticism and impassioned social commentary is a far cry from the more demure, self-celebratory, and conciliatory rhetoric associated with American exceptionalism, as is his brazen analysis of America's flaws. It is little wonder, then, that Douglass has been largely excluded from the ranks of American exceptionalists: How could one so intent on exposing America's dark underbelly be simultaneously committed to exceptionalism?

In this chapter, I argue that Douglass' exclusion from the American exceptionalist tradition is the result of the broader philosophical phenomenon described in the introduction—namely, the tendency (in both the academy and in society *writ large*) to define American exceptionalism as a self-celebratory, unquestioning belief in America's greatness. I further claim that Douglass, just as much as John Winthrop, can and should be understood as an American exceptionalist thinker. Although Douglass speaks and writes about America's faults with penetrating and incisive rhetoric, he, like more canonical American exceptionalists, remains

¹ James McCune Smith, "Introduction," in *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 137.

² In fact, some scholars have argued that Douglass is *anti*-exceptionalist. Richard T. Hughes, for example, characterizes Douglass as a critic of American exceptionalism, or, to use Hughes' language, a *dissenter* from "the myth of the Chosen Nation." *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 11-13.

fundamentally committed to America's potential and possibility. Ultimately, then, I claim that Frederick Douglass, though a distinct *type* of exceptionalist, works within and contributes to the American exceptionalist tradition.

To defend these claims, I offer a reading of Douglass as an *aspirational* American exceptionalist thinker. I proceed in three parts. In the first section, I offer close readings of two of Douglass' most acclaimed works—"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July" and "To My Old Master"—and provide discursive analysis of the works' rhetorical structures, forms, and tropes. In so doing, I show that Douglass employs rhetorical and stylistic techniques that are characteristic of aspirational American exceptionalist rhetoric. Less conciliatory and affirmative than more traditional American exceptionalist rhetoric, Douglass nonetheless betrays a deep commitment to the potential and promise of America and her future. I thus argue that in structure and form, Douglass' works clearly belong within the exceptionalist tradition and are striking examples of exceptionalism's aspirational mode.

In the second section, I study the content and substance of Douglass' works in order to trace the contours and limits of his exceptionalist commitments. Although his concerns about abolition and equality are global, Douglass is particularly preoccupied with and committed to the betterment of the United States. I argue that this singular and unwavering American focus stems from Douglass' deeper concern about hypocrisy. For Douglass, it seems, America is exceptional not because it is inherently better than any other nation but because it, unlike other countries, has promised (and yet continually fails) to be a paragon of equality, freedom, and the like. Put differently, Douglass believes that America is exceptional precisely because it has promised to be so. But Douglass also finds America exceptional for its blatant hypocrisy—i.e., for its inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to make good on its lofty, sweeping assurances. Douglass'

exceptionalism is, in other words, grounded both in America's extraordinary vow to defend freedom and equality *and* in its thoroughgoing dissemblance, i.e., its perpetual failure to fulfill its exceptional pledges.

In the final section, I describe the rhetorical force of Douglass' exceptionalism and consider what citizenship practices, if any, his aspirational rhetoric enables. To do this, I analyze two aspects of Douglass' rhetoric: his explicit, propositional claims and his affective, performative arguments. Ultimately, I argue that along both dimensions, Douglass' exceptionalism activates a distinct mode of citizenship that is progressive and proactive, passionate and honest. I contrast this with the citizenship practices endorsed and enabled by more traditional exceptionalist thinkers and, in so doing, highlight Douglass' unique and important contributions to both the American exceptionalist canon and American civic life.

I. Douglass' Aspirational Rhetoric

After escaping from slavery in 1838, Frederick Douglass spent much of his life writing and speaking against the American slave system. Although many (if not most) of his works include aspirational features and tropes, two are particularly representative of Douglass' aspirational exceptionalist orientation. The first, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July," is a speech delivered to the Ladies' Antislavery Society of Rochester on July 5, 1862 and is "widely considered to be not only one of Douglass' greatest speeches but one of the greatest speeches of the nineteenth century."³ The second, the eponymous "To My Old Master," is a letter Douglass penned to Thomas Auld, his former owner, ten years after escaping to freedom.

³ Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July," in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 50, f.n.16. Nicholas Buccola has also described the speech as "what will forever be known as [Douglass'] best speech and one of the greatest orations ever given in American history." "Introduction," in *The Essential Douglass*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), xviii.

Both “Fourth of July” and “To My Old Master” are famously caustic and critical. Perhaps because of this, neither is generally included in the canon of American exceptionalism. But while Douglass’ sharp rhetoric is far from the conciliatory, self-assuring tone of accomplished exceptionalism, Douglass regularly employs the tropes and conventions of traditional exceptionalist rhetoric. What is more, Douglass’ captious diction conveys a sincere and profound belief and hope in America’s potential—a belief, to borrow Emerson’s phrase, in America’s “unattained but attainable self.”⁴ In this section, I explore these and other rhetorical characteristics of “Fourth of July” and “To My Old Master” and, in so doing, demonstrate that in structure, technique, and form, Douglass fits neatly within the aspirational exceptionalist rhetorical tradition.

I begin with the more famous of the two pieces, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July.” At the outset, it is worth noting that the speech bears a peculiar structure and is composed of three distinct parts.⁵ The first section, Douglass’ introduction, is a laudatory, nostalgic, and idealized account of America’s revolutionary history. In it, Douglass presents America’s founding fathers as “men of honesty, and men of spirit” who, though “harshly and unjustly treated, by their home government,” “petitioned and remonstrated” in a “decorous, respectful, and loyal manner.”⁶ He suggests that their efforts were “treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn” and thus claims that the founders justifiably “became restive” and searched

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 239.

⁵ This division is my own. In printed form, the speech is broken into *seven* subsections, each of which is demarcated with a descriptive heading (e.g., “The Internal Slave Trade,” “Religious Liberty,” “The Constitution,” etc.). However, these subsections and headings seem to exist primarily for organizational purposes (i.e., to mark where Douglass shifts from one topic to another) and thus provide little interpretive value or guidance. Because of this, I find it more useful to divide the speech based on the themes, tone, and tropes Douglass uses throughout. When viewed this way, the speech is divisible into three sections: a laudatory introduction, a critical body, and a hopeful conclusion.

⁶ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 52.

for alternate (and more radical) solutions. Eventually, Douglass argues, these “brave men” resolved to break free from the British crown, and they thus drafted—and ultimately “made good” on—a Declaration of Independence.⁷ “[They] staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country,” he narrates, “[and] in their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests.”⁸ They were, in other words, “statesmen, patriots and heroes”—hence, Douglass’ admonition to “mark them!”⁹

After this backward-looking, romantic, and celebratory introduction, Douglass transitions to the second, more critical part of his speech. He explicitly tells his listeners that he plans to “leave [...] the great deeds of [their] fathers to other gentlemen” and to instead focus on “the present,” “the ever-living now.”¹⁰ He then undertakes a dramatic shift in tone and trades his nostalgic, reverent refrains for chastisement, criticism, and condemnation. Rather than praise and celebrate the past as he did in his introduction, Douglass slams the “murderous traffic” of the American slave trade,¹¹ disparages the pharisaical American church,¹² and insists that the nation itself, a land many celebrate as a “broad republican domain,” is in fact a “hunting ground for

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² In one particularly impassioned passage, for example, Douglass argues, “The fact that the Church of our country [...] does not esteem ‘the fugitive slave law’ as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that Church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and *not* a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will toward man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing above right doing, solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind. The Bible addresses all such persons as ‘scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites, who pay tithe of *mint, anise, and cumin*, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.’” *Ibid.*, 64.

men.”¹³ He delivers, in short, “a ruthless critique of everything existing”¹⁴—a diatribe that he, himself, characterizes as “severe[.]” denunciation,¹⁵ “stern rebuke,”¹⁶ and “blasting reproach.”¹⁷

But then, in a remarkable rhetorical about-face, Douglass returns to “where [he] began, [...] *hope*.”¹⁸ Abandoning his caustic, unforgiving tone, he turns his attention to the future and, with calm assuredness, predicts that “the doom of slavery is certain.”¹⁹ He also quotes William Lloyd Garrison’s poem “The Triumph of Freedom,” and insists that “THAT HOUR WILL COME” when “none on earth / Shall exercise a lordly power, / Nor in a tyrant’s presence cower; But all to manhood’s / stature tower, By equal birth!”²⁰ The third and final section of “Fourth of July” is thus encouraging, faithful, and optimistic—a stark departure from the caustic section that preceded.

In short, Douglass arranges his speech in ternary form:²¹ he leads with hopeful praise, moves to dejected critique, and eventually returns to hope and optimism. This unique structure is significant for at least two reasons. First, the structure allows Douglass to give voice to the both the self-assured, laudatory tropes of conventional accomplished exceptionalism (in the first and third sections) *and* the more critical and self-reflective tropes of exceptionalism’s

¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴ Omedi Ochieng, “A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing: Frederick Douglass and the Architectonic of African American Radicalism,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 2 (2011): 168-184. Ochieng uses this phrase to describe Douglass’ rhetorical style in general, but it seems a particularly fitting description of “Fourth of July.”

¹⁵ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹ In music, this term is used to describe a piece that is divided into three self-contained sections (typically labeled A, B, and A). In ternary form, the first and last sections (both labeled A) are nearly identical in both theme and tone, while the middle section (B) contrasts sharply with the other two.

aspirational mode (in the second section). It thus proves that American exceptionalism exists in different and competing modes, and it highlights the tropal differences between conventional accomplished exceptionalism and the more radical, aspirational mode. Second, and more importantly, the structure allows Douglass to marry praise and blame and to bind, as if with a “ring-bolt,”²² the seemingly opposing forces of self-celebration and self-critique.²³ The organizational schema thus reveals Douglass’ aspirational orientation—which is at once carping and celebratory, anxious and auspicious—and shows that one can be caustic and candid while nonetheless remaining committed to America’s promise and potential.

Beyond the structure of his speech, Douglass reveals his aspirational exceptionalism by drawing heavily on aspirational tropes and techniques. Like any good exceptionalist (aspirational or otherwise), Douglass boldly proclaims his affection for and commitment to the United States, admitting his sincere “admiration” for the selfless,²⁴ principled,²⁵ and devoted²⁶

²² For a superb discussion of Douglass’ use of the “ring-bolt” metaphor, see Nick Bromell, “A ‘Voice from the Enslaved’: The Origins of Frederick Douglass’s Political Philosophy of Democracy,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 714-717.

²³ Bromell suggests that this ability to “hold contraries” in tension is, essentially, what Ralph Ellison would later call “antagonistic cooperation.” “A ‘Voice from the Enslaved,’” 714. For further discussion of this “antagonistic cooperation” in “Fourth of July,” see Gregory Stephens, “Frederick Douglass’ Multiracial Abolitionism: ‘Antagonistic Cooperation’ and ‘Redeemable Ideals’ in the July 5 Speech,” *Communication Studies* 48, no. 3 (1997): 175-194.

²⁴ According to Douglass, the framers “loved their country more than their own private interests” and “in their admiration of liberty, [...] lost sight of all other interests.” “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 54.

²⁵ “They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression. They showed forbearance; but that they knew its limits. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny. With them, nothing was ‘settled’ that was not right. With them, justice, liberty, and humanity were ‘final’; not slavery and oppression.” *Ibid.*

²⁶ Douglass describes the founders’ conviction thus: “Fully appreciating the hardships to be encountered, firmly believing in the right of their cause, honorably inviting the scrutiny of an on-looking world, reverently appealing to heaven to attest their sincerity, soundly comprehending the solemn responsibility they were about to assume, wisely measuring the terrible odds against them, your fathers, the fathers of this republic, did, most deliberately, under the inspiration of a glorious patriotism, and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep, the cornerstone of the national super-structure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you.” *Ibid.*, 54-55.

men who founded the country;²⁷ praising their “solid manhood”; and noting that “peculiar circumstances [...] make the advent of this republic an event of *special* attractiveness.”²⁸ But unlike accomplished exceptionalism, which insists that America is a unified and harmonious whole, Douglass makes intentional stylistic choices that shine light on the many cleavages and factions that divide the American populace. For example, throughout the speech, Douglass noticeably and intentionally distances himself from his audience by addressing his listeners in the second person: he describes the festivities as a celebration of “*your* national independence, and of *your* political freedom,”²⁹ for instance, and he repeatedly refers to “*your* nation,”³⁰ “*your* legislative halls,”³¹ and “*your* fathers” (i.e., America’s founders).³² He also separates himself from his audience by explicitly identifying and describing “the disparity between [himself and his listeners]” and by noting that “this Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*.”³³ Rather than pretend that the United States is a peaceful, unified whole, Douglass boldly reminds his listeners that he is “not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary” and that their “high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.”³⁴ In true aspirational exceptionalist fashion, he foregrounds the nation’s white/black cleavages and gives a realistic, rather than idealized, account of race relations in America.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53 (emphasis mine).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 51. For further discussion of Douglass’ distinctive use of the second person, see Bromell, “A ‘Voice from the Enslaved,’” 714. See also Stephens, “Frederick Douglass’ Multiracial Abolitionism,” 184-185.

³³ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

In addition to his deliberate use of the second person, Douglass highlights America's internal cleavages by describing the plight of American slaves. He also uses a pattern of imperative mood verbs to command his listeners to "see."³⁵ In one poignant passage, Douglass instructs his audience to "behold [...] the internal slave-trade."³⁶ Speaking as if narrating a scene in front of him, Douglass describes "men and women, reared like swine, for the market."³⁷ He then directs his listeners to "see the old man, with locks thinned and gray," to "cast one glance [...] upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun," and to "see [...] that girl of thirteen, weeping, *yes!* weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn!"³⁸ Douglass instructs his audience to hear the "clank" of fetters, the "rattles" of chains, and the cracking "sound of the slave whip," and he asks them to remember the "deep, sad sobs" that arise from the slave multitude.³⁹ He also directs his listeners "attend" an imaginary slave auction, to "see men examined like horses," and to "see the forms of women rudely and brutally exposed to the shocking gaze of American slave-buyers."⁴⁰

Through this vivid imagery and sensory language, Douglass conjures a lucid portrait of American slavery. Not only does he talk *about* the nation's flaws—he essentially dramatizes them. And then he goes one step farther. After describing, in shocking detail, the American slave system, Douglass uses the imperative mood to force his audience to "behold," "witness," and "see" the evils he has uncovered. He does not give his audience the option of looking away

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

but instead ensures that all who are listening *view* the “horrors” of slavery.⁴¹ These rhetorical moves—honest accounts of social problems, intense imagery, and an unyielding demand for the audience to attend to the things he exposes—stand in sharp contrast with the amnesia and evasion that are characteristic of accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric. Douglass does not tiptoe around the nation’s problems by re-directing and re-focusing on its strengths but instead faces America’s dark underbelly head-on and forces his audience to do likewise.

Douglass also employs the aspirational tropes of warning and critique. Though he begins his speech with an idealized account of America’s founding, Douglass quickly turns to condemnation and reproof, and he repeatedly and unambiguously denounces America’s hypocrisy and moral culpability. He calls the American slave trade “fiendish and shocking,”⁴² for example, and he boldly declares that “the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to [him] than on this Fourth of July.”⁴³ Douglass accuses America of “inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous”⁴⁴ practices, and, inverting the traditional Independence Day refrain, argues that “for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.”⁴⁵ He reproves America for its “gross injustice and cruelty”;⁴⁶ insists that “America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future”;⁴⁷ and brazenly tells his listeners, “YOUR HANDS ARE FULL OF BLOOD.”⁴⁸

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

In condemning American slavery, Douglass again relies heavily on the second person—a rhetorical decision that, as Nick Bromell notes, “affords [Douglass] a liminal position outside of the American polity from which he can see and critique it.”⁴⁹ Douglass also draws heavily on religious language and imagery. In so doing, he lends his critique divine authority and suggests that America has offended both humanity and a higher power. For example, Douglass calls slavery “the great sin and shame of America” and claims that he “[stands] with God” in denouncing America’s practices.⁵⁰ Douglass also insists that “there is not a nation on the earth *guilty* of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States.”⁵¹ These accusations mark a dramatic departure from the self-righteous tone of accomplished exceptionalism. If an accomplished America is “God-blessed,”⁵² a nation that perpetually enjoys divine favor, then Douglass’ America is both “sublime”⁵³ *and* “superlatively guilty”⁵⁴—a state that is capable of greatness but that nonetheless can (and does!) offend its maker.

Douglass couples this scathing fulmination with warning—another trope of aspirational exceptionalism. Rather than celebrate America’s assured greatness and glory, as an accomplished exceptionalist would, Douglass likens America to Babylon and warns, “It is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin.”⁵⁵ Douglass also

⁴⁹ Bromell, “A ‘Voice from the Enslaved,’” 714.

⁵⁰ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 58.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵² Reagan, Ronald, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” Farewell Address to the Nation,” speech, January 11, 1989, transcript <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650>.

⁵³ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

cautions against the inevitable effects of slavery, America's crime—effects which, he believes, undermine the nation's status, strength, and influence:

[Slavery] destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundations of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a byword to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your *Union*. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you cling to it, as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes.⁵⁶

Here, as elsewhere in his work, Douglass' strategic grammatical decisions underscore and enhance his cautionary message. By making slavery the agent of a series of independent clauses, Douglass suggests that slavery is a real and dynamic threat—a force that, like a hostile foreign power, could “seriously disturb[] and endanger[] your *Union*.”⁵⁷ And by selecting vivid, active verbs—“destroys,” “corrupts,” “saps,” “fetters,” “disturbs,” “endangers,”⁵⁸ etc.—he emphasizes the magnitude of slavery's menace, the pressing reality of its risks. Douglass' rhetoric is thus genuinely cautionary and contrasts sharply with the self-assured and self-celebratory tone typical of accomplished exceptionalism. Unlike accomplished exceptionalism, which gestures at caution but ultimately delivers only praise and commendation,⁵⁹ Douglass offers full-throated warning. Neither travesty nor caricature, this warning reflects sincere concern and disquiet: “Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom [...] *for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster [...]*!”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See, for example, Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation.”

⁶⁰ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 68.

Douglass' aspirational exceptionalism is perhaps most evident in his harsh diction and caustic word choice. Unlike accomplished exceptionalists, whose messages are often gentle and sugarcoated, Douglass claims that "scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed."⁶¹ He thus marshals "the severest language [he] can command"⁶² and, sparing no insult or criticism, boldly accuses his listeners of "swelling vanity," "brass fronted impudence," "bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy."⁶³ Clearly, Douglass is not afraid to upset or offend his audience: He understands that his biting criticism "fail[s] to make a favorable impression on the public mind," and yet he refuses to "rebuke less."⁶⁴ "Had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear," he declares, "I would, to day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder."⁶⁵

Despite his vitriol, however, it is clear that Douglass remains committed to—and invested in—the United States of America. In fact, he acknowledges that his "fire" and "thunder" are meant to "quicken[]," "rouse[]," and "startle[]," but not to destroy.⁶⁶ Douglass may have little patience for America's shortcomings, but he nonetheless remains dedicated to the country's "great principles [...] and the genius of American institutions."⁶⁷ And though his speech is caustic and critical, he repeatedly addresses his audience as "Fellow citizens."⁶⁸ As Bromell

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁸ In Bromell's count, Douglass uses this inclusive appellation "not fewer than eight times!" "A 'Voice from the Enslaved,'" 715.

argues, “If [Douglass] had wished only to suggest that he was in no sense of the word an American, and in no way a communicant with his audience in this celebration of the nation’s birth, he would not have employed this phrase.”⁶⁹ That Douglass uses this appellation suggests that, though “his rhetoric insists on the ‘immeasurable distance’ between them,” Douglass nonetheless aims to “bind his audience to him.”⁷⁰

Most significantly, though, Douglass shifts his diction to conclude “with *hope*,” and he insists that “notwithstanding the dark picture [he has] this day presented, [he does] not despair of this country.”⁷¹ He expresses a firm conviction that the Declaration’s promises will eventually come to fruition, that “the obvious tendencies of the age”⁷² will spur Americans toward abolition, and that eventually, America’s “human blood shall cease to flow.”⁷³ He also reminds his audience that global affairs are changing and that “no nation can now shut itself up, from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference.”⁷⁴ Douglass insists that “intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe,”⁷⁵ and he predicts that this intelligence, this light, will eventually and inevitably reach even the dark corners of the American South. “No abuse,” he writes, “no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light.”⁷⁶

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 70.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71. For an excellent analysis of Douglass and hope, see David W. Blight, “Sources of Hope in the Pre-Civil War Thought of Frederick Douglass,” in *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1-26.

Douglass thus displays a distinct ability to, as David Blight has argued, “grasp hope from the midst of despair,” “foster hope by any means possible,” and “fashion[] hope out of the hard lives of his people”⁷⁷ Douglass is not, in other words, an exceptive nag who aims only to destabilize and disparage. Instead, he is a constructive critic—aware of America’s present flaws, yet committed to its flawless future. In sum, he is an exceptionalist, but his orientation toward American greatness is one of possibility rather than assurance. Douglass recognizes that America is special, “genius,” and “great,”⁷⁸ but he also acknowledges that it is not *necessarily* so—that it can betray its founding principles and is capable of “crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.”⁷⁹ He thus articulates his exceptionalism in conditional, rather than absolute, terms, and he believes (and hopes) that his vitriol and “scorching irony” will spur the nation toward its exceptional potential.⁸⁰

This aspirational orientation is equally evident in Douglass’ “To My Old Master.” Written in 1848, ten years after Douglass’ escape from slavery, the letter is, as one scholar described, a “scathing public letter” to Thomas Auld, Douglass’ former owner.⁸¹ But like “Fourth of July,” which couples celebration and critique, “To My Old Master” breaks with epistolary convention by bootstrapping generalized, national commentary to personal, individualized correspondence. It is not, in other words, a facile communiqué between former slave and former master but is rather an epistle to (and about) the American nation, a powerful ode to and critique of America’s unrealized potential.

⁷⁷ Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 22.

⁷⁸ Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸¹ Frederick Douglass, “To My Old Master,” in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 413.

Before exploring the substance of Douglass' letter, it is again helpful to briefly examine its structure. Like "Fourth of July," which combines "biting critique and deep devotion,"⁸² Douglass' letter is, structurally, a blend of optimism and objugation, dedication and disdain. But unlike the Independence Day address, which sandwiches critique between two sections of praise and celebration, Douglass here begins and ends by acknowledging and affirming his relationship with Auld. For example, Douglass opens with formal (and somewhat hollow) pleasantries—a salutation of "Sir," an apology for any discomfort the letter might cause, an appeal to "the long and intimate" relationship between himself and Auld, etc.⁸³ And at the letter's end, he expresses a desire to commune with Auld further ("[Y]ou shall hear from me again unless you let me hear from you"⁸⁴) and suggests that, should the two ever meet in person, "there is nothing in [Douglass'] house which [Auld] might need for [his] comfort, which [Douglass] would not readily grant."⁸⁵

Despite these fleeting pleasantries, though, Douglass warns that his master may experience some "disagreeable surprise" at "finding [his] name coupled with [Douglass']", in any other way than in an advertisement."⁸⁶ Douglass also cautions that his language may seem "indelicate," even shocking, to many of his readers.⁸⁷ He notes that he plans to "*frankly* state the ground upon which [he] justif[ies] [himself] in this instance," suggesting that as in "Fourth of July," he aims to write with forceful honesty.⁸⁸ He even warns that he intends to "call[] [Auld]

⁸² Buccola, "Introduction," xix.

⁸³ Douglass, "To My Old Master," 414.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 414 (emphasis mine).

hard names” and hopes to “expose” to the American public Auld’s true and reprehensible character.⁸⁹

Douglass makes good on these promises and, as I will discuss below, spends the body of the letter upbraiding his former master. But by bookending his criticisms with polite, conciliatory references to his relationship with Auld, Douglass performs the rhetorical work of identification⁹⁰ and, in so doing, betrays his hope that he and Auld might eventually view and treat each other as consubstantial.⁹¹ Though the body of his letter is caustic and critical, then, the introductory and concluding sections stress that Douglass “entertain[s] no malice towards [Auld] personally”⁹² and reveal Douglass’ belief that, with proper spurring, the nation *and* Auld might eventually be brought to repentance. The letter’s arrangement thus couples criticism with hope, underscores Douglass’ aspirational orientation, and, like “Fourth of July,” highlights his ability to simultaneously enact both denunciation and devotion.

Douglass also reveals his aspirational orientation through use of aspirational tropes. As in “Fourth of July,” Douglass offers sharp, *parrhesiastic* critiques: he accuses Auld of

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ This term is Kenneth Burke’s and refers to the process by which a person is persuaded to see and appreciate the ways he or she is similar with another party. According to Burke, “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even with their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.” *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 20.

⁹¹ Again, the term is Burke’s. Burke writes, “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. [...] To identify A with B is to make A ‘consubstantial’ with B.” *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.

Interestingly, Douglass and Auld were, in a way, consubstantial in their master/slave relationship, because Auld literally owned Douglass. Here, though, Douglass gestures toward a different sort of consubstantiality—one more consistent with Burke’s usage of the term—and expresses a hope that he and Auld might view and treat each other as co-equals.

⁹² Douglass, “To My Old Master,” 420.

“wickedness and cruelty,”⁹³ calls Auld’s conduct “an outrage upon the soul,”⁹⁴ and describes slaveholders as “agent[s] of hell.”⁹⁵ Douglass also boldly insists that Auld has, like any other “man guilty of theft, robbery, or murder,” “forfeited the right to concealment and private life.”⁹⁶ Drawing on the superlative, Douglass insists that “the vocabulary of the damned would not afford a word sufficiently infernal” to describe the nature of Auld’s “God-provoking wickedness.”⁹⁷ Douglass even questions his master’s mental and moral capacities, writing, “Your mind must have become darkened, your heart hardened, your conscience seared and petrified, or you would have long since thrown off the accursed load and sought relief at the hands of a sin-forgiving God.”⁹⁸

Douglass also uses harsh and frank speech to expose the wretched realities of the American slave system. In his opening paragraph, Douglass argues that “a man guilty of theft, or robbery, or murder has forfeited the right to concealment and private life.”⁹⁹ Douglass thus makes it his objective and aim to subject Thomas Auld and other slaveholders “to the most complete exposure.”¹⁰⁰ He does not, like an accomplished exceptionalist, try to hide the nation’s flaws but instead aims to shed light, to foreground, to make visible the invisible. “However much [slaveholders] may desire retirement, and aim to conceal themselves and their movements from the popular gaze,” he writes, “the public have a right to ferret them out.”¹⁰¹

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Douglass' caustic diction and stark imagery facilitate this project of exposure. In vivid detail, Douglass describes the conditions and horrors of slavery—the “piteous cries” of slave women,¹⁰² the “death-like gloom overshadowing the broken spirit of the fettered bondman,”¹⁰³ the “appalling liability of [...] being torn away from wife and children,”¹⁰⁴ and, of course, the “chain, the gag, the bloody whip.”¹⁰⁵ He also conveys slavery's horrific emotional repercussions by describing the “ghastly terror”¹⁰⁶ (418), “lamenting,”¹⁰⁷ “trembling,”¹⁰⁸ and “deep agony of soul”¹⁰⁹ that he witnessed and experienced while in bondage. What is more, Douglass contrasts these “grim horrors”¹¹⁰ with the “golden”¹¹¹ and “rich experience” of freedom.¹¹² Describing his existence as a free man, he writes that he has “never lived more happily” and has “commenc[ed] ... a higher state of existence than any to which [he has] ever aspired.”¹¹³ And, while Douglass generally calls slavery “dark”¹¹⁴ and “gloomy,”¹¹⁵ he claims to have escaped from slavery at “daylight,” under the “bright sun” of a “beautiful September morning.”¹¹⁶ This striking and

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 415.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 416.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 417.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

symbolic imagery underscores the vast distance between bondage and liberty and suggests that Douglass follows nature in preferring freedom (sunlight, day) over slavery (darkness, gloom).

Through this vivid imagery, Douglass exposes the horror, darkness, and misery of the slave condition. His graphic, striking, and detailed descriptions thrust slavery before the public gaze and challenge the reader to encounter and acknowledge America's most wretched and abhorrent practices. And his careful use of symbolism—e.g., equating freedom with light and sunshine while describing slavery as gloomy and dark—highlights the gaping chasm between the nation's free and enslaved. Douglass thus does not, as an accomplished exceptionalist might, gloss over the brutal realities of slavery, and he does not shy away from difficult and painful truths. Instead, he directly confronts the ugliness of slavery, highlights its wretchedness, and asks Auld (and other readers¹¹⁷) to contemplate it head-on.

Douglass also reveals his aspirational orientation by asking Auld to engage in critical and self-reflective thought—a demand that accomplished exceptionalists rarely make of their audiences. Using the interrogative mood, Douglass asks Auld to imagine how *he* (Auld) would feel if placed in Douglass' (or any slave's) situation. Specifically, Douglass writes:

How, let me ask, would you look upon me were I some dark night in company with a band of hardened villains, to enter the precincts of your elegant dwelling and seize the person of your own lovely daughter Amanda, and carry her off from your family, friends, and all the loved ones of her youth—make her my slave—compel her to work, and I take her wages—place her name on my ledger as property—disregard her personal rights—fetter the powers of her immortal soul by denying her the right and privilege of learning to read and write—feed her coarsely—clothe her scantily, and whip her on the naked back occasionally; more and still more horrible, leave her unprotected—a degraded victim to the brutal lust of fiendish overseers, who would pollute, blight, and blast her fair soul—rob her of all dignity—destroy her virtue, and annihilate all in her person the graces that

¹¹⁷ The letter was published in Douglass' *The North Star* newspaper and was thus available to a broader audience than Thomas Auld alone.

adorn the character of virtuous womanhood? I ask, how would you regard me, if such were my conduct?¹¹⁸

Rather than merely describe the horrors of slavery (though he has done that, too), Douglass here asks Auld to think empathetically about the slave's plight. And by personalizing the hypothetical—by demanding that Auld imagine how he would react if *his* daughter were taken—Douglass requests that Auld's contemplation is sincere and unaffected (at least insofar as is possible) by his status as a free white male. Essentially, Douglass asks Auld to momentarily step down from the privileged and safe seat he occupies as a white slaveholder and to *really* imagine how it would feel to stand in Douglass' shoes. He challenges Auld to contemplate (albeit momentarily and hypothetically) slavery's moral outrages, and he requests that Auld consider how those outrages would impact *him*. In so doing, Douglass provokes Auld's critical self-reflection and shows that "[Auld's] treatment of [Douglass'] beloved sisters is in all essential points precisely like the case [...] now supposed."¹¹⁹

Of course, Douglass also issues warnings and admonitions and tells Auld that, for the "wickedness and cruelty committed in this respect on [his] fellow creatures," Auld will have to "give account at the bar of our common Father and Creator."¹²⁰ Douglass also employs warnings that, at least in a few instances, border closely on threats. For example, Douglass tells Auld that he "intend[s] to make use of [Auld] as a weapon with which to assail the system of slavery—as a means of concentrating public attention on the system, and deepening their horror of trafficking

¹¹⁸ Douglass, "To My Old Master," 420.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* It is significant that, in asking for Auld's contemplation, Douglass relies on the interrogative mood. By requesting, rather than commanding, Auld's reflection, Douglass resists assuming the role of "master" and instead establishes a rhetorical tone suitable for a conversation between equals. In so doing, Douglass reveals his hope that one day, the two men might interact on egalitarian footing—not as master and former slave, but as social and intellectual co-equals. For further discussion of this hope, see footnotes 124-138 and accompanying text, below.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 419.

in the souls and body of men [...] and as a means of bringing this guilty nation with [Auld himself] to repentance.”¹²¹ Douglass also intimates that “you [Auld] shall hear from me again unless you let me hear from you.”¹²² Surely, Douglass knows that these warnings (threats?) will unsettle and unnerve, but he includes them nonetheless. This rhetorical decision suggests that here, as in “Fourth of July,” Douglass views himself as a Socratic gadfly whose role is to agitate, animate, and provoke.

But despite all this—despite the brutal honesty, acerbic castigation, relentless denunciation, etc.—Douglass’ letter is ultimately a message of aspiration and hope. For every dark description of slavery he offers, Douglass also provides a portrait of freedom, slavery’s “rich”¹²³ and “enlightened”¹²⁴ counterpart. And each time he depicts the bleak and damning conditions of bondage, he also describes the progress, improvement, and development he has enjoyed in liberation. For example, Douglass devotes a considerable portion of the letter—nearly two of its eight pages—to an account of his “rich experience” as a free man, and he goes to great lengths to tell Auld that he has married, has “learned to count money, as well as to make it,”¹²⁵ and “can boast of as comfortable a dwelling as [Auld’s] own.”¹²⁶ He also notes that, though he “toil[s] hard,” he has “never lived more happily” and has “occupied stations which [he] never dreamed of when a slave.”¹²⁷

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 420.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 417, 416.

Douglass also expresses a belief and hope that he will be “understood” and that his words might have some effect on his master and/or the public.¹²⁸ He is well aware that white readers may be “shocked” by his letter, and he anticipates that he “shall probably be charged with an unwarrantable, if not a wanton and reckless disregard of the rights and properties of private life.”¹²⁹ And yet, Douglass proceeds, all the while expressing (or, at the very least, exhibiting) hope that he will be allowed to “justify [him]self,” that he will be able to “meet every reasonable or plausible objection to [his] conduct,” and that his letter might inspire dialogue between the two races.¹³⁰ Indeed, the very act of writing to his old master reveals Douglass’ hope that change might be possible—after all, people do not typically subject themselves to “inconsiderable amount[s] of censure” unless they believe (or at least hope) that their actions might produce some desired effect.¹³¹ Douglass also insists that, despite his harsh tone, he “entertain[s] no malice towards [Auld] personally,” and that there “there is no roof under which [Auld] would be more safe than [Douglass’].”¹³² If genuine, these assurances suggest that Douglass anticipates a future where black and white might treat each other as social equals, and where former masters and slaves can interact as guests.¹³³

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹³⁰ In fact, Douglass ends his letter by stating, “You shall hear from me again unless you let me hear from you”—an indication that he intends to invite dialogue and conversation. *Ibid.*, 420.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 420.

¹³³ Douglass did, in fact, re-connect with his old master, under what seem to have been civil and amicable circumstances. For Douglass’ account of this reunion, see Frederick Douglass, “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,” in *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 874-878. For another account, see William S. McFeeley, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1995), 294.

By adding these positive details to his philippic, Douglass crafts a letter that is, like “Fourth of July,” a distinctive “mixture of despair and hope.”¹³⁴ Using his own ascension from slavery to liberation as a case-study, he shows that despite America’s many flaws, progress and development are possible. He also sends a strong message of aspiration and optimism and proves that bondage can become freedom; want, abundance; and darkness, light. Despite his caustic rhetoric, then, Douglass maintains a clear and bright note of hopefulness. He condemns the nation’s shortcomings, to be sure, but also suggests that they can (albeit with great difficulty) be overcome.

Douglass also expresses hope in the nation’s white citizens. Though he lambasts the slave-owning South, he repeatedly calls for its “repentance,” which suggests that he sees contrition and change as actual possibilities.¹³⁵ Douglass also provides a lengthy philosophical explanation for his decision to escape¹³⁶ and, starting with first principles (“What you are, I am. You are a man, and so am I.”¹³⁷), justifies his opposition to slavery. This reasoned defense suggests that Douglass thinks his white audience might be open to dialogue and persuasion. It also reveals a clear faith that, through sustained rational conversation, the white citizenry might come to understand “how mankind ought to treat each other”¹³⁸ and might, as a result, choose to make good on the Declaration’s exceptional promises. In sum, Douglass has hope for and faith in *both* races. He believes blacks will triumph in the face of white oppression, but he also hopes that whites might choose (or be persuaded) to abandon their oppressive practices. He thus looks

¹³⁴ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 13.

¹³⁵ Douglass, “To My Old Master,” 420.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 415-416.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 420.

forward to a day when America's exceptional pledges will be secured for all, and he believes that the Declaration's lofty aspirations of freedom, equality, and the like will eventually be actualized.

Like "Fourth of July," then, "To My Old Master" exemplifies Douglass' aspirational exceptionalism. Vituperous and critical, the letter exposes America's flaws, provides honest accounts of internal fractures and cleavages, and offers scathing warnings and cautions. It suggests that America *might* be great but also claims that, at least for now, it is a "guilty nation" in need of "repentance."¹³⁹ The letter describes America's possibilities and potential but also highlights the wide gap that stands between what it is and what it might yet be. And while it expresses hope in and reverence for America's principles and institutions, it notes that American greatness is an aspiration, rather than a guarantee. "To My Old Master" is thus both a celebration of America's promise and a condemnation of America's pitfalls—a scathing critique of what *is*, a hopeful depiction of what *might be*, and a plea to bridge the gap between the two.

II. "False to the Future": America's Exceptional Hypocrisy

I have argued that Douglass utilizes and relies upon aspirational exceptionalist tropes—that his writings are self-critical, expose America's flaws, include warnings and cautions, and present American greatness as an aspiration rather than a guarantee. But thus far, I have merely shown that Douglass qualifies as an exceptionalist thinker: I have analyzed his rhetorical techniques and identified and analyzed the exceptionalist tropes in his texts, but I have said little about the substance or content of his exceptionalism. At this point, then, a reader might wonder whether Douglass is committed to American exceptionalism ideologically or just rhetorically.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 415-416.

Does Douglass *actually believe* that America is special, or is he simply using exceptionalism as a rhetorical device or tool? And if he truly thinks the nation is exceptional—if there really is some substance to his exceptionalism—then why, and on what grounds?

In this section, I argue that Douglass' exceptionalism is more than mere rhetorical strategy and claim that Douglass does, in fact, believe that the United States is special and unique. But Douglass' exceptionalism is itself exceptional, because it is not grounded in any inherent feature or quality of the American polis. Unlike other exceptionalists, who claim that America is special because it has been chosen by God or history, because her people are inherently better than others, or so on, Douglass thinks America is exceptional *only* because it has held itself out to be so. In other words, Douglass' exceptionalism is contingent rather than deterministic—a response not to America's innate or inherent features, but to the claims America has made about itself.

But what, exactly, are these claims? While many thinkers of his time (and ours) might have turned to the Constitution to uncover America's fundamental creeds and commitments, Douglass instead looks to the Declaration of Independence, a document which he calls “the RINGBOLT to the chain of [America's] destiny.”¹⁴⁰ According to Douglass, the Declaration

¹⁴⁰ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 53. Douglass does not treat the Constitution as the embodiment America's commitments and creed because in his eyes, the document is, at best, lukewarm toward slavery. Early in his career, Douglass adhered to William Lloyd Garrison's view that the Constitution was thoroughly pro-slavery, “a compact demanding immediate disannulment.” Frederick Douglass, “The Constitution and Slavery,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 42. Later, after meeting Gerrit Smith and William Goodell, Douglass modified his view and admitted that, if “construed in the light of well established rules of legal interpretation,” the Constitution could, in fact, be “wielded in behalf of emancipation.” “The Constitution and Slavery,” 43. Though his view softened slightly, Douglass remained skeptical of the document, which, he rightly noted, contained multiple “slaveholding compromises.” *Ibid.*, 40. Thus, Douglass never viewed the Constitution itself as an articulation of America's highest hopes and values. (He did, however, occasionally make positive references to the Preamble. See, for example, Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 69.)

For a more detailed discussion of Douglass' changing views on the Constitution, see Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 31-35; Buccola, “Introduction,” xvii-xviii; Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 31-38; James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick*

contains “saving principles” which, as any American schoolchild knows, include the idea that all men are created equal, that individuals are endowed with inalienable rights, and that government derives from the consent of the governed. These principles represent America’s highest values and aspirations and provide a yardstick against which to gauge the nation’s institutions, practices, and policies. Noting that Americans have, through their Declaration, proclaimed these values “before the world,”¹⁴¹ Douglass insists that Americans “be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.”¹⁴² To do otherwise, he suggests, would be a betrayal of sacred commitments and a violation of promises made to American citizens and to the world.

Douglass also locates America’s fundamental values and commitments in the idea of natural rights. In many of his writings, Douglass articulates his personal philosophy of natural rights—his belief that individuals are born with basic rights, that governments are responsible for protecting those rights, and that governments are only legitimate insofar as they fulfill that responsibility.¹⁴³ And because the Declaration of Independence explicitly invokes the language and principles of natural rights theory (by referencing “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”

Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 8-21; Richard S. Ruderman, “‘Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land’: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Abolition of Slavery,” in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 385-391; and Ronald Sundstrom, “Frederick Douglass,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/frederick-douglass/>.

¹⁴¹ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 68.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴³ For an example of Douglass’ natural rights philosophy, see Frederick Douglass, “Is Civil Government Right,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 45-49; Frederick Douglass, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 72-75; and Frederick Douglass, “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 429-434. For further discussion of Douglass and natural rights philosophy, see Buccola, “Introduction,” xviii.

and by claiming that “all men are [...] endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights,” for example), Douglass seems to believe that the United States has similarly committed itself to natural rights governance. Douglass thus expects all civil governments, but *particularly* the United States, to acknowledge and protect individual liberties, to “respect the rights of man,”¹⁴⁴ and to “establish justice in the world.”¹⁴⁵ And if and when America fails to uphold these responsibilities, Douglass claims, it, like any other government founded on natural law, “ceases to be a government [...] and is entitled to no respect whatsoever.”¹⁴⁶

For Douglass, then, America is exceptional because it has made exceptional promises—because it, through the Declaration and its adoption of natural rights theory, has vowed to recognize and protect the natural liberty, rights, and equality of *all* men. But America is also exceptionally hypocritical, because in spite of these lofty promises, it routinely and persistently fails to live up to its creeds. “You declare,” Douglass exclaims, “before the world, and are understood by the world to declare, that you ‘*hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights [...]*’; and yet, you hold securely, in [...] bondage [...] a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country.”¹⁴⁷ This great and flagrant inconsistency is, for Douglass, one of America’s most unique and astonishing features—the true source, perhaps, of American exceptionalism.

Though saddened by hypocrisy in all its forms, Douglass particularly condemns two broad categories of America’s exceptional two-facedness. The first is America’s striking *political* hypocrisy. According to Douglass, America’s “republican politics [...] are flagrantly

¹⁴⁴ Douglass, “Is Civil Government Right,” 49.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Douglass, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 73.

¹⁴⁷ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 68.

inconsistent,” because, while Americans “boast of [their] love of liberty,” they nonetheless pledge “the whole political power of the nation [...] to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three million of [their] countrymen.”¹⁴⁸ Further, Americans “hurl [...] anathemas at the crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria” while “consent[ing] to be the mere *tools* and *body-guards* of the tyrants of Virginia and Carolina.”¹⁴⁹ Douglass continues:

You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression from abroad [...]; but the fugitives from your own land, you advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill.¹⁵⁰ [...] You shed tears over fallen Hungary, and make the sad story of her wrongs the theme of your poets, statesmen and orators [...]; but in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make those wrongs the subject of political discourse! You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America.—You discourse eloquently on the dignity of labor; yet, you sustain a system which, in its very essence, casts a stigma upon labor. You can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery, to throw off a three-penny tax on tea and yet wring the last hard-earned farthing from the grasp of the black laborers of your country.¹⁵¹

Because America’s political practices contrast sharply with the liberty-loving, tolerant image it projects to the rest of the world, Douglass concludes that “for [...] shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.”¹⁵² Although other nations also enslave and oppress, only America “declare[s], before the world, and [is] understood by the world to declare[.]”¹⁵³ that all people are

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Douglass makes a similar claim in “The Word ‘White,’” an essay he penned in response to the impending passage of the Homestead Bill: “[We are] Americans by birth—attached to the country by every association that can give a right to share in the benefits of its institutions, the first successful tillers of the soil—and yet foreigners, aliens, Irish, Dutch, English and French, are to be made welcome to a quarter section of American land, while we are to be kept off from it by the flaming sword of the Republic. Shame on the outrage!” “The Word ‘White,’” in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 427-428.

¹⁵¹ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 67-68.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

created equally. And while other countries tolerate cruel monarchs and relentless tyrants, America alone professes to be “king-hating, people-loving, [and] democratic.”¹⁵⁴ For Douglass, these “national inconsistencies” brand “[American] republicanism as a sham” and make the nation supremely and exceptionally hypocritical.¹⁵⁵

But this political hypocrisy is only half the story. According to Douglass, America not only flouts its political promises—it also violates its religious principles and professions. Douglass sees this religious hypocrisy operating on at least two levels. First, Douglass describes the micro-level, individualized hypocrisy of people who claim to be Christian but nonetheless participate in, support, or enable slaveholding. In his first autobiography, for example, Douglass describes and censures various white individuals who, though professing belief in the Christian faith, subject slaves to cruel and unjust treatment. In fact, one of Douglass’ chief complaints against his Master Thomas Auld (who Douglass describes as being “destitute of every element of character commanding respect”¹⁵⁶) is that Auld “found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty” and “made the greatest pretensions to piety.”¹⁵⁷ Douglass makes similar observations about Mr. Edward Covey (a “professor of religion” and “pious soul” who was assigned to act as Douglass’ “nigger-breaker”¹⁵⁸), and the Reverends Daniel Weeden (a “merciless, *religious* wretch” who used his lash so frequently that one of his female slave’s back was “for weeks [...] kept literally raw”¹⁵⁹) and Rigby Hopkins (a man who “could always find

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” in *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 51.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

something [...] to justify the use of the lash” but yet “made higher professions of religion” than any other slaver in the region¹⁶⁰).

For Douglass, the abhorrent behavior of these slaveholders is made all the more repulsive by the fact that each professed to follow Christianity. In fact, this hypocrisy—this ability to “profess[] love to God whom they have not seen, whilst [hating] their brother whom they have seen”—leads Douglass to declare that he “hate[s] the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”¹⁶¹ Though living under a master like Reverend Hopkins or Reverend Weeden would be miserable under any circumstance, it is, for Douglass, even more unbearable when these same lash-loving men move straight from whipping to “prayer and preaching meetings.”¹⁶² It is little wonder, then, that Douglass claims he “should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall [him].”¹⁶³

Douglass is also keenly aware of the ways this religious hypocrisy operates at the institutional level. In “Fourth of July,” for example, Douglass accuses the church as an institution of being “not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave” but also of “actually tak[ing] sides with the oppressors.”¹⁶⁴ He further claims that the church has become “an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty”¹⁶⁵ and that it “esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 97. Though Douglass is vehemently opposed to this Christianity, which he calls “the Christianity of this land,” he is not opposed to Christianity as such. Douglass notes, “[B]etween the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.” *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶⁴ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 64.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

above right doing; solemn meetings above practical righteousness.”¹⁶⁶ In his autobiography, Douglass offers a similar critique and likens American Christianity to “the ancient scribes and Pharisees.”¹⁶⁷ “Christians in America,” he writes, “strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. [...] They would be shocked at the proposition of fellowshipping a *sheep*-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their communion a *man*-stealer, and brand me with being an infidel, if I find fault with them for it.”¹⁶⁸

Interestingly, Douglass sees this institutional religious hypocrisy as a unique feature of the American church. In England, Douglass claims, “the question of emancipation was a high religious question” and was “demanded, in the name of humanity, and according to the law of the living God.”¹⁶⁹ The English church thus “came forward promptly” and, “true to its mission of ameliorating, elevating, and improving the condition of mankind,” advocated on behalf of the country’s slaves.¹⁷⁰ In America, though, the church has done just the opposite and “has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters.”¹⁷¹ “The anti-slavery movement *there* [in England],” Douglass explains, “was not an anti-Church movement,” but “the church of this country [has assumed] [...] a hostile position toward [abolition].”¹⁷²

Taken together, these three American hypocrisies—political, individual-level religious, and institutional religious—form the foundation of Douglass’ exceptionalism. For him, the nation is not exceptional because of any inherent quality or virtue. Rather, America is

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶⁷ Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” 99.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶⁹ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 67.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 67

exceptional because it, and it alone, has made exceptional promises that it has failed to uphold in spectacular ways. Unlike any other nation, America drafted a Declaration of Independence promising to honor mankind's natural rights and liberties, and yet it brooks (and even facilitates) widespread oppression and bondage. And at both the individual and institutional level, America prioritizes the interests of slaveholders above the doctrines of Christ in ways that other nations and peoples do not and have not. America neither renders to Caesar what it has pledged to Caesar, nor to God what it has promised to God, and yet it proudly claims to do both. For Douglass, then, America's exceptionalism originates both in the nation's exceptional assurances *and* in its perpetual and hypocritical failure to make good on its promises.

III. "Roused to Virtuous Indignation": Douglass' Aspirational Citizenship

In the previous sections, I have shown that Frederick Douglass operates within the American exceptionalist tradition and that his rhetoric, though caustic and critical, betrays a fundamental commitment to United States and its potential. I have also shown that Douglass' exceptionalism is grounded in America's unique and blatant hypocrisy: For Douglass, America is exceptional not because it is inherently great, but because it promises (and yet perpetually fails) to be a bastion of freedom and equality. In both content and configuration, then, Douglass qualifies as an aspirational American exceptionalist.

But what do we gain by counting Douglass among the ranks of America's exceptionalist thinkers? As discussed in the introduction, this dissertation accepts the proposition, articulated by Charles Taylor and others, that "language is not just a set of words which designate things" but is rather "the vehicle of [...] reflective awareness"¹⁷³—i.e., a medium that allows humans to

¹⁷³ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 229.

“relate to things in new ways [...] and to have new emotions, goals, relationships, as well as being responsive to issues of strong value.”¹⁷⁴ It is thus a central claim of this dissertation that the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, which is one of the more dominant discourses in American politics, necessarily affects the way listeners understand themselves, their country, and their role(s) within society. By reading Douglass as an exceptionalist, then, we do more than simply expand the canon of American exceptionalist thought. We also uncover and activate a new mode of enacting American citizenship and “express/realize [new] [and distinctly Douglassian] way[s] of being in the world.”¹⁷⁵

But what is this Douglassian citizenship? How, in other words, does Douglass’ aspirational exceptionalism open new dimensions, and what possibilities for political action does it unlock? To answer these questions, I consider two dimensions of Douglass’ aspirational rhetoric. First, I examine Douglass’ cognitive/rational claims and identify the citizenship practices he endorses through explicit and reasoned argumentation. I then discuss Douglass’ affective/performative rhetoric and consider the traits he models, inspires, and provokes. By focusing on both his rational argumentation and his performative rhetoric, I acknowledge that Douglass, like all great rhetoricians, persuades his audience using both cognitive and affective strategies. I thus capture the full range and impact of his aspirational exceptionalism and show that, at both the analytical and affective levels, his rhetoric activates citizenship practices that are critical, progressive, proactive, and self-reflective.

¹⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 37. In an earlier essay, Taylor explains this idea as follows: “If language serves to express/realize a new kind of awareness; then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things; an ability to describe them, but also new ways of feeling, of responding to things. If in expressing our thoughts about things, we can come to have new thoughts; then in expressing our feelings, we can come to have transformed feelings.” *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 233.

¹⁷⁵ Taylor, *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 232.

A. Propositional Arguments

The first and most obvious way Douglass articulates his preferred citizenship practices is through explicit, reasoned proposals. In many (if not most) of his speeches and writings, Douglass explicitly commends some actions while condemning others. Douglass also uses the panegyric techniques of epideictic rhetoric (a popular rhetorical style in 19th-century America)¹⁷⁶ and the suasive strategies of deliberative speech¹⁷⁷ to praise, blame, recommend, and decry certain civic behaviors. Douglass thus explicitly names many of the characteristics he endorses, and his own language, taken on its face, reveals a great deal about his recommended citizenship practices.

Perhaps the most obvious of these practices is active political involvement. Throughout his works, Douglass repeatedly stresses the importance of active and engaged citizenship, and he often admonishes his audience to involve themselves in political affairs. He insists that “the neutral scholar is an ignoble man” and that “he that is not for us, is against us,” and he demands

¹⁷⁶ Aristotle’s term for rhetoric that “has as its subject praise or blame.” *Rhetoric*, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1932), 17. As Ochieng and others have noted, Republican epideictic (i.e., a rhetorical tradition modeled after Aristotle’s epideictic category) was a “dominant rhetorical style[]” of the 19th century. Ochieng, “A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing,” 179. So, Douglass would have likely been familiar with this mode of rhetoric, and may have intentionally mimicked and borrowed epideictic strategies. For further discussion of Douglass and epideictic rhetoric, see Ochieng, “A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing.” For further discussion of 19th century American epideictic, see Edwin Black, “The Sentimental Style as Escapism, or the Devil With Dan’l Webster,” in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, ed. K.K. Campbell and K.H. Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 70-81.

¹⁷⁷ Aristotle’s term for rhetoric which “gives advice about things to come.” *Rhetoric*, 17. It is less clear whether Douglass knew of or intentionally employed deliberative techniques, as defined by Aristotle. However, Aristotle’s category of deliberative rhetoric became a key component of Roman rhetorical education, which, in turn, served as a model for Western education to Douglass’ day and beyond. So, it is possible that Douglass was at least somewhat familiar with the tropes and techniques of deliberative speech.

Still, by invoking Aristotle’s deliberative mode here, I do not mean to suggest that Douglass was a trained Aristotelian rhetorician or that he self-consciously utilized deliberative strategies. Rather, I introduce the deliberative category only as a means of discussing, classifying, and analyzing Douglass’ various argumentative strategies.

that his audience take and defend clear political positions.¹⁷⁸ Douglass even recommends specific political actions. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,¹⁷⁹ for instance, he admonishes free blacks to emigrate to Kansas in order to “secure[] [the territory] for Liberty.”¹⁸⁰ He also argues (controversially) that it is “right and wise” to kill slave-catchers, men who “deliberately violate [the law of justice] by taking pleasure in enslaving, imbruting, and murdering their fellow-men.”¹⁸¹ For Douglass, a citizen “must be hot, or be accounted cold, or perchance, something worse than hot or cold.”¹⁸² Citizens must, in other words, be women and men of action and must be passionately involved in political life.

Douglass also celebrates practices of political resistance and, in so doing, suggests that citizens ought to be willing to push back against unjust governmental practices. Although Douglass clearly reveres the potential of America’s institutions,¹⁸³ he also believes that a nation’s laws command and deserve obedience only insofar as they approximate *natural* law.¹⁸⁴ And

¹⁷⁸ Frederick Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 80.

¹⁷⁹ Which repealed the Missouri Compromise and allowed citizens in Kansas and Nebraska to determine whether to allow slavery in their respective territories.

¹⁸⁰ This admonition comes in the form of an essay titled, “Our Plan for Making Kansas a Free State.” In it, Douglass writes, “Colored men, Colored Citizens—for such they really are—native born Citizens to boot, can safely emigrate to Kansas, and can safely occupy lands located therein. And the question is *Ought they not to do so?* We believe they ought to do so. Whether regarded from the point of duty to the Slave—its effect being to weaken the slave power—or from the point of duty to themselves—its effect being to increase their welfare, and to elevate their condition—they *ought to go* into that Territory as *permanent* settlers.” In *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 436.

¹⁸¹ Douglass, “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” 431.

¹⁸² Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” 80.

¹⁸³ See, for example, Douglass’ discussion of the American framers in “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 51-53. See also “Is Civil Government Right,” where Douglass praises the institutions of civil government.

¹⁸⁴ Douglass’ natural law theory is evident throughout writings but is particularly obvious in “Is It Right and Wise to Kill and Kidnapper.” In that essay, Douglass describes a man who commits suicide by throwing himself from the top of a building. According to Douglass, the man’s act is a blatant violation of the natural law of gravity. Because the man disregards this natural law, “the observance of [which] was necessary to his preservation,” he “forfeits his *right* to live.” 431. Thus, the man “dies according to law, and however shocking may be the spectacle he presents, it is no argument against the beneficence of the law of gravitation, the suspension of whose operation must work ruin to the well-being of mankind.” *Ibid.*

because he believes that the natural law is one of justice and equality,¹⁸⁵ he insists that human beings are only “authorized by their Creator to institute a government for themselves, and to pass and enforce laws which are in accordance with justice, liberty and humanity.”¹⁸⁶ If and when government fails to do this, Douglass explains, “resistance is [...] wise, as well as just,”¹⁸⁷ and it becomes “the first duty of every American citizen, whose conscience permits so to do, to use his *political* as well as his *moral* power [to] overthrow” the offending law or institution.¹⁸⁸

Douglas abhors a politics of passivity. Rather, he encourages active political involvement and strong (even physical) resistance to oppressive governmental practices. He expects citizens to monitor and, if need be, correct their government officials, and he insists that “all tyrants, all oppressors *should be taught*, by precept and example, that, in trampling wantonly and ruthlessly upon the lives and liberties of their unoffending brother-men, they forfeit their own right to liberty and richly deserve the slavery and death that they inflict upon others.”¹⁸⁹ He thus asks citizens to abandon “the fallacy that submission is the best remedy for [...] wrongs and

Like the law of gravity, which governs the physical world, Douglass suggests that there are natural laws that control the moral and social spheres. And just as “human life is not superior to the laws for the preservation of the physical universe, so, too, is it not superior to the eternal law of justice, which is essential to the preservation of the rights, and the security, and happiness of the race.” *Ibid.* If and when a government acts contrary to natural law, then, it ceases to be legitimate and forfeits its right to be obeyed, just as the man who throws himself from a building forfeits his right to live.

¹⁸⁵ Unlike John Locke, Douglass never delineates the content or boundaries of the natural law. However, in one essay, Douglass calls the natural law “the eternal law of justice.” “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” 432. He also suggests that the Declaration of Independence, with its affirmation of mankind’s equality, embodies “the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice,” and he argues that “enslaving, imbruting, and murdering” are clear violations of natural law. “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 56; “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” 430. Douglass thus seems to believe that the natural law guarantees, at a minimum, freedom, equality, and justice.

¹⁸⁶ Douglass, “Is Civil Government Right,” 46.

¹⁸⁷ Douglass, “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” 433.

¹⁸⁸ Frederick Douglass, “Change of Opinion Announced,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016): 43.

¹⁸⁹ Douglass, “Is Civil Government Right,” 49 (emphasis mine).

injustice” and instead admonishes them to actively, “unhesitatingly[,] and heartily consecrate [themselves]” to “advocacy [for righteous civil government].”¹⁹⁰

Douglass also calls on citizens to be promoters and defenders of liberty and equality. Throughout his works, Douglass explicitly and emphatically argues that all human beings share a “common nature” and a “united destiny.”¹⁹¹ He insists that “human rights stand upon [this] common basis,” and he argues that, “by all the reason that [rights] are supported, maintained and defended for all one variety of the human family, they are supported, maintained and defended for *all* the human family.”¹⁹² Douglass makes repeated reference to the Declaration of Independence, and he regularly quotes or paraphrases the “self-evident” truths that “all men are

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Douglass’ endorsement of physical resistance may stem, in part, from his experiences with Edward Covey. In January 1834, after repeatedly letting his master’s horse escape, Douglass was sent to live with Mr. Edward Covey, a poor farmer who “enjoyed the execrated reputation, of being a first rate hand at breaking young negroes.” Douglass, “My Bondage and My Freedom,” in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 256. A particularly cruel slave handler, Covey repeatedly subjected Douglass to savage floggings and, in Douglass’ words, made “[Douglass] drink the bitterest dregs of slavery.” *Ibid.*, 267.

One day, after suffering a “merciless” beating, Douglass fled to his master Thomas Auld, hoping to “invoke the interposition of [Auld’s] power and authority, to protect [Douglass] from further abuse and violence.” *Ibid.*, 272, 274. Auld, however, was unmoved by Douglass’ plight and ordered him to return to Covey’s farm. Douglass obeyed and, on his way, resolved to “defend and protect [himself]” against any future blows. *Ibid.*, 281-82.

The day after Douglass returned to the farm, Covey tackled Douglass, and for the first time, Douglass fought back. He describes the incident thus: “*I was resolved to fight*, and, what was better still, I was actually hard at it. The fighting madness had come upon me, and I found my strong fingers firmly attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor; as heedless of consequences, at that moment, as though we stood as equals before the law. The very color of the man was forgotten. I felt as supple as a cat, and was ready for the snakish [*sic*] creature at every turn. Every blow of his was parried, though I dealt no blows in turn. [...] I flung him on the ground several times, when he meant to have hurled me there. I held him so firmly by the throat, that his blood followed my nails.” *Ibid.*, 283.

Eventually, Douglass overpowered Covey, and the frightened Covey called for help. After Douglass resisted the men who came to Covey’s aid, Covey “gave up the contest.” *Ibid.*, 285. From that day on, Covey never again beat or flogged Douglass. This incident, which Douglass referred to as “the last flogging,” was a major turning point in Douglass’ life and may have persuaded Douglass of the power and efficacy of physical resistance, because when he later wrote about the event, he observed, “A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity.” *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁹¹ Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” 88.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

created equal” and are endowed with the rights of life and liberty.¹⁹³ He insists, for example, that the Declaration’s commitment to freedom and equality is the “only intelligible principle on which popular sovereignty is founded,”¹⁹⁴ and he calls it a “saving principle[.]”¹⁹⁵

Douglass is firm in his commitment to “the unity of the human race—the brotherhood of man—[and] the reciprocal duties of all to each, and of each to all,”¹⁹⁶ and he insists that America’s destiny depends on “a rigid adherence to [these] principles.”¹⁹⁷ He also suggests that failing to secure equality and liberty will provoke the wrath of God, for “God has no children whose rights may be safely trampled upon.”¹⁹⁸ Douglass thus calls for citizens to be champions and defenders of freedom and equality, and he admonishes his audience to “cling to [these principles] with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight.”¹⁹⁹ Without the Declaration’s promise of freedom and equality, Douglass argues, “all is lost,”²⁰⁰ so citizens must “be true to [these principles] on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever costs.”²⁰¹

Douglass thus calls for citizens who are diligently involved in politics, who are willing to engage in active (and, if necessary, physical) resistance, and who fight for liberty and equality, and he deploys all the techniques of reasoned, analytical argument to justify and defend these

¹⁹³ See, e.g., Frederick Douglass, “The Kansas-Nebraska Bill,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 106. Aside from the Bible, Douglass cites the Declaration of Independence more than any other single text.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 53.

¹⁹⁶ Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” 83.

¹⁹⁷ Douglass, “The Kansas-Nebraska Bill,” 100.

¹⁹⁸ Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” 89.

¹⁹⁹ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 53.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

requests. For example, Douglass uses fact-based, measured strategies to convince his audience that certain courses of action (e.g., emigrating to Kansas,²⁰² killing slave catchers,²⁰³ etc.) are useful and right. He also offers tight and well-reasoned defenses of his more controversial propositions and insists that his own escape from slavery was moral,²⁰⁴ that it is permissible to “kill in defence [*sic.*] of one’s liberty,”²⁰⁵ that citizens can and should rise up against governments that do not honor basic human rights,²⁰⁶ etc. Douglass also mimics the showy, colorful language of Republican epideictic rhetoric to praise (e.g., his celebration of “resistance [as] [...] wise as well as just”²⁰⁷) and censure (e.g., his insistence that the slaveholder is “an agent of hell”²⁰⁸) noble and ignoble citizenship practices. And he uses pathos—i.e., appeals to anger, fear, pity, and other emotions and sensations—to stir his audience’s emotions, and, by

²⁰² Douglass, “Our Plan for Making Kansas a Free State.”

²⁰³ Douglass, “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper.”

²⁰⁴ Writing to his former master, Douglass offers this reasoned defense of his escape: “I am myself; you are yourself; we are two distinct persons, equal persons. What you are, I am. You are a man, and so am I. God created both, and made us separate beings. I am not by nature bound to you, or you to me. Nature does not make your existence depend upon me, or mine to depend upon yours. [...] We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence. In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me, and in no way lessened your means for obtaining an *honest* living. Your faculties remained yours, and mine became useful to their rightful owner. I therefore see no wrong in any part of the transaction.” “To My Old Master,” 416.

²⁰⁵ Douglass defends this proposition in “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper.” He reasons as follows: “All will agree that human life is valuable or worthless, as to the innocent or criminal use that is made of it. Most evidently, also, the possession of life was permitted and ordained for beneficent ends, and not to defeat those ends, or to render their attainment impossible. Comprehensively stated, the end of man’s creation is his own good, and the honor of his creator. Life, therefore, is but a means to an end, and must be held in reason to be not superior to the purposes for which it was designed by the All-wise Creator. In this view there is no such thing as an absolute right to live; that is to say, the right to live, like any other human right, may be forfeited, and if forfeited, may be taken away.” 430. Based on this logic, Douglass argues that it is “right and wise” to kill slave-catchers and others who deprive individuals of their liberty, because these have “forfeited [their] right to live, and [their deaths are] necessary, as a warning to others liable to pursue a like course.” *Ibid.*, 432.

²⁰⁶ Douglass defends this proposition using the logic of social contract theory: “Human government is for the protection of rights; and when human government destroys human rights, it ceases to be a government, and becomes a foul and blasting conspiracy; and is entitled to no respect whatsoever.” “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 73.

²⁰⁷ Douglass, “Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper,” 433.

²⁰⁸ Douglass, “To My Old Master,” 418.

recounting the graphic and “heart-sickening details”²⁰⁹ of slavery, provoke visceral responses that “bring his hearers into a frame of mind that [...] dispose them to anger” against the slave system.²¹⁰

Douglass also takes great care to establish his rhetorical authority and credibility—i.e., to build and project ethos. As a black man and former slave, he surely knows that few in his audience view him as a respectable, trustworthy, or legitimate speaker. So, Douglass does all he can to build his credibility or, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, to ensure that “his own character should look right.”²¹¹ One way Douglass does this is by repeatedly quoting and discussing both the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. In nearly all of his speeches and essays, Douglass makes at least some reference to either the Bible or the Declaration, and in some works, he cites both texts extensively and repeatedly. In so doing, Douglass quite literally places his words alongside the words of God (or, in the case of the Declaration, of Jefferson) and thereby creates the impression that his words and God’s form one continuous (and equally legitimate) text.²¹² By positioning his own claims within those of the Bible and the Declaration, Douglass suggests that his arguments are comparable to, if not indistinguishable from, the word of God (or, at the very least, the word of America’s demi-god Thomas Jefferson). He also implies that all rational, patriotic, faithful Americans should heed his counsel and that rejecting his words would be akin to rejecting God and/or Jefferson—i.e., an act of either religious or political heresy.

²⁰⁹ Douglass, “My Bondage and My Freedom,” 205.

²¹⁰ Aristotle, “Rhetorica,” In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1384.

²¹¹ Aristotle, “Rhetorica,” 1379.

²¹² Indeed, Douglass cites the Declaration so regularly that listeners may have occasionally found it difficult to discern where Jefferson’s words ended and Douglass’ began.

In sum, Douglass uses demonstrative and analytical arguments to describe and endorse three citizenship practices: active civic participation, political resistance, and commitment to liberty and equality. He defends these practices at the level of logic and cognition, and he deploys all the rhetorical techniques at his disposal to craft persuasive and rational arguments for each. Douglass' endorsement of these three practices is thus unmistakable, evident from the face of his text, and his direct and demonstrative persuasive techniques suggests that these behaviors, above all, lie at the heart of his preferred mode of citizenship.

B. Affective/Performative Arguments

Douglass does not persuade using words and logic alone; he also recommends citizenship practices through his actions and example. In addition to offering explicit prescriptions, then, Douglass persuades through embodying, enacting, and exemplifying behaviors that he expects citizens to cultivate. He admonishes citizens to do both as he says *and* as he does, and he uses performative and affective techniques to illustrate additional aspects of his aspirational exceptionalist citizenship.

We can better understand Douglass' politics by making use of the Greek concept²¹³ of *parrhesia*, or frank-speech. According to Foucault, *parrhesia*—which stems from the Greek words “pan” (everything, all) and “rhema” or “rhesis” (speech)—is the act of giving “a complete and exact account of what [the speaker] has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks.”²¹⁴ In *parrhesia*, a speaker “uses the most direct words and

²¹³ Or “way of being”—in “The Courage of Truth,” Foucault specifies that *parrhesia* is not a technique or skill like rhetoric, but rather a “stance” or “mode of action.” “First Lecture, 1 February 1984, First Hour,” in *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984*, ed. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 14.

²¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia,” in *Six Lectures Given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, Oct.-Nov. 1983*, ed. Joseph Pearson, 1999, https://foucault.info/system/files/pdf/DiscourseAndTruth_MichelFoucault_1983_0.pdf.

forms of expression he can find”²¹⁵ and “acts on other people’s mind by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes.”²¹⁶ The *parrhesiastes* (i.e., the speaker using *parrhesia*) also “says what he knows to be true” and demonstrates the veracity of his or her claims by speaking with sincerity and courage.²¹⁷ Because *parrhesia* typically involves the articulation of an idea “different from what the majority believes,” it necessarily involves a “risk or danger [...] in telling the truth.”²¹⁸ Indeed, the *parrhesiastes* is, according to Foucault, “someone who takes a risk,” and who “risks death to tell the truth instead of reposing in the security of a life where the truth goes unspoken.”²¹⁹

Douglass, who is remembered for his “relentless” criticisms²²⁰ and “blistering attack[s],”²²¹ perfectly embodies this *parrhesiastic* disposition.²²² On multiple occasions, Douglass openly admits his intent to “expos[e],”²²³ to “startle[],”²²⁴ and to “rouse[]”²²⁵ and, in so doing, reveals his *parrhesiastic* willingness to “open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person.”²²⁶ He also willingly confesses that he uses “the severest language

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* According to Foucault, “If there is a kind of ‘proof’ of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes*, it is his courage. The fact that a speaker says something dangerous—different from what the majority believes—is a strong indication that he is a *parrhesiastes*.”

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Ochieng, “A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing,” 172.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

²²² *Ibid.*, 172.

²²³ Douglass, “To My Old Master,” 420; Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 59.

²²⁴ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 59.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Foucault, “First Lecture, 1 February 1984, First Hour,” 11.

[he] can command,”²²⁷ an admission that bears striking resemblance to Foucault’s description of the *parrhesiastes* as one who “uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find.”²²⁸ Douglass explains that he aims to “concentrat[e] public attention on the system [of slavery],”²²⁹ and he describes his letter to his former master as a “dragging [...] before the public,” suggesting that he intends the work to function as a sort of exposé.²³⁰ He also acknowledges the dangers inherent in his truth-telling and notes that his words will, at *best*, “subject [him] to no inconsiderable amount of censure.”²³¹

In true *parrhesiastic* fashion, then, Douglass exposes, critiques, and insists that the “damning fact[s]” about slavery “be perpetually told.”²³² He models the practice of frank-speech and, as Foucault outlines, “uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsity or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.”²³³ Douglass is, in other words, a certifiable *parrhesiastes*, and he illustrates what it means to commit oneself to truth-telling.²³⁴ His performative rhetoric thus serves as an advertisement and endorsement of courageous, open, and frank *parrhesiastic* speech.

²²⁷ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 58.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Douglass, “To My Old Master,” 420.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 413.

²³¹ *Ibid.* Of course, public censure was one of the mildest possible consequences of Douglass’ frank speech. As William Lloyd Garrison noted, Douglass was, ultimately, “self-emancipated” fugitive slave and was constantly “surrounded [...] by peril [...] even in Massachusetts, on the soil of the Pilgrim Fathers, among the descendants of revolutionary sires.” “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” 4. Douglass’ *parrhesia* could have thus easily cost him his freedom, or even his life.

²³² Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 63.

²³³ Foucault, “Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia.”

²³⁴ Douglass’ *parrhesia* was not lost on his audiences. In fact, one of Douglass’ frequent observers, William Lloyd Garrison, described Douglass’ frank speech thus: “I am confident that [Douglass’ rhetoric] is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS.” Garrison,

In addition to *parrhesia*, Douglass models an open-minded non-dogmatism—i.e., a willingness to re-visit, re-consider, and re-assess. This intellectual flexibility is perhaps most evident in his changing assessment of the Constitution. At the outset of his public life, Douglass accepted William Lloyd Garrison’s belief that the US Constitution was inherently pro-slavery.²³⁵ Douglass endorsed this view in his newspaper the *North Star* and vigorously (and publicly) defended the proposition that “[the Constitution] was made in view of the existence of slavery, and in a manner well calculated to aid and strengthen that heaven-daring crime.”²³⁶ Later, however, Douglass grew close with Gerrit Smith, William Goodell, and other abolitionists who insisted that slavery and the Constitution were incompatible. Douglass eventually accepted these views and in 1851, just two years after writing a Garrisonian critique of the Constitution, published an editorial called “Change of Opinion Announced,” wherein he publicly revoked his previous position.²³⁷ “We [feel] in honor bound,” he wrote, “to announce at once to our old anti-slavery companions [...] that we [have] arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution; construed in the light of well established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble.”²³⁸ To wit, Douglass, the zealous anti-Constitution abolitionist, had changed views.

“Preface to Narrative of the Life,” in *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 7.

²³⁵ For further discussion of Garrison’s position, see Jonathan D. Glickstein, “William Lloyd Garrison,” in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 264. See also Ruderman, “Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land,” 377-385.

²³⁶ Douglass, “The Constitution and Slavery,” 39.

²³⁷ Douglass, “Change of Opinion Announced.” For further discussion of Douglass’ changing position on the Constitution and slavery, see Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 31-35; Buccola, “Introduction,” xvii-xviii; Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 31-38; Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 8-21; and Sundstrom, “Frederick Douglass.”

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

As the owner-publisher of a prominent newspaper and the public face of the African American abolition movement, Douglass must have worried that this “flip-flop” would hurt his credibility, his readership, and the abolitionist cause. His decision to boldly and publicly announce his changed opinion is thus significant, as it reveals his willingness to re-assess, critique, and challenge even his own views. This intellectual flexibility is similarly evident in Douglass’ assertion that “true stability consists not in being of the same opinion now as formerly, but in a fixed principle of honesty, even urging us to the adoption or rejection of that which may seem to us true or false at the ever-present now.”²³⁹ For Douglass (and for Douglassian citizens), it seems, intellectual open-mindedness is a virtue, and “the only truly consistent man is he who will, for the sake of being right today, contradict what he said wrong yesterday.”²⁴⁰

Like his frank-speech, then, Douglass’ open-minded rhetorical performance reveals an essential component of his aspirational citizenship. Through words and argumentation, Douglass explicitly endorses non-dogmatism, open-mindedness, and self-critique, claiming that these traits are markers of “true stability” rather than weakness.²⁴¹ And then, in case his words are not persuasive enough, Douglass offers an example (his own) to demonstrate how non-dogmatism looks in practice. By revoking his own erroneous views, he shows that even he strives to cultivate and practice self-correction. He thus enacts open-mindedness and, in so doing, provides an effective affective model of this aspirational trait.

²³⁹ Douglass, “The Constitution and Slavery,” 37.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Bromell describes Douglass’ non-dogmatism as follows: “[Douglass] had learned from experience the wisdom of seeing things from multiple perspectives, and he saw the foolishness of rejecting a reality *in toto* because part of it was inconsistent with a single perspective. His disposition, then, was to find a way to reinterpret and reframe rather than reject a position with his own. For consistency, as he now understood it, did not mean intellectual or moral purity. It meant a steady commitment to a struggle—what he would call a ‘fixed principle of honesty’—not a logical point-by-point alignment of reality and principle, or past with present.” “A ‘Voice from the Enslaved,’” 710.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Finally, Douglass models hopefulness, optimism, and future-orientedness. Although he is terrifically critical of America and its institutions, he constantly reminds his audience that he “do[es] not despair of this country.”²⁴² And though he laments the country’s failings—its hypocrisy, inequality, injustice, and the like—he is careful to communicate his belief and hope in the nation’s future. After lambasting America’s inability (or, perhaps, unwillingness) to make good on its founding promises, for example, Douglass reminds his audience that “there are forces in operation, which must inevitably, work the downfall of slavery.”²⁴³ Douglass also “draw[s] encouragement from ‘the Declaration of Independence,’ the great principles it contains, and the genius of American institutions,”²⁴⁴ and he explains that he has “no fear for the ultimate triumph of free principles in this country”²⁴⁵ and takes “consolation in the thought, that America is young.”²⁴⁶ “Great streams,” he writes hopefully, “are not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages. [...] They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. [...] As with rivers so with nations.”²⁴⁷

Douglass thus adopts an attitude of hopefulness, and though he is painfully aware of the “dark clouds”²⁴⁸ that threaten America and its principles, he remains focused not on the “present state” but on “what we ought to be.”²⁴⁹ This optimism, this unwavering commitment to the potential of the “future state,”²⁵⁰ propels Douglass through despair, dejection, and paralysis. By

²⁴² Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 70.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Douglass, “The Kansas-Nebraska Bill,” 107.

²⁴⁶ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” 51.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Douglass, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 75.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

maintaining his hope in and commitment to America's future, then, Douglass marries criticism with confidence and shows that citizens can, at once, be exasperated by the present and encouraged about what is to come. His rhetoric thus serves, once again, as a model for would-be Douglassians, providing performative proof that "biting critique and deep devotion" can and should coexist.²⁵¹

Douglass' affective and performative strategies complement his arguments to illustrate and endorse certain citizenship practices. He speaks "frankly"²⁵² and with "severe[] language"²⁵³ and, in so doing, models for his audience the practice of *parrhesia*. He also transparently reassesses his own positions and opinions and thereby illustrates intellectual flexibility, non-dogmatism, and openness. Finally, Douglass maintains a hopeful, optimistic tone, and despite his criticisms, he constantly reminds his audience that he has faith in and hope for America's future. He thus embodies a future-oriented optimism and, through his example, encourages his audience to adopt a similarly hopeful ethos.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Frederick Douglass works within and contributes to the American exceptionalist tradition. Through close readings and textual analyses of two of his acclaimed works ("What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July" and "To My Old Master"), I have shown that Douglass relies heavily on aspirational exceptionalist tropes and is fundamentally committed to the potential and promise of America. I have also explored the nature and source of his exceptionalist commitments and have argued that Douglass' exceptionalism is grounded in

²⁵¹ Buccola, "Introduction," xix.

²⁵² Douglass, "To My Old Master," 414.

²⁵³ Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July," 58.

his recognition of (and frustration with) the nation's unparalleled promises/principles as well as hypocrisy. Lastly, I have explored the distinct mode of citizenship that Douglass' aspirational exceptionalism activates, and I have shown that Douglass uses both analytical and affective rhetorical strategies to endorse and model six basic citizenship practices: engaged involvement, active resistance, commitment to liberty and equality, frank speech, non-dogmatism, and hopeful optimism. I have, in other words, described Douglass' unique mode of aspirational citizenship and have shown that his rhetoric activates and enables practices that are thoughtful, honest, and engaged.

I offer these insights and arguments in part for intellectual historical purposes—namely, to destabilize and expand the existing canon of American exceptionalism. More importantly, though, I offer them as a normative claim about citizenship practices in America. If Frederick Douglass teaches us that American exceptionalist rhetoric need not always be self-celebratory, backward-looking, and banal, he also shows that American citizenship practices (which, as I argue in the introductory chapter, are often based on and inspired by American exceptionalism) need not always be self-assured, passive and smug. Characterizing Frederick Douglass as an American exceptionalist thinker thus expands the boundaries of the American exceptionalist rhetorical tradition, but it also (and more significantly) broadens the range of “acceptable” and laudable citizenship practices. It creates room for critics, for *parrhesiastes*, for discontents, and for resisters, and it reminds (or, perhaps, teaches) us that good American citizens can be loud, disgruntled, angry, and defiant while remaining committed to the country and its future.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. 1932. *Rhetoric*. Translated by Lane Cooper. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.
- . 2001. "Rhetorica." In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, translated by Richard McKeon, 1325-1454. New York: Modern Library.
- Black, Edwin. 1978. "The Sentimental Style as Escapism, or the Devil With Dan'l Webster." In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, edited by K.K. Campbell and K.H. Jamieson, 70-81. Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Blight, David W. 1991. *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Bromell, Nick. 2011. "A 'Voice from the Enslaved': The Origins of Frederick Douglass's Political Philosophy of Democracy,." *American Literary History* 23 (4): 697-723.
- Buccola, Nicholas. 2016. "Introduction." In *The Essential Douglass*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, xv-xxvi. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1969. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Douglass, Frederick. 2016. "Change of Opinion Announced." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 43-44. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- . 2016. "Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 80-89. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- . 2016. "Is Civil Government Right?" In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 45-49. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- . 2016. "Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?" In *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, edited by John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 429-434. New York: Penguin.
- . 1994. "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass." In *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., 453-1045. New York: Library of America.
- . 1994. "My Bondage and My Freedom." In *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 103-452. New York: Library of America.
- . 1994. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass." In *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1-102. New York: Library of America.
- . 2016. "Our Plan for Making Kansas a Free State." In *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, edited by John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 435-440. New York: Penguin.
- . 2016. "The Constitution and Slavery." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 37-42. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- . 2016. "The Fugitive Slave Law." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 72-75. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- . 2016. "The Kansas-Nebraska Bill." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 93-107. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

- . 2016. "The Word "White"." In *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, edited by John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr., 427-428. New York: Penguin.
- . 2016. "To My Old Master." In *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, edited by John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr., 413-420. New York: Penguin.
- . 2016. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 50-71. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1938. "History." In *Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 235-256. New York: Library of America.
- Foucault, Michel. 1999. "Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia." *Six Lectures Given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, Oct.-Nov. 1983*. Edited by Joseph Pearson. https://foucault.info/system/files/pdf/DiscourseAndTruth_MichelFoucault_1983_0.pdf.
- . 2008. "First Lecture, 1 February 1984, First Hour." In *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984*, edited by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.
- Garrison, William Lloyd. 1994. "Preface to Narrative of the Life." In *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, edited by Jr. Henry Louis Gates, 3-10. New York: Library of America.
- Glickstein, Jonathan D. 1995. "William Lloyd Garrison." In *A Companion to American Political Thought*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg, 263-265. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Hughes, Richard T. 2003. *Myths America Lives By*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Martin, Waldo E. 1984. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- McFeeley, William S. 1995. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: W.W Norton & Company.
- Oakes, James. 2007. *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Ochieng, Omedi. 2011. "A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing: Frederick Douglass and the Architectonic of African American Radicalism." *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (2): 168-184.
- Reagan, Ronald. 1989. "Farewell Address to the Nation." *The American Presidency Project*. January 11. Accessed August 8, 2016. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650>.
- Ruderman, Richard S. 2003. "'Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land': Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Abolition of Slavery." In *History of American Political Thought*, edited by Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga, 385-391. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Smith, James McCune. 1994. "Introduction." In *Frederick Douglass Autobiographies*, by Frederick Douglass, 125-137. New York: Library of America.
- Stephens, Gregory. 1997. "Frederick Douglass' Multiracial Abolitionism: 'Antagonistic Cooperation' and 'Redeemable Ideals' in the July 5 Speech." *Communication Studies* 48 (3): 175-194.
- Sundstrom, Ronald. 2017. "Frederick Douglass." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Spring. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/frederick-douglass/>.

Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—. 2016. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

A Place to Think Alone: Ralph Waldo Emerson and America’s Exceptional School for Self-Trust

“Emerson is the American Shakespeare. His power of articulation is so great, so uninhibited, that he gives voice to almost all the general thoughts and recurrent sentiments that have since arisen in American culture. [...] He helps to map the mind of the American democracy.”

—George Kateb¹

In the previous chapter, I presented Frederick Douglass as an American exceptionalist thinker and analyzed his aspirational orientation and commitments. But Frederick Douglass was not the only aspirational exceptionalist of his time. While Douglass was contemplating and critiquing America’s exceptional hypocrisy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, another prominent American intellectual, was developing his own ideas about America’s exceptional potential. In this chapter, I explore these ideas and consider how Emerson, like Douglass, participated in and shaped the aspirational exceptionalist tradition.

Until the 1990s, academics largely treated Ralph Waldo Emerson as an “apolitical”² philosopher who had little to say about civic affairs. This characterization was based, in part, on Emerson’s claim that poetry—not politics—“[was his] nature and vocation.”³ It was also grounded in scholars’ narrow focus on what Sarah Ann Wider terms “the small canon”⁴—a set of

¹ George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995), 197.

² Jack Turner, “Emerson, Slavery, and Citizenship,” *Raritan* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 127.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Letter to Lydia Jackson, February 1, 1835,” in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 142. Mary McAleer Balkun cites this as evidence that “Ralph Waldo Emerson considered himself, first and foremost, a poet.” “Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803-1882),” in *American Poets and Poetry: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, vol. 1, ed. Jeffrey Gray, Mary McAleer Balkun, and James McCorkle (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2015), 193. W. Robertson Nicoll similarly argues that above all, “Emerson’s ambition was to be a poet.” “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *The North American Review* 176, no. 558 (May 1903): 682.

⁴ This “small canon,” which is primarily made up of Emerson’s writings from 1836-1844, has “been the mainstay of Emerson scholarship until very recently.” Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, “Introduction: The New History of Emerson’s Politics and His Philosophy of Self-Reliance,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 15. See also Sarah Ann Wider, *The Critical Reception of Emerson: Unsettling All Things* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2000), 44.

well-known writings wherein Emerson critiques political parties,⁵ condemns reform movements,⁶ and challenges individuals to focus on individual, rather than collective, development.⁷ Taken together, these two factors (i.e., Emerson's own self-characterization and the academy's selective emphasis on his more individualist texts) led generations of political theorists to dismiss Emerson as one who "focused his intellectual energies on issues [...] far removed from politics."⁸ And so, as Jack Turner recently observed, "Emerson is not known as a voice of social or civic responsibility."⁹

Since the 1990s, though, scholars have begun reading beyond Emerson's "small canon," and have offered thoughtful and sustained analyses of Emerson's more overtly political texts. In so doing, these scholars have uncovered a new, more political Emerson—one who has a robust conception of citizenship, who endorses social reform, and who advocates political activism.¹⁰

⁵ See, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Politics," in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120. In another address, Emerson laments that "party sacrifices man to the measure" and that "parties [...] exhibit a surprising fugacity in creeping out of one snake-skin into another of equal ignominy and lubricity." "The Fortune of the Republic," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1904), 520.

⁶ In "New England Reformers," for example, Emerson critiques the country's culture of perpetual change and revision. Critiquing New England's "great activity of thought and experimenting," he writes, "It is handsomer to remain in the establishment better than the establishment, and conduct that in the best manner, than to make a sally against evil by some single improvement, without supporting it by a total regeneration. Do not be so vain of your one objection. Do you think there is only one?" In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 402, 407.

⁷ See, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 53-73.

⁸ David M. Robinson, "Introduction: Emerson as a Political Thinker," in *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 1. Wilson Carey McWilliams, for example, argues that "Emerson's [is] a doctrine of activity," so "individualistic romanticism, not democracy, [is] the logical result of his teaching." "Emerson: The All and the One," in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 49. V.F. Calverton similarly suggests that "[e]ternally, Emerson's stress is upon the self, the individual self, the personal ego. Society can take care of itself, or go hang." *The Liberation of American Literature* (New York: Scribners, 1932), 249. For a helpful review of other scholars who have endorsed this "myth of Emerson's apolitical individualism," see Levine and Malachuk, "Introduction," 15-21.

⁹ Turner, "Emerson, Slavery, and Citizenship," 127.

¹⁰ For examples of recent scholarship on Emerson's politics, see Len Gougeon, "Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy," in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 185-222; Turner, "Emerson, Slavery, and

Far from a solitary, passive isolationist, this Emerson petitions and critiques political leaders,¹¹ campaigns on behalf of candidates for public office,¹² and publicly denounces slavery. He is, in other words, a thoroughly political thinker, one who demonstrates “a consistent, active, and public commitment to self-reliance and democracy” and who “underst[ands] democratic politics as the practical application of [the] ethics [...] of self-reform.”¹³

In this chapter, I add to this “new history”¹⁴ of Emersonian scholarship by providing further evidence of Emerson’s politicality. Specifically, I argue that Emerson is an American exceptionalist thinker and that he, like more well-known exceptionalists, believes America is special, unique, and chosen. I further claim that Emerson’s exceptionalism is, like Douglass’, aspirational. Emerson clearly believes that the United States occupies a special position in the world—he calls it “the home of man”¹⁵ and predicts that it is destined to become “a leading nation [...] whose eminent citizens [are] willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity.”¹⁶ But he also believes that nothing—not even America’s exceptional status—is stable, and he claims that “every action admits of being undone.”¹⁷ Like Douglass, then,

Citizenship”; and Robinson Woodward-Burns, “Solitude Before Society: Emerson on Self-Reliance, Abolitionism, and Moral Suasion,” *Polity* 48, no. 1 (January 2016): 29-54.

¹¹ See, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Letter to Martin Van Buren, President of the United States,” in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49-52. For a scathing critique of Daniel Webster, see Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 777-792.

¹² In 1851, Emerson campaigned on behalf of John Gorham Palfrey, the Free Soil Party’s congressional candidate. For further detail, see Tiffany Wayne, “Palfrey, John Gorham (1796-1881),” in *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism* (New York: Facts On File, 2006), 207.

¹³ Levine and Malachuk, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁴ Levine and Malachuk’s term for recent scholarship focused on the political Emerson.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 228.

¹⁶ Emerson, “The Young American,” 226.

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 252.

Emerson sees America's greatness as contingent, rather than assured. He thus prods, pokes, and "unsettle[s] all things"¹⁸ to push the nation toward its exceptional potential.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I explore the nature of Emerson's exceptionalist sentiments and consider why, exactly, he believes America is great. I begin by reviewing Emerson's praise and celebration of the United States, as articulated in his more overtly political writings. I then explore his philosophical commitment to self-reliance—his unyielding insistence that individuals "never imitate,"¹⁹ "trust [themselves],"²⁰ and resist society's demands for conformity. Ultimately, I suggest that these philosophical and political commitments are linked: Emerson reveres the United States because it provides the ideal political environment for individuals to develop and practice philosophical self-reliance. Emerson's exceptionalism is thus fundamentally wrapped up with his transcendental individualism; his devotion to America, with his concern for courageous, independent souls.

In the second section, I analyze the rhetorical features of Emerson's exceptionalist thought and argue that he, like Frederick Douglass, works within the aspirational exceptionalist tradition. Drawing evidence and examples from his political writings, I show that Emerson is caustic, cautionary, and critically attentive to America's flaws. At the same time, though, Emerson believes that anything is possible for America, and he insists that, despite its shortcomings, the country is "on the brink of more wonders."²¹ Like Douglass, then, Emerson marries castigation and critique with optimism, ambition, and hope. His exceptionalism is thus aspirational—a belief that America is not yet, but could someday be, excellent.

¹⁸ Emerson, "Circles," 260.

¹⁹ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address to the Citizens of Concord," in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

In the final section, I describe the citizenship practices that Emerson's aspirational exceptionalism enables. Using evidence from his speeches and writings, I suggest that Emerson calls for citizens who are ameliorative, active, and resilient in the face of failure or defeat. I also argue that Emerson demands love and camaraderie, and that he expects citizens to be compassionate and caring toward one another. I thus offer a portrait of the ideal Emersonian citizen and claim that Emerson's distinctive aspirational exceptionalism activates an equally distinctive mode of American citizenship.

I. Emerson the Exceptionalist

One of the most prominent American intellectuals of the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson is best known for his poetry, his transcendentalism, and his romantic (or, depending on one's perspective, "petty bourgeois"²²) quest for self-reliance. Historically, though, he has not been celebrated for his contributions to American political thought. Though he spoke and wrote extensively about public issues, scholars have not always viewed Emerson as a serious political thinker.²³ In fact, until the 1990s, the few who dared look to Emerson for political wisdom concluded that he offered at best, a theory of political isolationism; at worst, one of radical egotism, insanity, and suicide.²⁴

For over a century, then, scholars largely agreed that Emerson is apolitical (or possibly even *anti*-political). Perhaps because of this, none have considered whether or how Emerson

²² Levine and Malachuk, "Introduction," 20.

²³ See footnotes 2-13 above and accompanying text. Of course, there are some exceptions to this general trend—George Kateb, for example, began writing about Emerson as a political thinker in the late 1980s. See "Thinking About Human Extinction (II): Emerson and Whitman," *Raritan* 6, no. 3 (Winter 1987): 1-22. For the most part, though, Emersonian scholarship published before 1990 treated Emerson as a non-political (or even *anti*-political) thinker.

²⁴ Levine and Malachuk, "Introduction," 18.

might fit within the tradition of American exceptionalist thought. The omission is understandable. American exceptionalism requires an acceptance (if not an endorsement) of sovereignty, governmental institutions, and political borders/boundaries; a normative commitment to the American political system; and a belief that the United States is a legitimate political entity deserving of participation, devotion, and respect. So if Emerson is, in fact, apolitical—if he truly believes that individuals “must go alone”²⁵—it makes little sense to classify him as an American exceptionalist. After all, how could a thinker who insists that “no law can be sacred to me but that of my nature”²⁶ simultaneously profess that *any* government (let alone America’s) is necessary, good, or special?

As mentioned above, though, Emerson has recently experienced a sort of political resurrection. Starting in the 1990s, scholars like Len Gougeon,²⁷ David M. Robinson,²⁸ T. Gregory Garvey,²⁹ George Kateb,³⁰ and Stanley Cavell³¹ began turning their attention to Emerson’s lesser-read (and more political) works, particularly those dealing with abolition, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the Emancipation Proclamation. In so doing, these scholars ushered in a new wave of Emersonian scholarship—one that challenged the “pernicious myth of Emerson’s indifference to politics.”³² As Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk note, “thanks to [these

²⁵ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ Len Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

²⁸ David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁹ Gregory Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

³⁰ George Kateb, “Thinking About Human Extinction (II): Emerson and Whitman”; *Emerson and Self-Reliance*.

³¹ Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³² Levine and Malachuk, “Introduction,” 4.

scholars], we now study a very different Emerson from the one studied from the 1880s through the 1980s.”³³ In particular, we now understand that Emerson’s individualist philosophical commitments are at once personal *and* political, and that his “self-reliance [...] entails not only an ethical commitment to the active ‘reform’ or ‘cultivation’ of one’s self but also a political commitment to a democracy where all other individuals are able to do the same.”³⁴

In the last twenty years, scholars leading this Emersonian political renaissance have offered compelling readings of Emerson as an abolitionist,³⁵ as a social and political activist,³⁶ and as a theorist of representation.³⁷ They have used Emerson’s conception of friendship to enhance contemporary understandings of citizenship,³⁸ and they have argued that today’s liberal-democratic societies ought not, perhaps, be so hostile to the Emersonian principle of autonomy.³⁹ But despite this increased attention on Emerson’s political projects, the academy has still produced no sustained or serious analyses of Emerson’s relationship to American exceptionalist thought. This dearth is surprising: Given Emerson’s prominent position in the American intellectual landscape, scholars should, it seems, be eager to understand how Emerson interacts with or contributes to this robust (and distinctly American) rhetorical tradition. What is more, Emerson’s writings are peppered with hints that he, like other exceptionalist thinkers, believes

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ See, e.g., James H. Read, “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 152-184.

³⁶ See, e.g., Gougeon, “Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy.”

³⁷ See, e.g., Jason Frank, “Standing for Others: Reform and Representation in Emerson’s Political Thought,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 383-414.

³⁸ Jason A. Scorza, “Liberal Citizenship and Civic Friendship,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 1 (February 2004): 85-108.

³⁹ Mark E. Button, “Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times: Contesting the Abandonment of Autonomy,” *Political Theory* 43, no. 3 (March 2015): 312-333.

that America is special—that it is “the culmination of [the] triumphs of humanity,”⁴⁰ “the great charity of God to the human race,”⁴¹ and a place where “personal power, freedom, and the resources of nature strain every faculty of every citizen.”⁴² How, then, has Emerson’s exceptionalism slipped through the cracks?

In this section, I fill this gap by offering a reading of Emerson as an American exceptionalist thinker. I proceed in two stages. In the first stage, I highlight instances where Emerson clearly exhibits his exceptionalist commitments—i.e., his beliefs that the United States is superior, chosen, and tasked with unique responsibilities. In so doing, I aim only to establish the fact of Emerson’s exceptionalism—that is, to identify instances where employs and engages with exceptionalist tropes—and to show that Emerson’s exceptionalism is thoroughgoing, equally present in both his lesser-known political writings *and* in his widely-read philosophical works.

In the second stage, I turn to the substance of Emerson’s exceptionalism. Having demonstrated that Emerson does, in fact, assert that the United States is special, superior, and chosen, I discuss *why*, exactly, he believes the nation is excellent. Put differently, I consider the basis for and meaning of Emerson’s exceptionalist sentiments. Ultimately, I suggest that Emerson views America as a school for self-reliance, an environment where individuals have all the tools, resources, and incentives necessary to become strong, independent souls. For Emerson, then, America is an exceptional training ground and is special precisely because it

⁴⁰ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 515.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 540.

⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Power,” in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 223.

offers citizens the invaluable opportunity to cultivate self-trust, personal autonomy, and moral independence.

A. Exceptionalism in Emerson's "Small Canon" and Beyond

Because Emerson claims that human beings, nature, and history exist as parts of one great whole, his political thought is, in many ways, both universalizing and egalitarian. But while he insists that all people share a "common heart"⁴³ and that "within man is the soul of the whole,"⁴⁴ Emerson also seems to believe that there is something important and distinctive about the United States. True, he argues that "the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul," and he celebrates *all* human accomplishments as instantiations of the same universal genius (regardless of the doer's race, gender, or nationality).⁴⁵ But Emerson also suggests that the United States is destined for a special sort of greatness and that the American populace is poised to achieve wonders in a way other nations and peoples are not.

This exceptionalism—this belief that, despite mankind's common, transcendental soul, the United States stands out—is particularly evident in "The Young American," a lecture Emerson read for the Mercantile Library Association on February 7, 1844. In this piece, Emerson offers a meditation on the features and characteristics that make the United States distinctive. Emerson notes, for example, the "remarkable" fact that American citizens "have their intellectual culture from one country [Great Britain, presumably], and their duties from

⁴³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 246.

⁴⁴ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," 237.

⁴⁵ He argues, for example, that "genius is religious. It is a larger imbibing of the common heart. It is not anomalous, but more like and not less like other men. There is in all great poets a wisdom of humanity which is superior to any talents they exercise. The author, the wit, the partisan, the fine gentleman, does not take the place of the man. Humanity shines in Homer, in Chaucer, in Spenser, in Shakespeare, in Milton." *Ibid.*, 246-247.

another.”⁴⁶ He also describes America’s “want of feudal institutions,”⁴⁷ its “organic simplicity and liberty,”⁴⁸ and its “heterogeneous population [...] from all corners of the world.”⁴⁹ Emerson further reflects on Americans’ unique industry and inventiveness, and he suggests that the country’s “internal improvements” (such as the development and expansion of the railroad) have produced a distinctive “American sentiment” or ethos.⁵⁰ He is, in other words, eager and quick to observe ways the United States differs from the rest of the world.

But Emerson does not simply catalog America’s unique features.⁵¹ Like a true exceptionalist, he also suggests that these differences make America special (better, even) and set the country above and apart from its peers. For example, Emerson praises America’s “natural wealth”⁵² and argues that “the whole land is a garden,” “the bowers of a paradise.”⁵³ He further claims that the “bountiful [American] continent”⁵⁴ provides “physic and food for our mind, as well as our body” and has a special transformative power—a “sanative and Americanizing influence”—which “promises to disclose new virtues for ages to come.”⁵⁵ Emerson also suggests that America “offers opportunity to the human mind not known in any other region.”⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Emerson, “The Young American,” 213.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 230. Emerson regularly comments on this unique feature of American life. In “Fortune of the Republic,” for example, he celebrates the “removal of absurd restrictions and antique inequalities” in the United States, and he thankfully observes that America “began well” because the country “was opened after the feudal mischief was spent. 516, 528.

⁴⁸ Emerson, “The Young American,” 228.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵¹ If he didn’t, he’d hardly be an exceptionalist. See Introduction, Section III.A.1.

⁵² Emerson, “The Young American,” 214.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

If in England the future is “closing in [...] to a narrow slit of sky,” in America “the open future expand[s] [...] before the eye of every boy to vastness.”⁵⁷ America is thus different from *and* better than countries of the old world and offers benefits, freedoms, and possibilities that are not available elsewhere.

In addition to praising the country’s many strengths and advantages, Emerson discusses America’s unique and important place in human history.⁵⁸ Like other exceptionalists, who claim that America is somehow chosen or set apart, Emerson insists America is destined to “speak for the human race.”⁵⁹ He thus dubs it “the country of the Future” and describes it as a nation “of beginnings, of projects, of designs, and expectations.”⁶⁰ Emerson argues that America perpetually “inspire[s] [...] the most expansive and humane spirit,”⁶¹ and he insists that “all men of common sense and common conscience” understand “that here, here in America, is the home of man.”⁶² “In every age of the world,” he argues, “there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity [...]. Which should be that nation but these States? Which should lead that movement, if not New England? Who should lead the leaders, but the Young American?”⁶³

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

⁵⁸ Emerson’s invocation of this particular exceptionalist trope prompts many questions: Why does he believe America is destined to fulfil an important role? What, exactly, does that role look like? What does he mean when he suggests that America will “speak for the human race”? And so on. In the next subsection, I address each of these questions and analyze the substance and basis of Emerson’s exceptionalism. Here, though, I only show that Emerson’s exceptionalism exists, and that he, like more traditional exceptionalist thinkers, envisions a special role for the United States.

⁵⁹ Emerson, “The Young American,” 217.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 226.

Emerson thus believes that the United States is special—a young, rugged country mercifully free from the damning vestiges of feudalism and aristocracy. He also predicts that it will play an important role in both global history and the development of the human race. In fact, in a passage remarkably reminiscent of John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity,” Emerson argues:

This land, too, is as old as the Flood, and wants no ornament or privilege which nature could bestow. Here stars, here woods, here hills, here animals, here men abound, and the vast tendencies concur of a new order. If only the men are employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit who led us hither, and is leading us still, we shall quickly enough advance out of all hearing of other’s censures, out of all regrets of our own, into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded.⁶⁴

Like Winthrop, who felt he had “entered into a covenant with [God]”⁶⁵ to travel to and settle in America, Emerson here suggests that the United States has been (and continues to be) led by a “Spirit” or higher power. And like Winthrop, who admonished his listeners to “strictly observe[]”⁶⁶ the conditions of their divine commission, Emerson encourages his audience to remain “employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit.”⁶⁷ If they fulfill this divine calling, Emerson predicts that the nation will become a “new and more excellent social state”⁶⁸ than has ever been seen before. It will, in other words, be like Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” and will serve as model and inspiration to the rest of the world.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶⁵ John Winthrop, “Model of Christian Charity,” in *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought, Volume 1: Origins Through the Civil War*, ed. Scott J. Hammond, Kevin R. Hardwick, and Howard L. Lubert (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 18.

⁶⁶ Winthrop, “Model of Christian Charity,” 18.

⁶⁷ Emerson, “The Young American,” 230.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

“The Young American” is thus a clear example of Emerson’s belief that the United States is special, set apart, and destined to fulfil an important role or mission. But these exceptionalist commitments are also evident in Emerson’s other works. In “Literary Ethics,” for example, Emerson celebrates the country’s vast, untamed landscape and suggests that, like the American soil, the American intellect has potential and riches that “we do not seem to have imagined.”⁶⁹ In “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” he praises the “genius of [the American] people,” insists that “nothing is impracticable to this nation,” and predicts that America will lead the world toward new and better horizons.⁷⁰ And in the well-known “American Scholar,” Emerson claims that, by both “prophecy” and “preparation,” America’s intellectuals have been set apart to achieve the “unsearched might of man.”⁷¹ He further suggests that if Americans fulfill this special calling, the United States will become more civilized, refined, and self-reliant than any other country in history. In his words, “a nation of men will for the first time exist.”⁷²

Emerson’s exceptionalism is also present in his later (and lesser-studied) political writings. One such piece is the 1878 speech “Fortune of the Republic,” Emerson’s very last public lecture. In the address, Emerson asserts that America “more than any other [country]

⁶⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 101. Emerson also suggests that, given the country’s special potential and opportunities, Americans ought to be better—intellectually, creatively, and artistically—than their contemporaries in Europe. Speaking of the American intellect (“the intellect of this country”), he explains, “We do not seem to have imagined its riches. We have not heeded the invitation it holds out. To be as good a scholar as Englishmen are; to have as much learning as our contemporaries; to have written a book that is read; satisfies us. We assume, that all thought is already long ago adequately set down in books,—all imaginations in poems; and what we say, we only throw in as confirmatory of this supposed complete body of literature. A very shallow assumption. Say rather, all literature is yet to be written. Poetry has scarce chanted its first song. The perpetual admonition of nature to us, is, ‘The world is new, untried. Do not believe the past. I give you the universe a virgin today.’” “Literary Ethics,” 101.

⁷⁰ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 149.

⁷¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 70.

⁷² Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 71.

represents the sentiment and the future of mankind.”⁷³ He then praises America’s unique social and political arrangements; lauds the country’s sober, hard-working citizenry;⁷⁴ and proudly observes that the “conditions of mankind in America are really favorable to progress.”⁷⁵ Emerson heaps further praise upon “the genius of the country,”⁷⁶ its “highly intellectual organization,”⁷⁷ and the unparalleled “opportunity of civil rights, of education, of personal power, and not less of wealth.”⁷⁸ He also anticipates exceptional roles and responsibilities for the young nation, and he predicts that America will “carry out to the last the ends of liberty and justice.”⁷⁹

In both his philosophical and political writings, then, Emerson is explicitly and strikingly exceptionalist. He consistently emphasizes America’s many unique features—its lack of feudal institutions, its natural resources and beauty, etc.—and insists that “never country had such a fortune [...] as this, in its geography, its history, and in its majestic possibilities.”⁸⁰ He also suggests that these features carry normative weight and that, because of them, the United States is (or could be) superior to its European counterparts. He thus admonishes Americans to “let

⁷³ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 515.

⁷⁴ Describing the American populace, Emerson writes, “Ours is the country of poor men. Here is practical democracy; here is the human race poured out over the continent to do itself justice; all mankind in its shirt-sleeves; not grimacing like poor rich men in cities, pretending to be rich, but unmistakably taking off its coat to do hard work, when labor is sure to pay. This through all the country. [...] Well, the result is [...] here [the population] has arrived at sloven plenty,—ham and corn-cakes, tight roof and coals enough have been attained; an unbuttoned comfort, not clean, not thoughtful, far from polished, without dignity in his repose; the man awkward and restless if he have not something to do, but honest and kind for the most part, understanding his own rights and stiff to maintain them, and disposed to give his children a better education than he received.” “The Fortune of the Republic,” 526.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 541.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 529.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 541.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 543. Emerson makes a similar argument in “The American Scholar,” suggesting that the America scholar must lead the world forward. 70.

⁸⁰ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 530.

[their] passion for America cast out [their] passion for Europe” and insists that “they who find America insipid [...] are not Americans.”⁸¹ Most significantly, though, he maintains that America is (or at least has the potential to be) “the guide and lawgiver of all nations”⁸² and is responsible for leading and inspiring others. He is, in sum, an exceptionalist, and is thoroughly enchanted with and devoted to the genius of the American state.

B. “We Will Walk on Our Own Feet”: America as a School for Self-Reliance

In both his “small canon” and beyond, then, Emerson maintains that America is unique, chosen, and called to fulfill a significant historical role. But if Emerson’s exceptionalism is evident throughout his writings, the basis for that exceptionalism is less clear. Though Emerson repeatedly praises America’s rich and untapped territory, its lack of feudal history, and its unique political institutions, he does not directly articulate how or why those features contribute to the country’s excellence. So the question remains: Why, exactly, are America’s “vast resources,” “good will,” and “great moral advantages” good things?⁸³ In what way do these make the nation great?

To answer this, we must revisit Emerson’s celebration and defense of the trait he calls “self-reliance.” According to Emerson, self-reliance is the ability to act for oneself, to resist conformity, and to form one’s own spiritual and moral judgments. It is, as George Kateb writes, “intellectual independence,” the “steady effort of thinking one’s thoughts and thinking them through.”⁸⁴ It involves a bold and unwavering commitment to “the integrity of [one’s] own

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁸² Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 71.

⁸³ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 647, in Notes.

⁸⁴ George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 31. According to Kateb, Emerson describes two forms of self-reliance: mental self-reliance (i.e., independence of mind) and active self-reliance (i.e., independence of action, of being in the world). Kateb further suggests Emerson values mental self-reliance above active self-reliance, and that he views “active self-reliance [as] [...] less worthy, less dignified, than mental self-reliance.” *Ibid.*, 29. Though I acknowledge that Emerson does, in places, distinguish between self-reliance in actual versus intellectual life, I do

mind” and requires a daring willingness to ignore “what the people think.”⁸⁵ The self-reliant individual is thus one who follows her own intuitions, “believe[s] [her] own thought,”⁸⁶ and resists society’s demands for imitation.⁸⁷

Despite its emphasis on the individual, though, self-reliance is not self-centeredness. On the contrary, true self-reliance entails honoring one’s own spiritual and intellectual independence and allowing others the same privilege. As Levine and Malachuk observe, “self-reliance entails not a narrow selfishness or even just cultivation of one’s self but an empathy of all selves.”⁸⁸ So, if the self-reliant individual is reluctant to accept ideas from others, she is equally hesitant to impose her beliefs on her fellow citizens. Properly understood, then, Emerson’s self-reliance need not produce a culture of selfish, isolated, egoistic individuals. Instead, it ought to generate an environment of mutual respect and toleration or, as Mark Button explains, “forms of social and political relation that [...] make room for and value the fullest possible unfolding of individuality—in oneself and others.”⁸⁹

But this is easier said than done. According to Emerson, society jealously protects its social and intellectual norms: “For nonconformity,” he warns, “the world whips you with its

not utilize Kateb’s two categories in this chapter. Instead, I adopt Mark Button’s definition and treat “self-reliance” as a broad, general “ability to select and pursue a course of life, and the capacity and disposition to think critically and potentially revise one’s pursuits and commitments.” Button, “Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times,” 316.

⁸⁵ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 57.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁷ Here I’ve primarily quoted “Self-Reliance,” but Emerson’s concern with self-trust and independent thinking is evident in other works, as well. See, e.g., his admonition in “The Divinity School Address” to “cast behind you all conformity” and “trust your own heart.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 89.

For an excellent (and much more thorough) discussion of Emerson’s concept of self-reliance, see Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*.

⁸⁸ Levine and Malachuk, “Introduction,” 2.

⁸⁹ Button, “Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times,” 316.

displeasure.”⁹⁰ Because of this, the self-reliant is often a pariah—scorned, rejected, and misunderstood. Cultivating and practicing self-reliance is thus an “arduous” and thankless venture, something few are brave or strong enough to undertake.⁹¹ In fact, Emerson candidly admits that even he, the evangelist and standard-bearer for self-trust, sometimes fails to act independently.⁹² Still, Emerson insists that individuals ought, at least, to try. Though it “demands something godlike [to] cast off the common motives of humanity and to trust [one]self for a taskmaster,”⁹³ self-reliance is the highest form of being and becoming, the pinnacle of human existence. In it, “all the virtues are comprehended,” so its cultivation is worth any price.⁹⁴

Put simply, Emerson asks individuals to fulfill the “paramount duties of self-reliance” by respecting the “sacredness of private integrity” (that is, the capacity and responsibility for independent judgment) of both themselves and others.⁹⁵ At the same time, though, he acknowledges that this is a terrific request and that individuals (himself included) rarely have the

⁹⁰ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 58.

⁹¹ Judith N. Shklar observes that “Most people are simply too dependent to try, especially in big cities.” “Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 55. George Kateb similarly suggests that “it is very hard to find one’s own way [i.e., to act self-reliantly]; one falls back on conventionally-defined opportunities.” *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 23.

⁹² In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson condemns those who give to charity out of a sense of social obligation. But he confesses “with shame” that even he “sometimes succumb[s] and gives[s] the dollar.” “Self-Reliance,” 56-57. That even Emerson, the father of self-reliance, struggles to practice it is a testament to the ethic’s rigor.

Shklar makes a similar observation: “He confesses with shame and regret, in fact, he is too weak to refuse a dollar to the poor. The principle remains intact, the joke is on him, but he has not withdrawn himself from fellowship after all. It is easy to turn one’s back on parties, churches, and a ‘dead Bible society,’ but on the poor? That is only to be proclaimed; it cannot be done.” “Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy,” 55.

⁹³ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 67.

⁹⁴ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 65.

⁹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Lecture on the Times,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 163.

stamina, courage, or fortitude to stand up to the crushing pressure of societal influences.⁹⁶ And here—between his demand for self-reliance, on one hand, and his recognition of its impossibility, on the other—lies the source of Emerson’s American exceptionalism. Though he acknowledges that self-reliance is difficult to achieve, Emerson suggests that the America provides the best possible environment for individuals to cultivate and practice self-trust. America is exceptional, then, because it is an ideal training ground for self-reliant souls. In the “new, untried” American territory, individuals have the space (both physical and intellectual) to think, act, and believe daringly.⁹⁷ And only there, where there are no remnants of monarchy, feudalism, or old-world traditions, can citizens cultivate the “independence of spirit” needed to truly “think alone.”⁹⁸

When Emerson celebrates America’s natural wealth, political institutions, and lack of feudal history, then, he does so because he sees these as creating an environment conducive to self-reliance. Consider, for example, his comments on feudalism. Emerson regularly describes America’s great fortune at having thrown off the “absurd restrictions and antique inequalities” that characterize a feudal system.⁹⁹ In so doing, though, Emerson does not suggest that democracy is inherently better than feudalism. On the contrary, he concedes that feudalism “had some good traits of its own”¹⁰⁰ and admits that democracy “[is] not better, but only fitter for

⁹⁶ If this seems like an overstatement, remember that Emerson calls society a “conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” and a “joint-stock company, in which members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.” “Self-Reliance,” 55.

⁹⁷ Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” 101.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105. Significantly, though, Emerson’s vision of the United States as an exceptionally new, untainted space presupposes that America is in fact vacant. Emerson’s perspective thus entails some belief in the fantasy of an “empty America” and a corresponding willingness to overlook or ignore the presence of native peoples.

⁹⁹ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 516.

¹⁰⁰ Emerson, “The Young American,” 220.

us.”¹⁰¹ If Emerson approves of America’s social and economic arrangements, then, it is because he believes that the rupture with European systems and practices created space for American intellect and creativity. Freed from the traditions of their fathers, Americans are no longer “mortgaged to the opinions and usages of Europe, and Asia, and Egypt.”¹⁰² They can thus think, write, and believe courageously, for “the moment they desert the tradition for a spontaneous thought, [...] poetry, wit, hope, virtue, learning, anecdote, all flock to their aid.”¹⁰³

Emerson’s praise of America’s physical features is similarly grounded in his concern for self-reliance. Throughout his works, Emerson repeatedly suggests that nature “is the memory of the mind,” the “flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone.”¹⁰⁴ Because of this, Emerson claims that humans can learn about and develop themselves by engaging with the natural world. “When I go into my garden with a spade,” he explains, “I feel such an exhilaration and health, [...] [and] education is in the work.”¹⁰⁵ This same invigorating instruction is available to any who will “stand in primary relations”¹⁰⁶ with the land, because the earth, according to Emerson, yields “information [...] of [the] supreme nature which lurks within all.”¹⁰⁷

If wild, uncultivated territory is desirable, then, it is because “the land and sea educate the people, and bring out presence of mind, self-reliance, and hundred-handed activity.”¹⁰⁸ Hence Emerson’s enchantment with America’s natural landscape. Because America offers vast tracts

¹⁰¹ Emerson, “Politics,” 119.

¹⁰² Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” 97.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 140.

¹⁰⁶ Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 142.

¹⁰⁷ Emerson, “Lecture on the Times,” 168.

¹⁰⁸ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 534.

of “untouched,”¹⁰⁹ “new,”¹¹⁰ and “undescribed”¹¹¹ land, its citizens have limitless opportunities to adventure and explore. This, in turn, allows individuals to learn about and develop themselves. America is thus an ideal training ground for self-reliance—a place where individuals can interact with nature, can “become master[s],” and can “conquer the world for [themselves].”¹¹² Its land offers nourishment for both body and mind¹¹³ and reminds man that he, like the natural world, “does not exist to any one or to any number of particular ends, but to numberless and endless benefit.”¹¹⁴

For Emerson, then, America’s natural and historical peculiarities are praiseworthy only because they provide individuals with the resources, opportunities, and freedoms necessary to cultivate self-reliance. The same is true of America’s political institutions. Emerson recognizes the government’s unique, democratic features, and he boasts that all American institutions are “educational, for responsibility educates fast.”¹¹⁵ He thus claims that American citizens are particularly smart and capable: because all share in the responsibilities of government, all have access to the “superior academy” that is the state.¹¹⁶ But despite this praise of America’s “practical democracy,”¹¹⁷ Emerson does not suggest that American institutions are inherently special or superior. In fact, he explicitly acknowledges that Americans are perhaps too “vain” of their political institutions, and that, while “we may be wise in asserting the advantage [...] of the

¹⁰⁹ Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” 130.

¹¹⁰ Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” 101.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 142.

¹¹³ Emerson, “The Young American,” 214.

¹¹⁴ Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” 121.

¹¹⁵ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 527.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 526.

democratic form, [...] to other states of society, in which religion consecrated the monarchical, that and not this was expedient.”¹¹⁸ Emerson also argues that “the end of all political struggle” is “not free institutions” but rather the securing of “a state of things which allows every man the largest liberty compatible with the liberty of every other man.”¹¹⁹ Put more simply, free and democratic institutions are desirable insofar as they facilitate independent thinking, but they are not special for their own sake.

Unlike some exceptionalists, then, Emerson does not claim that America’s democratic institutions are necessarily or inherently “better” than other political arrangements.¹²⁰ He does, however, suggest that these unique governmental structures contribute to America’s excellence by creating an environment where citizens can develop self-reliance. In his words, “The result [of our institutions] appears in the power of invention, the freedom of thinking, in the readiness for reforms, eagerness for novelty, even for all the follies of false science [...] [and] all this forwardness and self-reliance, cover self-government; proceed on the belief that as the people have made a government they can make another.”¹²¹

In sum, although Emerson recognizes America distinctive features—specifically its lack of feudalism, its natural resources, and its democratic institutions—he does not think that these alone make America exceptional. But Emerson does think these peculiarities are uniquely conducive to self-reliance, and that they provide an environment wherein individuals can practice bold, fearless, and independent living. And this, for Emerson, is what makes America exceptional. If, as Emerson writes, “the whole value of history is to increase my self-trust, by

¹¹⁸ Emerson, “Politics,” 119.

¹¹⁹ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 541.

¹²⁰ Emerson, “Politics,” 119.

¹²¹ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 527-528.

demonstrating what man can be and do,” then a country where men and women can learn to be self-reliant is a special country, indeed.¹²² And this is precisely what America provides. In America, and only in America, citizens have the historical, mental, physical, and institutional space to pursue their own ideas and cultivate self-trust. They are able to “live for [them]selves,—and not as pall-bearers of a funeral, but as the upholders and creators of our age.”¹²³ American citizens “put [their] own interpretation on things,” and they wear a crown of self-determination and autonomy.¹²⁴ America is thus an exceptional school for self-reliance, a training-ground for souls who “will walk on [their] own feet; [...] will work with [their] own hands; [and] will speak with [their] own minds.”¹²⁵

II. “Unattained but Attainable”: Emerson’s Aspirational Exceptionalism

In the previous section, I highlighted the exceptionalist themes that are present in Emerson’s writings and argued that Emerson is both deeply political and thoroughly exceptionalist. I also discussed the substance of Emerson’s exceptionalism and explored the connection between his philosophical commitment to self-reliance and his political devotion to the United States. I suggested that Emerson praises America’s unique history, territory, and institutions because he believes that these encourage and enable citizens to think, act, and speak autonomously. Put more simply, Emerson thinks America is exceptional precisely because it offers ideal conditions for individuals to cultivate and practice self-direction and self-trust.

Thus far, then, I have demonstrated that Emerson is an exceptionalist thinker who believes the United States is special, chosen, and superior. But I have not yet paid much

¹²² Emerson, “Literary Ethics,” 97.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 71.

attention to the form of his exceptionalist thought, and I have not analyzed the rhetorical techniques he uses to articulate his exceptionalist ideas. In this section, I turn my focus to these rhetorical concerns. Through close readings of his political speeches and writings (particularly “Emancipation in the British West Indies,”¹²⁶ “Address to the Citizens of Concord,”¹²⁷ “The Fugitive Slave Law,”¹²⁸ and “Fortune of the Republic”¹²⁹), I show that Emerson regularly employs the aspirational exceptionalist tropes of warning, critique, exposure, and hope. I also show that Emerson’s exceptionalism is critical and contingent and that, though he recognizes special American potential, he sees America’s greatness as uncertain, not assured. I thus claim that Emerson is, like Douglass, an aspirational exceptionalist thinker, and that his attitude toward America’s greatness is characterized by potentiality rather than promise.

As discussed in the previous section, Emerson is keen to celebrate the United States. Like more traditional exceptionalists, he consistently praises America’s institutions, history, and territory. He also believes that the country has a special role to fulfil, and that it will be a light and leader to the world. But this praise and laudation is only part of the picture. Though Emerson acknowledges and boasts of America’s greatness, he does not shy away from censure and criticism. Instead, he regularly employs caustic, biting rhetoric and offers bold, blunt critiques. He also exposes America’s fractures and flaws and, in many of his works, draws explicit attention to areas where the country has fallen short. And like Douglass, he bemoans the nation’s failures and warns of the devastation that might result therefrom. In the end, though,

¹²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 751-776.

¹²⁷ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 135-152.

¹²⁸ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 777-792.

¹²⁹ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 511-544.

Emerson remains hopeful and forward-looking, and notwithstanding America's many flaws, he ultimately believes the country will achieve its exceptional potential.

These aspirational themes and tropes are particularly evident in "Emancipation in the British West Indies," an address Emerson delivered to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Britain's 1833 Slavery Abolition Act.¹³⁰ For a piece of exceptionalist rhetoric, the speech is structurally unique. Unlike other exceptionalist writings, the speech does not begin with praise and celebration of America.¹³¹ Instead, it starts with a portrait of America's greatest rival—England—and includes a detailed history of that nation's advancement toward abolition. Rather than celebrate great Americans, Emerson devotes his opening remarks to the "humane persons"

¹³⁰ Emerson, "Emancipation in the British West Indies," 751-776. The Slavery Abolition Act, which took effect on August 1, 1834, freed all slaves held in any British colonies (albeit with some notable exceptions). It reads, in relevant part, "Be it enacted, that all and every person who, on the first August 1834, shall be holden in slavery within any such British Colony as aforesaid, shall upon and from and after the said first August, become and be to all intents and purposes free, and discharged of and from all manner of slavery, and shall be absolutely and forever manumitted; and that the children thereafter born to any such persons, and the offspring of such children, shall, in like manner, be free, from their birth; and that from and after the first August 1834, slavery shall be and is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful throughout the British colonies, plantations, and possessions abroad." Slavery Abolition Act, 1833, 3 & 4 Will. 4, c. 73. For further discussion of the Act's history and passage, see "Emancipation," The National Archives, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/emancipation.htm>.

¹³¹ It is typical for both accomplished and aspirational exceptionalists to begin with praise of their nation. In the previous chapter, I explored how Douglass does this in both "Fourth of July" and "To My Old Master." Other exceptionalists, who I do not discuss in this project, do the same. Consider, for example, the Athenian exceptionalist Pericles, who begins his famous "Funeral Oration" with paragraphs of praise for the Athenian state. Lincoln, also arguably an exceptionalist, offers similar praise for the United States at the outset of his "Gettysburg Address."

who campaigned for emancipation in Britain: Granville Sharpe,¹³² Lord Mansfield,¹³³ the Quakers,¹³⁴ and others. He also extols the “infinite honor [of] the people and parliament of England” and compliments the British for their “rare independence and magnanimity.”¹³⁵ Emerson describes, with unconcealed admiration, the stubborn but noble British “national pride, which refused to give the support of the English soil or the protection of the English flag to these disgusting violations of nature [i.e., slavery].”¹³⁶ He also remarks that “[i]t was a stately spectacle to see the cause of human rights argued with so much patience and generosity.”¹³⁷

Where other exceptionalists lead with praise of the United States, then, Emerson begins by celebrating the country’s rival. But he then pivots and offers powerful (and thoroughly aspirational) account of America’s flaws. After praising the British, Emerson immediately confesses that England’s accomplishments provoke “the most painful comparisons.”¹³⁸

¹³² As Emerson recounts, Granville Sharpe was “accidentally made acquainted” with a slave who, after being “beaten with a pistol [...] so badly that his whole body became diseased,” had been abandoned by his master. “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” 756. Sharpe took the slave into his care, helped him secure medical treatment, and oversaw his recovery. Sharpe then helped the man obtain a position at an apothecary shop. Later, the slave’s former master came into the shop and, seeing that his slave was fully healed, “instantly endeavored to get possession of him.” *Ibid.* Sharpe attempted to protect the slave but quickly learned that England’s laws offered little protection. So, “Sharpe instantly sat down and gave himself to the study of English law for more than two years, until he had proved that the opinions relied on [...] were incompatible with the former English decisions and with the whole spirit of English law.” *Ibid.* Sharpe eventually published a book and successfully defended another slave, George Somerset, before Lord Mansfield. Sharpe’s efforts were thus instrumental in the legal battle against slavery and helped establish “the principle that the ‘air of England is too pure for any slave to breathe.’” *Ibid.*, 756-757.

¹³³ Lord Mansfield adjudicated George Somerset’s case. According to Emerson, Mansfield had been “very unwilling [...] to reverse the late decisions” and “suggested twice from the bench, in the course of the trial, how the question might be got rid of.” *Ibid.*, 756. Ultimately, though (and largely due to Granville Sharpe’s zealous advocacy), Mansfield decided in favor of the slave, and ruled that “tracing the subject to *natural principles*, the claim of slavery can never be supported.” *Ibid.* “We cannot say,” Mansfield opined, “the cause set forth by this return is allowed or approved by the laws of this kingdom; and therefore the man must be discharged.” *Ibid.*, 756-757.

¹³⁴ For Emerson’s discussion of Quaker contributions to emancipation efforts, see *ibid.*, 757-758.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 767.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 766.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 767.

Specifically, he notes that England's magnanimity makes him acutely aware of his own country's heartless, callous indifference to the plight of slaves. Where England's statesmen "reach[ed] out the benefit of the law to the most helpless citizen in her world-wide realm," America's have "turned their backs" and abandoned slaves to fend for themselves.¹³⁹ And where England surrounded slaves with "happy friends," America has left its "very poor, very ill-clothed, very ignorant"¹⁴⁰ blacks with "no law to save them."¹⁴¹ For Emerson, then, England's successes provide painful proof that the United States is guilty of "all manner of rage and stupidity,"¹⁴² and that it has failed in its fundamental duty to "defend the weak and the poor and the injured party."¹⁴³

Emerson's "Emancipation" speech thus bears a unique, two-part structure: it begins with praise of another country (England) and ends with critique of the United States. For an exceptionalist speech, this arrangement is unconventional.¹⁴⁴ However, the atypical structure facilitates Emerson's aspirational exceptionalist project in at least two ways. First, the speech's structure allows Emerson to directly compare American and British attitudes toward slavery. This comparison reveals America's shocking indifference to (and complicity in) the "damnable outrage" and shows that, unlike their British counterparts, Americans have done little to protect their fellow men.¹⁴⁵ The comparison also suggests that America's failures are inexcusable: If Britain, the nation of tradition and aristocracy, can abolish slavery, then surely America ought to

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 768.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 771.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 770.

¹⁴⁴ A more typical arrangement is the ternary form Douglass employs, which begins with praise, follows with critique, and ends with celebration and hope.

¹⁴⁵ Emerson, "Emancipation in the British West Indies," 768.

be able to, as well. Emerson's organizational schema thus facilitates his aspirational project of exposure and helps him shed light on America's shortcomings and faults.

Second, the speech's unusual comparative structure permits Emerson to introduce and utilize the aspirational trope of critique. By placing the two countries side by side and highlighting areas where the United States falls short of Britain's example, Emerson identifies areas where America is deserving of criticism. He then takes full advantage of these opportunities for censure and offers bold, brash denunciations of his home country. After describing states' unwillingness to protect "poor black men," for example, Emerson decries the country's inept institutions and insists that "the Governor of Massachusetts is a trifler; the State-House in Boston is a play-house; the General court is a dishonored body."¹⁴⁶ He also castigates America's politicians and citizenry: the latter, he claims, "are disgraced men" who "walk without honor,"¹⁴⁷ while the former are "too prudent and too cold" to take a meaningful stand against slavery.¹⁴⁸ Emerson condemns America's statesmen for their spinelessness and laments that his congressional representatives are regularly "schooled and ridden by the minority of slave-holders."¹⁴⁹ "To what purpose," he asks, "have we clothed each of these representatives with the power of seventy thousand persons, and each senator with near half a million, if they are to sit dumb at their desks and see their constituents captured and sold—perhaps to gentlemen sitting by them in the hall?"¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 768.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 770.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 769.

In true aspirational fashion, then, Emerson exposes and critiques the nation's flaws. Though he claims he "is loath to say harsh things" and "know[s] too little of politics for the smallest weight to attach to any censure of [his],"¹⁵¹ he attacks the country's timid, cowardly citizenry; condemns its opportunistic, sycophantic politicians; and expresses his deep regret that "there is a disastrous want of *men*" in the halls of American government.¹⁵² He also liberally criticizes America's "cheap and intelligible" culture—that is, its penchant for basic and superficial comforts.¹⁵³ Emerson complains that unlike other great nations, which were motivated by concerns for poetry, music, the arts, military virtue, piety, and the like, the United States is governed by "a shopkeeping civility" and is singularly focused on trade. Because of this, he claims, Americans prioritize commercial interests above moral and spiritual considerations: "The customer," he laments, "is the immediate jewel of our souls. Him we flatter, him we feast, compliment, vote for, and will not contradict."¹⁵⁴ The nauseating result of this commercial obsession? Americans care more for sweet sugar and fragrant coffee than for the lives of the slaves who produce those commodities. "If any mention [is] made of homicide, madness, adultery, and intolerable tortures," Emerson laments, "we [...] let the church-bells ring louder, the church-organ swell its peal and drown the hideous sound."¹⁵⁵

Despite his commitment to and infatuation with America's promise and potential, then, Emerson remains willing and eager to diagnose the country's ills. In fact, he seems to view

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 769.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 764. According to Emerson, Americans are more concerned with status and material goods than with intellectual, moral, or spiritual pursuits. "Unroof any house," he writes, "and you shall find it. The well-being consists in having a sufficiency of coffee and toast, with a daily newspaper; a well glazed parlor, with marbles, mirrors and centretable and the excitement of a few parties and a few rides in a year. Such is one house, such are all." *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 765.

himself as whistleblowing provocateur, of sorts—someone who bears the duty and responsibility of ensuring that America’s “crime[s] [are] not hushed up any longer.”¹⁵⁶ But though he is deeply critical of the United States—as Stanley Cavell notes, he “finds America, as it stands, or presents itself, to be repellant”¹⁵⁷—Emerson does not simply tear the nation down. Instead, he pairs his critiques with concrete and affirmative suggestions for improvement and “turns not just away, but at the same time, and always, toward America.”¹⁵⁸ And so, after critiquing America’s politicians, Emerson urges “the senators and representatives of the State [to] go in a body before the Congress and say that they have a demand to make on them, so imperative that all functions of government must stop until it is satisfied.”¹⁵⁹ He later challenges “citizens in their primary capacity [to] take up [the slave’s] cause,”¹⁶⁰ and he insists that there is “no choice for the action of the intellect and the conscience of the country.”¹⁶¹ Despite his caustic critiques, then, Emerson does not offer a destructive diatribe but rather a motivating and optimistic call to action. His tone is thus forward-looking and jeremiadic—attentive to present shortcomings, but urgently committed to the promise of the future.

In places, Emerson articulates this hopeful optimism explicitly. Near the end of the speech, he “assure[s] [him[self] that this coldness and blindness will pass away.”¹⁶² He then stresses his complete confidence that America’s “good and wise elders, the ardent and generous youth, will not permit what is incidental and exceptional to withdraw their devotion from the

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 768.

¹⁵⁷ Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, 121.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Emerson, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” 769.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 770.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 775.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 776.

essential and permanent characters of the question.”¹⁶³ “It cannot be disputed,” he argues, “[that] there is progress in human society [and] a blessed necessity by which the interest of men is always driving them to the right; and, again, making all crime mean and ugly.”¹⁶⁴ And this progressive force will, he thinks, inevitably lead America toward its exceptional potential. “The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom.”¹⁶⁵ Put differently, in the face of America’s startling flaws, Emerson nonetheless remains hopeful, because he believes that the trajectory of human development, the forces of the universe, and—most importantly—the unique “intellect and [...] conscience of the country”¹⁶⁶ will eventually and necessarily ensure America’s success.

These same aspirational tropes—exposure, critique, warning, and hope—are similarly present in “Address to the Citizens of Concord”¹⁶⁷ and “The Fugitive Slave Law.”¹⁶⁸ Emerson gave these addresses in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a law which compelled citizens to aid in the capture and return of escaped slaves. For Emerson, the law posed a tremendous affront to self-reliance (both his own and that of other citizens and slaves) because it forced him and others to actively participate in a practice that undermined the agency and manhood of human beings and “reduced [...] the value of life.”¹⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, then, Emerson’s remarks on the subject are tremendously harsh: because it threatens the value he holds

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 775.

¹⁶⁷ A speech Emerson delivered in Concord, Massachusetts on May 3, 1851.

¹⁶⁸ A speech delivered at the New York City Tabernacle on March 4, 1854.

¹⁶⁹ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 136.

most sacred (self-reliance), the law naturally becomes the target of Emerson's most biting critiques.

The Fugitive Slave Law addresses begin, almost immediately, with criticism. Instead of leading with praise or celebration (as he does in "Emancipation in the British West Indies," or as Douglass does in "Fourth of July"), Emerson straightaway lambasts the "inferior men" who passed the Fugitive Slave Law.¹⁷⁰ He insists that they were "men without self-respect [and] without character," and he accuses them of having "no memory for what they had been saying like the Lord's Prayer all their lifetime."¹⁷¹ Emerson decries their "total want of stamina"¹⁷² and suggests that they cravenly abandoned their own principles in order to appease Daniel Webster, the "life and soul" of the bill. "They had no opinions," Emerson exclaims, and "if [Daniel Webster] jumped, they jumped. [...] They were only looking to see what their great Captain did."¹⁷³

Emerson also critiques America's institutions and political culture, and he cites the Fugitive Slave Act as proof that these are deeply flawed. According to Emerson, the law's passage reveals "the slightness and unreliableness of our social fabric" and shows "the shallowness of leaders; the divergence of parties from their alleged grounds; [and that] men [will] not stick to what they [have] said."¹⁷⁴ It also highlights the country's cultural and ideological hypocrisy and demonstrates that "the popular assumption that all men love[] freedom, and believe[] in the Christian religion, [is] [...] hollow American brag."¹⁷⁵ The law

¹⁷⁰ Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 780.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Emerson, "Address to the Citizens of Concord," 137.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

exposes America's dark underbelly and, with "the illuminating power of a sheet of lightning at midnight,"¹⁷⁶ shows that "America, the most prosperous country in the universe, has the greatest calamity in the universe, negro slavery."¹⁷⁷ It proves, in sum, that America is exceptionally flawed—an excellent country, perhaps, but also one marred by deep and profound faults.¹⁷⁸

But if Emerson critiques America's culture, institutions, and lawmakers, he reserves his most vehement chastisement for Daniel Webster, the Massachusetts senator who, in Emerson's view, did most to facilitate the law's passage. In both his 1851 and 1854 addresses, Emerson accuses Webster of being beholden to commercial interests and of prioritizing property interests above moral values.¹⁷⁹ He calls Webster's actions "treachery,"¹⁸⁰ and he insists that "the decision of Webster [to support the Fugitive Slave Act] was accompanied with everything offensive to freedom and good morals."¹⁸¹ Emerson castigates Webster for his lack of perception and moral sentiment and claims that any "scraps of morality to be gleaned from [Webster's] speeches are reflections of the minds of others."¹⁸² Emerson also condemns Webster's lack of integrity and, calling the senator a "white slave," laments that "[he], our best

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷⁸ Emerson emphasizes both America's virtues *and* its flaws when he exclaims, "What is the use of admirable law-forms and political forms, if a hurricane of party feeling and a combination of monied interests can beat them to the ground? What is the use of courts, if judges only quote authorities, and no judge exerts original jurisdiction, or recurs to first principles? What is the use of a Federal Bench, if its opinions are the political breath of the hour? And what is the use of constitutions, if all the guaranties provided by the jealousy of ages for the protection of liberty are made of no effect, when a bad act of Congress finds a willing commissioner?" *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁷⁹ In "Address to the Citizens of Concord," for example, Emerson says that Webster "obeys his powerful animal nature;—and his finely developed understanding only works truly and with all its force, when it stands for animal good; that is, for property. He believes, in so many words, that government exists for the protection of property. He looks at the Union as an estate, a large farm, and is excellent in the completeness of his defence of it so far." *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸¹ Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 784.

¹⁸² Emerson, "Address to the Citizens of Concord," 147.

and proudest, [...] irresistibly [took] the bit in his mouth, and the collar on his neck, and [harnessed] himself to the chariot of the planters.”¹⁸³

In articulating these critiques, Emerson does not mince his words. Instead, he employs cutting, bitter, and dramatic rhetoric and makes little attempt to soften his rhetorical blows. He accuses America of unparalleled “wickedness,”¹⁸⁴ calls the Fugitive Slave Act a “suicidal”¹⁸⁵ and “disastrous defection,”¹⁸⁶ and describes slavery as a “mountain of poison.”¹⁸⁷ He labels American citizens “cowardly”¹⁸⁸ and “lukewarm,”¹⁸⁹ and he repeatedly uses the superlative (“the *greatest* calamity,”¹⁹⁰ “the *darkest* passage in the history”¹⁹¹) to stress the magnitude of America’s flaws. Emerson even hurls personal insults at the country’s inert politicians and at one point suggests that, instead of morals or conscience, Daniel Webster has “a hole in the head.”¹⁹² He thus follows Douglass (who intentionally marshalled “the severest language [he could] command”¹⁹³) and embraces aspirational exceptionalism’s trenchant, acerbic style.

In addition to bold criticisms and brash rhetoric, Emerson utilizes the aspirational trope of warning. Like Douglass, who cautioned against the negative effects of slaveholding, Emerson predicts that slavery will jeopardize American politics and values. He thus warns against

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁸⁶ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 784.

¹⁸⁷ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 149.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁸⁹ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 791.

¹⁹⁰ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 138.

¹⁹¹ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 784.

¹⁹² Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 147.

¹⁹³ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 58.

continued support of the institution, and he urges his listeners to guard against its insidious influence. To lend urgency to these requests, Emerson personifies slavery, presenting it as “industrious” but scheming woman.¹⁹⁴ “She [...] gives herself no holidays,” he warns, “[and] no proclamations will put her down. She got Texas, and now will have Cuba, and means to keep her majority.”¹⁹⁵ Emerson also uses active verbs to depict slavery as a dynamic and foreboding threat. He insists, for example, that slavery is “no longer mendicant, but [has] become aggressive and dangerous,”¹⁹⁶ and he likens it to a “rot” that “spreads [...] fast” and “is growing serious.”¹⁹⁷ Through these careful grammatical choices, Emerson conveys the gravity and immediacy of his warnings and cautions his audience to actively guard against slavery’s anabasis. Because slavery will not “lie by,” American citizens must constantly and vigilantly resist her advances.¹⁹⁸

Emerson thus employs the aspirational tropes of warning, critique, and harsh language. But despite his foreboding and critical tone, his message is ultimately one of hope. Though he begins his Fugitive Slave Law addresses with fulmination and frustration, he admits that he “strongly share[s] the hope of mankind in the power, and, therefore, in the duties of the Union.”¹⁹⁹ He also predicts that America will, eventually, overcome its great flaws, because

¹⁹⁴ A troubling metaphor, to say the least. In other essays, Emerson is relatively progressive in his views on women—he insists, for example, that women be allowed to vote, and he demands that “the laws be purged of [...] every barbarous impediment to women.” “Woman,” in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166. Because of this, it is not clear whether this gendered metaphor is merely a benign literary device, or whether it is intended to communicate something about the relationship between gender and self-reliance. If slavery, the antithesis of self-reliance, is womanly, then is self-reliance a masculine trait? Can women be truly self-reliant? These questions are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present study, but I flag them here in hopes that other interested scholars might pursue them further.

¹⁹⁵ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 148.

¹⁹⁶ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 784.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 790.

¹⁹⁸ Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 148.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

“nothing is impracticable to this nation, which it shall set itself to do.”²⁰⁰ Emerson acknowledges that “slavery is disheartening,” but he also insists that “slowly, slowly the Avenger comes, but comes surely.”²⁰¹ His awareness of America’s faults is thus matched by his belief in its power to correct course; his exasperation, with an expectation that eventually, “every thing [*sic*] invites to emancipation.”²⁰²

Emerson also conveys his hopeful optimism by advocating specific political action. Though he acknowledges that “mountains of difficulty must be surmounted [and] stern trials met” before America can achieve its exceptional potential, he does not treat the country as a lost cause.²⁰³ Instead, he admonishes his listeners to throw their “virtue, intelligence, and education [...] where they rightfully belong”²⁰⁴ and instructs them to resist, disobey,²⁰⁵ and “correct” the Fugitive Slave Law.²⁰⁶ Emerson insists that the law “must be abrogated and wiped out of the statute book,” and he encourages citizens to “confine slavery to slave states, and help them effectually to make an end of it.”²⁰⁷ And in his distinctive, colorful style, he commands his listeners to “bore, blast, excavate, pulverize, and shovel [the law] once for all, down into the bottomless Pit.”²⁰⁸ These and other calls to action suggests that, despite its many defects,

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁰¹ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 789.

²⁰² Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 149.

²⁰³ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 790.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ He says, “Whilst it stands [on the statute book], it must be disobeyed.” “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 150. More generally, he argues, “As soon as the Constitution ordains an immoral law, it ordains disunion. The law is suicidal, and cannot be obeyed.” *Ibid.*, 147. He also claims that the Fugitive Slave Law is one “which no man can obey, or abet the obeying, without loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of a gentleman” and he insists that “if our resistance to this law is not right, there is no right.” *Ibid.*, 144, 139.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

Emerson thinks the country is yet perfectible. They reveal, in other words, Emerson's hope that America might become better and his faith that the nation can and will "rid itself at last of every wrong."²⁰⁹

Emerson's addresses on the Fugitive Slave law are thus paradigmatic examples of his aspirational exceptionalism. In these speeches, Emerson highlights America's defects and condemns its shortcomings and faults. He delivers vituperative censure and castigating critique, and he warns of threats on the horizon. Emerson laments the current state of affairs and lambasts the country's politicians and policies. And yet, he believes that the sincere efforts of well-meaning American citizens might make the country great. Emerson is not, then, a fatalist, and he does not think the country is destined for failure, faction, and fault. Instead, he believes in America's exceptional potential and insists that citizens can, through consistent and committed exertion, "accelerate [...] the progress of mankind."²¹⁰

Emerson's 1878 lecture "The Fortune of the Republic" provides a third and final example of his aspirational rhetoric. Curiously, Emerson begins this piece with a basic principle of hydrostatics—namely, the known rule that water seeks its own level. Citing both scientific and commercial examples, he explains that "in economy as well as in hydraulics [...] you must have a source higher than your tap."²¹¹ He then abruptly transitions to the United States and, abandoning his brief foray into fluid dynamics, devotes the remainder of the lecture to a discussion of American politics. On first reading, this incongruous introduction seems strangely unrelated to the rest of the address. Hydraulics, after all, have little to do with affairs in the American republic. From an exceptionalist perspective, though, the hydrostatic example is

²⁰⁹ Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 789.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 790.

²¹¹ Emerson, "The Fortune of the Republic," 511.

significant, for it suggests that aspiration—a constant seeking for higher, improved ground—is natural, a law that governs both the physical world and the social. As Emerson writes, “If this is true in all the useful and in the fine arts, that the direction must be drawn from a superior source or there will be no good work, does it hold less in our social and civil life?”²¹² Put differently, if fluids (and, as Emerson notes, sailors, manufacturers, artists, and the like) perpetually aspire toward a higher, more improved path, should not political structures do the same?

Emerson’s opening anecdote is thus a marker of and metaphor for his aspirational orientation. The hydrostatic example also mirrors the structure of the speech and provides a road map, of sorts, for what is to follow. For just as water begins at a high source, falls, and then eventually returns to its original level, Emerson’s speech moves from praise (high), to condemnation (low), and then to hope (high). In his opening paragraphs—the speech’s “source,” so to speak—Emerson praises and celebrates the unique features of American society and highlights its triumphs, its values, and its efforts to “carry out the bill of political rights to an almost ideal perfection.”²¹³ He then transitions (or falls, if we are to continue the hydraulic metaphor) into critique, and he identifies the many ways in which America can and ought to improve. In his final section, though, Emerson expresses his faith in the “chiefest benefits” and “blessing[s]” that “Divine Providence” has in store for America.²¹⁴ Like fluid seeking its own level, he rises to where he began and concludes the speech with optimism, hope, and “new confidence for the future.”²¹⁵

²¹² *Ibid.*, 513.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 517.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 544.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In structure, then, “Fortune” is deeply aspirational. Like “Fourth of July,” it seamlessly transitions from sincere praise, to caustic critique, to hopeful buoyancy. It thus mimics the source-seeking movement of fluid, links seemingly antithetic ideas, and shows that discouragement and devotion can harmoniously coexist. But there is more. In addition to its ternary, aspirational structure,²¹⁶ the speech is imbued with aspirational themes and tropes. Abrasive in language and tone, it contains forceful warnings and admonitions. It also provides relentless critiques and, like “Emancipation in the British West Indies” and the Fugitive Slave Law addresses, draws attention to America’s flaws. But the speech is also fundamentally hopeful, offering optimistic predictions for the future. It is thus aspirational in form as well as substance, and is characterized by both a typical aspirational structure *and* by the tradition’s defining rhetorical tropes.

Of these aspirational tropes, critique is, perhaps, the most obvious. Although Emerson begins with a celebratory account of America’s “favorable” conditions,²¹⁷ its “common sense,”²¹⁸ and its special “place in the opinion of nations,”²¹⁹ he is also attentive to—and critical of—the country’s countless flaws. He insists, for example, that Americans exhibit a marked lack of probity and that “instead of character, there is a studious exclusion of character.”²²⁰ He further laments that America’s “great men [...] peril their integrity for the sake of adding to the weight of their personal character the authority of office,”²²¹ and he condemns American politicians as being “adventurers [who] break away from the law of honesty and think they can

²¹⁶ See Chapter 1, note 21 and accompanying text.

²¹⁷ Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic,” 516.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 515.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 518.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 519.

afford to join the devil's party."²²² Emerson accuses Americans of "a great deal of lying vanity"²²³ and he critiques citizens for "risking all the prized charters of the human race [...] for a paltry selfish gain."²²⁴ He believes, in short, that Americans are shallow and cowardly, and he chastises them for their willingness to "stoop low[.]"²²⁵

Emerson also critiques the country's political culture and institutions. In his view (and much to his chagrin) the country is "governed in bar-rooms," not in Congress.²²⁶ Its legislation is thus "equivocal, interested and vicious,"²²⁷ its politicians, often "rogues."²²⁸ The political economy is "low and degrading,"²²⁹ and the "spirit of [America's] political action" devalues "the sacredness of man."²³⁰ What is more, the country's politics favor the vulgar and reward those "depart widest from [themselves]."²³¹ Perhaps because of this, American statesmen are, in Emerson's assessment, "an inferior class of professional politicians" who exacerbate, but never mend, the country's flaws.²³² In Emerson's words, "the trustees of power [are] only energetic when mischief [can] be done, [but] imbecile as corpses when evil [is] to be prevented."²³³

Above all else, though, Emerson critiques America's failure to secure and encourage self-reliance. As discussed above, Emerson's exceptionalism stems from his belief that America, and

²²² *Ibid.*, 520.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 530.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 521.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 518.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 519.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*, 518.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 519.

America alone, provides the resources and conditions necessary for courageous, self-directing behavior.²³⁴ But as Emerson laments in “Fortune,” the country has failed (and continues to fail) to actualize this potential. Though America provides the geographic, cultural, and intellectual space requisite for self-reliance, its citizens “shrink from [...] act[s] of [their] own” and instead live “according to custom.”²³⁵ And though the country offers unique opportunities for individuals to direct their own lives, citizens “lean on some other” rather than trust their own, inherent capacities.²³⁶ “Worst of all,” the country is dangerously dependent on European influence and is obsessed with imitating its British motherland. “The tendency of this,” Emerson laments, “is to make all men alike; to extinguish individualism and choke up all the channels of inspiration from God in man.”²³⁷ Insofar as Americans emulate Englishmen, they “lose [their] invention and descend into imitation”—so much so that the American man “no longer conducts his own life.”²³⁸ Emerson chastises Americans for this colossal failure and grieves the fact that America, a nation with the exceptional potential to train self-reliant souls, has lost itself in replication, conformity, and the “torpor of every day.”²³⁹

Although he celebrates America’s unique accomplishments, then, Emerson critiques the country’s failings and insists that there is still “much to learn, much to correct.”²⁴⁰ In so doing, he utilizes the scathing, caustic tone that is typical of aspirational rhetoric. Eschewing flattery (a trope characteristic of accomplished exceptionalism), Emerson insults his listeners and calls

²³⁴ See Section I of this chapter, above.

²³⁵ Emerson, “Fortune of the Republic,” 521.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 532.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 534.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 533.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 530.

them “careless,”²⁴¹ “reckless,”²⁴² and “unscrupulous.”²⁴³ He mocks their self-interested shortsightedness,²⁴⁴ questions their motives and values,²⁴⁵ and attacks their opportunistic, faint-hearted politicians.²⁴⁶ Emerson even ridicules Americans’ lack of self-reliance and claims that the few souls who dare behave independently are made famous for their acts. He further jests that “on one memorable occasion,” an audacious American dared utter the words, “I will take the responsibility.”²⁴⁷ “His phrase,” Emerson jokes, “[...] is a proverb ever since.”²⁴⁸

And yet somehow, despite all this ridicule, chastisement, and critique, Emerson preserves a note of hope. In his concluding paragraphs, he reiterates his belief that America is qualified, “rough and ready,” and capable of “find[ing] a way out of any peril.”²⁴⁹ If it will but let go of its English traditions, he urges, the country might yet be “what the earth waits for,” a land of “exalted manhood.”²⁵⁰ Buoyed by this possibility, Emerson expresses his great “confidence for the future” and predicts that America will, eventually, “carry out to the last the ends of liberty

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 521.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 522.

²⁴⁴ At various points throughout the speech, Emerson suggests that Americans only behave the way they do because they are too narrowly focused on their immediate comfort and material well-being. He notes, for example, that Americans vote infrequently and irresponsibly only “because they do not entertain the possibility of being seriously caught in meshes of legislation.” *Ibid.*, 523. “If,” though, “[citizens] should come to be interested in themselves and their career”—that is, if they focused on their long-term interests rather than their immediate comfort—“they would no more stay away from the election than from their own counting-room or the house of their friend.” *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ For example, Emerson accuses Americans of making moral compromises in order to both appease their political parties and “add[] to the weight of their personal character the authority of office.” *Ibid.*, 519.

²⁴⁶ As mentioned above, he calls America’s politicians “rogues” and claims they are “only energetic when mischief [can] be done” but “imbecile as corpses when evil [is] to be prevented.” *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 521.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 535.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

and justice.”²⁵¹ “I see in all directions the light breaking,” he remarks hopefully, “[and] I do not think we shall by any perverse ingenuity prevent the blessing.”²⁵²

This hopeful optimism is clearly grounded in Emerson’s belief that America offers unparalleled opportunities for self-development and growth. In fact, Emerson is explicit that he has faith in America’s future precisely because the country is perpetually new (e.g., has virgin land, lacks feudal history) and is therefore uniquely conducive to self-reliance. Emerson specifically notes, for example, that if America is a land of limitless “opportunity of civil rights, of education, of personal power, and not less of wealth,” this is because its “land is wide enough” and “the soil has bread for all.”²⁵³ He also argues that America represents “the flowering of civilization” because in America, citizens have room (both physical and intellectual) to develop, grow, and maximize their exceptional potential. Emerson frankly asserts that “the humanity of all nations is now in the American Union” and then, just a sentence later, comments, “When I see the emigrants landing at New York, I say, There they go—to school.”²⁵⁴ He suggests, in other words, that America’s bright future originates in its opportunities for self-development, and that if America becomes exceptional, it will be because the country provides a valuable training ground for independent souls.

Like “Emancipation in the British West Indies” and the Fugitive Slave Law addresses, then, “Fortune of the Republic” illustrates Emerson’s aspirational orientation. In the speech, Emerson celebrates America’s unique and special features and acknowledges that the country has an important role to fulfill. But he also condemns America’s flaws and warns that the nation

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 543.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 544.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 541.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 645, in Notes.

might fail to achieve its exceptional potential. Still, Emerson maintains an aspirational hope in the country's "unattained but attainable"²⁵⁵ potential, and he insists that "the Genius or Destiny of America is [...] a man incessantly advancing, as the shadow on the dial's face."²⁵⁶ He believes, in other words, that America's progress is certain and assured, and he is hopeful that, like shadows on a sundial, the country will move forward steadily, reliably, and perpetually.

In a recent article, Mark Button observes that Emerson's self-reliance is aspirational—something individuals can never quite achieve but should nonetheless strive toward. The same, I think, is true of Emerson's exceptionalism. As my readings of "Emancipation in the British West Indies," the Fugitive Slave Law addresses, and "The Fortune of the Republic" illustrate, Emerson is critical, faultfinding, but committed to America's perpetual becoming. His exceptionalism is thus a continuous process, and is directed toward something about the United States that is potentially, but not assuredly, great. Like self-reliance, which, according to Button, "names an ethical ideal and a political pursuit, not a necessary or natural fact about human being," Emerson's exceptionalism is an ongoing struggle, an endless journey to overcome flaws and faults.²⁵⁷ It does not, then, "name a fixed state," but instead points to a "ceaseless aspirational pursuit—one that will never, can never, be completed."²⁵⁸ In this way, Emerson's exceptionalism is truly aspirational and is focused not on what the nation now is, but on what it might eventually become.

III. Emerson's Aspirational Citizenship: Ceaseless Striving in a Community of Friends

²⁵⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 239.

²⁵⁶ Emerson, "Fortune of the Republic," 537.

²⁵⁷ Button, "Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times," 318.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

In the previous sections, I have shown that Ralph Waldo Emerson is an aspirational exceptionalist thinker. I have argued that he, like other exceptionalists, views the United States as special, chosen, and superior. I have also suggested that his American exceptionalism is grounded in his commitment to self-reliance, and that he believes the country is great because it offers the conditions and opportunities necessary for individuals to cultivate their own self-trust. I have noted, though, that Emerson's exceptionalism is contingent and aspirational. Like Douglass, Emerson is hyperaware of the nation's shortcomings and recognizes that America can (and does) fail. He thus treats America's exceptional opportunities for self-reliance as possibilities, not guarantees, and though he hopes that American citizens will secure the country's exceptional potential, he admits that they can and might fall short.

Having established Emerson's status as an aspirational exceptionalist, I now consider the impact of his aspirational thought and rhetoric. More specifically, I consider how Emerson's distinctive aspirational commitments might influence and inspire citizenship practices in the United States. Here again, I treat language as a constitutive force that lends meaning and significance to human existence. My analysis is thus grounded in the proposition that Emerson's words (and all words, for that matter) have real-world effects and offer new ways of understanding our position(s) in the world.

In this section, then, I describe the world-building effects of Emerson's aspirational exceptionalism. More specifically, I suggest that Emerson's aspirational rhetoric encourages and engenders four specific behaviors: amelioration, activity, love, and resilience. These progressive, self-reflective practices might be foreign to those accustomed to accomplished exceptionalism's more passive, self-celebratory norms.²⁵⁹ But this is precisely why Emerson's

²⁵⁹ See Introduction, Section I.A.

exceptionalism matters—because it activates and makes possible new, unfamiliar, and productive ways of enacting American citizenship.

The first of Emerson’s aspirational citizenship practices is amelioration—that is, the habit of consistent striving and perpetual self-betterment. According to Emerson, nature and history are constantly in flux and are governed by a “law of eternal progression.”²⁶⁰ There is, then, no final or ending point; rather, “all things renew, germinate and spring.”²⁶¹ But if this is true in the natural world, it is equally true for human beings. Like a tree that perpetually sprouts and sheds its leaves, or a series of concentric circles rippling in a pond, humans are never more than “suggestion[s] of that [they] should be.”²⁶² They are always already beginning and remain perpetually perched at the start of an endless and infinite adventure. Human beings are thus, as Stanley Cavell observes, involved in an unending “process of moving to, and from, nexts.”²⁶³ Or, in Emerson’s words, “the life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.”²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Emerson, “Circles,” 258.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁶³ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 12.

²⁶⁴ Emerson, “Circles,” 253. According to Jason Frank, this concern for amelioration may be the reason Emerson authored biographical sketches of his so-called “Representative Men.” In Frank’s words, “Emerson’s representative men are neither heroes nor kings, congressmen nor party leaders, but poetic public mediators who offer a perpetual exhibition of—and provocation toward—new possibilities. Emerson’s representatives do not reveal the community to itself, much less give ‘public expression to the particular range of qualities that vie the community and its members their identity. They act instead as catalysts of conversion capable of stirring a nation, in Tocqueville’s words, to ‘rise *above* itself.’” “Standing for Others,” 386.

Shklar makes a similar observation, noting that “great individuals have only one claim on our attention: to help us grow up and to do without them.” “Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy,” 62.

Because human beings are thus limitless, and because “every end is a beginning,” Emerson expects citizens to constantly strive for improvement and betterment.²⁶⁵ In fact, he explicitly instructs his listeners that their “end should be one inapprehensible to the senses: [...] a god always approached,—never touched,”²⁶⁶ and he encourages citizens to strive towards their “unattained but attainable” selves.²⁶⁷ Emerson thus endorses a citizenship of moral perfectionism—that is, a citizenship premised on the idea that individuals can and must strive to become better than they are²⁶⁸—and, as Naoko Saito notes, views life as an “endless journey of self-overcoming and self-realization whose focus is on the here and now in the process of attaining a next self, not the highest self.”²⁶⁹ And so, Emerson challenges citizens to perpetually improve and to focus on becoming (i.e., developing habits and tendencies) rather than being (i.e., accomplishing specific acts).²⁷⁰ Emerson further advises citizens to become comfortable with evanescence and transitivity and to accept the “perpetual inchoation” that is inherent in human existence.²⁷¹ In his words, “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. [...] People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”²⁷²

Emerson proposes one way citizens might enact this ameliorative ethos: by constantly sharpening their intellectual faculties and by learning, in self-reliant fashion, to think for

²⁶⁵ Emerson, “Circles,” 252.

²⁶⁶ Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” 128.

²⁶⁷ Emerson, “History,” 239.

²⁶⁸ This is, admittedly, a very crude summary of a much more complicated philosophical concept. For a much more thorough analysis of Emerson and moral perfectionism, see Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. See also Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

²⁶⁹ Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 53.

²⁷⁰ Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” 125.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷² Emerson, “Circles,” 261.

themselves. According to Emerson, the world presents countless opportunities for growth and offers libraries and colleges of accumulated wisdom and knowledge. A good, ameliorative citizen will, of course, be familiar with these.²⁷³ But she will also hone her mental and creative capacities, “write [her] own books,” and approach existing literature as provocation rather than prescription.²⁷⁴ An ameliorative citizen will recognize that learning is not dead and that literature did not cease with Shakespeare or Milton. She will thus “look[] forward” and will seek always to think and create.²⁷⁵

An Emersonian citizen might embody an ameliorative ethos in other ways, as well—by improving her physical capacities, perhaps, or by learning new trades and skills. The crucial point is simply that she remains active and persistently strives to become more and better than she is. This does not, however, mean that citizens can or should be self-centered. On the contrary, Emerson expects individuals to improve themselves so that they can become better contributors to and members of their political societies. “Society,” Emerson insists, “gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him.”²⁷⁶ If self-betterment is a virtue, then, it is because self-improved citizens are best able to enact meaningful social and political reform, and because “the transformed city, the good city, is the expression [...] [of] that transformation of [the] self.”²⁷⁷ Robinson Woodward-Burns summarizes the idea

²⁷³ “Of course,” Emerson explains, “there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,—to teach elements.” “The American Scholar,” 59.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁷⁶ Emerson, “New England Reformers,” 407. George Kateb formulates the point thus: “If [social] reform is to be genuine, the reformer must first be self-reformed.” “Self-Reliance, Politics, and Society,” in *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995), 173-196. Read the full chapter for a thorough discussion of Emerson’s thoughts on self-improvement and political activity.

²⁷⁷ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 8.

thus: “In private contemplation [and solitary self-improvement], one intuits self-determined reasons for action. Following these, one can reenter politics self-reliantly, sharing one’s moral enlightenment with others in small conversations that avoid the conformity of the mass.”²⁷⁸

Emerson’s call for ameliorative citizens thus dovetails with his second recommended citizenship practice: activity. For one who has been accused of being an apolitical recluse, Emerson is surprisingly outspoken about the value of political action. In fact, he quite explicitly argues that “the one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.”²⁷⁹ Emerson does not, then, encourage citizens to board themselves up and ponder their own navels (though some scholars have accused him of this).²⁸⁰ Instead, he admonishes individuals to enter the world, to reform, to influence, and to make.²⁸¹ Emerson even suggests that action is a necessary part of learning, development, and growth, and that without it, “thought can never ripen into truth.”²⁸² Because of

Emerson suggests that solitude and self-improvement is a necessary prerequisite for meaningful social and political relationships when he writes the following: “Why must the student be solitary and silent? That he may become acquainted with his thoughts. If he pines in a lonely place, hankering for the crowd, for display, he is not in the lonely place; his heart is in the market; he does not see; he does not hear; he does not think. But go cherish your soul; expel companions; set your habits to a life of solitude; then, will the faculties rise fair and full within, like forest trees and field flowers; you will have results, which, when you meet your fellow-men, you can communicate, and they will gladly receive. [...] The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society.” “Literary Ethics,” 105.

²⁷⁸ Woodward-Burns, “Solitude Before Society,” 31. Read the full article for a thoughtful discussion of how Emerson understood the relationship between self-reflection, self-improvement, and political activity.

For another study of Emerson’s thoughts on self-improvement, solitude, and society, see George Kateb, “Friendship and Love,” in *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995), 96-133, wherein Kateb argues that for Emerson, self-improvement and self-reflection are necessary and valuable insofar as enable critical thinking and engagement with the world.

²⁷⁹ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 57.

²⁸⁰ For a sampling of these, see Levine and Malachuk, “Introduction,” 18.

²⁸¹ In “Man the Reformer,” for example, Emerson asks, “What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a re-maker of what man has made [...]?” 146.

²⁸² Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 60. Emerson similarly argues that “the one condition coupled with the gift of truth is its use,” and that “that man shall be learned who reduceth his learning to practice.” “The Method of Nature,” 131.

this, he labels “every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power,”²⁸³ and he admonishes would-be truth-seekers to enter the world and *do*.

Emerson’s citizenship is thus a citizenship of activity: it “neither encourage[s] nor condone[s] withdrawal from the world, but rather demand[s] a commitment to action.”²⁸⁴ More specifically, though, it is a citizenship of *political* action—one that calls for citizens who are involved in social and civic affairs. Because despite his penchant for solitude, Emerson is, in the end, a democratic devotee. As Kateb notes, Emerson views democracy as “the only moral political system” and affirms it “because it is the only political system that pays homage to the idea that all human beings, just by the fact that they are human beings, are morally equal.”²⁸⁵ What is more, Emerson celebrates democracy as the “only [...] set of political arrangements that provide the protections and encouragements for individuals to become individuals, rather than the servants of society.”²⁸⁶ Though sometimes skeptical of politics, then, “Emerson’s work is soaked in the democratic spirit.”²⁸⁷ His call for active, involved citizens is thus a call for individuals who, like he, affirm and respect the institutions of democracy.

Emerson makes this explicit by requesting and endorsing specific political actions. He insists, for example, that citizens monitor their governmental officials and, if necessary, “go in a body before the Congress and say that they have a demand to make on them, so imperative that all functions of government must stop until it is satisfied.”²⁸⁸ He also celebrates civic dialogue,

²⁸³ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 60.

²⁸⁴ Gougeon, “Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy,” 211.

²⁸⁵ Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 181.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ Emerson, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” 769.

encourages citizens to thoughtfully debate public matters,²⁸⁹ and, as George Kateb notes, views town meetings and other forms of “primary democracy [as] the best worldliness.”²⁹⁰ Emerson advises citizens to pursue change through legal channels²⁹¹ but also concedes that “if ordinary legislation cannot reach [a political problem], then extraordinary must be applied.”²⁹² He even acknowledges the value of civil disobedience and celebrates citizens who, like John Brown, utilize extralegal means to safeguard the ideals of the American republic.²⁹³

Ultimately, then, Emerson demands citizens who are actively committed to democratic institutions and who will act as “citadels and warriors” to “make good the cause of Freedom.”²⁹⁴ His aspirational citizenship thus entails both personal amelioration and public, political action (the former being a necessary prerequisite for the latter). If citizens cultivate both of these practices, Emerson argues, they will find access to truth and understanding, will reap “the richest return of wisdom,”²⁹⁵ and will be able to serve their society and their country. If they do not, their faculties will remain inert, and they will never fully become “acquainted with

²⁸⁹ For example, although Emerson he abhors the Fugitive Slave Law, he admits that it brought one great benefit: it “turned every dinner-table into a debating club, and made every citizen a student of natural law.” “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” 144.

²⁹⁰ Kateb writes, “In Emerson’s hands, the town meeting becomes a miniature world in which the observer can take the sort of high pleasure that he or she can take in the contrasting and antagonistic elements of the whole world. As for the participants, they show the proper spirit when they see themselves as individuals joined in a common enterprise of speech that thrives to the extent that they remain individuals. They uphold the structure that is rooted in everyday necessities, but that needs them to be or become individuals. The better each person speaks, the better the life [...]” *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 184.

²⁹¹ Emerson exemplifies this approach in his “Speech on Affairs in Kansas,” where he requests that the government send aid to Kansas emigrants. In *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press 1904), 254-263.

²⁹² Emerson, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” 769.

²⁹³ For further discussion of the political practices Emerson embodies and endorses, see Kateb, “Self-Reliance, Politics, and Society.”

²⁹⁴ Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 787.

²⁹⁵ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 61.

[themselves].”²⁹⁶ For Emerson’s citizens to make good on their ameliorative and political duties, then, they must enter into and engage with the world around them. In his words:

Deserve thy genius: exalt it. The good, the illuminated, sit apart from the rest, censuring their dullness and vices, as if they thought that, by sitting very grand in their chairs, the very brokers, attorneys, and congressmen would see the error of their ways, and flock to them. But the good and wise must learn to act, and carry salvation to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena below.²⁹⁷

Emerson’s request for a politically active and perpetually ameliorative citizenry, is, of course, a tall order, but Emerson is not naïve. Just as he recognizes the possibility that America might fail to achieve its exceptional potential, he acknowledges that individual citizens might, on occasion, fall short of their political, ameliorative goals. In these inevitable moments of failure, Emerson expects citizens to demonstrate a third citizenship trait: resilience. According to Emerson, America’s citizens are too easily defeated and give up at the first sign of defeat. “If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises,” he laments, “they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is *ruined*.”²⁹⁸ But a person who yields so readily will not last long on the unending road to individual and political self-betterment. And so, Emerson challenges citizens to be otherwise. Rather than relinquish hope at the first sign of difficulty, Emerson admonishes them to mimic a “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet.”²⁹⁹ Put more simply, he asks citizens to be tenacious and gritty and to soldier forward in spite of political setbacks and defeats. If citizens can do this, Emerson argues, they will “not

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1938), 203.

²⁹⁸ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 67.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

postpone [their] life, but live[] already” and will have “not one chance, but a hundred chances.”³⁰⁰ They will, in other words, be able to endure their involved, ameliorative quests and will have the resilience necessary to improve both themselves and their political communities.

Lastly, Emerson challenges citizens to love and care for one another. To a twenty-first century reader, this request might seem saccharine, even mawkish. For Emerson, though, the call for love is sincere, because in his assessment, Americans suffer from a marked lack of affection. According to Emerson, “our age and history [...] has not been the history of kindness, but of selfishness.”³⁰¹ Because of this, American society is characterized by inequality and distrust and is full of cheats, swindlers, and other opprobrious characters. Americans try to contain these ills by building courts, supporting prisons, and governing through a “system of force.”³⁰² But these corrective measures have their own insidious effects: they drain public funds and, more significantly, perpetuate the belief that individuals cannot be trusted to dictate their own life direction and choices. America’s unloving, egoistic culture thus breeds many of the nation’s problems, and it threatens the country’s potential for self-reliance.

And so, Emerson calls for citizens who love. According to Emerson, affection and camaraderie might resolve (or at least mitigate) America’s difficulties and restore trust in man’s capacity for self-reliance. In fact, Emerson claims that love is “the one remedy for all ills, the panacea of nature.”³⁰³ He thus admonishes citizens to treat each other with care and kindness and to interact as brothers and as friends. Such a citizenry could, Emerson claims, “accomplish

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 148.

³⁰² Emerson, “Politics,” 125.

³⁰³ Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 148.

that by imperceptible methods [...] which force could never achieve.”³⁰⁴ They could also “put a new face on this weary old world in which we dwell” and could end, once and for all, the “vain diplomacy of statesmen” and “the impotence of armies, and navies, and lines of defence.”³⁰⁵ If America’s citizens adopted an ethic of love, they would find that “the impossible becomes possible.”³⁰⁶ The country would experience a “noble[] morning”³⁰⁷ and would find, happily, that “every calamity [is] dissolved in the universal sunshine.”³⁰⁸

But what does this loving ethos look like in practice? Emerson describes a few possibilities. At its most basic level, loving citizenship requires individuals to understand and appreciate each other as autonomous, worthy individuals. At present, Emerson argues, Americans trade and bargain in order to meet their needs. Because of this, they are not aware of the conditions of production, the circumstances under which their so-called “necessities” are produced. For example, Americans buy Cuban sugar, but they turn a blind eye to the “abominations of slavery” that make that purchase possible.³⁰⁹ And they enjoy the “luxuries [and] conveniences of society”³¹⁰ without questioning “the progress of the articles of commerce from the fields where they grew, to [American] houses.”³¹¹ As a result, Americans ignore their working-class countrymen. “We allow ourselves to be served by them,” Emerson laments,

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

“[but] we do not greet their talents, nor rejoice in their good fortune, nor foster their hopes, nor in the assembly of the people vote for what is dear to them.”³¹²

A loving citizenry would counteract these effects by recognizing the labor of their fellow-citizens and by acknowledging the behind-the-scenes efforts that make daily living possible. Citizens could, Emerson argues, accomplish this by doing their own work, by “stand[ing] in primary relations with the work of the world”³¹³ and by practicing commercial and economic self-reliance (i.e., by providing for one’s own needs rather than relying on the labors of others). They could also recognize their fellow men and women by making a conscious, mental effort to become aware of the so-called “help.”³¹⁴ At the end of each day, Emerson suggests, loving citizens might ask themselves “whether we have earned our bread to-day by the hearty contribution of our energies to the common benefit.”³¹⁵ And if, upon reflection, the answer is “No,” they ought to “tend to the correction of these flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day.”³¹⁶

On a larger scale, Emerson admonishes the state to enact and encourage loving citizenship by changing its laws and institutions. Rather than leave individuals to succeed or fail on their own, the state should, Emerson argues, “consider the poor man” and ensure that “every child that is born [has] a just chance for his bread.”³¹⁷ Emerson further insists that “government must educate the poor man” and must respond to intellectual and economic inequalities with

³¹² *Ibid.*, 148. Emerson’s arguments on the de-humanizing and anti-socializing effects of trade and commerce are very similar to Marx’s.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

“love and wisdom.”³¹⁸ The state could also reform its property laws to ensure that property does not arbitrarily and inequitably “pass[] through donation or inheritance to those who do not create it.”³¹⁹ And it could, through “amelioration in our laws of property,” teach citizens “that no one should take more than his share, let him be ever so rich.”³²⁰

At both the individual and institutional levels, then, Emerson encourages Americans to “renovat[e] the State on the principles of right and love.”³²¹ And though he acknowledges “the power of love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried,” he predicts that the results will be positive.³²² Loving citizenship will allow Americans to view each other as expressions of the same universal genius and will remind them that “every man is a channel through which heaven floweth.”³²³ It will help citizens recognize that “I am my brother, and my brother is me” and will teach them that “[their] brother is [their] guardian, acting for [them] with the friendliest designs.”³²⁴ Love will foster democracy and inclusivity and will mitigate the toxic influence of self-interested politicians. Most importantly, though, it will help citizens value and trust one another and will engender a culture friendly to and supportive of Emersonian self-reliance.

Emerson’s aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric is thus bound up with a distinct model of citizenship—one that is at once active, ameliorative, resilient, and loving. And because Emerson’s exceptionalism is grounded in self-reliance (i.e., because he believes America offers

³¹⁸ Emerson, “The Young American,” 224.

³¹⁹ Emerson, “Politics,” 117.

³²⁰ Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 149.

³²¹ Emerson, “Politics,” 125.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 398.

³²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Compensation,” in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 90.

exceptional opportunities for individuals to practice independence and self-trust), his citizenship is, unsurprisingly, geared toward individual self-direction. If individuals adopt Emerson's active, ameliorative, and resilient ethos, they will have the tenacity and courage to accept the "ceaseless aspirational pursuit" for autonomy.³²⁵ And if they enact Emerson's loving camaraderie, they will have the patience and compassion to support all humans (blacks³²⁶ and women³²⁷ included) in their parallel quests. Emerson's exceptionalist rhetoric and exceptionalist citizenship practices are thus mutually reinforcing: America is exceptional because it provides opportunities for self-reliance, and citizens are most likely to achieve that self-reliance if they adopt Emerson's exceptionalist citizenship practices.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Ralph Wald Emerson works within and contributes to the American exceptionalist tradition. I have shown that he, like more traditional exceptionalists, believes American is great, chosen, and superior. I have also explored the basis of his

³²⁵ Button, "Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times," 319.

³²⁶ Although Emerson advocated for equal treatment of all races, it is worth noting that his notion of human equality was not as expansive as Douglass'. Unlike Douglass, who was fundamentally concerned with the equal status of all people, Emerson's priority was first and foremost the protection and facilitation of self-reliance. If Emerson opposed slavery, then, he did so primarily because he believed the institution interfered with the self-reliance of both slaves and slave-owners.

Emerson's response to the Fugitive Slave Law illustrates this point. Tellingly, Emerson did not speak vocally against slavery until *after* the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. In fact, before the law, Emerson admitted that he "lived all [his] life without suffering any known inconvenience from American Slavery": "I never saw it," he wrote, "I never heard the whip; I never felt the check on my free speech and action." "The Fugitive Slave Law," 780. After the law's passage, though, Emerson was, like all citizens of free states, required to cooperate in the capture and return of escaped slaves. For the first time, then, he was forced to participate in an enterprise he believed immoral. Emerson viewed this as a terrific affront to his own self-reliance, and he opposed the law both because it forced him to do something he did not believe in *and* because it asked him to undermine the self-reliant actions of those slaves who had chosen to flee from their masters.

This is not to say that Emerson was apathetic about racial issues. On the contrary, Emerson cared about racial equality very much. Unlike Douglass, though, Emerson appears to have been less concerned about promoting racial justice in and of itself. Instead, it seems that Emerson's concern for racial equality originated in (and was secondary to) his broader concerns about self-reliance.

³²⁷ For a taste of Emerson's views on women, see Emerson, "Woman," 157-167.

exceptionalist commitments and have argued that he finds America exceptional because it offers ideal conditions (historical, geographic, and cultural) for individuals to cultivate and enact self-reliance. I have provided close readings and textual analyses of four of Emerson's speeches ("Emancipation in the British West Indies," "Address to the Citizens of Concord," "The Fugitive Slave Law," and "The Fortune of the Republic") and have shown that, like Frederick Douglass, Emerson relies heavily on aspirational exceptionalist tropes. Finally, I have explored the distinct mode of citizenship that his aspirational exceptionalism activates and have described four distinctly Emersonian citizenship practices: amelioration, action, resilience, and love.

This chapter has thus provided a portrait of a second aspirational exceptionalist thinker—one who is, like Douglass, both disappointed with *and* devoted to the United States. In so doing, it has once again shown that American exceptionalism need not be backward-looking, conservative, and superficial. Rather than uncritically celebrate America's assured greatness, American exceptionalists can, like Douglass and Emerson, lament the country's shortcomings and flaws while remaining hopeful about its future. They can also endorse citizenship practices that are progressive, active, and thoughtful. By including Ralph Waldo Emerson in the American exceptionalist canon, then, this chapter has expanded both the American exceptionalist tradition and the opportunities for citizenship in the United States.

Bibliography

- Balkun, Mary McAleer. 2015. "Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803-1882)." In *American Poets and Poetry: From the Colonial Era to the Present, Vol. I*, edited by Jeffrey Gray, Mary McAleer Balkun and James McCorkle, 192-197. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood.
- Button, Mark E. 2015. "Reading Emerson in Neoliberal Times: Contesting the Abandonment of Autonomy." *Political Theory* 43 (3): 312-333.
- Calverton, V. F. 1932. *The Liberation of American Literature*. New York: Scribners.
- Cavell, Stanley. 1990. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2003. *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 1989. *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Douglass, Frederick. 2016. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 50-71. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2008. "Address to the Citizens of Concord." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 135-151. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2000. "Circles." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 252-262. New York: Modern Library.
- . 2008. "Compensation." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 75-91. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2000. "Emancipation in the British West Indies." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 751-776. New York: Modern Library.
- . 1938. "History." In *Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 235-256. New York: Library of America.
- . 1938. "Lecture on the Times." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 151-170. New York: Library of America.
- . 1997. "Letter to Lydia Jackson, February 1, 1835." In *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Joel Myerson, 142-143. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2008. "Letter to Martin Van Buren, President of the United States." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 49-52. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1938. "Literary Ethics." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 91-112. New York: Library of America.
- . 1938. "Man the Reformer." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 133-150. New York: Library of America.
- . 2000. "New England Reformers." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 402-418. New York: Modern Library.

- . 2000. "Nominalist and Realist." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 390-401. New York: Modern Library.
 - . 2008. "Politics." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 115-126. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - . 2008. "Power." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 219-232. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - . 2008. "Self-Reliance." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 53-73. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - . 1904. "Speech on Affairs in Kansas." In *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI*, 255-263. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press.
 - . 1938. "The American Scholar." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 51-71. New York: Library of America.
 - . 1938. "The Divinity School Address." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 73-92. New York: Library of America.
 - . 1904. "The Fortune of the Republic." In *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI*, 511-544. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press.
 - . 2000. "The Fugitive Slave Law." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 777-792. New York: Modern Library.
 - . 1938. "The Method of Nature." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 113-132. New York: Library of America.
 - . 2000. "The Over-Soul." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 236-251. New York: Modern Library.
 - . 1938. "The Transcendentalist." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 191-209. New York: Library of America.
 - . 1938. "The Young American." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays & Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte, 211-230. New York: Library of America.
 - . 2008. "Woman." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 157-167. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Frank, Jason. 2011. "Standing for Others: Reform and Representation in Emerson's Political Thought." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 383-414. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Garvey, Gregory, ed. 2000. *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Gougeon, Len. 2011. "Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 185-222. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- . 2010. *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

- Kateb, George. 1995. *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- . 1995. "Friendship and Love." In *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, by George Kateb, 96-133. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- . 1995. "Self-Reliance, Politics, and Society." In *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, by George Kateb, 173-196. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- . 1987. "Thinking About Human Extinction (II): Emerson and Whitman." *Raritan* 6 (3): 1-22.
- Levine, Alan M., and Daniel S. Malachuk. 2011. "Introduction: The New History of Emerson's Politics and His Philosophy of Self-Reliance." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 1-39. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- McWilliams, Wilson Carey. 2011. "Emerson: The All and the One." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 43-52. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- National Archives. n.d. *Emancipation*. Accessed March 16, 2018.
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/emancipation.htm>.
- Nicoll, W. Robertson. 1903. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *The North American Review* 176 (558): 675-687.
- Read, James H. 2011. "The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 152-184. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Robinson, David M. 1993. *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2004. "Introduction: Emerson as a Political Thinker." In *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*, edited by David M. Robinson, 1-26. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Saito, Naoko. 2005. *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Scorza, Jason A. 2004. "Liberal Citizenship and Civic Friendship." *Political Theory* 32 (1): 85-108.
- Shklar, Judith N. 2011. "Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, 53-68. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Turner, Jack. 2008. "Emerson, Slavery, and Citizenship." *Raritan* 28 (2): 127-146.
- Wayne, Tiffany. 2006. "Palfrey, John Gorham (1796-1881)." In *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*, by Tiffany Wayne, 207. New York: Facts on File.
- Wider, Sarah Ann. 2000. *The Critical Reception of Emerson: Unsettling All Things*. Rochester, NY: Camden House.
- Winthrop, John. 2007. "Model of Christian Charity." In *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought, Volume 1: Origins Through the Civil War*, edited by Scott J. Hammond, Kevin R. Hardwick and Howard L. Lubert, 13-18. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Woodward-Burns, Robinson. 2016. "Solitude Before Society: Emerson on Self-Reliance, Abolitionism, and Moral Suasion." *Polity* 48 (1): 29-54.

Where “Nothing Is Fixed”: James Baldwin and America’s Exceptional Indefiniteness

“Baldwin is large; he contains multitudes!”

—Dwight A. McBride¹

In this chapter, I turn to the work of yet another overlooked exceptionalist. Born in 1924, James Baldwin spent his formative years in Harlem, New York, where he witnessed firsthand the horrors and injustice of racial animus. Though he lived far from the Jim Crow South, Baldwin regularly experienced overtly racist treatment: hostile slurs,² police beatings,³ and the like. His adolescence was marked by “incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger,”⁴ and by his late teenage years, he had watched many of his black friends come to ruin—either by fleeing into the military, moving to other ghettos, or turning to “wine or whiskey or the needle.”⁵ Because of this, Baldwin quickly learned that “white people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks” and that “the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared.”⁶ “There seemed,” he wrote, “to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between [Negroes] and the sun, between them and love and life and power [...]. One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one’s situation.”⁷

Marked by the experiences of his youth, Baldwin vowed to fight and expose America’s racial injustices: “I was icily determined,” he explained, “never to make my peace with the

¹ Dwight A. McBride, “‘How Much Time Do You Want for Your Progress?’ New Approaches to James Baldwin,” in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

² See, for example, James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 19.

³ See, for example, James Baldwin, “A Report from Occupied Territory,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 728-731.

⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

ghetto but to die and go to Hell before I would let any white man spit on me, before I would accept my ‘place’ in this republic.”⁸ And so, after a brief stint in the ministry, Baldwin began to write. Over the next several decades, his novels, essays, and plays were published in various magazines and newspapers (including *Time*, *Playboy*, and *The New Yorker*), and he was regularly invited to speak at college campuses, on television, and in other public venues. By his death in 1987, his writings were well-known, and he enjoyed a secure and well-established reputation as an American author, intellectual, and social critic.

Although political theorists have occasionally lamented that the field does not take Baldwin seriously as a political thinker,⁹ there is a wealth of literature exploring Baldwin’s political thought. Lawrie Balfour, for example, has written extensively on Baldwin’s “race consciousness”—that is, his attention to the ways society recognizes and responds to both “whiteness” and “blackness”—and has suggested that Baldwin provides valuable insight for America’s present racial challenges.¹⁰ More recently, Lisa Beard has explored the idea of “boundness” in Baldwin’s political thought and has suggested that Baldwin articulates a politics of interracial solidarity.¹¹ George Shulman has analyzed Baldwin’s contributions to the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ George Shulman, for example, has recently argued, “Although James Baldwin’s essays depict the relationship of white supremacy to the formation of American society and the shaping of national identity, prevailing forms of liberal and Marxist political thought, as well as most versions of so-called democratic theory, do not recognize him as a political thinker or even contributing to the understanding of politics.” “Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 151.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Also see Lawrie Balfour, “‘A Most Disagreeable Mirror’: Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 19-47.

¹¹ See Lisa A. Beard, “‘Flesh of Their Flesh, Bone of Their Bone’: James Baldwin’s Racial Politics of Boundness,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (2016): 378-398.

prophetic tradition within American politics,¹² while Vincent Lloyd has explored the Christian influences on Baldwin's political thinking.¹³ And Robert Scott,¹⁴ Lisa Beard,¹⁵ and Eddie S. Glaude Jr.¹⁶ have explored Baldwin's influence(s) on both the Black Power movement of the 1960s and '70s and the Black Lives Matter movement of today.

While these and other scholars have devoted considerable energy to analyses of Baldwin's political thought, none have yet explored his contributions to or involvement in the tradition of American exceptionalism. Because of this, Baldwin has, like Douglass and Emerson, largely been shut out of the American exceptionalist canon. But if Emerson's exclusion stems from his reputation for political indifference, Baldwin has likely been omitted for the opposite reason: because his politicality seems *too* intense, his critiques, too anti-American. Indeed, Baldwin's characteristic passion and vitriol led some of his contemporaries to conclude that he led a "coterie of America-haters" and cared little for his country.¹⁷

¹² See George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹³ See Vincent Lloyd, "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin" in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 171-194.

¹⁴ Robert Scott, "Rhetoric, Black Power, and Baldwin's 'Another Country,'" *Journal of Black Studies* (September 1970), 21-34.

¹⁵ Lisa Beard, "James Baldwin on Violence and Disavowal," in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 337-360.

¹⁶ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. "James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter," in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 361-372.

¹⁷ This quote is from William F. Buckley, Jr., who opposed Baldwin in a 1965 debate. After the debate, Buckley accused Baldwin of believing that "Western Civilization ha[d] failed him and his people, [and] that we ought to throw it over." Buckley further suggested that "Mr. Baldwin's indictment of society is total" and insisted that Baldwin and his extremist followers ought to "be ghettoized in the corners of fanaticism." For further description of the debate, see Nicholas Buccola, "What William F. Buckley Jr. Did Not Understand about James Baldwin: On Baldwin's Politics of Freedom," in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 119.

Contemporary readers, even sympathetic ones, have similarly pigeonholed Baldwin as someone who “takes exception to American exceptionalism.”¹⁸

In this chapter, I challenge this view by suggesting that, although Baldwin “takes exception” to certain *modes* of exceptionalism (namely, the accomplished mode), he nonetheless remains committed to America’s unique promise and potential. More specifically, I claim that Baldwin is, like Douglass and Emerson, an aspirational exceptionalist thinker and that he critiques the nation precisely because he cares deeply about its fate. As Baldwin himself explains, “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”¹⁹ His condemnations are thus grounded in adoration and motivated by an unyielding commitment to America’s aspirational potential.

The chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first, I offer textual evidence of Baldwin’s exceptionalism and explore his love for and devotion to the United States. Through analyses of Baldwin’s nonfiction works, I show that he is, like more traditional (i.e., accomplished) exceptionalists, thoroughly dedicated and deeply loyal to his nation. I further show that, despite his criticisms, he believes that the United States is special and has an important socio-historical role to fulfill. I then explore the substance of Baldwin’s exceptionalism and argue that Baldwin believes the United States is special because of its unlimited and unparalleled social and political fluidity. While other, older nations are bound up in millennia of traditions and social hierarchies, the United States is, for Baldwin, a society of “rich confusion” where individuals have endless opportunities to define and discover their identities.²⁰ In many ways, this “rich confusion” is deeply problematic—it is, according to Baldwin, the sole reason for the country’s “Negro

¹⁸ Shulman, “Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics,” 161.

¹⁹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 9.

²⁰ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 11.

problem.”²¹ But America’s fluid instability also offers opportunities for development, discovery, and growth that are not available anywhere else in the world. For Baldwin, then, America is exceptional precisely because it is variable: Its culture of confusion and instability create unique tensions but also generate “opportunities [...] thicker than anywhere else on the globe.”²²

In the second section, I distinguish Baldwin’s exceptionalism from that of more traditional, accomplished exceptionalist thinkers. Using evidence from multiple texts, I show that Baldwin is profoundly and overtly critical of accomplished rhetoric—that he condemns its self-celebratory orientation and bemoans its inclination toward historical amnesia. I then offer close readings of *The Fire Next Time* and the short essay “We Can Change the Country” and, in so doing, explore Baldwin’s frequent use of aspirational exceptionalist strategies. By highlighting Baldwin’s rejection of accomplished tropes *and* exploring his use of aspirational strategies, I show that Baldwin is at once critical, disappointed, and optimistic—painfully aware of America’s shortcomings but also profoundly committed to its future. I thus suggest that Baldwin, like Douglass and Emerson, is best understood as an aspirational exceptionalist thinker.

In the final section, I consider the citizenship practices that might be activated and enabled if Baldwin is treated seriously as an exceptionalist thinker. Using textual evidence from his essays and writings, I show that Baldwin challenges citizens to engage in candid self-reflection and to confront—rather than disavow—their shortcomings and flaws. He also urges citizens to recognize their deep interconnectedness and to pursue political agendas that enhance the well-being of both races. In addition, Baldwin calls for active political involvement and

²¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 95.

²² Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 88.

urges citizens to engage with their political system. His citizenship is thus thoroughly aspirational: active, reflective, and attentive to the needs of all.

I. Baldwin the Exceptionalist

Despite his contemporaries' hyperbolic accusations, James Baldwin was not, in fact, an "America-hater."²³ But Baldwin's relationship with his homeland was complicated, and his feelings toward America were often strained and fraught. Though Baldwin regularly confessed his affection for the United States, he also viewed his Americanness as a challenge, and his writings recount his long and deep struggle to "accept,"²⁴ "reconcile,"²⁵ and come to terms with his political heritage. And when he was only 24, Baldwin determined that "in [his] own country [...] the question of [his] life [...] was closed,"²⁶ and so he "quit America, never intending to return."²⁷ Clearly, Baldwin's connection to the country was tense, tumultuous, and nuanced. Little wonder, then, that he opened his 1961 book *Nobody Knows My Name* with Henry James' famously ambivalent observation: "It is a complex fate to be an American."²⁸

And yet, as Baldwin wrote in a later essay, "every good-bye ain't gone."²⁹ Shortly after arriving in Europe, Baldwin realized that he "[was] a stranger" there, too.³⁰ Living abroad thus strengthened Baldwin's American ties and reminded him that the United States was, and always would be, his home. In Baldwin's words, "I found myself, willy-nilly, alchemized into an

²³ Buccola, "What William F. Buckley Jr. Did Not Understand about James Baldwin," 141.

²⁴ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ James Baldwin, "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 774.

²⁷ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 195.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ Baldwin, "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone," 771.

³⁰ Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son*, 172.

American the moment I touched French soil.”³¹ And so, despite his initial intentions to settle permanently abroad, Baldwin eventually returned home. “If I am part of the American house,” he wrote, “[...] it is because my ancestors paid—*striving to make it my home*—so unimaginable a price: and I have seen some of the effects of that passion everywhere I have been, all over this world. That music is everywhere, resounds, resounds: and tells me that now is the moment, for me, to return to the eye of the hurricane.”³²

As Susan J. McWilliams notes, Baldwin’s choice to return to the United States was, in essence, a decision to “do what [...] no American really wants to do, which is to face himself and the place from whence he came.”³³ Put differently, by becoming a revenant, Baldwin demonstrated his willingness to “come to terms with his Americanness—a fact about himself from which he could not be freed, no matter how far he moved.”³⁴ But Baldwin’s return also reveals that, despite his quarrels with his country, he harbored a deep, unshakable connection to the United States. Baldwin himself admitted this when he wrote, “[America is] a nation that I care the most about—I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”³⁵ His decision to come back thus provides at least some evidence of his exceptionalism: That he, a black man from Harlem, willingly chose to resume his tumultuous American life suggests that at his core, Baldwin truly cherished his homeland.³⁶

³¹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 83.

³² Baldwin, “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone,” 779.

³³ Susan J. McWilliams, “James Baldwin and the Politics of Disconnection,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 102.

³⁴ McWilliams, “James Baldwin and the Politics of Disconnection,” 102.

³⁵ James Baldwin, “Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 159.

³⁶ Of course, Baldwin’s return to the United States does not conclusively prove his exceptionalist orientation—after all, a person can identify with or feel connected to a place without believing that the place is or ought to be exceptional for other people, as well. By highlighting Baldwin’s return to America, then, I merely offer anecdotal evidence of his deep affection for the United States. Later in the chapter, though, I will show that this affection is

This exceptionalism is made more evident in Baldwin's essays and writings. Though he employs exceptionalist tropes less conspicuously than other thinkers in the tradition, Baldwin often makes subtle reference to America's distinctiveness, superiority, and unique responsibilities. He calls the country "peculiar"³⁷ and "unprecedented,"³⁸ and he insists that America's "history, [...] aspirations, [...] and position in the world" are "profoundly and stubbornly unique"³⁹ He also suggests that America is, in some ways, superior to other countries, and he reminds his readers that "we really did conquer a continent; we have made a lot of money; [and] we're better off materially than anybody else in the world."⁴⁰ Baldwin is not, perhaps, as blatantly boastful as other exceptionalists, but he still highlights America's achievements and accomplishments. He even notes (though somewhat reluctantly) that "no other country can afford to dream of a Plymouth and a wife and a house with a fence and the children growing up safely to go to college and to become executives, and then to marry and have the Plymouth and the house and so forth."⁴¹ "A great many people," he acknowledges, "do not live this way and cannot imagine it."⁴²

Baldwin also declares his fidelity to America as a political body and is emphatic that he hopes to reform, rather than eliminate, the country and its institutions. This commitment is

deeper than mere connection or identification and that Baldwin's attachment to and view of the United States does, in fact, rise to the level of exceptionalism.

³⁷ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 3.

³⁸ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 139.

³⁹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 3.

⁴⁰ James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 78.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, "From *Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States*," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 12. Even as he acknowledges these advantages, though, Baldwin recognizes that the dream he describes is not one that is available to black Americans.

⁴² *Ibid.*

particularly apparent in *The Fire Next Time*, where Baldwin recounts an uncomfortable evening he spent with Elijah Muhammad, the then-leader of the Nation of Islam movement. According to Baldwin, Muhammad spent the evening explaining that “the white man was a devil” and that “it [was] the will of Allah that this lost black nation, the black men of this country, be redeemed from their white masters and returned to the true faith, which is Islam.”⁴³ The conversation made Baldwin uneasy. Though sympathetic with Muhammad’s cause (Baldwin admits that “it is not hard for [the Negro] to think of white people as devils”⁴⁴), Baldwin was, ultimately, turned off by the group’s separatist agenda, by “Elijah’s intensity,”⁴⁵ and by “the bitter isolation and disaffection of [the other guests].”⁴⁶ And though Baldwin “really wished to be able to love and honor [Muhammad],” he remained committed to working *with*, rather than against, his white countrymen.⁴⁷ And so, when the meal ended, Baldwin declined Elijah’s invitation to join the separatist movement. “I knew two or three people, white, whom I would trust with my life,” Baldwin recalls, “[b]ut how could I say this? [...] Because of what [Muhammad] conceived as his responsibility and what I took to be mine, we would always be strangers, and possibly, one day, enemies.”⁴⁸

In addition to his affection for and devotion to the United States, Baldwin repeatedly suggests that the United States has an exceptional calling or mission. More specifically, he claims that America has the unique ability to overcome racial categories and that the country is therefore responsible for establishing and modeling a bias-free society. For example, Baldwin

⁴³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 66.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72, 79

argues that “America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color.”⁴⁹ He also insists that America is “the only Western nation with both the power and [...] the experience that may help to make these revolutions real and minimize the human damage.”⁵⁰ He suggests that America has a duty and responsibility to improve itself “for the sake of those who are coming after us,”⁵¹ and he argues that “we are the generation that must throw everything into the endeavor.”⁵² He even predicts that the country’s actions will have global and timeless effects and that “we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”⁵³

I will discuss the substance of this uniquely American role and responsibility in greater detail below. For now, though, I have identified Baldwin’s references to America’s special purpose only to strengthen the central argument of this section—that is, to establish Baldwin is an exceptionalist thinker whose writings are laced with traditional exceptionalist tropes. Indeed, as the foregoing has shown, Baldwin’s words and deeds demonstrate a deep devotion to the United States, a recognition of its superiority, and a belief that it is specially situated to fulfill an important calling or mission. Though he is critical—an aspect I’ll address in the next section—he is clear in his commitment to and affection for the United States. To treat Baldwin as anti-American, then, one must read his work selectively: It is, after all, is hard to view him as an

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵² James Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 41.

⁵³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105.

America-hater when he himself insists that he “love[s] America more than any other country in the world.”⁵⁴

But here, we again face the same question that arose in the previous two chapters: *Why*, exactly, does this thinker believe that America is exceptional? For Frederick Douglass, the answer to this question lay in America’s extreme hypocrisy, its tendency to make, and later disregard, sweeping guarantees. Ralph Waldo Emerson, by contrast, thought America exceptional because it offered unparalleled opportunities for citizens to become self-reliant and experience individual growth. For James Baldwin, though, America’s exceptionalism stems from another source entirely. Baldwin believes America is exceptional because it is a country where things and people are constantly in flux. Baldwin recognizes that this perpetual transition and motion is, in ways, problematic—he suggests, for example, that the country’s lack of fixity is the source of its racial problems. But he also believes this fluidity provides exceptional opportunities for individuals to (re)discover and (re)define themselves, their relationships with others, and their society as a whole.

Though Baldwin repeatedly discusses this distinctive fluidity, he never gives it a name or label. Instead, he uses a variety of terms and descriptors to reference America’s lack of fixity. Sometimes, he calls the phenomenon “rich confusion,”⁵⁵ “possibilities,”⁵⁶ or “chaos.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere, he describes it as “the problem of status”⁵⁸ or “social paranoia.”⁵⁹ Sometimes, he

⁵⁴ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 9.

⁵⁵ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁷ James Baldwin, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 7.

⁵⁸ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

presents it metaphorically—as a “peculiar” but slippery ladder that Americans scramble, desperately, to climb.⁶⁰ And sometimes, he simply explains that, in the United States, “nothing is fixed,”⁶¹ and people “cannot find solid ground beneath their feet.”⁶²

Although his word choice and imagery shift, Baldwin is, in each of these instances, remarking on a common phenomenon—namely, the extreme flexibility of American identities, statuses, values, and relationships. According to Baldwin, America is free from the traditions, bloodlines, and status markers that governed the old world, and Americans are able to (re)define their identities in radical and unprecedented ways.⁶³ As a result, Americans are constantly rising and falling on the great “American social ladder,” and their statuses and roles are perpetually in flux.⁶⁴ This freedom and fluidity is not available in societies with long histories of social stratification, or where individuals have “lived with the idea of status for a long time.”⁶⁵ But in America, “where everyone has status,” people can “reach out to everyone” and are “accessible to everyone and open to everything.”⁶⁶ For Baldwin, this radical flexibility yields “tremendous”⁶⁷ possibilities and makes America a land thick with opportunity.⁶⁸

But this flexibility is not without its drawbacks. Because American identities are constantly in flux, Baldwin believes that American citizens are uniquely and particularly “uneasy

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 133. Baldwin presents the metaphor thus: “One cannot afford to lose status on this peculiar ladder, for the prevailing notion of American life seems to involve a kind of rung-by-rung ascension to some hideously desirable state. If this is one’s concept of life, obviously one cannot afford to slip back one rung. When one slips, one slips back not a rung but back into chaos and no longer knows who he is.” *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 73.

⁶³ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁸ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 88.

as to just what [their] status is.”⁶⁹ Americans are thus exceptionally insecure, and they are perpetually afraid to lose their positions in society. This widespread insecurity is not present in Europe, where “a man can be as proud of being a good waiter as of being a good actor, and, in neither case, feel threatened.”⁷⁰ In the United States, though, “the waiter [...] feel[s], with obscure resentment, that the actor has ‘made it,’ and the actor is [...] tormented by the fear that he may find himself, tomorrow, once again a waiter.”⁷¹ Americans thus live in a sort of “social panic”⁷² and are constantly afraid of losing status, of falling from favor, and of slipping “into [a] chaos [where one] no longer knows who he is.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Baldwin’s remarks on America’s distinctive fluidity are reminiscent of Alexis de Tocqueville, who claims that the culture of equality in America makes citizens particularly insecure about their statuses *vis-à-vis* one another. In Tocqueville’s words:

In nations where the aristocracy dominates society and holds it immobile, the people in the end become habituated to poverty like the rich to their opulence. The latter are not preoccupied with material well-being because they possess it without trouble; the former do not think about it because they despair of acquiring it and because they are not familiar enough with it to desire it. [...]

When, on the contrary, ranks are confused and privileges destroyed, when patrimonies are divided and enlightenment and freedom are spread, the longing to acquire well-being presents itself to the imagination of the poor man, and the fear of losing it, to the rich. A multitude of mediocre fortunes is established. Those who possess them have enough material enjoyments to conceive the taste for these enjoyments and not enough to be content with them. They never get them except with effort, and they indulge in them only while trembling. [...]

I did not encounter a citizen in America so poor that he did not cast a glance of hope and longing on the enjoyments of the rich and whose imagination was not seized in advance by the goods that fate was obstinately refusing him. *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 507.

Elsewhere (in a chapter aptly titled “Why the Americans Show Themselves So Restive in the Midst of Their Well-Being”), Tocqueville articulates the idea thus:

In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition that exists in the world; it seemed to me that a sort of cloud habitually covered their features; they appeared to me grave and almost sad even in their pleasures.

The principal reason for this is that the first do not think of the evils they endure, whereas the others dream constantly of the goods they do not have. [...]

Baldwin argues that Americans have coped with and counteracted this “social paranoia”⁷⁴ by inventing social and political categories—groupings that help orient and ground their otherwise vacillating existence. Of these categories, the most abiding and pernicious are the racial groupings of “white” and “black.” According to Baldwin, these groupings do not refer to inherent or morally significant distinctions but are rather labels invented in response to America’s great “social panic.”⁷⁵ Put differently, “white” and “black” serve only to establish structure in an instable society, to “tell us where the bottom is,” and to show us “where the limits are and how far we must not fall.”⁷⁶ “No one,” Baldwin writes, “was white before he/she came to America.”⁷⁷ And yet, these invented categories govern American life by offering the direction, orientation, and structure that Americans so desperately crave.

Baldwin thus suggests that America’s “Negro problem”⁷⁸ is the direct result of the country’s unique social fluidity, and that Americans need racial categories to counteract their society’s maddening, slippery indefiniteness. But this indefiniteness—the very phenomenon that gives rise to America’s racial problems—has positive effects, too. Although it makes Americans particularly vulnerable to social slippages, the country’s social fluidity also forces Americans to

When all the prerogatives of birth and fortune are destroyed, when all professions are open to all, and when one can reach the summit of each of them by oneself, an immense and easy course seems to open before the ambition of men, and they willingly fancy that they have been called to great destinies. [...]

When inequality is the common law of a society, the strongest inequalities do not strike they eye; when everything is nearly on a level, the least of them wound it. That is why the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater. *Ibid.*, 511-513.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Elsewhere, Baldwin writes, “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.” *The Fire Next Time*, 104.

⁷⁷ James Baldwin, “On Being White ... and Other Lies,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 167.

⁷⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 22.

examine themselves and to “fight for [their] identit[ies].”⁷⁹ And though it makes individuals insecure and paranoid, the nation’s constant undulation “brings [the American], full circle, back to himself, with the responsibility for his development where it always was: in his own hands.”⁸⁰ By constantly threatening individuals’ status and identity, America’s indefiniteness forces citizens to seriously contemplate themselves, their fellow citizens, and their roles within society. It thus offers “unprecedented opportunities”⁸¹ for self-knowledge and forces individuals—Baldwin included—to squarely face “the question of who [they are].”⁸²

More significantly, though, the country’s distinct social fluidity (and its corollary “Negro problem”) provides Americans with the extraordinary opportunity to face, and potentially resolve, the issue of race. As discussed above, Baldwin views racial categories as the direct result of America’s unique social instability. Because of this, Baldwin believes that America is the only country where the “Negro” and the “Negro problem” exist.⁸³ But Baldwin also notes that America’s “Black and white people have lived together [...] for generations, and now for centuries,”⁸⁴ and that the country’s unique social flexibility creates unparalleled opportunities for social reform, change, and redefinition. Though uniquely burdened with racial tensions, then, America is well situated—demographically, historically, and institutionally—to challenge, and potentially reform, racial categories.

⁷⁹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, xii. Baldwin was keenly aware (and somewhat afraid) of these distinct opportunities for self-discovery. Thus, of his decision to return to America, he wrote: “Am I afraid of returning to America? Or am I afraid of journeying any further with myself?” *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁸³ “Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other [country].” Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 25.

⁸⁴ Baldwin, “From *Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States*,” 18.

Baldwin thus suggests that Americans have the opportunity and the social/institutional flexibility to form a society free from racial bias and division. Because American society is uniquely mobile, American citizens are not, like citizens of other nations, “born into a framework which allows them their identity.”⁸⁵ Instead, they must “*achieve* an identity”⁸⁶ and must define, for themselves, their place in the world. Americans thus have “an opportunity which no other nation has” of overcoming pernicious racial and social categories.⁸⁷ If they choose, then, Americans could “create a country in which there are no minorities—for the first time in the history of the world.”⁸⁸

In sum, Baldwin believes that America is exceptional because it is fluid—a country free from the social rules and traditions that govern other nations. But this fluidity cuts two ways. Though it enables individuals to define and construct their own identities, America’s unique flexibility also creates a culture of status paranoia and identity crises. It also gives rise to racial categories and biases, which individuals invent in their desperate desire for definition and stability. Still, Baldwin believes that America’s Janus-faced fluidity is productive, and that it provides unprecedented possibilities for the nation and its citizens to discover themselves and grow in self-knowledge. What is more, this fluidity offers America the unique opportunity to “end the racial nightmare,”⁸⁹ to transcend racial categories, and to “change the history of the

⁸⁵ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 137.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 672.

⁸⁸ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 137.

⁸⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105.

world.”⁹⁰ Baldwin thus views America’s distinctive indefiniteness as the source of the country’s exceptionalism—the reason that “we are the strongest nation in the western world.”⁹¹

II. “A Lover’s War”: Baldwin’s Aspirational Exceptionalism

In the previous section, I explored Baldwin’s exceptionalism and showed that he, like other exceptionalist thinkers, views the United States as chosen, special, and tasked with unique responsibilities. I also discussed the basis for Baldwin’s exceptionalist commitments, and I suggested that his affection for the country is grounded in America’s distinct social fluidity. I noted that Baldwin views this fluidity as both a blessing and a burden: He feels that it provides opportunities for self-definition and growth, but he also recognizes that it yields insecurity, paranoia, and pernicious racial categories. But for precisely this reason—that is, because it simultaneously exacerbates racial tension *and* creates opportunities for growth—Baldwin embraces America’s instability and views it as a productive source of the country’s exceptional calling and potential.

At this point, then, I have established the *what* and *why* of Baldwin’s exceptionalism: I have shown that he qualifies as an exceptionalist thinker, and I have explained why he thinks his country is great. I have not, however, classified or characterized Baldwin’s exceptionalism, nor have I considered his position within the tradition as a whole. In this section, then, I consider the mode and form of Baldwin’s exceptionalist thought. I begin by showing that Baldwin is, in many of his writings, deeply critical of accomplished themes and tropes—he decries, for example, any form of media or discourse that is uncritical, self-celebratory, or complacent. I then provide close readings of two texts—*The Fire Next Time* and the more obscure short essay

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 672.

“We Can Change the Country”—and, in so doing, show that Baldwin utilizes aspirational rhetorical strategies in both his popular and his lesser-known works. I thus offer two reasons for treating Baldwin as an aspirational exceptionalist: his conscious rejection of accomplished exceptionalist strategies *and* his deliberate and thoroughgoing use of aspirational tropes. Taken together, I argue, these rhetorical patterns provide compelling evidence that Baldwin’s exceptionalism is aspirational—a firm but contingent belief that America could be better than it is.

A. Baldwin’s Accomplished Exceptionalism Antipathy

As I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters, aspirational exceptionalist thinkers (including Douglass and Emerson) generally eschew accomplished exceptionalist tropes (self-celebration, historical amnesia, unifying rhetoric, etc.) in favor of more caustic, biting, and provocative rhetorical strategies. Baldwin, however, goes one step further. Rather than merely avoid the accomplished form, he offers pointed, direct criticisms of its tropes and their effects. He does not, in other words, quietly tiptoe around the accomplished tradition but instead engages with and attacks it head-on.

Baldwin’s disapproval of the accomplished exceptionalist form is particularly evident in his literary and film criticism. Consider, for example, his analysis of *The Defiant Ones*. According to Baldwin, the film—which portrays the friendly relationship between two men (one white and one black) who escape from prison together—suggests “that Negroes and whites can learn to love each other if they are only chained together long enough.”⁹² In Baldwin’s assessment, this message “runs so madly counter to the facts that it must be dismissed as one of

⁹² Baldwin, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist,” 5.

the latest, and sickest, of the liberal fantasies.”⁹³ Baldwin further laments that the film is “designed not to trouble, but to reassure” and that its “principal effort is to keep the audience at a safe remove from [...] experience.”⁹⁴ He fears, in other words, that the movie draws too heavily upon accomplished exceptionalism’s tropes of idealization, self-celebration, and self-assurance and that, as a result, it “weaken[s] our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are.”⁹⁵ Baldwin is similarly critical of the accomplished exceptionalist elements that prevail in popular theater. Though some plays pretend to confront racial issues (by casting black actors, by depicting scenes of racial violence, etc.), Baldwin regrets that most do not offer meaningful examination of “the realities of economics, sex, politics, and history.”⁹⁶ Because of this, Baldwin claims, most theater is detrimental to the Negro’s cause: It insists, in true accomplished fashion, that “we’ll get together and everything will be all right”⁹⁷ but declines any opportunity to provoke, challenge, or “instruct through terror and pity.”⁹⁸

Baldwin condemns popular protest novels—literature designed to draw attention to the African American’s plight—for similar reasons. According to Baldwin, protest novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*⁹⁹ and *Native Son*¹⁰⁰ are “far from being disturbing” and are instead “an

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁶ James Baldwin, “Theater: The Negro In and Out,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 22.

⁹⁷ Baldwin, “Theater: The Negro In and Out,” 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ By Harriet Beecher Stowe.

¹⁰⁰ Written by Baldwin’s friend and mentor Richard Wright. In an essay titled “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin famously and controversially critiqued Wright’s book as a “protest novel” and suggested that it, like other popular black novels, pandered to white audiences and presented safe, watered-down accounts of racism in America. Baldwin’s critique infuriated Wright and all but destroyed their friendship. Reminiscing on the incident after Wright’s death, Baldwin recalled:

accepting and comforting [read: accomplished] aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary.”¹⁰¹ The novels do not, in other words, encourage self-reflection or critical thought but instead reinforce the accomplished exceptionalist illusion that the United States is stable, unified, and well on its way to racial equality.¹⁰² Because these books address their dark subject matter only cursorily—“whatever unsettling questions are raised,” Baldwin writes, “are evanescent, titillating; remote”¹⁰³—they are ultimately self-celebratory and self-assuring. They leave readers with “a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all”¹⁰⁴ but also imply that reading, alone, is enough. Like all accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric, then, such protest novels do not spur people to action. Instead, they leave readers feeling confident and assured that eventually (and without any further effort or action), “everything will be all right.”¹⁰⁵

I [...] wrote [...] the essay called “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” On the day the magazine was published, and before I had seen it, I walked into the Brasserie Lipp. Richard was there, and he called me over. I will never forget that interview, but I doubt I will ever be able to re-create it.

Richard accused me of having betrayed him, and not only him but all American Negroes by attacking the idea of protest literature. [...] Richard thought that I was trying to destroy his novel and his reputation; but it had not entered my mind that either of these *could* be destroyed, and certainly not by me. [...] This quarrel was never really patched up, though it must be said that, over a period of years, we tried. “What do you mean, *protest!*” Richard cried. “*All* literature is protest. You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest.” To this I could only weakly counter that all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature.

Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 196-197. For Baldwin’s critique of *Native Son*, see “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, 13-23.

¹⁰¹ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 19.

¹⁰² Baldwin lambasts Ross Lockridge, Jr.’s novel *Raintree Country* for exactly this reason—because it elides individual differences and pretends that the United States is a unified, un-fractured whole. “*Raintree Country*,” Baldwin writes disapprovingly, “is nothing if not affirmative. It elects to weld into an inviolable unity these Sprawling United States. [...] In encompassing this aim, Mr. Lockridge makes it apparent that he loves his country; and it becomes apparent that he doesn’t really understand it and that he is disturbed.” “Lockridge: ‘The American Myth,’” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 592.

¹⁰³ Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

In addition to criticizing the accomplished exceptionalist tropes that prevail in popular literature, cinema, and theater, Baldwin condemns the complacent and self-assured orientations that predominate in America's political sphere. He regularly accuses Americans of ignoring painful truths, and he insists that most citizens cling to pleasant and idealized illusions rather than confront unpleasant facts about their political lives. He also suggests that Americans have "striking addiction to irreality,"¹⁰⁶ and that they are "ignorant of [their] history and enslaved by a myth."¹⁰⁷ In Baldwin's assessment, Americans are uncritical and self-celebratory and are, like the protest plays and novels described above, "unbelievably ignorant concerning what goes on in [their] country."¹⁰⁸ He thus laments that America is a thoroughly accomplished exceptionalist environment—"a country that has told itself so many lies about its history that, in sober fact, has yet to excavate its history from the rubble of romance."¹⁰⁹

Baldwin is thus explicit in his condemnation of accomplished exceptionalism. He consistently lambasts the authors, playwrights, and directors who adopt its self-celebratory and conciliatory tone, and he denounces any work that denies the "gulf between our dream and the realities we live with."¹¹⁰ He also berates authors, politicians, and rhetoricians who offer only "the usual, superficial sunlight,"¹¹¹ and he chastises those who "exploit[] every possible device to explain away all contradictions."¹¹² Baldwin laments the accomplished tendency to offer "easy

¹⁰⁶ James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 702.

¹⁰⁷ James Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 637.

¹⁰⁸ Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 699.

¹⁰⁹ Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," 629.

¹¹⁰ Baldwin, "Lockridge: 'The American Myth,'" 593.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 591.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

comfort,”¹¹³ and he regrets that “we live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up.”¹¹⁴ He is, in sum, thoroughly disgusted with the accomplished exceptionalist mode and despises its “perpetual insistence that darkness is not possible; or, at any rate, not possible in America, ‘the last best hope of earth.’”¹¹⁵

B. Aspirational Tropes in *The Fire Next Time*

These thoroughgoing critiques of accomplished rhetoric provide a strong indication that Baldwin is not, and did not intend to be, an accomplished exceptionalist.

This is further revealed through Baldwin’s own rhetorical choices, because, like Douglass and Emerson, Baldwin regularly and deliberately eschews accomplished strategies in favor of aspirational exceptionalist tropes: criticism, exposure, harsh language, hope, and the like.

1. Structural Aspirational Exceptionalism

Though these aspirational themes are present in many (if not most) of Baldwin’s writings, they are especially obvious in the bestselling book *The Fire Next Time*. Before analyzing the book’s aspirational rhetoric, though, I offer some brief comments on its structure and organization. Structurally, *Fire* is arranged in two parts: the first, a letter from Baldwin to his nephew; the second, a narrative account of Baldwin’s adolescence and a re-telling of his encounter with Elijah Muhammad. Thus organized, *Fire* marks a departure from the more typical, ternary aspirational form—it does not, like Douglass’ and Emerson’s works, move from praise, to criticism, to hope. Still, the book seems deliberately arranged to enhance Baldwin’s

¹¹³ The quotation come from Baldwin’s essay titled “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” in which Baldwin praises King’s willingness to speak hard truths, articulate cutting criticism, and otherwise deviate from accomplished exceptionalist norms. In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 644.

¹¹⁴ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 36.

¹¹⁵ Baldwin, “Lockridge: ‘The American Myth,’” 591.

aspirational tone, and both of its sections reinforce, in unique ways, its broader aspirational agenda.

The book's first section, Baldwin's letter to his nephew, lays the groundwork for this aspirational project by establishing that the United States is flawed and fractured—that is, that it has something to aspire *towards*. The letter highlights this room for improvement in two ways. First, it reveals the deep cleavages that separate Baldwin (and his nephew) from the white reader. Consistent with epistolary convention, the letter is addressed from one speaker (Baldwin) to one recipient (Baldwin's nephew). It is, in other words, a personal conversation, and is intended (at least ostensibly) for Baldwin's nephew alone. The letter is thus deeply intimate: In it, Baldwin addresses his nephew affectionately (as “old buddy”¹¹⁶), describes their deep family ties (“I have known both [you and your Daddy] all your lives”¹¹⁷), and candidly describes the challenging life of an American black man. It also contains personalized encouragement and advice (“T[]rust your experience”¹¹⁸; “[T]his is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it.”¹¹⁹)—counsel Baldwin might not have included in a more public communiqué.

In the book's first section, then, Baldwin makes the reader privy to a personal conversation and publicizes an otherwise tender and intimate exchange. Ironically, this transparency does not leave the reader feeling like part of Baldwin's intimate circle but instead produces the uncomfortable sensation that one is intruding, listening to a conversation that was

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

not intended to be overheard.¹²⁰ This, in turn, provokes feelings of shame and guilt and reminds the white reader that, no matter how sympathetic she might be, she is separate from Baldwin and his experiences. By granting access to this private communication, then, Baldwin puts the reader on edge and reminds his audience that America is a fractured polity—a place where even the most willing and sympathetic citizens are deeply divided from one another.

In addition to highlighting the distance between author and reader—and, by extension, between ordinary American citizens—the opening epistle establishes America’s fallen (and therefore improvable) state by denying the reader any opportunity to construct or challenge Baldwin’s narrative. As literary theorist Monika Fludernik explains, letters are generally used to convey objective information and have, historically, “served as petitions or concentrated on conveying news, asked for information, and facilitated business transactions.”¹²¹ Letters thus “len[d] a seriousness and a moral context,” and readers generally view them as legitimate (even indisputable) sources of political, legal, and/or economic news.¹²² Because of this, readers are less likely to engage with or challenge information presented in epistolary format. Instead, they instinctually view letters as conveying accurate, realistic information that is not open to discussion or debate.¹²³

¹²⁰ But of course, the letter *is* meant to be overheard—Baldwin includes it in his book, after all! But pretending that the communication is meant only for his nephew enables Baldwin to shame his white readers and to highlight the separation and distance between them and himself.

¹²¹ Monika Fludernik, “Letters as Narrative,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2010), 277.

¹²² Thomas O. Beebee, “Epistolary Novel,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2010), 141.

¹²³ We might understand letters as a form of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “authoritative discourse.” According to Bakhtin, authoritative discourse is language backed by authority that we have “already *acknowledged*.” It is thus unquestioned (even unquestionable) and its meaning and authenticity is established and complete. Authoritative discourse “demands our unconditional allegiance” and “permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it.” Instead, it “enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it.”

This is certainly true of Baldwin's opening epistle. Because it comprises the book's first ten pages, the letter does much to set the stage for Baldwin's later critiques: it introduces the relevant characters (whites, blacks), explains the country's problems (willful ignorance, social insecurity), and describes its primary conflicts (racial oppression, social tension, etc.). And because it is formatted as a letter (and not, as other parts of the book, a first person narrative), it presents itself as an accurate representation of true fact. Readers are thus expected to take its contents at face-value and to view it as an objective portrayal of reality. They are also reminded that, even if they *do* have doubts or objections, it is not their place to articulate them: The letter is, after all, addressed directly to Baldwin's nephew, and the reader is not invited to add to or subtract from the story. Through the introductory letter, then, Baldwin crafts his narrative world (or, to use legal terminology, establishes the facts of his record) without input from white readers, who, if given the opportunity, might object that America has no such problems. The letter thus allows Baldwin to definitively establish the country's fallen state and to show, without disputation, that there is room (and a pressing need) for America to become better.

If the book's first section embodies the expository and critical components of aspirational exceptionalism, the second (a description of Baldwin's childhood and later encounter with Elijah Muhammad) illustrates its more affirmative and inclusive features. Like Baldwin's letter, the second section is critical and expository—it draws attention to and critiques America's fractures and flaws. Unlike the letter, though, this section is addressed to a broad audience and is written

"Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 683.

As examples of authoritative discourse, Bakhtin cites religious dogma, acknowledged scientific truths, and currently fashionable books. Because letters are often perceived as objective communications about settled truth, they, too, might be considered a form of authoritative discourse.

in narrative form.¹²⁴ Rather than speak directly to his nephew, Baldwin here recounts his experiences for any who might be reading. And so, Baldwin addresses his readers directly—both individually (as “you”) and as part of a collective whole (e.g., “We, the black and the white, deeply need each other...”¹²⁵). He also uses hypothetical questions (e.g., “How can one respect [...] the values of a people who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they should?”¹²⁶) and imperative commands (e.g., “You must consider what happens to this citizen, after all he has endured, when he returns—home”¹²⁷) to invite the reader’s contemplation and participation. Gone, then, is any sense of intrusion or eavesdropping: Because this narrative is crafted for *all* readers, there is now space for any and all who want to listen.

Baldwin’s shift from letter to narrative format is significant because, as narrative theorists have long observed, the narrative genre is inherently more inclusive than other modes of communication. Unlike more authoritative texts, narrative invites readers to engage with the story, to empathize (or not) with characters, and to assess the events and actions. It thus encourages critical evaluation and, as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, forces readers “into an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses.”¹²⁸ Recent studies on narrative and psychology have confirmed this, and have demonstrated that readers feel more included and

¹²⁴ Again, both the letter and the narrative are, ultimately, addressed to the same readership. However, Baldwin at least pretends as if the letter is intended only for his nephew (and, in so doing, draws attention to the cleavages that divide American society—see note 116-120 and accompanying text, above). The narrative, by contrast, he explicitly opens to all willing readers.

¹²⁵ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 97.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹²⁸ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 685.

empathetic when engaged with narrative texts.¹²⁹ David S. Miall, for example, has suggested that narratives provoke self-reflection, invite interpretation, and prompt judgment.¹³⁰ Franziska Hartung et al. have similarly argued that “stories, as compared to non-narrative texts, often cause the reader to get immersed into the story,” to undergo “mental stimulation,” and to experience “mental imagery, emotional engagement with protagonists, transportation into the story world, and attention during reading.”¹³¹

In moving from letter to narrative, then, Baldwin shifts from exclusivity to inclusivity, and from didacticism to dialogue. Baldwin no longer expects his reader to unquestioningly accept his account of American society but instead creates space for the reader—who, as discussed above, he addresses directly—to engage with and interpret his work. He uses hypothetical questions and imperative commands to invite readers to participate as co-creators of meaning,¹³² and he acknowledges their ability and need to shape, empathize with, and interpret the information he presents. If the first section stripped readers of their participation and voice, the second allows audiences to assess, judge, and interact with Baldwin’s words. The narrative thus embodies aspirational exceptionalism’s hopeful and inclusive components: it reaffirms Baldwin’s respect for his fellow Americans and reflects his belief that they, like he, are (or, at least, could be) capable of moral judgment and action.

¹²⁹ For a discussion of the ways narrative storytelling generates empathy in its readers, see Suzanne Keene, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (Oct. 2006): 207-236. See also Amy Coplan, “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 141-152.

¹³⁰ David S. Miall, “Emotions and the Structuring of Narrative Responses,” *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 323-348. This article offers an excellent literature review on the ways narrative affects feeling.

¹³¹ Franziska Hartung et al., “Taking Perspective: Personal Pronouns Affect Experiential Aspects of Literary Reading,” *PLoS ONE* (May 18, 2016): e0154732. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0154732>.

¹³² See notes 124-27 and accompanying text, above.

Taken as a whole, then, the book's structure captures and reaffirms the key elements of aspirational exceptionalism: critique, exposure, and hope. By leading with an exclusive, private letter, Baldwin highlights America's flaws and reveals its deep divisions. But by later transitioning to a first person narrative, he indicates that, despite his criticisms, he respects his audience's participation and capacity for rational judgment. In arrangement, then, the book is at once critical, expository, *and* optimistic. Its structure thus reflects all aspects of Baldwin's aspirational exceptionalist orientation.

2. Substantive Aspirational Exceptionalism

In addition to these strategic organizational decisions, Baldwin establishes his aspirational perspective through frequent use of aspirational tropes. Like Douglass and Emerson, Baldwin is shockingly revelatory and eager to highlight America's dark, fractured underbelly. And so, in the opening pages of the book, Baldwin confesses that he intends to "force [his] brothers to see themselves as they really are" and to help them "cease fleeing from reality."¹³³ Baldwin executes this project of exposure by drawing attention to three distinct features of American life. First, and most fundamentally, Baldwin highlights the vast sociopolitical chasm separating white and black Americans. Rather than pretend that the two races coexist peacefully, Baldwin offers vivid descriptions of the many ways white people abuse and oppress their black countrymen.¹³⁴ But Baldwin also admits (somewhat disapprovingly) that many black Americans view "all white men [as] devils"¹³⁵ and that he does "not know many Negroes who are eager to

¹³³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 10.

¹³⁴ For example, Baldwin describes "being spat on" and recalls being humiliated by white police officers who publicly addressed him using racial slurs. *Ibid.*, 24, 19. He also insists that "the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes" was so bad that "one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account. One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear." *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

be ‘accepted’ by white people, still less to be loved by them.”¹³⁶ Baldwin thus presents whites and blacks as two distinct camps, and he suggests that both groups intentionally distance themselves from one another.

Baldwin further highlights America’s racial cleavages by analyzing the ways whites and blacks threaten one another. Throughout the book, Baldwin describes various incidents of racial violence and, in so doing, demonstrates that whites pose a real and obvious threat to black people’s physical well-being.¹³⁷ But Baldwin also notes that blacks endanger white status and identity, and that “the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world’s definitions.”¹³⁸ If blacks are afraid of white men because they “simply don’t wish to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant,”¹³⁹ then white men are equally afraid of losing “their lives, their self-image, or their property.”¹⁴⁰ The two races are thus mutually threatening to—and threatened by—one another, which makes their relationship one of discord and division.

Second, Baldwin uses exclamation, hyperbole, and vivid imagery to expose the grim realities of life in black America. Though he insists that “there has been almost no language [...] for the horrors of the American Negro’s life,”¹⁴¹ Baldwin nonetheless attempts to portray the brutal and unforgiving existence that African Americans endure. To this end, he recounts his own, harrowing childhood experiences in Harlem. Sparing no detail, Baldwin describes “wine-

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁷ Baldwin recalls, for example, that in Harlem, “it was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it.” *The Fire Next Time*, 21. He also says that it was not uncommon for white police officers to “frisk[]” him and “leav[e] [him] flat on [his] back in one of Harlem’s empty lots.” *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

stained and urine-splashed hallway[s],” “clanging ambulance bell[s],” “knife and pistol fight[s],” and young men being “blown into eternity by [their] own hand[s].”¹⁴² He recalls police whippings, oppression, and “incessant and gratuitous humiliation,”¹⁴³ and he notes that “everyone [...]—housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers—would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use [him] as an outlet for [their] frustrations and hostilities.”¹⁴⁴ Rather than conceal or sugarcoat the circumstances of his upbringing, then, Baldwin thrusts this grim reality before his reader’s gaze and insists that “the brutality with which Negroes are treated in this country simply cannot be overstated.”¹⁴⁵ He thus forces readers to confront the bleak realities of African American life and reminds them that the country they imagine—unified, united, and free from conflict or turmoil—is in fact “entirely hostile.”¹⁴⁶

Baldwin also highlights black Americans’ bleak existence through strategic use of the imperative mood. According to Baldwin, Americans are remarkably uncomfortable with self-examination, and they willfully ignore unflattering truths about themselves and their country. To counteract this tendency, Baldwin adopts the imperative mood—a rhetorical strategy that makes it difficult for his listeners to disregard, twist, or dismiss his words. In one particularly forceful passage, for example, Baldwin describes several scenarios that black citizens routinely encounter: employment discrimination, income inequality, segregated facilities, and the like. He

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

then instructs his audience to “consider,”¹⁴⁷ “search,” and “see”¹⁴⁸ those scenarios and to imagine how they might impact the American Negro. “Search,” Baldwin implores, “in [the Negro’s] shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on the segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying ‘White’ and ‘Colored’ [...]; [and] listen, with his ears, to political speeches.”¹⁴⁹ Baldwin surely recognizes that white Americans will never fully understand how these scenarios impact the lives of their black countrymen, but by forcing his audience’s attention through these active, imperative commands, he hopes, at least, to compel some recognition.

Third, Baldwin exposes the structural and social barriers that limit opportunity for black Americans. In his opening letter to his nephew, Baldwin candidly explains that black lives are always already restricted, and that there is no room in American society for black advancement or growth. In Baldwin’s words, “You [i.e., his nephew and all black Americans] were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.”¹⁵⁰ Baldwin reiterates this point by describing his own childhood ambitions and by recalling “the fear that I heard in my father’s voice [...] when he realized that I really *believed* I could do anything a white boy could do.”¹⁵¹ Rather than perpetuate the illusion that anybody can become anything in America, Baldwin repeatedly reminds his audience of the many social and political constraints that limit black opportunity. He thus exposes cracks in the

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

great American dream and demonstrates that “[his] fate [like that of all black Americans] [has] been sealed forever, from the beginning of time.”¹⁵²

Like a true aspirational exceptionalist, then, Baldwin rejects the fiction that America is a united, undivided whole and instead reveals country’s racial cleavages, highlights its mistreatment of blacks, and exposes the damning barriers that limit African American opportunity. Baldwin also draws heavily on the aspirational trope of critique and, like Emerson and Douglass, demonstrates his willingness to condemn the country’s flaws. Baldwin insists, for example, that the “the American republic has never become sufficiently mature”¹⁵³ and that the country is too cowardly to undertake any meaningful change.¹⁵⁴ He also lambasts America’s “slothful”¹⁵⁵ and “deluded”¹⁵⁶ citizens and accuses them of “tak[ing] no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country.”¹⁵⁷ Baldwin decries “the sloppy and fatuous nature of American good will,” and he suggests that Americans “can never be relied upon to deal with hard problems.”¹⁵⁸ He also complains that the “American dream has [...] become something much more closely resembling a nightmare”¹⁵⁹ and he rues that “we are an unmitigated disaster.”¹⁶⁰

Like Douglass, Baldwin is also critical of American Christianity. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) his religious upbringing, Baldwin is keenly aware of and troubled by the church’s

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵⁴ He repeatedly refers to “our fear of change.” *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

flaws and foibles. He thus repeatedly complains of Christian hypocrisy and critiques the church for drifting from its doctrinal foundations. Baldwin asserts, for example, that “in the realm of morals the role of Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent,”¹⁶¹ and he accuses the Church of “prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies.”¹⁶² He also shares Douglass’ belief that Christians do not practice what they profess, and he claims, “[T]hough I would love to believe that the principles [of the church] [are] Faith, Hope, and Charity, [...] this is clearly not so for most Christians.”¹⁶³ Baldwin observes, with disgust, that Christian ministers “eventually acquire[] houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate.”¹⁶⁴ He thus concludes that “there [is] no love in the church”¹⁶⁵ and that Christianity is no more than “a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair.”¹⁶⁶

Above all, though, Baldwin critiques America’s tendency to shield itself from any unpleasant or inconvenient truths. According to Baldwin, white Americans “do not dare examine”¹⁶⁷ their lives and “take no responsibility”¹⁶⁸ for the country or its challenges. Instead, they perpetually “flee[] from reality”¹⁶⁹ and ignore facts that reflect poorly on their country or character. Though they “have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands lives,” they continue to deny the country’s racist past, because they “do not know it and do not want to know

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31. For a discussion of Douglass’ views on America’s religious hypocrisy, see Chapter 1, Section II.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

it.”¹⁷⁰ They also pretend that black Americans do not exist, because “a knowledge of the role [blacks] played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know.”¹⁷¹

Baldwin lambasts his white countrymen for this willful ignorance and condemns them for their naïve and stubborn insistence that United States is, and will always be, alright. He also accuses whites of tokenism and reproves them for interpreting even the smallest egalitarian gestures as proof their progress and enlightenment. Baldwin notes, for example, that “white Americans congratulate themselves on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the schools” and “suppose, in spite of the mountain of evidence that has since accumulated to the contrary, that this was proof of a change of heart—or, as they like to say, progress.”¹⁷² He chides his white countrymen for their selfish appropriation of this decision and claims that whites’ celebration of *Brown v. Board of Education* is, in fact, no more than a persistent refusal to “accept [them]selves as [they] are.”¹⁷³

Baldwin thus condemns his country’s deliberate lack of self-awareness and prods the white man for his “profound desire [...] not to be seen as he is.”¹⁷⁴ He also warns that the country’s culture of disavowal has damned, and will continue to damn, American progress. “In order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world,” Baldwin cautions, “America and all the Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101. For a helpful discussion of this “willful not-seeing and disclaiming of responsibility,” see Shulman, “Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics,” 151-160.

¹⁷² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 86.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long.”¹⁷⁵ Put more simply, unless white Americans recognize and take responsibility for their actions, and unless they are willing to be “in fruitful communion with the depths of [their] own being[s],” the country cannot, and will not, “achieve [its] identity, [its] maturity.”¹⁷⁶

This forceful warning is not the only one Baldwin issues, because he, like other aspirational exceptionalists, draws heavily on the trope of caution and admonition. Like Douglass, who warned that slavery would lead to America’s “irrecoverable ruin,”¹⁷⁷ Baldwin insists that America’s refusal to acknowledge and accept its black members will “condemn [the country], with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay.”¹⁷⁸ And like Emerson, who predicts that slavery will corrupt the nation’s morals and values,¹⁷⁹ Baldwin warns that America’s racial oppression will result in extermination, murder, and moral bankruptcy.¹⁸⁰ Baldwin predicts that “a bill is coming in that [...] America is not prepared to pay,”¹⁸¹ and he warns that America’s response (or lack thereof) to its racial problems will, ultimately, determine whether the country survives or fails.¹⁸² And in his final sentence—the line that lends the book its title—Baldwin ominously predicts that, “if we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷⁷ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 54.

¹⁷⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 93.

¹⁷⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” in *Emerson Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148.

¹⁸⁰ Baldwin observes, bleakly, that “we have the power to exterminate ourselves.” *The Fire Next Time*, 57. He also claims that, as a rule, racial oppression always leads to murder. *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁸² “[The black man],” Baldwin writes, “is *the* key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or dark as his.” *Ibid.*, 94.

created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*"¹⁸³

Of all Baldwin's warnings, though, the most jolting is his suggestion that the United States could, if it is not careful, end up like Nazi Germany. According to Baldwin, "the glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—has always been and always will be a recipe for murder."¹⁸⁴ Because such glorification and debasement is a defining feature of American life, Baldwin fears that "the fate of the Jews, and the world's indifference to it [...] [could] be [his] portion on the day that the United States decide[s] to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little and catch-as-catch-can."¹⁸⁵ Sensing, perhaps, that this forceful prediction might be uncomfortably provocative, Baldwin quickly asserts that he has been "authoritatively assured that what [...] happened to the Jews in Germany could not happen to the Negroes in America."¹⁸⁶ But then, just as quickly, Baldwin reopens his bleak warning by musing that "the German Jews [...] probably believed similar counsellors" and that he cannot, as much as he would like to, "share the white man's vision of himself."¹⁸⁷ Although Baldwin hedges for a moment, then, he ultimately delivers a warning that is as clear as it is shocking: If the United States does not change its ways, there is a very real chance that it will replicate the horrors of holocaust.

Despite these dire predictions and caustic critiques, though, Baldwin retains an aspirational hope for America's future. In fact, as early as the book's tenth page, he articulates

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

his firm conviction that “we can make America what America must become.”¹⁸⁸ This same hopeful optimism persists throughout the work. Though Baldwin acknowledges that the nation faces daunting obstacles, he takes great faith in knowing that a few white people “[are] struggling as hard as they [know] how, and with great effort and sweat and risk, to make the world more human.”¹⁸⁹ And though he is perpetually disappointed in America’s callousness, hypocrisy, and willful blindness, he remains hopeful “that people can be better than they are.”¹⁹⁰ Baldwin is acutely and painfully aware that America can fail (and has, thus far, persistently failed) to live up to its founding principles, but he also believes the country “capable of bearing a great burden.”¹⁹¹ He is hopeful, then, that America can overcome its racial challenges and that its citizens, if they choose to do so, can “change the history of the world.”¹⁹²

Ultimately, this hope stems from the very fact that gave rise to Baldwin’s exceptionalism in the first place—that is, from his recognition that the United States is exceptionally flexible. In fact, Baldwin is explicit that he believes in America’s future precisely because the country possesses the social and political fluidity requisite for reform. Consider, for example, Baldwin’s recipe for national progress. According to Baldwin, the nation can only improve if it is “able and willing to change,”¹⁹³ if it is willing to “re-examine [...] everything white Americans think they believe in,”¹⁹⁴ and if it accepts that “the price of [its] transformation is the unconditional freedom

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

of the Negro.”¹⁹⁵ This, of course, is a tall order (Baldwin even admits, “I know what I’m asking is impossible”¹⁹⁶), but if it can be accomplished anywhere, it will be in the United States—a country where people, attitudes, and traditions can and do change. Because Baldwin sees America as a land of radical social, political, and institutional fluidity, then, he is confident that the country is poised to execute the transformative self-examination that will be necessary for progress. He believes, in other words, in “the perpetual achievement of the impossible,”¹⁹⁷ and he is certain that if America will embrace its unique flexibility (instead of “envy[ing] those more civilized and elegant European nations that were untroubled by the presence of black men on their shores”¹⁹⁸), it will be able to re-examine its traditions, reform its social and political categories, and ultimately “prove the uselessness and the obsolescence” of racial categories.¹⁹⁹

C. Aspirational Tropes in “We Can Change the Country”

The Fire Next Time is thus thoroughly aspirational—a condemnation of America’s flaws, an exposure of its cleavages, and a celebration of its unparalleled flexibility and potential. These same aspirational features—exposure, critique, warning, and hope—are also present in Baldwin’s oft-overlooked essay “We Can Change the Country,” which was published in the New Left journal *Liberation* in October of 1963.²⁰⁰ I have selected the piece because it is, in many ways, the antithesis of *Fire*: it is short (only six pages long) and, unlike *Fire*, is relatively

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ James Baldwin, “We Can Change the Country,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 59-64. *Liberation* was founded by A.J. Muste and Dave Dellinger in 1956 and was published in New York City on a monthly basis. It was the first publication to carry the full text of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

unknown and under-studied. But like *The Fire Next Time*, “Country” is laden with aspirational tropes and is an emblematic articulation of Baldwin’s exceptionalism. “Country” thus provides unique insight into the depth of Baldwin’s aspirational commitments and reveals that his exceptionalism permeates even his most obscure and lesser-known works.

Because “Country” is only six pages long, it is structurally unremarkable (aside, perhaps, from the fact that it opens directly with critique). But like *The Fire Next Time*, the essay draws heavily on aspirational tropes and techniques. To begin, “Country” is deeply expository and revelatory. In its six short pages, Baldwin offers dry and matter-of-fact descriptions of black citizens’ subjugation and describes blatant segregation in the Jim Crow South,²⁰¹ subtle discrimination in the North,²⁰² and overt acts of racial violence.²⁰³ He also attacks the various fictions and illusions that whites use to justify their privileged place, and he candidly describes scenarios that white Americans might otherwise prefer not to think about. Baldwin notes, for example, that “our government and most of our citizens” believe he, a black man, is “happy in my place and that I love[] doing all that singing and dancing,” when in reality, “not for a moment does any black man [...] believe that he really [is] what the country [says] he [is].”²⁰⁴ He also insists that New York, the pride of the North, is in fact “a segregated city,” and that the

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰² *Ibid.* He does this by comparing it to the North, which is equally (but less blatantly) segregated. “The North,” he writes, “has prided itself on not being like the Southern racists. In the North they don’t have signs up saying ‘white’ and ‘colored.’ No one tells you where you can and cannot go. In the North, you have to find that out day by day, by what we call trial and error.” *Ibid.*

²⁰³ He writes, “The moment you go anywhere near what The Man is really concerned about—I mean his pocketbook—what happened in Birmingham happens in New York.” *Ibid.* He also observes, “If I had done one-tenth of what General Edwin Walker has done in Mississippi, if I had been inciting a mob to murder children, I would be in jail.” *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

American justice system—which punishes civil rights activists like Robert Williams²⁰⁵ but “pretends it has no right to arrest Governor Wallace”²⁰⁶—is overtly and blatantly racist.

Baldwin also insists that, despite its proclamations to the contrary, “[America] is not a free country.”²⁰⁷ To demonstrate this, he offers a long and revealing description of a predominantly black neighborhood. He writes:

If you doubt me, when you leave here, walk or ride up to 125th Street and walk through those streets and ask yourself what you’d feel like if you lived there, why you lived there if you did, and why it looks like a concentration camp.²⁰⁸ I mean the police walking two by two and three by three. Ask yourself what chances you would have, if you lived there, to get theft or fire or life insurance. Now this, as I said, is not an act of God. It is an act of the nation, and it began not quite a hundred years ago when the North signed a bargain with the South: they would take me out of the cotton fields and lift me over to the factories, where I’ve been ever since. If you doubt me, check it out with your labor unions. Ask yourself why the Puerto Ricans and the Negroes are pushing carts in the Garment Center and nobody else.²⁰⁹

Through these vivid details, Baldwin exposes a deeply and fundamentally fractured polis and shows that America is a land of profound social, economic, and racial cleavages. In so doing, he forces white Americans to confront truths that most would prefer to deny. Baldwin does not, then, permit his listeners to cling to the comfortable illusion that theirs is a united, undivided

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63. A prominent civil rights activist who presided over the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP during the 1950s. Williams controversially advocated for armed black self-defense and was a vocal critic of non-violent civil rights activism.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* A prominent segregationist who served four terms (16 years) as governor of Alabama. Wallace’s first inaugural speech infamously included the line: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” “The Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace,” January 14, 1963, transcript <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/2952>.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰⁸ Here again the comparison to a concentration camp is significant. Baldwin’s white readers may have been unable (or unwilling) to acknowledge the divisions in their own society, but they were certainly aware of—and mortified by—the blatant discrimination in Nazi Germany. What better way, then, to expose a fragmented society than by likening New York’s black neighborhoods to Hitler’s segregated camps?

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

society. Instead, he displays the country's cuts and cleavages and discredits the pledge's claim that America is "one Nation under God, indivisible."

In addition to revealing these broad divisions within American society, Baldwin highlights the more intimate differences between himself and his readers. He does this, in part, by drawing attention physical characteristics that separate him from white readers (e.g., his "broad nose, big lips, and kinky hair"²¹⁰). He also highlights this distance by deliberately using the first and second person points of view. In many of his other essays, Baldwin describes conditions in American from a general, third person perspective—he refers to "white Americans" and "black Americans" but does not assign himself or his reader to either group.²¹¹ In "Country," though, he draws a sharp distinction between author and reader by referring to his audience using the direct and informal "you." Rather than allow readers to decide which group, black or white, they prefer to sympathize with, Baldwin places all his readers in this separate "you" category, which he positions apart from—and in opposition to—himself. He then repeatedly gestures toward this division—saying things like, "If you know what *you* want, then you know what *I* want"²¹²—to reaffirm the distance between his reader and himself. If this deliberate distancing seems accusatory (as it does when Baldwin writes, "I [...] do not bring down property values when I move in. You bring them down when you move out."²¹³), this is because Baldwin intends, through his grammatical choices, to expose an intimate and immediate rift—one that firmly separates *this* author from *this* reader.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹¹ With a few small exceptions, this is the point of view Baldwin uses in *The Fire Next Time*: he describes a grand drama unfolding between two groups, whites and blacks, but allows his reader to identify with or self-select into either group.

²¹² Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country," 60.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Baldwin thus uses multiple strategies to expose America's internal divisions and flaws: he offers unpleasant descriptions, challenges popular illusions, and employs the second person to highlight the distance between himself and his readers. In addition, Baldwin draws heavily on the aspirational trope of critique. As in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin is, throughout "Country," deeply critical of America and its politics. In fact, he begins the essay by insisting that Americans not celebrate Christmas, because "we have lost the right—by the murder of our brothers and sisters—to be called a Christian nation."²¹⁴ Like Douglass, who condemns Americans' religious hypocrisy, Baldwin alleges that "this Christian nation may never have read any of the Gospels, but they do understand money."²¹⁵ He also accuses America of ethical bankruptcy and insists that "morally, this nation should be, for the foreseeable future, in mourning."²¹⁶

Baldwin also levies criticisms at America's political representatives and institutions. According to Baldwin, Americans are constantly "victimized by [...] the Republican and Democratic parties,"²¹⁷ which he calls "sordid political machines."²¹⁸ Baldwin further claims that the country is led by biased, twisted politicians who "insist[] on representing a handful of nostalgic Southern colonels"²¹⁹ but who fail to protect the common interest. Baldwin condemns these representatives for "continually betray[ing] twenty million citizens,"²²⁰ and he scoffs at

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

their “pathetic” and perpetual insistence that they “have no right to act.”²²¹ “It is time,” Baldwin writes, “to serve notice on our representatives that they are under the obligation to represent us [...]. If they can invade Cuba, they can act.”²²²

Lastly, Baldwin criticizes America’s laws and justice system, which he claims are profoundly and overtly corrupt. According to Baldwin, America’s law enforcement officers are in bed with its white supremacists and would rather “stay at the homes of the people who did the bombings” than actually investigate hate crimes.²²³ What is more, such officers apply the law selectively and inconsistently and jail some protesters (black) while leaving others (white) uncharged. “If I had done one-tenth of what General Edwin Walker has done in Mississippi,” Baldwin chides, “I would be in jail.”²²⁴ That Walker is instead free—and “probably working in the Justice Department”²²⁵—is, for Baldwin, damning proof of the legal system’s racist partiality.

In addition to these critiques, Baldwin offers a series of aspirational cautions and warnings. As he did in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin predicts that America’s racial problems present a “terrifying crisis”²²⁶ and will, if unresolved, lead to turmoil and destruction. Baldwin further warns that “if we don’t now do everything in our power to change this country, this country will turn out to be [...] so tangled and so trapped and so immobilized by its interior dissension that it can’t do anything else.”²²⁷ Baldwin thus predicts that Americans have two

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* A right-wing political activist and former military general who was arrested—but subsequently released—for inciting riots at the University of Mississippi after the school admitted a black student.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

choices: “We will learn to live together here or all of us will abruptly stop living.”²²⁸ America can, in other words, abandon its racist ways, or it can continue on its collision course toward devastation and ruin. If the country takes this latter path, Baldwin foresees the “murder—and please remember there are several million ways to murder—of future children.”²²⁹ Without profound changes, then, Baldwin predicts that America’s “future is going to be worse than the past.”²³⁰

Despite these bleak warnings, however, Baldwin is hopeful about his country’s future and, as George Shulman notes, “never relinquishe[s] faith in the possibility of reconstituting the field of possibility.”²³¹ Though he is keenly aware of the country’s daunting obstacles and challenges, he nonetheless believes America has the potential to correct its course. He thus insists that “it is perfectly possible to tap the energy of the country” and that “we can change and save ourselves.”²³² Baldwin is not, then, a fatalist, who believes that America is inevitably destined for failure and despair. Instead, he views America as an exceptional country that can, if it chooses, harness an exceptional future. This aspirational hope is clearly conveyed in the essay’s title—an emphatic and undoubting assertion that “*We Can Change the Country*.”²³³ It is also evident in Baldwin’s concluding sentence, which boldly predicts that “we can change the government, and we will.”²³⁴

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²³¹ Shulman, “Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics,” 167.

²³² Baldwin, “We Can Change the Country,” 63.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

Here again, Baldwin’s faithful optimism stems from his belief that America is exceptionally flexible. As Baldwin notes throughout the essay, Americans are uniquely able to reform their political institutions: they are free, if they choose, to “begin a massive campaign of civil disobedience,”²³⁵ to “create a third [political] party,”²³⁶ or to “[take] the government into [their] own hands.”²³⁷ In addition, Americans are allowed—even encouraged—to “take a very hard look at [their] economic structure and [their] political institutions,” and they enjoy the intellectual freedom and flexibility necessary for sincere self-reflection.²³⁸ Equipped with this institutional, intellectual, and political flexibility, Baldwin suggests, Americans are perfectly positioned to “tap the energy of this country” and to “change and save [them]selves.”²³⁹ If Baldwin is hopeful, then, it is for the same reason he is an exceptionalist—namely, because he recognizes the potential inherent in America’s exceptional indefiniteness.

The Fire Next Time and “We Can Change the Country” thus provide two striking examples of Baldwin’s aspirational exceptionalism. In both pieces, Baldwin condemns his country and offers acerbic and biting criticism. He also deliberately exposes America’s hidden flaws and offers bleak and foreboding warnings about the country’s future. He acknowledges America’s exceptional potential but characterizes it as a contingent possibility, rather than an assured guarantee. He eschews, in other words, accomplished exceptionalism’s complacent confidence and instead suggests that America *could*, but need not, be great.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

In both pieces, though, Baldwin expresses hope and optimism about America's prospects and articulates his commitment to the country's exceptional potential. His "dispute with [his] country" is thus a lover's quarrel, a battle he fights only and precisely because he cares deeply for the nation.²⁴⁰ As Baldwin himself acknowledges, "a person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among compatriots than mocked and detested by them."²⁴¹ By assuming this critical responsibility, then, Baldwin demonstrates his love for America and proves that he, like any true lover, is willing to do "what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself."²⁴² Baldwin is thus thoroughly aspirational and, as George Shulman notes, boldly and brashly "announces the conditions we *must* acknowledge if we are to flourish."²⁴³ But he does this only because he loves—"in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth"²⁴⁴—his country.

III. Baldwin's Aspirational Citizenship: Reflective, Interconnected, Involved

In the previous sections, I have shown that James Baldwin is an exceptionalist thinker, and that he views the United States as special and potentially superior. I have also suggested that his American exceptionalism is based on America's unique fluidity, which creates social and racial tensions but also generates unparalleled opportunities for the country to examine its traditions, modify its institutions, and potentially overcome its racial biases. I have argued that Baldwin's exceptionalism is conditional and aspirational and that he, like Douglass and

²⁴⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 7.

²⁴¹ James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 552.

²⁴² Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 672.

²⁴³ For an excellent analysis of Baldwin's relationship to the prophetic tradition, see Shulman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics."

²⁴⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 95.

Emerson, recognizes that America can (and does) fail. I have also claimed that Baldwin treats America's exceptionalism as a contingent possibility: he does not view excellence as the country's inalterable destiny, but rather sees it as an opportunity that Americans must choose and work to harness.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the impact of Baldwin's aspirational thought and rhetoric. As Baldwin himself recognizes, language is "a political instrument, means, and proof of power."²⁴⁵ It is also "the most vivid and crucial key to identity" and "it reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity."²⁴⁶ If this is true, then Baldwin's rhetoric is, like all language, a constitutive force with tangible, real-world effects. His words can thus "control[] an experience"²⁴⁷ and have the potential to activate and engender new modes of political being.

But what are these new modes of being? How, in other words, does Baldwin's rhetoric open new possibilities for political action? In this section, I answer these questions by highlighting the unique citizenship practices that Baldwin models, endorses, and encourages. More specifically, I suggest that Baldwin's aspirational rhetoric engenders three behaviors: honest self-assessment, brotherhood (or, as Lisa Beard calls it, "boundness"²⁴⁸), and active political involvement. Like the citizenship practices endorsed by Emerson and Douglass, these behaviors are critical and reflective, and they push individuals to engage with and improve their

²⁴⁵ James Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 781.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 68.

²⁴⁸ Beard, "'Flesh of Their Flesh, Bone of Their Bone': James Baldwin's Racial Politics of Boundness," 379.

political communities. The behaviors thus offer a third, and distinctly Baldwinian, way of enacting aspirational American citizenship.

As discussed in the previous section, Baldwin is profoundly troubled by America's willful ignorance—that is, its tendency to overlook and disavow unpleasant aspects of its social and political history.²⁴⁹ Given this, it is not surprising that the first citizenship practice he recommends is honest self-reflection and critique. Indeed, if there is one theme that runs throughout all of Baldwin's work, it is his insistence that American citizens stop taking “refuge in [...] delusion”²⁵⁰ and instead engage in critical and sustained self-examination. Baldwin is convinced that such examination is the only means by which the country can progress: “Nothing,” he writes, “can be changed until it is faced.”²⁵¹ Baldwin thus demands that Americans engage in “a thorough self-appraisal”²⁵² and confront, once and for all, the “many things they do not want to face.”²⁵³

Throughout his writings, Baldwin expressly endorses this self-reflection. He repeatedly implores citizens to “stare [their] ghastly failure in the face,”²⁵⁴ and he insists that “the American white has got to accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not.”²⁵⁵ He also predicts that,

²⁴⁹ Baldwin articulates this concern often. In his essay “Black Power,” for example, he argues, “We have constructed a history which is a total lie, and have persuaded ourselves that it is true. I seriously doubt that anything worse can happen to any people.” In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 103. Elsewhere, he decries “the American failure to face reality” and insists that America is built on a “system of lies, evasions, and naked oppression designed to pretend this isn't so.” “The Uses of the Blues,” 78; “What Price Freedom?” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 84. And, speaking of the American founding, Baldwin writes, “We've made a legend out of a massacre.” “The White Problem,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 92.

²⁵⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104.

²⁵¹ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 42.

²⁵² Baldwin, “Lockridge: ‘The American Myth,’” 59.

²⁵³ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 151.

²⁵⁴ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 40.

²⁵⁵ Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” 74.

without self-reflection, the country will fail, and he warns that “we will never establish human communities”²⁵⁶ and “will not change”²⁵⁷ until citizens learn to self-examine. Though Baldwin acknowledges that “neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back,” he insists that “the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.”²⁵⁸ He thus demands introspection and insists that citizens “must crack the American image and find out and deal with what it hides.”²⁵⁹

In addition to offering these explicit directives, Baldwin endorses critical introspection through his own, modeled behavior. By recounting his experiences abroad, for example, Baldwin reveals that he, too, struggled to come to terms with his identity: he left the United States because he not could bear to accept his role in the country,²⁶⁰ and he reluctantly returned because he realized it would be the only way to “journey[] any farther with [him]self.”²⁶¹ Baldwin also confesses that he, at times, prefers the safety of self-delusion, and he admits that introspection “requires every ounce of stamina he can summon.”²⁶² Baldwin shows, then, that he sympathizes with the desire to flee from reality, and he acknowledges that even he struggles to come to terms with his identity and past. But he also maintains that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and that “self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a

²⁵⁶ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 40.

²⁵⁷ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 71.

²⁵⁸ Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son*, 6.

²⁵⁹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 132.

²⁶⁰ Baldwin claims that his time in Europe “helped to reconcile [him] to being a ‘nigger’” and he suggests that he could “not [...] have made this reconciliation here [in America].” *Nobody Knows My Name*, 5.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xiii. As Susan J. McWilliams argues, “Baldwin’s greatest act of daring—and the confrontation with his own greatest fear—was to come to terms with his own Americanness.” “Introduction,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 7.

²⁶² Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name.*, xii.

price no writer [and no country] can afford.”²⁶³ By thus recounting his struggles with and journey toward self-reflection, Baldwin offers himself as a model of critical self-assessment. He shows, that is, that self-reflection is both necessary and possible—even for those who, like him, “prefer fantasy to a truthful re-creation of [...] experience.”²⁶⁴

Baldwin also models self-critique by admitting and accepting responsibility for America’s failures. He does this through careful and effective use of first person plural pronouns. Though he sometimes writes in the more accusatory second person, Baldwin more often describes the country’s flaws and failures using *we*, *ours*, and *us*. In so doing, he groups himself among those responsible and claims America’s problems as his own. For example, Baldwin suggests that “if *we* were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes[,] *we* would never victimize, as *we* do, children whose only crime is color [...]. *We* wouldn’t drive Negroes mad as *we* do by accepting them in ball parks, and on concert stages, but not in *our* homes and not in *our* neighborhoods, and not in *our* churches.”²⁶⁵ Baldwin also suggests that the country’s racial prejudices are not based on anything the Negro has done, but instead have “everything to do with *ourselves*.”²⁶⁶ By including himself as part of this “we,” Baldwin accepts his own involvement in the country’s racial problems and, as Lawrie Balfour notes, “slips back and forth across the line—now aligning himself with African Americans, now looking at them from a distance, now obscuring the difference.”²⁶⁷ In so doing, he models self-

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Baldwin, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist,” 3.

²⁶⁵ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 134, emphasis mine.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶⁷ Balfour, ““A Most Disagreeable Mirror,”” 27. For a fascinating analysis of Baldwin’s use of “we,” see *ibid.*, 26-32.

reflection and shows readers how to acknowledge, accept, and claim responsibility for hard truths.

Baldwin is thus explicit in his call for self-reflection, and he articulates, in both word and behavior, his firm belief that “the time has come, God knows, for us to examine ourselves.”²⁶⁸ But Baldwin also acknowledges that his is a daunting request, and he admits that it will be difficult and unpleasant to enact. “It is not,” Baldwin observes, “an easy thing to be forced to re-examine a way of life and to speculate, in a personal way, on the general injustice.”²⁶⁹ This task is even more difficult for Americans, who “are not noted for introspection and rather disapprove of it.”²⁷⁰ Despite these formidable obstacles, though, Baldwin persists in his emphatic demand for self-reflection. “If [America] is, indeed, the last, best hope,” he insists, “we had better find out more about it. And this will demand an understanding which can only be arrived at through a thorough self-appraisal.”²⁷¹

Baldwin does not, however, endorse self-reflection in and of itself. Rather, he suggests that critical thinking is valuable and necessary insofar as it leads to social and political improvement. In Baldwin’s view, “nothing can be changed until it is faced.”²⁷² If citizens are to improve themselves and their country, then, they must first be “willing to tell the truth about [them]selves”²⁷³; self-reflection is, in other words “the price” America must pay if it is to take advantage of its exceptional potential.²⁷⁴ If citizens are willing to pay this price—that is, if they

²⁶⁸ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 11.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁷⁰ Baldwin, “Lockridge: ‘The American Myth,’” 591.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 42.

²⁷³ Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 671.

²⁷⁴ In Baldwin’s words, “We have an opportunity which no other nation has of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began

honestly and candidly assess themselves and their country—they will necessarily and inevitably recognize their faults and flaws. Citizens will also, and perhaps more importantly, recognize that racial categories are arbitrary and constructed—that blackness is simply “a condition forged in history,” and whiteness, “a delusion.”²⁷⁵ Once equipped with this knowledge, Baldwin believes that citizens will finally be able to transcend racial categories, “remake [...] cities, conquer our cruel and unbearable human isolation, [...] [and] establish human communities.”²⁷⁶ But until Americans learn to critically “reexamine everything,”²⁷⁷ Baldwin claims, “we cannot possibly become what we would like to be.”²⁷⁸

In addition to self-reflection (which, according to Baldwin, is the only path to improvement and change), Baldwin urges citizens to recognize their interconnectedness and celebrate the many ties that link them to one another. As explained above, Baldwin believes that race is a moral and political category, not a biological one, and he argues that racial groupings exist only because of America’s exceptional fluidity. Baldwin thus insists that, despite their perceived differences, whites and blacks are in fact linked to each other.²⁷⁹ He notes, for

speaking of the New World. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record.” “The Creative Process,” 672.

²⁷⁵ James Baldwin, “Dark Days,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 789.

²⁷⁶ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 40.

²⁷⁷ James Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 841.

²⁷⁸ Baldwin, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist,” 7.

²⁷⁹ Lisa Beard calls this interconnectedness “boundness” and suggests that it is a key theme in Baldwin’s political thought. She describes the phenomenon thus: “In Baldwin’s work, white and black people—even though they have been subjected to centuries of racist laws, policies, ideologies and other forms of violence that encourage each group to think of themselves as different and separate—are understood to be literally bound (by blood) and therefore morally bound together.” “Flesh of Their Flesh, Bone of Their Bone,” 379.

For an excellent and thorough discussion of how this interconnectedness (boundness) operates in Baldwin’s works, see *ibid.*

example, that both races share a “common history”²⁸⁰ and that blacks “have been here as long as [whites] have been here—longer.”²⁸¹ He also claims that the two races are connected biologically, and that they are literally “flesh of [each other’s] flesh and bone of [each other’s] bone.”²⁸² Baldwin urges citizens to acknowledge this interconnectedness and begs them to accept that “there is one race and [...] we are all part of it.”²⁸³ “Whether I like it or not,” he writes, “or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. There is no way around this.”²⁸⁴

Baldwin thus insists that, as Susan J. McWilliams has argued, “the most essential moral task confronting Americans—the essential political task facing the American republic—is to recognize the interconnectedness of all our lives.”²⁸⁵ At base, this entails acknowledging the historical and physical connections that link whites and blacks. But it also requires a recognition that the fates and futures of both races are tied up together. According to Baldwin, neither whites nor blacks can succeed without one another. The future of the black race thus rests in the hands of white citizens, and vice versa. “Black freedom will make white freedom possible,”²⁸⁶ Baldwin claims, “and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as [the Negro’s].”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁰ James Baldwin, “The Nigger We Invent,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 113.

²⁸¹ Baldwin, “The Nigger We Invent,” 116.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ James Baldwin, “Smaller Than Life,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 578.

²⁸⁴ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 136.

²⁸⁵ McWilliams, “Introduction,” 9.

²⁸⁶ James Baldwin, “The Fire This Time: Letter to the Bishop,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 267.

²⁸⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 94.

If *either* race wants to progress or move forward, then, it must first cultivate a “real recognition of, and respect for, the other and for the condition of the other.”²⁸⁸

Because he believes that white and black futures are linked in this manner, Baldwin insists that both races are responsible to and for one another.²⁸⁹ He thus admonishes both groups to work and advocate for each other’s interests, and he condemns any political agenda that prioritizes the needs of only one race. Baldwin is uncomfortable, for example, with the separatist platform of the Nation of Islam, and he refuses to accept Elijah Muhammad’s position that white men are devils. He also rejects the teaching, articulated by many black preachers, that Christian doctrines like “love everybody” do “not apply to white people at all.”²⁹⁰ As long as racial interests are divided and set against one another in this manner, Baldwin believes that neither whites, nor blacks, nor the country can advance. He thus rejects singular racial agendas and instead endorses platforms that reflect and celebrate racial interconnectedness.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ James Baldwin, “A Letter to Prisoners,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 263.

²⁸⁹ Baldwin describes this responsibility thus: “*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.* That is a hard saying. It is hard to live with that. It is a merciless description of our responsibility for one another. It is that hard light under which one makes the moral choice.” “Open Letter to the Born Again,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 784-785.

²⁹⁰ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 40.

²⁹¹ Baldwin is skeptical, for example, of the Nation of Islam, which preaches that “Allah [...] never approved of the creation of the white man in the first place” and that there is “no virtue in white people, and [...] no hope for them.” *Ibid.*, 67. According to Baldwin, this movement is as exclusive and problematic as the white supremacist agenda. “There is nothing new,” Baldwin writes, “in [the Nation of Islam’s] formulation except the explicitness of its symbols and the candor of its hatred. Its emotional tone is as familiar to me as my own skin; it is but another way of saying that *sinner shall be bound in Hell a thousand years.*” *Ibid.*, 67-68.

By contrast, Baldwin is complimentary of the student movements in the South. Unlike the Nation of Islam, these are, in Baldwin’s assessment, movements that demand “nothing less than the total revision of the ways in which Americans see the Negro, and this can only mean a total revision of the ways in which Americans see themselves.” “They Can’t Turn Back,” 623. In other words, the student movements are attentive to the fact that whites and blacks are inextricably linked and thus seek to improve the lives and well-being of all.

Lastly, Baldwin calls for citizens who are actively engaged in improving their communities. Because he believes that all individuals—both white and black—are deeply and inextricably connected, Baldwin insists that every American is equally responsible for the country’s ills. And so, Baldwin demands that all citizens actively work to improve the nation, regardless of whether or how they have contributed to its flaws. “I know you didn’t do it,” Baldwin writes, “and I didn’t do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason.”²⁹² Citing their shared humanity, then, Baldwin admonishes citizens to “do everything in [their] power to change this country”²⁹³ and to act—now—to improve its future.

To help cultivate an ethos of involvement, Baldwin recommends that citizens involve themselves directly in political processes. He argues, for example, that citizens monitor their government officials, and he instructs them to “serve notice on our representatives that they are under the obligation to represent us.”²⁹⁴ He also endorses sit-ins, encourages protests, and recommends “a massive campaign of civil disobedience.”²⁹⁵ Baldwin insists that “*some laws should not be obeyed*,”²⁹⁶ and he advises citizens to “literally move, sit down, stand, walk, don’t go to work, don’t pay the rent”²⁹⁷—whatever it takes to “let the people who represent us know that it is our country.”²⁹⁸ Above all, though, he advises citizens to guard against political apathy.

²⁹² James Baldwin, “Words of a Native Son,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 713.

²⁹³ Baldwin, “We Can Change the Country,” 63.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62. He illustrates this practice by himself authoring a choleric letter to President Carter, wherein he openly critiques the president’s “continuing wrong[s].” See “An Open Letter to Mr. Carter,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 766-769.

²⁹⁵ Baldwin, “We Can Change the Country,” 61.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

“It is inconceivable,” he writes, “that a sovereign people should continue, as we do so abjectly, to say, ‘I can’t do anything about it. It’s the government.’ The government is the creation of the people. It is responsible to the people [...]. No American has the right to allow the present government to say, when Negro children are being bombed and hosed and shot and beaten all over the deep South, that there is nothing we can do about it.”²⁹⁹

Like both Douglass and Emerson, then, Baldwin expects citizens to be actively involved in the political sphere, and he insists that “one must never, in one’s own life, accept [political injustices] as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength.”³⁰⁰ He thus admonishes citizens to “throw everything into the endeavor to remake America into what we say we want it to be.”³⁰¹ Such activity will not be easy, and it will demand “moral energy, [...] spiritual daring,”³⁰² and persistent, sustained, and uncomfortable effort. If they are to achieve their exceptional potential, though, this discomfort is a burden citizens must be willing to endure—after all, “the pain which signals a toothache is a pain which saves your life.”³⁰³

Baldwin’s aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric thus activates a distinct and progressive mode of citizenship—one that is self-reflective, attentive to human interconnectedness, and actively involved in political affairs. As was true for both Douglass and Emerson, these citizenship practices are directly linked to Baldwin’s understanding of America’s exceptionalism. Because he believes that the United States is exceptionally and uniquely

²⁹⁹ James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 684-685

³⁰⁰ Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son*, 114-115.

³⁰¹ Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” 41.

³⁰² James Baldwin, “White Racism or World Community,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 755.

³⁰³ James Baldwin, “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 56.

unstable, Baldwin thinks the country has the unparalleled opportunity to eliminate racial tension and lead the world toward a more unified, egalitarian existence. He is clear, though, that this opportunity is entirely contingent, and he warns that the country could very easily fail³⁰⁴—particularly if it does not combat its habitual willful ignorance, overcome its profound racial divisions, and revitalize its apathetic and unaccountable citizenry. Baldwin thus admonishes citizens to engage in candid self-examination, to acknowledge their deep ties to one another, and to actively take responsibility for the nation’s well-being. His mode of citizenship is, in other words, uniquely designed to help secure his vision of America’s exceptional potential.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that James Baldwin is an aspirational exceptionalist thinker. Through close readings of his essays and writings, I have shown that like all exceptionalists, Baldwin is devoted and committed to the United States. I have also explored the basis for this exceptionalist affection and have suggested that, for Baldwin, America is great because it is indefinite, shifting, and fluid. Baldwin acknowledges that this fluidity generates unique and challenging problems—he notes, for example, that America’s racial tensions exist precisely because in America “nothing is fixed.”³⁰⁵ But he also sees America’s indefiniteness as a great source of opportunity and potential—a feature that, if harnessed, will permit the country to influence the history of the world.

³⁰⁴ To emphasize this point, Baldwin often uses conjunctions of contingency. He insists, for example, that “America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color.” To show that this is far from guaranteed, though, Baldwin quickly follows this assertion with a “but”: “But it has not dared to accept this opportunity, or even to conceive of it as an opportunity.” *The Fire Next Time*, 93.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

In addition to highlighting his exceptionalist commitments, I have shown that Baldwin, like Douglass and Emerson, works within the aspirational exceptionalist tradition. Although he is devoted to the United States (he regularly admits that he “love[s] our country”³⁰⁶), Baldwin is eager to expose its internal divisions and fractures. He is also deeply critical of America, and he regularly offers harsh and biting condemnations of its glaring flaws. Baldwin believes that America has the potential to be great, but he regularly warns that this potential is conditional. “*If*,” he writes, “we [...] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare.”³⁰⁷ But this is only an “if,” and Baldwin cautions that America will, if it is not careful, sabotage its own exceptional future.

In the end, though, Baldwin remains hopefully committed to his country’s potential, and he believes that despite the country’s challenges, “we [...] are not destined for the rubble.”³⁰⁸ Baldwin thus admonishes Americans to “keep the faith”³⁰⁹ and to continue to “move on up the road.”³¹⁰ To facilitate these aspirational efforts, Baldwin admonishes citizens to be self-reflective, to recognize their interconnectedness, and to remain actively involved in politics. He thus shows that, in both rhetoric and effect, American exceptionalism can be progressive, ameliorative, and thoughtful, and that good, exceptionalist citizens can both lament the country’s shortcomings and flaws *and* remain hopeful about its future.

³⁰⁶ Baldwin, “An Open Letter to Mr. Carter,” 769.

³⁰⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105.

³⁰⁸ Baldwin, “A Letter to Prisoners,” 263.

³⁰⁹ Baldwin, “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone,” 779.

³¹⁰ James Baldwin, “How One Black Man Came To Be an American,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 765.

Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. "Discourse in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, 269-422. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Baldwin, James. 2010. "A Letter to Prisoners." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 261-263. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "A Report from Occupied Territory." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 728-738. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "A Talk to Teachers." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 678-686. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "An Open Letter to Mr. Carter." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 766-769. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "As Much Truth as One Can Bear." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 34-42. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "Black English: A Dishonest Argument." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 154-160. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "Black Power." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 98-104. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "Dark Days." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 788-798. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 773-779. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "From 'Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States'." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 10-18. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "How One Black Man Came To Be an American." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 762-765. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 780-783. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "Lockridge: 'The American Myth'." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 588-593. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 3-7. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1985. "No Name in the Street." In *The Price of the Ticket*, 449-552. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- . 1993. *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2012. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- . 1998. "Nothing Personal." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 692-706. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "On Being White ... and Other Lies." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 166-170. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "Open Letter to the Born Again." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 784-787. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "Smaller Than Life." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 577-578. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 50-58. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "The Creative Process." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 669-672. New York: Library of America.
- . 1998. "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 638-658. New York: Library of America.
- . 1993. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "The Fire This Time: Letter to the Bishop." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 264-267. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "The Nigger We Invent." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 109-119. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "The Price of the Ticket." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 830-842. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "The Uses of the Blues." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 70-81. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "The White Problem." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 88-97. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "Theater: The Negro In and Out." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 19-28. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "They Can't Turn Back." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 622-637. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "We Can Change the Country." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 59-64. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2010. "What Price Freedom?" In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, 82-87. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1998. "White Racism or World Community." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 749-756. New York: Library of America.
- . 2010. "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Essays*, edited by Randall Kenan, 65-69. New York: Vintage Books.

- . 1998. "Words of a Native Son." In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, 707-713. New York: Library of America.
- Balfour, Lawrie. 2017. "'A Most Disagreeable Mirror': Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 19-47. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- . 2000. *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Beard, Lisa A. 2016. "'Flesh of Their Flesh, Bone of Their Bone': James Baldwin's Racial Politics of Boundness." *Contemporary Political Theory* 15 (4): 378-398.
- Beard, Lisa. 2017. "James Baldwin on Violence and Disavowal." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 337-360. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Beebee, Thomas O. 2010. "Epistolary Novel." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, 140-141. New York: Routledge.
- Buccola, Nicholas. 2017. "What William F. Buckley Jr. Did Not Understand about James Baldwin: On Baldwin's Politics of Freedom." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 116-148. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Coplan, Amy. 2004. "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2): 141-152.
- Douglass, Frederick. 2016. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 50-71. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2008. "Address to the Citizens of Concord." In *Emerson Political Writings*, edited by Kenneth Sacks, 135-151. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2010. "Letters as Narrative." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, 277. New York: Routledge.
- Glaude, Jr., Eddie S. 2017. "James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 361-372. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hartung, Franziska, Michael Burke, Peter Hagoort, and Roel M. Willems. 2016. "Taking Perspective: Personal Pronouns Affect Experiential Aspects of Literary Reading." *PLoS ONE* 11 (3): e0154732. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0154732>.
- Keene, Suzanne. 2006. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative* 14 (3): 207-236.
- Lloyd, Vincent. 2017. "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 171-194. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- McBride, Dwight A. 1999. "'How Much Time Do You Want for Your Progress?' New Approaches to James Baldwin." In *James Baldwin Now*, edited by Dwight A. McBride, 1-9. New York: New York University Press.

- McWilliams, Susan J. 2017. "Introduction." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 1-16. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- . 2017. "James Baldwin and the Politics of Disconnection." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 94-115. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Miall, David S. 2011. "Emotions and the Structuring of Narrative Responses." *Poetics Today* 32 (2): 323-348.
- Scott, Robert. 1970. "Rhetoric, Black Power, and Baldwin's 'Another Country'." *Journal of Black Studies* 21-34.
- Shulman, George. 2008. *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shulman, George. 2017. "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics." In *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Susan J. McWilliams, 151-170. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1990. *Democracy in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Wallace, George C. 1963. "Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace." *Speech*. January 14. Accessed July 5, 2018. <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/2952>.

**This is America:
Aspirational Exceptionalism in the Contemporary American State**

“He’s undermining patriotism. [...] This is activism that is sympathetic to ISIS. For me, if I’m the coach, I would say you’re done. Until you take a knee and beg forgiveness from the American people, you’re not going to set foot out on this field again.”

—Rep. Steve King (R-IA), on Colin Kaepernick’s anthem protests¹

“I did it because I feel like people are doubting Colin, saying that if he hates America, he can leave. But really expressing his First Amendment right to choose to sit or stand, I think that was him showing how much he loves America.”

—Keyonna Morrow, student athlete at West Virginia University Institute of Technology, on her decision to kneel before a collegiate volleyball game²

“[America is] this dynamic, evolving, pressing, self-critical experiment. [...] An America that’s chronically dissatisfied with itself, because embedded in our DNA is this striving, aspirational quality to be even better.”

—Barack Obama³

In the last three chapters, I have argued that Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Baldwin are thinkers who work within and contribute to the tradition of American exceptionalism. Through close readings and discourse analyses, I have shown that each thinker believes that the United States is special, superior to other nations, and chosen to fulfill an important role or mission. I have also shown that these thinkers regularly utilize aspirational exceptionalist tropes and willingly criticize America’s faults, expose its internal cleavages, and warn of the dangers that threaten its future. I have thus suggested that Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin view America’s status as contingent, and that they recognize that the nation can (and

¹ Jason Devaney, “Rep. Steve King on Kaepernick: ‘Activism Sympathetic to Isis,’” *Newsmax*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/steve-king-kaepernick-activism-sympathetic/2016/09/13/id/748107/>.

² Sean Gregory, “All Across the Country, Athletes Are Fueling a Debate About How America Defines Patriotism,” *Time*, September 22, 2016, <http://time.com/4504023/athletes-america-patriotism/>.

³ Greg Jaffe, “Obama’s New Patriotism,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/?utm_term=.8ba3fc20b338_

may) fail to actualize its exceptional potential. I have, in other words, shown that these are aspirational exceptionalist thinkers who are hopeful for, but not assured of, America's greatness.

Thus far, then, I have identified, defined, and explored an alternative mode of American exceptionalism (i.e., aspirational exceptionalism) and have described three American intellectuals who exemplify and embody its rhetorical and ideological commitments. In so doing, I have shown that aspirational exceptionalism is a robust intellectual tradition, and that it is characterized by defining tropes, distinctive themes, and particular rhetorical conventions. I have also shown that the tradition has had adherents and spokespeople throughout American history, and that it is present in the works of some of America's best-known writers and rhetoricians. Aspirational exceptionalism is not, then, an obscure and iconoclastic rhetorical style occasionally adopted by the country's disgruntled critics. It is instead a cohesive tradition, characterized by distinctive tropes and techniques, that has been adopted by prominent American thinkers and statesmen at critical junctures throughout the nation's history.

Up until this point, though, my arguments about aspirational exceptionalism have been purely historical, focused on rhetoric and thinkers from America's distant past. Because of this, one might wonder whether or how aspirational exceptionalism is relevant in today's United States. Is the tradition still alive? Have any thinkers since Baldwin utilized its techniques and tropes? Do contemporary American thinkers speak in aspirational exceptionalist registers? And, if so, does the tradition continue to activate distinctive and productive citizenship practices?

In this concluding chapter, I explore these questions and offer some brief reflections on the contemporary valence of aspirational American exceptionalism. More specifically, I consider what place, if any, aspirational exceptionalism occupies in America's current discursive culture. I ultimately suggest that aspirational exceptionalism persists and is utilized by figures as

diverse as Barack Obama and Colin Kaepernick. I note, though, that the tradition occupies an endangered and contested position in America's rhetorical culture and is therefore at risk of being supplanted by other forms of exceptionalist rhetoric. If the aspirational exceptionalist tradition is to survive, then, it will need zealous defenders—citizens who recognize its merits, endorse its citizenship practices, and embody its critically hopeful orientation.

This conclusion describes two contemporary figures who embody the aspirational exceptionalist ethos. It proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I describe football player Colin Kaepernick, whose 2016 decision to kneel during the national anthem generated a lasting national controversy. In the second, I offer reflections on former President Barack Obama, whose rhetoric became increasingly and explicitly aspirational throughout his presidency. Through these two portraits, I show that aspirational exceptionalism remains a prominent tradition in the contemporary American polis—one that is utilized and exemplified by some of the country's most prominent and high-profile political and cultural figures. But I also show that modern expressions of aspirational exceptionalism are highly contested and controversial, and that, more often than not, the country's Kaepernicks and Obamas are chastised for their aspirational orientations.

In the third part, I offer some concluding reflections on the aspirational exceptionalist tradition. After briefly reviewing the contributions of the previous chapters, I suggest that aspirational exceptionalism remains a vulnerable, controversial, and misunderstood rhetorical mode. I argue, though, that the tradition offers new possibilities for national development and growth, and that it serves an important function in counterbalancing accomplished exceptionalism's conservative, self-celebratory, and uncritical norms. I thus offer a defense of

aspirational exceptionalism and suggest that, though it has been (and is) maligned, it is an invaluable part of America's discursive culture.

I. Colin Kaepernick's Aspirational Exceptionalism

When Colin Kaepernick joined the San Francisco 49ers in 2011, he was known primarily for his achievements on the NCAA football field. As quarterback for the University of Nevada, Reno, Kaepernick had become the first NCAA player to pass for more than 10,000 yards and rush for more than 4,000 yards in a collegiate career.⁴ He had also tied the all-time record for rushing touchdowns by a quarterback,⁵ won multiple WAC Offensive Player of the Year awards,⁶ and, in his final year, led his team to a 13-1 season.⁷ Entering the NFL, then, Kaepernick's reputation was tied up with his athletics. He was, as one commentator observed, "the greatest dual threat in college football history,"⁸ and most experts predicted that his professional career would be equally promising.

But on August 26, 2016, Kaepernick made a single, small gesture that forever changed his reputation and career. During a pre-season game against the Green Bay Packers, Kaepernick opted to sit, rather than stand, during the national anthem. Initially, the decision went entirely unnoticed (in fact, Kaepernick had done the same thing at two previous games, without receiving

⁴ Kaepernick's collegiate statistics are available at: <https://www.footballdb.com/college-football/players/colin-kaepernick-kaepe000>. See also Michael Patmas, "NFL Draft 2011: Why Nevada's Colin Kaepernick Is the Best of the Bunch," *Bleacher Report*, March 7, 2011, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/629296-2011-nfl-draft-why-nevadas-colin-kaepernick-is-the-best-of-the-bunch>.

⁵ At 59. See Patmas, "NFL Draft 2011."

⁶ In 2008 and 2010. See <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/awards/wac-opoy.html>.

⁷ In 2010. See <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/nevada/2010.html>.

⁸ Michael Patmas, "2011 NFL Draft Results: Nevada's Colin Kaepernick Drafted by San Francisco," *Bleacher Report*, April 29, 2011, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/684755-nevadas-colin-kaepernick-drafted-by-san-francisco>.

any attention).⁹ But when a beat writer tweeted a photograph of the team's national anthem formation,¹⁰ observant journalists recognized Kaepernick's seated figure, and the NFL community went berserk. By the end of the following day, Kaepernick's gesture had gone viral,¹¹ and the 49ers had released an official statement confirming that their quarterback had, in fact, sat through the song.¹² More importantly, though, Kaepernick had become "the most polarizing figure in American sports," forever to be remembered as "the quarterback who knelt for the national anthem."¹³

⁹ When @ProFootballTalk learned that Kaepernick sat during the national anthem, they tweeted, "Colin Kaepernick sits during national anthem, one day after comparing American and Confederate flags on Twitter." August 26, 2016, 11:48 PM. NFL Network reporter Mike Garafolo responded, "[Kaepernick]'s actually done it all preseason. No one noticed. First time in uniform was last night." @MikeGarafolo, August 27, 2016, 4:34 AM.

¹⁰ The photograph was posted by @jenniferleechean (August 26, 2016, 7:02 PM) and is accessible here: <https://twitter.com/jenniferleechean/status/769354272735531009>. Interestingly, the beat writer did not notice Kaepernick in the photograph, and did not intend for the post to draw attention to him.

¹¹ Within just a few hours, news outlets all over the country scrambled to report the incident. See, for example, the many responses to @jenniferleechean's tweet (August 26, 2016, 7:02 PM), most of which came from major journals and publications. For a sampling of the extensive contemporaneous coverage Kaepernick's gesture received, see: Associated Press, "Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem Over Treatment of Minorities," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/27/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest>; Mike Florio, "Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem," *Pro Football Talk NBC Sports*, August 27, 2016, <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2016/08/27/kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem/>; Fox News Insider, "Colin Kaepernick Sat During National Anthem to Protest America's 'Oppression,'" *Fox News Insider*, August 27, 2016, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2016/08/27/nfl-quarterback-colin-kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem-protest-america>; Euan McKirdy, "NFL Star Colin Kaepernick Sits in Protest During National Anthem," *CNN*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/28/sport/nfl-colin-kaepernick-protest-sit-down-national-anthem/index.html>; Nick Wagoner and the Associated Press, "Colin Kaepernick Protests Anthem Over Treatment of Minorities," *ESPN*, August 28, 2016, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17401815/colin-kaepernick-san-francisco-49ers-sits-national-anthem-prior-preseason-game; Adam Wells, "Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem Before Packers v. 49ers," *Bleacher Report*, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2660085-colin-kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem-before-packers-vs-49ers>.

¹² Less than 24 hours after the game, the 49ers issued the following statement: "The national anthem is and always will be a special part of the pre-game ceremony. It is an opportunity to honor our country and reflect on the great liberties we are afforded as its citizens. In respecting such American principles as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, we recognize the right of an individual to choose to participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem." Florio, "Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem."

¹³ John Branch, "The Awakening of Colin Kaepernick," *New York Times*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-protests.html>.

In their initial coverage, news outlets reported that “[it was] unclear why Kaepernick sat.”¹⁴ Fortunately, the quarterback did not keep his motives concealed for very long.

Immediately after the game, Kaepernick told a reporter, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”¹⁵ Two days later, on August 28, 2016, he held a media session where he elaborated further:

People don't realize what's really going on in this country. There are a lot of things that are going on that are unjust. People aren't being held accountable for. And that's something that needs to change. That's something that this country stands for freedom, liberty and justice for all. And it's not happening for all right now. [...] These aren't new situations. This isn't new ground. There are things that have gone on in this country for years and years and have never been addressed, and they need to be. [...] [So] yes. I'll continue to sit. I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel like that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand.¹⁶

Kaepernick made good on this promise and, for the remainder of the season, sat or knelt¹⁷ during national anthem. Other athletes, both in the NFL and other professional leagues, soon followed

¹⁴ Florio, “Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem.” There was, however, a great deal of fuss about the fact that just one day before his protest, Kaepernick had retweeted an image of the American and Confederate flags with a caption that read: “The fact that you really believe that there is difference in these flags means that your [*sic*] ignoring history.” See Florio, “Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem”; Matt Maiocco, “Kaepernick Takes Stand on Civil Rights, Sits During National Anthem,” *NBC Sports*, August 27, 2016, <https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/49ers/kaepernick-takes-stand-civil-rights-sits-during-national-anthem>.

¹⁵ Steve Wyche, “Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During National Anthem,” *NFL.com*, August 27, 2016, <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem>.

¹⁶ Nick Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick’s Comments About Sitting During National Anthem,” *ESPN*, August 28, 2016, http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_id/18957/transcript-of-colin-kaepernicks-comments-about-sitting-during-national-anthem.

¹⁷ Kaepernick adopted this modified gesture after speaking with former Special Forces and NFL player Nate Boyer. Shortly after Kaepernick’s initial protest, Boyer who wrote an open letter articulating his discomfort with Kaepernick’s actions. The two later met, and their ensuing conversation prompted Kaepernick to kneel, rather than sit, in order to display respect for America’s military veterans. Although Boyer was initially distressed by Kaepernick’s decision to sit, he appreciated and respected the adoption of this modified gesture. “It took courage

suit, and by September of 2017, nearly two hundred had knelt, sat, or raised fists in similar gestures of protest.¹⁸

On August 27, 2016, one day after Kaepernick's gesture first caught public attention, reporter Mike Florio wrote, "[G]iven that Kaepernick opted to make a stand by sitting during the traditional pregame honoring of the country and its flag—which is so tightly woven into the DNA of the NFL—there surely will be a reaction."¹⁹ This prediction proved remarkably accurate: Kaepernick's silent gesture quickly ignited a national controversy and, within a matter of days, became the target of much criticism and debate. Pundits, politicians, and other professional athletes condemned Kaepernick's actions as "disrespectful,"²⁰ "whiny,"²¹

for [Kaepernick] to sit initially," Boyer said. "It took more courage for him to bend his position a little bit. I told him if they knelt I would be right next to them with my hand on my heart, because I support your right to peacefully protest in this country. That is what I fought for." Patrick Jennings, "Colin Kaepernick: From One Man Kneeling to a Movement Dividing a Country," *BBC Sport*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/american-football/41530732>.

For Boyer's letter to Kaepernick, see Nate Boyer, "An Open Letter to Colin Kaepernick, From a Green Beret-Turned-Long Snapper," *Army Times*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.armytimes.com/opinion/2016/08/30/an-open-letter-to-colin-kaepernick-from-a-green-beret-turned-long-snapper/>.

¹⁸ For a record of all who participated in Kaepernick-esque protests between August 26, 2016 and September 25, 2017, see Mark Sandritter, "A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest and the Athletes Who Joined Him," *SB Nation*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl>.

¹⁹ Florio, "Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem."

²⁰ Of Kaepernick's protest, New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees said, "There's plenty of other ways that you can [speak out about a very important issue] in a peaceful manner that doesn't involve being disrespectful to the American flag." Mike Triplett, "Drew Brees 'Wholeheartedly' Disagrees with Colin Kaepernick's Method of Protest," *ESPN*, August 29, 2016, http://www.espn.com/blog/new-orleans-saints/post/_id/23063/drew-brees-wholeheartedly-disagrees-with-colin-kaepernicks-method-of-protest. Giants offensive lineman Justin Pugh tweeted, "[Sitting during the national anthem is] disrespectful to all the men and women who put their lives on the line to protect this country." @JustinPugh, August 27, 2016, 9:30 AM. Boomer Esiason, former NFL player and CBS Sports analyst, offered an even more pointed criticism: "I cannot say it in the strongest, most direct way, that it's an embarrassment and it's about as disrespectful as any athlete has ever been. [...] The NFL football field is not a place for somebody to further their political ambitions." Ryan Wilson, "Esiason on Kaepernick Sitting: 'It's About As Disrespectful as Any Athlete Has Ever Been,'" *CBS Sports*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/esiason-on-kaepernick-sitting-its-about-as-disrespectful-as-any-athlete-has-ever-been/>.

²¹ Tomi Lahren, "Sit Down Colin Kaepernick," *Final Thoughts*, aired August 29, 2016 on The Blaze, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU62YQttC18>.

“attention-seeking,”²² and “mouth diarrhea.”²³ Prominent sports figures expressed “disappointment”²⁴ and disgust, and some insisted that, thanks to Kaepernick’s protests, they would “never watch another NFL game.”²⁵ At football games, fans “mercilessly booed” Kaepernick’s anthem demonstrations²⁶ and chanted “USA” when he entered the stadium.²⁷ And on Twitter and other social media platforms, users tagged posts with “#istand” to indicate their opposition to Kaepernick’s “misguided tantrum.”²⁸

The controversy ruffled presidential feathers, as well. On October 8, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence walked out of an NFL game after several players knelt during the national anthem, tweeting, “I left today’s Colts game because @POTUS and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our flag, or our National Anthem.”²⁹ Meanwhile, Donald Trump publicly urged NFL owners to fire any players who would not stand for the anthem. At a rally for an Alabama senatorial candidate, Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL

²² Lahren, “Sit Down Colin Kaepernick.”

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cindy Boren, “Vin Scully Vows He’ll ‘Never Watch Another NFL Game’ Because of Anthem Protests,” *Washington Post*, November 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2017/11/05/vin-scully-vows-hell-never-watch-another-nfl-game-because-of-anthem-protests/?utm_term=.31d69a9339c8.

²⁵ Boren, “Vin Scully Vows He’ll ‘Never Watch Another NFL Game.’”

²⁶ John Breech, “LOOK: Kaepernick Gets Mercilessly Booed For an Entire Half in San Diego,” *CBS Sports*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/look-kaepernick-gets-mercilessly-booed-for-an-entire-half-in-san-diego/>.

²⁷ Nick Wagoner, “Bills Fans Boo Colin Kaepernick, Chant ‘USA’ Before He Kneels,” *ABC News*, October 17, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/bills-fans-boo-colin-kaepernick-chant-usa-kneels/story?id=42866573>.

²⁸ Tomi Lahren, “Final Thoughts on Sunday Kneeling by NFL Players,” *Final Thoughts*, aired September 11, 2017 on Fox News, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2017/09/11/tomi-lahren-final-thoughts-nfl-players-protesting-national-anthem>.

²⁹ @VP, October 8, 2017, 10:08 AM. Trump later admitted that he had asked Mike Pence to leave the match if any players protested: “I asked @VP Pence to leave stadium if any players kneeled, disrespecting our country. I am proud of him and @SecondLadyKaren.” @realDonaldTrump, October 8, 2017, 11:16 AM. For further coverage, see Eli Watkins, “Pence Leaves Colts Game After Protest During Anthem,” *CNN*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/08/politics/vice-president-mike-pence-nfl-protest/index.html>.

owners [...] say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he’s fired. He’s FIRED.’”³⁰

Trump also encouraged the NFL to prohibit displays of protest during the national anthem and, in a televised interview, told Fox News, “You have to stand proudly for the national anthem or you shouldn’t be playing, you shouldn’t be there, maybe they shouldn’t be in the country.”³¹

The public response to Kaepernick’s gesture was not, however, entirely negative. On the contrary, some Americans celebrated the anthem protests as a mark of courage and patriotism. In the sports world, supportive fans showed their solidarity by purchasing Kaepernick’s jersey³² and organizing kneel-ins before NFL games.³³ Players joined in the protests, and several coaches and owners expressed their support for Kaepernick’s cause.³⁴ Beyond the athletic arena,

³⁰ Sophie Tatum, “Trump: NFL Owners Should Fire Players Who Protest the National Anthem,” *CNN*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-alabama-nfl/index.html>.

³¹ John Wagner and Mark Maske, “Trump: NFL Players Unwilling to Stand for Anthem Maybe ‘Shouldn’t Be in the Country,’” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-nfl-owners-doing-the-right-thing-on-national-anthem-policy/2018/05/24/cdd66490-5f36-11e8-a4a4-c070ef53f315_story.html?utm_term=.b1e16b351a49.

The NFL has since adopted a policy requiring players to stand if they are on the field during the national anthem. Players are, however, allowed to remain in the locker room during the song. Teams may be fined if any of their players do not comply with the policy. For further detail, see Kevin Seifert and Dan Graziano, “New Policy Requires On-Field Players, Personnel to Stand for Anthem,” *ESPN*, May 24, 2018, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/23582533/nfl-owners-approve-new-national-anthem-policy.

³² In fact, in the months following his initial protests, Kaepernick’s jersey became one of the best-selling in the NFL. See Darren Heitner, “Colin Kaepernick Tops Jersey Sales in NFL,” *Forbes*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2016/09/07/colin-kaepernick-tops-jersey-sales-in-nfl/#3b6115ac7aad>. See also Jeanna Thomas, “Colin Kaepernick Has Some of the NFL’s Best-Selling Merchandise Even Though Teams Don’t Want Him,” *SB Nation*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.sbnation.com/2017/8/1/16074976/nfl-colin-kaepernick-anthem-protest-jersey-sales>.

³³ One such kneel-in occurred before an October 16, 2016 game between the Bills and the 49ers. See Wagoner, “Bills Fans Boo Colin Kaepernick.”

³⁴ Stephen Ross, owner of the Miami Dolphins, went so far as to encourage his players to participate. Speaking to the media, he said, “I don’t think there was any lack of respect. Certainly I think everybody here our team and our whole organization respects the flag and what it stands for and the soldiers and everything. [...] But I think [...] these guys are making a conversation of something that I think is a very important topic in this country and I’m 100 percent supportive of them. This is a country, you’re allowed to really indicate what your preferences are and how your feeling and that’s what makes us so great, and I think it’s great, and I applaud them for what they’re doing.” Brandon Howard, “Dolphins Owner Steve Ross Supports and Encourages Players’ Right to Protest,” *DolphinsWire*, September 11, 2016, <https://dolphinswire.usatoday.com/2016/09/11/dolphins-owner-steven-ross-supports-and-encourages-players-right-to-protest/>.

activist and social justice groups (such as the NAACP³⁵) embraced the anthem protests. A few celebrities—including John Legend, Stevie Wonder, and Pharrell Williams—knelt at concerts and other public appearances,³⁶ and young people began tagging their social media posts with “#TakeAKnee.” Kaepernick even found a few supporters on Capitol Hill: Texas Representative Sheila Jackson-Lee, for example, knelt on the House floor to show her support for the anthem protests,³⁷ and New York Representative Hakeem Jeffries assured protesting athletes, “There are Members of the United States Congress who have your back.”³⁸

Today, nearly two years after his first anthem protest, Kaepernick remains one of the most controversial figures in America’s political and popular culture. As one writer recently observed, “there may be nobody in popular culture at this moment so divisive and so galvanizing, so scorned and so appreciated.”³⁹ Indeed, depending on who you ask, Kaepernick is “either a traitor (‘Maybe he should find a country that works better for him,’ Donald J. Trump said as presidential candidate last year) or a hero (‘He is the Muhammad Ali of this generation,’ the longtime civil rights activist Harry Edwards said in an interview last week).”⁴⁰ He has, in short, transcended his reputation for athletics and has established himself as one of today’s most salient and significant public figures.

³⁵ See James W. Jakobs, “NAACP Voices Support for Colin Kaepernick, Plans Push to Remove ‘Star Spangled Banner’ as National Anthem,” *ABC News*, November 8, 2017, <http://abc7news.com/politics/naacp-voices-support-for-colin-kaepernick/2620092/>.

³⁶ Andrew McMaster, “These Celebrities and Leaders Are Joining the #TakeAKnee Movement,” *GlobalCitizen.org*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/colin-kaepernick-takeaknee-celebrities-protest/>.

³⁷ See Sameea Kamal, “Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee Kneels on House Floor in Solidarity with NFL Protests,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-rep-sheila-jackson-lee-kneels-on-house-1506449211-htmlstory.html#nt=card>.

³⁸ Hakeem Jeffries, “First Principles,” speech to House of Representatives, September 25, 2017, transcript <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2017/9/25/house-section/article/h7439-1?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22steph%22%7D&r=1>.

³⁹ Branch, “The Awakening of Colin Kaepernick,”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

More importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, though, Colin Kaepernick provides a contemporary example of aspirational exceptionalism. Although he is not a writer or a rhetorician in the same way that Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin were, Kaepernick's words and actions are laden with the aspirational tropes of exposure, critique, warning, and hope. His communications thus seem deliberately crafted to convey an aspirational message, and they repeatedly emphasize that the United States is not presently, but could one day be, exceptional. Consider, for example, Kaepernick's statements at his August 28, 2016 media press conference. At that event, just two days after his protest first came to light, Kaepernick vocally and directly criticized America's racial problems. He argued, for example, that there are "bodies in the streets"⁴¹ and that "people of color have been targeted by the police."⁴² He also condemned "police brutality," suggested that "there's people being murdered unjustly," and lambasted the American police system for giving "paid leave [to officers] for killing people."⁴³ He even lamented the fact that that police officers "can become a cop in six months and don't have to have the same amount of training as a cosmetologist."⁴⁴ "That's insane," he bemoaned, "[that] someone that's holding a curling iron has more education and more training than people that have a gun."⁴⁵

In addition to these caustic criticisms, Kaepernick deliberately drew upon the aspirational trope of exposure. Like Douglass, who insisted that the "damning fact[s]" about slavery "be

⁴¹ Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During National Anthem."

⁴² Wagoner, "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments About Sitting During National Anthem."

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

perpetually told,”⁴⁶ Kaepernick admitted that his gesture was designed to highlight America’s flaws and expose its racial challenges. In fact, when asked why he chose to sit during the national anthem, Kaepernick simply responded, “People don’t realize what’s really going on in this country. [...] This is something that has to be said, it has to be brought to the forefront of everyone's attention.”⁴⁷ At other points during the press conference, Kaepernick repeated this desire to “shed more light” and “bring[] awareness” to the country’s problems.⁴⁸ He showed, in other words, that he perceived himself as an expositor and that he, like other aspirational exceptionalists, believed it his responsibility to reveal “things that need to change.”⁴⁹

But if Kaepernick critiqued and exposed America’s racial challenges, he did not do so in order to undermine or destroy his country. Rather, he, like Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin, offered exposure and critique in hopes that he might urge America toward its exceptional potential. Kaepernick made this point quite explicitly. Throughout the press conference, he repeatedly referenced America’s highest values and standards—particularly its promises of “freedom, liberty, and justice for all.”⁵⁰ He then noted that America had fallen short of those promises, was not “representing people the way that it’s supposed to,” and was not “holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody.”⁵¹ Kaepernick specifically admonished Americans to close this gap and to make good on the country’s lofty

⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” in *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 2016), 63.

⁴⁷ Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick’s Comments About Sitting During National Anthem.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

assurances. He also expressed his sincere hope that his protests would “unify this country” so that “we can move forward.”⁵²

Kaepernick’s revelations and criticisms were not, then, intended to damn his country and its citizens. Rather, Kaepernick offered harsh and bold critiques that he hoped would provoke improvement and “affect change.”⁵³ And despite his bleak portrayal of America’s racial politics, he expressed genuine optimism that such change might actually occur. He indicated this hope by vowing that he would again stand for the national anthem as soon as the country began “representing people the way that it’s supposed to.”⁵⁴ He also expressed his faith in America’s future more directly, stating his firm belief that “people can realize what the situation is and then really affect change.”⁵⁵

Kaepernick’s explanation of and justification for his protests were thus deeply aspirational: caustic, expository, and critical, but also genuinely committed to (and hopeful for) progress and change. Kaepernick’s physical gestures and performative rhetoric also fit this aspirational mould. Consider, for example, Kaepernick’s controversial act of kneeling during the national anthem. In the United States, it is customary for audiences to stand respectfully while the anthem is played. In fact, the act is so typical that for many it has become habitual, and most Americans take standing to be a common, unifying, and expected ritual. Kaepernick’s decision to sit during the anthem flew in the face of these conventions and, in so doing, provoked discussion, thought, and critical reflection. More specifically, the act forced others in the stadium (and later, once the news had spread, others in the country) to contemplate the meaning

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

and significance of standing and to consider why, exactly, someone might choose to sit instead. Kaepernick's physical gesture thus performed the deeply aspirational function of encouraging critical thought and reflection. It made viewers uncomfortable, challenged their expectations, and, in so doing, reminded them that not all citizens view the national anthem (or the country it represents) with the same, unqualified reverence.

In addition, Kaepernick's physical gesture highlighted cleavages both within the stadium and in the public *writ large*. Because standing during the national anthem is so routine, Kaepernick's deliberate decision to sit marked him as separate and distinct from others present at the game. The gesture provided a tangible and visible marker of difference, and it reminded viewers in a very literal and visual way that the American polity is more divided than most are wont to believe. That this made so many uncomfortable, and that viewers responded by demanding that Kaepernick participate in the common ritual, suggests that as a whole, Kaepernick's audience was not ready or willing to acknowledge the country's internal divisions. But Kaepernick intended to highlight, foreground, and emphasize the country's cleavages, and his aspirational performance—which created a symbolic physical disconnect on the field—allowed him to do just that.

But while Kaepernick's performance was critical, provocative, and revealing, it was also, like all aspirational rhetoric, laden with hope, admiration, and respect. Kaepernick could, after all, have adopted a variety of methods to express his disappointment—he could have staged a flag burning, screamed profanity during the national anthem, raised an angry sign, or otherwise disrupted the ritual. Instead, he quietly and reverently sat (and, in later games, knelt) to silently and subtly indicate his frustrations. Though the protest attracted much attention, Kaepernick did not intend to cause a spectacle—in fact, he insisted, “This isn't for looks [and] [t]his isn't for

publicity or anything like that.”⁵⁶ And so, he adopted a gesture that is universally understood as a symbol of respect and worship⁵⁷—one that Kaepernick’s teammate Eric Reid likened to “a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy.”⁵⁸

In addition to adopting a reverent, respectful gesture, Kaepernick and others who participated in the movement emphasized their devotion to their country by explicitly stressing that their actions were grounded in love for the United States. When he accepted Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience Award, for example, Kaepernick thrice repeated, “Love is at the root of our resistance.”⁵⁹ He further explained that “we protest because we love ourselves, and our people,” and he suggested that what whites sometimes view as “Black-rage” is in fact an expression of affection, a “beautiful form of defiance against a system that seeks to suppress [blacks’] humanity.”⁶⁰ Kaepernick’s supporters and fellow protesters similarly characterized their actions as being grounded in and motivated by love. In fact, when explaining his decision to kneel, Eric Reid, the first player to join the movement, borrowed Baldwin’s aspirational language: “It should go without saying,” he said, “that I love my country and I’m

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ The reverent nature of Kaepernick’s gesture was not lost on everyone. For example, former NFL player Arian Foster commented, “If it’s about the knee that people are upset about, every Sunday, people of faith take a knee to give thanks to their Lord and savior, whatever faith or religion that they are. It’s not about a knee, it’s not about the [symbolism], it’s about the message. They say it’s not the time to do this, but when is the time?” Brian Flaherty, “From Kaepernick Sitting to Trump’s Fiery Comments: NFL’s Anthem Protests Have Spurred Discussion,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/sports/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protests-and-NFL-activism-in-quotes/?utm_term=.051d7620364d.

⁵⁸ Eric Reid, “Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html>.

⁵⁹ Colin Kaepernick, “Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award,” speech, April 21, 2018, transcript <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2018/04/Colin-Kaepernick-Speech-Ambassador-of-Conscience-Final.pdf?x66178>.

⁶⁰ Kaepernick, “Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award.”

proud to be an American. But, to quote James Baldwin, ‘exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.’”⁶¹

Kaepernick’s verbal and performative rhetoric thus provides a striking example of contemporary aspirational exceptionalism—proof, as it were, that American rhetoricians and public figures continue to work within the critical, brash, expository, and hopeful aspirational tradition. But Kaepernick’s saga also reveals the role and place of aspirational exceptionalism in contemporary American society and shows that the aspirational tradition remains a maligned and vulnerable rhetorical mode. This is particularly evident when one considers the public responses to Kaepernick’s anthem protests. Although Kaepernick clearly justified his decision to kneel, expressed sincere hope that the United States would progress, and intentionally selected a reverent mode of protest, many (if not most) Americans viewed his actions as disrespectful and unpatriotic. And though he consistently reiterated his love and affection for the United States, many observers refused to believe that his actions were motivated by devotion. Rather than celebrate or thank Kaepernick for his gesture, then, many prominent Americans attacked him and accused him of not loving the United States.⁶² Some even insisted that kneeling was offensive and insolent: Tomi Lahren, for example, directly equated kneeling with disrespect when she

⁶¹ Reid, “Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee.” Other football players who joined in Kaepernick’s anthem protests similarly defended their actions as being grounded in love and patriotism. For example, before protesting at a September 11 football game, Miami Dolphin Michael Thomas said he was “very nervous” but added, “I know where my heart is in it. It’s not to be disrespectful, anti-blue, anti-patriotic. It’s to raise awareness and equality for all.” Thomas’ teammate Jelani Jenkins offered similar comments, saying, “I want to be clear that there’s no disrespect to the military or the police officers. It’s not about that. To me, love is progress, hate is expensive.” Dave Hyde, “Four Protesting Dolphins Joined by a Big Fifth – Owner Steve Ross,” *Sun Sentinel*, September 11, 2016, <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/sports/miami-dolphins/fl-hyde-dolphins-seahawks-column-0912-20160911-column.html>.

⁶² The most prominent of these accusers was, perhaps, Bill O’Reilly, who, on a September 26, 2017 airing of *Hannity*, said to protesting football players, “We know that some of you don’t like the country or want to get a point across, but this is the wrong forum, right? This is not the forum to do it.” A full transcript of the episode is available at <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2017/09/26/bill-oreilly-anthem-protesters-disrespecting-flag-country.html>.

condemned “those NFL players who decided to take a knee or otherwise disrespect our country,”⁶³ and Donald Trump decried Kaepernick’s actions as “a total disrespect of our heritage [and] a total disrespect of everything we stand for.”⁶⁴

Kaepernick’s protests brought professional consequences, as well. After a full season of kneeling through the national anthem, Kaepernick opted out of his contract with the 49ers and announced that he would become an unrestricted free agent.⁶⁵ But in the months that followed, the quarterback drew little interest on the free agent market. Despite the fact that he led the 49ers to both the 2012 NFC title and the Super Bowl (and was therefore presumably good enough to be re-hired), Kaepernick remained unemployed throughout the 2017 post-season. At the time of this writing, he is still a free agent and has not signed with another NFL team.

Although some observers and sports analysts suggested that Kaepernick’s protracted unemployment was the result of his diminishing football abilities (as one writer noted, “Kaepernick’s not having a job [...] might be justified on the merits, given Kaepernick’s current attributes, or lack thereof, as a quarterback”⁶⁶), most experts agree that he was—and remains—

⁶³ Tomi Lahren, “Final Thoughts on Sunday Kneeling by NFL Players.”

⁶⁴ Tatum, “Trump: NFL Owners Should Fire Players Who Protest the National Anthem.”

⁶⁵ See Associated Press, “Colin Kaepernick Opts Out of Contract, Becomes Free Agent,” *ESPN*, March 3, 2017, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18818589/colin-kaepernick-opts-contract-becomes-free-agent; Jared Dubin, “Colin Kaepernick Opts Out of Contract with 49ers, Heads to Free Agency,” *CBS Sports*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-opts-out-of-contract-with-49ers-heads-to-free-agency/>.

⁶⁶ Colin Fleming, “Maybe Colin Kaepernick Is Just Not That Good,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/colin-kaepernick.html>. According to Fleming:

It’s not hard to make a statistical case for why Kaepernick is not playing now. He threw for a mere 187 yards a game last season, which was good enough for 30th (in a league of 32 teams). For his career, he has completed fewer than 60 percent of his passes. Last season, 24 passers completed more than 60 percent. Kaepernick, at 59.2 percent, was ranked 26th. If you’re below 60 percent, you’re a fringe guy.

More damning, Kaepernick was not asked to make difficult throws; he’s not a Matt Ryan-type quarterback, slinging the ball far down the field on deep crosses or challenging out routes. In the current iteration of the N.F.L., offense rules the day with quarterbacks tasked to put up crooked numbers on the scoreboard. Kaepernick’s job was to be a game

good enough to play in the league.⁶⁷ And so, the consensus is now that Kaepernick has been blackballed, shut out of the NFL for his political positions. Indeed, most pundits, analysts, and journalists agree that “it’s obvious Kaepernick is being frozen out for his political opinions”⁶⁸ and that “the National Football League [...] is punishing a player for practicing political dissent.”⁶⁹ Kaepernick’s fellow players have also suggested as much: According to Packers’ quarterback Aaron Rodgers, for example, “[Kaepernick] should be on a roster right now. I think because of his protests, he’s not.”⁷⁰

One journalist recently argued that “Kaepernick’s situation highlights just how little progress we’ve made in this country in confronting the brutal legacy of racism.”⁷¹ But Kaepernick’s saga reveals something else, as well: It shows the enduring force and hegemony of accomplished exceptionalism. Because despite his explicit assertions of love, hope, and

manager, making the easiest, high-percentage throws. And he still struggled. What are you supposed to do with a guy like this? What can he do for you? Can he help you win?

⁶⁷ Kaepernick filed a lawsuit against the NFL in October of 2017, alleging that the league had colluded against him for his political views. As part of the lawsuit, Kaepernick requested texts, e-mails, and other internal franchise documents and communications. The materials that the league produced as part of this discovery process reveal that “teams viewed Kaepernick as being good enough not simply to be employed by an NFL team, but to be a starting quarterback for an NFL team” and that “multiple teams believed that Kaepernick was still good enough to play after becoming a free agent more than a year ago.” Mike Florio, “Kaepernick Collusion Case Proving that Teams Viewed Him as a Starting Quarterback,” *Pro Football Talk NBC Sports*, May 21, 2018, <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2018/05/21/kaepernick-collusion-case-proving-that-teams-viewed-him-as-a-starting-quarterback/>.

For further evidence that Kaepernick remains talented enough to play in the NFL, see Kyle Wagner, “Colin Kaepernick is Not Supposed to Be Unemployed,” *FiveThirtyEight*, August 9, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/colin-kaepernick-is-not-supposed-to-be-unemployed/>. The article features a fascinating report showing that Kaepernick-caliber quarterbacks rarely (if ever) have free agencies that last as long as Kaepernick’s.

⁶⁸ Wagner, “Colin Kaepernick Is Not Supposed to be Unemployed.”

⁶⁹ Dave Zirin, “The NFL Wants You to Think Colin Kaepernick Isn’t Being Sidelined by Politics. The NFL Is Wrong – Again,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-zirin-kaepernick-20170908-story.html>.

⁷⁰ Zirin, “The NFL Wants You to Think Colin Kaepernick Isn’t Being Sidelined by Politics.”

⁷¹ Michael Eric Dyson, “The Courage of Colin Kaepernick,” *The Undeclared*, September 6, 2016, <https://theundefeated.com/features/the-courage-of-colin-kaepernick/>.

patriotism, Kaepernick is never described as an exceptionalist thinker. Instead, he is consistently portrayed as “a traitor to the nation, a disruptive, self-aggrandizing narcissist,”⁷² and “a radical un-American who wants to divide our country.”⁷³ That Americans view Kaepernick in this way suggests that most citizens are still operating under the narrow and mistaken belief that exceptionalism is necessarily self-celebratory, affirming, and uncritical. Americans’ firm insistence that Kaepernick’s demonstrations are fundamentally inconsistent with patriotism further reveals that, for most Americans, accomplished exceptionalism is the only recognizable mode of exceptionalism.⁷⁴ Like Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin before him, then, Kaepernick has been excluded from the exceptionalist canon. Because he does not fit society’s expectations for an exceptionalist figure—that is, because he does not praise and celebrate unconditionally—he has been written off as someone who does not, and cannot, contribute to exceptionalist discourse.

Kaepernick is thus the latest casualty of accomplished exceptionalism’s dominance, the most recent figure to be excluded from exceptionalist ranks due to his critical, reflective, and sometimes harsh orientation. This, of course, is problematic. Because like Douglass, Emerson,

⁷² Dyson, “The Courage of Colin Kaepernick.”

⁷³ Reid, “Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee.”

⁷⁴ Like other aspirational exceptionalists, Kaepernick does not view his actions as unpatriotic and has thus found it difficult to accept the criticisms levied against him. “I don’t understand,” he has said, “what’s un-American about fighting for liberty and justice for everybody, for the equality this country says it stands for. To me, I see it as very patriotic and American to uphold the United States to the standards that it says it lives by.” Wagoner, “Bills Fans Boo Colin Kaepernick.”

Kaepernick’s teammate Eric Reid, who also joined in the anthem protests, expressed similar sentiments: “I can’t find words that appropriately express how heartbroken I am to see the constant smears against Colin, a person who helped start the movement with only the very best of intentions. We are talking about a man who helped to orchestrate a commercial planful of food and supplies for famine-stricken Somalia. A man who has invested his time and money into needy communities here at home. A man I am proud to call my brother, who should be celebrated for his courage to seek change on important issues. Instead, to this day, he is unemployed and portrayed as a radical un-American who wants to divide our country.” Reid, “Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee.”

and Baldwin, Kaepernick’s rhetoric punctuates, challenges, and destabilizes the predominant national discourse. In so doing, it encourages critical thought and provokes contemplation and reflection. What is more, Kaepernick’s aspirational rhetoric surely activates and inspires distinct modes of aspirational citizenship. Because an analysis of those citizenship practices exceeds the scope of this project, I have not discussed them here. I predict, though, that like the practices endorsed by Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin, they would prove beneficial additions to prevailing accomplished exceptionalist citizenship norms.

II. Barack Obama’s Aspirational Exceptionalism

In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted that Barack Obama has often been accused of being a poor exceptionalist and of lacking affection for the United States. In fact, midway through Obama’s second term, former mayor Rudy Giuliani insisted that the president did not love his country at all: “I know this is a horrible thing to say,” Giuliani expressed, “but I do not believe that the president loves America. He wasn’t brought up the way you were brought up and I was brought up, through love of this country.”⁷⁵ If the last three chapters have taught us anything, though, they have made us attentive to the fact that there are multiple ways of being an exceptionalist. Obama may not, then, be a traditional, accomplished exceptionalist, but like Colin Kaepernick, he exemplifies the aspirational exceptionalist mode.

Obama’s aspirational orientation is particularly evident in his memorial rhetoric—that is, in speeches he gave in response to national tragedies, deaths, and disasters. This body of rhetoric is not insignificant. During his eight years in office, Obama mourned the victims of 24 mass shootings, including those in Tucson, Arizona; Aurora, Colorado; Newton, Connecticut;

⁷⁵ Jaffe, “Obama’s New Patriotism.”

Charleston, South Carolina; and Orlando, Florida. He comforted survivors of natural and non-natural disasters: wildfires in Colorado, a hurricane along the East Coast, severe tornadoes throughout the Midwest, and a factory explosion in Texas. And he grieved with victims of terrorist activity, both in Boston and on the tenth anniversary of September 11. In total, he delivered more than 50 memorial speeches and honored hundreds of Americans killed or injured in unexpected tragedies. Little wonder, then, that by the time he left office, he was known as a “healer-in-chief.”⁷⁶

Impressively, Obama’s memorial speeches were consistently well-received: each successive eulogy, it seemed, replaced the one preceding it as Obama’s *new* finest moment.⁷⁷ More striking than these perpetually positive reviews, however, was the rhetorical and structural consistency that unified the corpus of Obamaian eulogies. From Fort Hood to Hurricane Sandy to Orlando, the memorial speeches were, in structure and topoi, remarkably similar and utilized the same set of rhetorical conventions: a celebration of the fallen, a summary of American values, and a description of America’s unparalleled greatness. The speeches also consistently

⁷⁶ David Nakamura, “In a Disaster, How the Commander in Chief Becomes the Healer in Chief,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-a-disaster-how-the-commander-in-chief-becomes-the-healer-in-chief/2012/07/20/gJQAq8b8yW_story.html?utm_term=.bd83811faefa.

⁷⁷ Obama’s Tucson memorial speech was acclaimed as an address that “even Fox News loved,” and Nate Silver of the New York Times argued that the speech “will be remembered as one of his best moments, almost regardless of what else takes place during the remainder of his presidency.” Dylan Stableford, “Even Fox News Loved Obama’s Tucson Memorial Speech Last Night,” *The Wrap*, January 13, 2011, http://www.thewrap.com/media/column-post/even-fox-news-loved-obama-tucson-speech-last-night-23867_ Obama’s address in Newtown, Connecticut received similar praise: “In his words, depth, and demeanor,” wrote U.S. News’ Jamie Stiehm, “Obama gave the best speech of his presidency by a country mile.” Jamie Stiehm, “Obama’s Newton Shooting Speech Was Best of His Presidency,” *US News*, December 18, 2012, http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/jamie-stiehm/2012/12/18/obamas-words-offer-solace-in-the-wake-of-newtown_ And at the Boston Marathon memorial service, the president delivered yet another “best” speech, which the Orlando Sentinel praised as a “stirring speech” which “reached new oratorical heights.” Hal Boedeker, “Barack Obama in Boston: His Greatest Speech,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 18, 2013, http://www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/blogs/tv-guy/os-barack-obama-in-boston-his-greatest-speech-20130418,0,2963180.post_

drew upon the themes and values of American exceptionalism and were laden with references to the country's superiority, its chosenness, and its unique destiny and calling.

But if Obama's memorial speeches regularly invoked exceptionalism's themes and tropes, they did not do so consistently. On the contrary, Obama's relationship with exceptionalism changed quite drastically throughout his presidency, and over time, his rhetoric shifted from the comfortable, self-celebratory accomplished mode to a bolder, ameliorative, and thoughtful aspirational style. Put differently, Obama always invoked exceptionalist tropes, but he was not always a clear aspirational thinker. Rather, his aspirational orientation developed and sharpened over time, reaching full expression only near the end of his presidency.

This development is most evident if one compares Obama's first term memorial speeches to those delivered in the later years of his presidency. In his earlier speeches (specifically, those given before the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School), Obama consistently incorporates accomplished exceptionalist tropes. For example, Obama regularly emphasizes America's noble heritage and reminds his listeners of the founders and their creeds,⁷⁸ of the "successive generations" of Americans who exemplified American values,⁷⁹ and of earlier Americans who sacrificed their lives for the nation (e.g., the anonymous "grandfather(s) who marched across Europe, [the] uncle(s) who fought in Vietnam, [the] sister(s) who served in the Gulf"⁸⁰). He also praises the noble American citizens who died, and he offers vivid accounts of their bravery and valiance. He describes, for example, the heroic virtues of those American

⁷⁸ Barack Obama, "Remarks at Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, AZ," speech, January 12, 2011, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>.

⁷⁹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA," speech, April 18, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-interfaith-service-boston-ma>.

⁸⁰ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood," speech, November 10, 2009, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/remarks-president-memorial-service-fort-hood>.

citizens who “[ran] towards explosions to treat the wounded,”⁸¹ who “[worked] through disasters,”⁸² who “answered the call,”⁸³ and who “did not flinch” in the face of death.⁸⁴ And he celebrates Americans’ “grit,”⁸⁵ “compassion,”⁸⁶ and “civic duty,”⁸⁷ insisting that, even “in the face of chaos and tragedy,” Americans reliably “display[] the very best of the American spirit.”⁸⁸

In addition to praising America’s exceptional heritage, values, and citizenry, Obama’s early speeches consistently celebrate the country itself. Like any good exceptionalist, Obama often describes the country’s distinctive and superior features, such as its commitment to the rule of law⁸⁹ and its habit of welcoming “people from all around the world—people of every faith, every ethnicity, from every corner of the globe.”⁹⁰ He also praises the country for being

⁸¹ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA.”

⁸² Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President After Touring the Tornado Damage in Oklahoma,” speech, May 26, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/26/remarks-president-after-touring-tornado-damage-oklahoma>.

⁸³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX,” speech, April 25, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/25/remarks-president-memorial-service-waco-tx>.

⁸⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil,” speech, December 16, 2012, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/16/remarks-president-sandy-hook-interfaith-prayer-vigil>.

⁸⁵ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to First Responders and Volunteers in Boston, MA,” speech, April 18, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-first-responders-and-volunteers-boston-ma>.

⁸⁶ Obama, “Remarks by the President to First Responders and Volunteers in Boston, MA.”

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ In a speech he gave after the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, for example, Obama celebrated America as being “a nation of laws whose commitment to justice is so enduring that we would treat a gunman and give him due process, just as surely as we will see that he pays for his crimes.” “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood.”

⁹⁰ Barack Obama, “Statement by the President,” speech, April 19, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/19/statement-president>.

“strong,”⁹¹ “resilient,”⁹² courageous,⁹³ and unafraid,⁹⁴ and he suggests that “America always bounces back.”⁹⁵ Obama repeatedly celebrates America’s excellence and regularly (eight times) claims that America is “the greatest nation on Earth.”⁹⁶ He also insists that America is invincible—that “nothing can break the will of a truly United States of America”⁹⁷—and argues that “we need not look to the past for greatness, because it is before our very eyes.”⁹⁸

Obama further reveals his exceptionalism by discussing America’s unique role, mission, and responsibilities. In many of his early speeches, Obama describes America as an exemplar, model, or “beacon.” He claims, for example, that the country “was built as a beacon of freedom and tolerance”⁹⁹ and he insists that “America is a beacon of hope for the world.”¹⁰⁰ By referring

⁹¹ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX.”

⁹² *Ibid.* See also Obama’s “Remarks by the President After Surveying Damage from Hurricane Sandy,” wherein the president declares, “You guys are tough. You bounce back, just as America always bounces back.” Speech, November 15, 2012, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/15/remarks-president-after-surveying-damage-hurricane-sandy>.

⁹³ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX.”

⁹⁴ Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: America Stands with the City of Boston,” speech, April 20, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/20/weekly-address-america-stands-city-boston>.

⁹⁵ Obama, “Remarks by the President After Surveying Damage from Hurricane Sandy.”

⁹⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the American Red Cross,” speech, October 30, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/30/remarks-president-american-red-cross>. He makes some variation of this claim in the following speeches: “Weekly Address: Giving Thanks to our Fallen Heroes this Memorial Day,” speech, May 25, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/25/weekly-address-giving-thanks-our-fallen-heroes-memorial-day>; “Remarks by the President at the National Peace Officers Memorial Service,” speech, May 15, 2013, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/15/remarks-president-national-peace-officers-memorial-service>; “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX.”; “Statement by the President”; “Remarks by the President After Hospital Visit,” speech, July 22, 2012, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/22/remarks-president-after-hospital-visit>; “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood.”

⁹⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at ‘A Concert for Hope,’” speech, September 11, 2011, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/11/remarks-president-concert-hope>.

⁹⁸ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood.”

⁹⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Pentagon Memorial Service in Remembrance of 9/11,” speech, September 11, 2012, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/11/remarks-president-pentagon-memorial-service-remembrance-911>.

¹⁰⁰ Obama, “Weekly Address: Giving Thanks to our Fallen Heroes this Memorial Day.”

to the country in this way, Obama suggests that the United States is destined to lead other nations, and that it has the unique responsibility of guiding the globe toward justice and light. He accepts, in other words, the exceptionalist notion that the United States is chosen, and maintains that America has—and will continue to—“inspire[] the world.”¹⁰¹

Like all exceptionalist rhetoric, then, Obama’s early speeches demonstrate a belief that the United States is special and superior, a conviction that the country is chosen, and a commitment to the notion that America has a unique and important role to fulfil. But unlike the rhetoric I have focused on in this dissertation, Obama’s first term speeches are not aspirational. On the contrary, Obama’s early memorial addresses draw heavily on the accomplished exceptionalist tropes of self-congratulation, historical amnesia, certainty, and idealized unity.¹⁰² Unlike aspirational rhetoric, the early speeches are rarely critical, forward-looking, or self-reflective. Instead, they celebrate the country’s greatness, gloss over its failures, and treat its exceptional status as an assured guarantee.

Of these accomplished tropes, Obama is perhaps most reliant on idealized depictions of American unity. In many of his early addresses, Obama claims that America is a united, undivided whole—that “out of many, we are one”¹⁰³—and he regularly insists that in America, “there is no such thing as a stranger.”¹⁰⁴ He also suggests the American populace is bound together by compassion and care for one another and that “whenever an American is in need, all of us stand together to make sure that we’re providing the help that’s necessary.”¹⁰⁵ Obama

¹⁰¹ Obama, “Remarks by the President to First Responders and Volunteers in Boston, MA.”

¹⁰² For a more detailed discussion of these tropes and how they operate in accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric, see Introduction Section I.B.

¹⁰³ Obama, “Remarks by the President at ‘A Concert for Hope.’”

¹⁰⁴ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX.”

¹⁰⁵ Obama, “Remarks by the President at the American Red Cross.”

rarely acknowledges that there are differences or divisions within the American polis, but when he does, he is quick to note that these are peaceful and benign—a source of cultural and racial diversity, perhaps, but not a cause of conflict. He thus downplays (or altogether ignores) America’s racial, cultural, and socioeconomic cleavages and instead describes the American populace as a body of “people of every race, religion and ethnicity—all of them pledging allegiance to one flag; all of them reaching for the same American dream.”¹⁰⁶

Because he makes such efforts to portray America as a unified, undivided whole, a listener unfamiliar with the country might leave an early Obamaian address believing that Americans have no conflict, that they support each other across racial and socioeconomic divisions, and that they selflessly care for one another in spite of their differences. But as any casual observer can attest, this is not at all true: America is in fact ridden with deep conflict and profound internal cleavages. But Obama ignores these realities and instead doggedly insists that “[America’s] common creed [...] cuts across whatever superficial differences we may have.”¹⁰⁷ In so doing, he provides a strong indication of his accomplished orientation and shows that he, like Winthrop, Reagan, and other accomplished exceptionalist thinkers, prefers the idealized vision of a peaceful, united America.

In addition to perpetuating the myth of American unity, Obama conceals and glosses over America’s flaws. As described in his early memorial speeches, America is not corrupt or immoral, but is a paragon of virtue—a nation which, “in the face of evil, will lift up what’s good.”¹⁰⁸ Obama crafts this appealing ideality using rhetorical tools borrowed from the ancient Greeks. Like the Attic eulogists, who highlighted Athens’ virtues while downplaying its

¹⁰⁶ Obama, “Remarks by the President at ‘A Concert for Hope.’”

¹⁰⁷ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA.”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

flaws,¹⁰⁹ Obama omits and/or transforms inglorious moments in the nation's history; he does not speak of Watergate and Guantanamo Bay, but instead highlights America's revolution,¹¹⁰ its Emancipation Proclamation,¹¹¹ and its V-E Day.¹¹² He also uses epideictic praise and blame to enhance stories of American virtue, celebrating Americans as "innocent"¹¹³ and "good"¹¹⁴ while condemning the country's enemies as "small, stunted,"¹¹⁵ "evil,"¹¹⁶ and "heinous."¹¹⁷ Hyperbole and exaggeration are also prevalent in Obama's speeches, and he uses these techniques to present America as a nation of universally strong character, a country that "*always* bounces back."¹¹⁸

Obama's early memorial addresses are also remarkably self-congratulatory. In them, Obama regularly applauds the country for its "heroic efforts,"¹¹⁹ for its "undimmed [...] spirit,"¹²⁰ and for its "courage and [...] compassion and [...] incredible grace."¹²¹ He also liberally expresses his great appreciation for his countrymen and emphasizes "how proud [he is] of them."¹²² And though his speeches are often responses to politically charged situations (gun

¹⁰⁹ For a discussion of this ancient Athenian rhetorical technique, see Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). See also Simon Stow, "Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning," *American Political Science Review* 101, No. 2 (May 2007): 196-198.

¹¹⁰ Obama, "Weekly Address: Giving Thanks to our Fallen Heroes this Memorial Day."

¹¹¹ Obama, "Remarks by the President at 'A Concert for Hope'" ("We have overcome slavery and Civil War.").

¹¹² See "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood," where Obama fondly describes an anonymous "grandfather who marched across Europe."

¹¹³ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA."

¹¹⁴ Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Peace Officers Memorial Service."

¹¹⁵ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA."

¹¹⁶ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil."

¹¹⁷ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA."

¹¹⁸ Obama, "Remarks by the President After Surveying Damage from Hurricane Sandy" (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁹ Obama, "Remarks by the President After Touring the Tornado Damage in Oklahoma."

¹²⁰ Obama, "Weekly Address: America Stands with the City of Boston."

¹²¹ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX."

¹²² Obama, "Remarks by the President After Touring the Tornado Damage in Oklahoma."

violence, terrorism, war, and the like), Obama never encourages his audience to consider whether they or their country might have contributed to the tragedy. In fact, he explicitly counsels listeners to avoid such critical reflection, and he admonishes them to avoid “pointing fingers or assigning blame.”¹²³ Implicitly, then, he encourages audiences to adopt a similarly self-congratulatory posture.

Finally, Obama draws heavily on the accomplished exceptionalist trope of assurance and describes America’s greatness in certain, rather than conditional, terms. Instead of presenting excellence as something the country must strive toward, Obama claims that America has always been exceptional—he insists, for example, that tragedies highlight America’s preexisting greatness and “simply reveal[] who [Americans have] always been.”¹²⁴ He also argues that America is great in the present moment (as quoted above, he suggests that Americans “need not look to the past for greatness, because it is before our very eyes”¹²⁵), and he confidently predicts that this greatness will carry forward into the future. Obama thus speaks of America in the indicative mood and asserts that “we recover”¹²⁶ (rather than “we *might* recover” or “we *could* recover”), “we rebuild”¹²⁷ (instead of “we *might* rebuild” or “we *could* rebuild”), and “we come back stronger” (instead of “we *might* come back stronger” or “we *hope to* come back stronger”).¹²⁸ He also explicitly and confidently anticipates the country’s future success—hence his expectant suggestion that, “if [the American] spirit is evident and manifest, and that’s what

¹²³ Obama, “Remarks at Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, AZ.”

¹²⁴ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service – Waco, TX.”

¹²⁵ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood.”

¹²⁶ Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: Recovering and Rebuilding After the Storm,” speech, November 3, 2012, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/03/weekly-address-recovering-and-rebuilding-after-storm>.

¹²⁷ Obama, “Weekly Address: Recovering and Rebuilding After the Storm.”

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

we're teaching our kids and that's what we're embodying in our own lives, then who can stop us? Who can touch us?"¹²⁹

At least in the early years of his presidency, then, Obama's memorial rhetoric was thoroughly accomplished—self-celebratory, uncritical, and historically amnesiac. But this changed on December 14, 2012, when a lone shooter killed 26 people (20 of them schoolchildren between ages six and seven) at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the days and weeks following this tragedy, Obama had numerous occasions to address the American populace. And in these speeches, he showed, for the first time, a new and more aspirational bent. Rather than celebrate the country and offer unconditional praise and commendation, Obama began critiquing, chastising, and highlighting the nation's flaws. He also began describing America's greatness contingently—as something that could be either thwarted or attained.

Consider, for example, Obama's December 16, 2012 remarks at the Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil. As in earlier speeches, Obama begins by praising the “strength,” “resolve,” “courage,” and “love” of America's “remarkable” citizens.¹³⁰ But this commendation does not last long, and Obama quickly shifts to a more critical, self-reflective register. Rather than offer an idealized account of the United States, Obama here draws attention to the troubling fact that in America, “there have been an endless series of deadly shootings [...], almost daily reports of victims, many of them children.”¹³¹ He further exposes—and condemns—the country's inexcusable “inaction” in the face of gun violence, and he explicitly suggests that “we're not doing enough.”¹³² These expository and accusatory comments mark a sharp

¹²⁹ Obama, “Remarks by the President to First Responders and Volunteers in Boston, MA.”

¹³⁰ Obama, “Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil.”

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

departure from the self-assured, self-congratulatory rhetoric that characterized his earlier memorial speeches and reveal an Obama who is, perhaps for the first time, willing to engage in serious, aspirational critique.

Obama's newfound aspirational exceptionalism is further evident in his calls for critical thought and reflection. As discussed above and in the Introduction, accomplished exceptionalists typically shy away from serious self-assessment, preferring instead to adopt comfortable and idealized images of their country and themselves.¹³³ But here, Obama asks his audience to face reality head-on and to think critically about whether and where they may have fallen short. And so, after telling his audience that "we are left with some hard questions," Obama explicitly asks his listeners whether "we [can] truly say, as a nation, that we are meeting our obligations."¹³⁴ He then offers a series of inquiries designed to provoke further critical thought: "Can we honestly say that we're doing enough to keep our children—all of them—safe from harm? Can we claim, as a nation, that we're all together there, letting them know that they are loved, and teaching them to love in return? Can we say that we're truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose?"¹³⁵

By asking these questions, Obama pushes his listeners to acknowledge the nation's flaws and, more importantly, to reflect on whether and how their actions (or inactions) have

¹³³ Nicole Loraux has suggested that ancient funeral rhetoric (which, like accomplished rhetoric, was remarkably idealized and self-celebratory) commonly left audiences feeling enchanted with idealized portrayals of themselves. Though she was not speaking of exceptionalism as such (and certainly not of *American* exceptionalism), her description of this enchanting effect could easily be applied to accomplished rhetoric, as well: "The funeral oration [or, in our case, accomplished rhetoric] abolished the frontiers that separate reality from fantasy and, by trying to focus excessively upon Athens [the United States], which it [turned] into a spectacle or a mirage, it [ended] by displacing Athens [the United States] from itself and substituting for the real city the phantom of an ideal polis, a utopia. Citizens of nowhere, the dazzled Athenians [Americans] [were] enthralled by the hollowest of all fantasies." *The Invention of Athens*, 287.

¹³⁴ Obama, "Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil."

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

contributed to its shortcomings. He thus demands recognition and accountability, and he expects his audience to think critically on their country and themselves. Gone, then, is the Obama who conceals flaws and discourages citizens from casting blame on one another. In his place—a president who exposes America’s fallibility, forces citizens to acknowledge their faults, and insists that “if we’re honest with ourselves, [...] we’re not doing enough.”¹³⁶

Though he is critical and self-reflective, though, Obama retains an aspirational hope in America’s future and potential. Like Douglass, Emerson, Baldwin, and Kaepernick, Obama is critical of his country, but he still believes that “we can do better than this.”¹³⁷ He also admits that “we will make mistakes,”¹³⁸ but he nonetheless encourages citizens to strive harder, to be better, and to “find the strength to carry on.”¹³⁹ If he condemns America’s shortcomings, then, he does so only in order to push the nation toward a better and brighter future. And so, despite his lamentations and critiques, he concludes with the hope that America can one day become “worthy of [the victims’] memory.”¹⁴⁰

Obama’s Sandy Hook address thus marks a dramatic departure from his earlier, accomplished exceptionalist memorial speeches. It also represents a turning point in Obama’s rhetoric, because in subsequent speeches, Obama draws on aspirational tropes with increasing frequency. There are, of course, many possible explanations for this shift—Obama might have adopted aspirational rhetoric as a means of articulating his sincere frustrations with the country, or he could have simply concluded that, at least on matters like gun violence, audiences

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

responded more favorably to aspirational speech. Or perhaps Obama recognized the constitutive and transformative power of aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric—a discourse that, in the face of tremendous tragedy and terror, can convey necessary criticisms, provoke introspection, and inspire political change—and drew on the tradition in order to inspire and motivate reform.¹⁴¹ But regardless of his motivations, the result remains the same: Obama gradually shifts away from accomplished exceptionalist tropes and is, by the end of his presidency, a full-fledged aspirational exceptionalist.

Obama's complete transition from accomplished to aspirational exceptionalist is perhaps most evident in his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, a reverend and state senator who was shot, along with eight of his congregants, while holding a prayer service on June 17, 2015.¹⁴² As expected, Obama begins his eulogy with praise: he describes Reverend Pinckney as being “full of empathy” and “true to his convictions,” and he celebrates the Reverend's “graciousness,” “smile” and “purity.”¹⁴³ After offering this conventional and celebratory portrait of the deceased, though, Obama shifts into aspirational gear. As he did in his Sandy Hook remarks, he highlights America's fractures and cleavages acknowledges that the American populace is

¹⁴¹ Though it is tempting to consider the reasons behind Obama's change in rhetoric, such an exploration is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Because of this, I do not, in this chapter, attempt to explain why Obama's rhetoric shifted from accomplished to aspirational exceptionalism; instead, I merely observe that this change occurred.

¹⁴² When the shooting occurred, Reverend Pinckney was holding a Bible study session at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, a 21-year-old white male, killed nine congregants, eight of whom died at the scene.

¹⁴³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney,” speech, June 26, 2015, transcript <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>.

deeply divided—by racial bias,¹⁴⁴ by poverty,¹⁴⁵ by gun violence,¹⁴⁶ and the like. He also eschews accomplished exceptionalism’s historical amnesia and instead speaks candidly about the darker moments in America’s past. Obama admits, for example, that “slavery [...] was wrong, [and] the imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance for civil rights for all people was wrong.”¹⁴⁷ He also calls for a more “honest accounting of America’s history” and suggests that a willingness to acknowledge the nation’s past faults would be “a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds.”¹⁴⁸

In addition to highlighting social cleavages and confronting the country’s sordid past, Obama offers sharp critiques of the present moment. He insists, for example, that “for too long, [Americans have] been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present” and have ignored the fact that “many of our children [...] languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career.”¹⁴⁹ He also condemns America’s prison and policing systems—which, he suggests, are “infected with bias”—and he lambasts the country for turning a blind eye “to the unique mayhem that violence inflicts upon this nation.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ He notes, for example, that “racial bias can infect us even when we don’t realize it, so that we’re guarding against not just racial slurs, but we’re also guarding against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal.” Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney.”

¹⁴⁵ For example, Obama candidly admits that as a senator, Reverend Pinckney represented “a place [...] wracked by poverty and inadequate schools.” *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Consider this bold description of America’s gun problem: “For too long, we’ve been blind to the unique mayhem that gun violence inflicts upon this nation. Sporadically, our eyes are open: When eight of our brothers and sisters are cut down in a church basement, 12 in a movie theater, 26 in an elementary school. But I hope we also see the 30 precious lives cut short by gun violence in this country every single day; the countless more whose lives are forever changed—the survivors crippled, the children traumatized and fearful every day as they walk to school, the husband who will never feel his wife’s warm touch, the entire communities whose grief overflows every time they have to watch what happened to them happen to some other place.” *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

He chastises his audience for “consider[ing] laws to make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote” and he laments that the American public has, whether by action or inaction, done things to “cause some of our children to hate.”¹⁵¹ He even accuses Americans of “rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each other,” and he boldly claims that “we’re all sinners.”¹⁵²

Obama also challenges his audience to engage in critical thought and self-reflection. For example, he admonishes Americans “ask some tough questions” and to “examine” whether their country is living up to its creeds.¹⁵³ He also encourages citizens to “acknowledg[e] the pain and loss of others,” to “open [...] [their] eyes” to the country’s flaws, and to stop “avoid[ing] uncomfortable truths about the prejudice that still infects our society.”¹⁵⁴ Obama does not, then, offer a comfortable panegyric that leaves audiences feeling satisfied and self-assured. Instead, he provokes, challenges, and rouses his listeners’ critical faculties and urges them to “see where [they’ve] been blind.”¹⁵⁵

Obama couples these requests for critical thought with bold calls for action and improvement. According to Obama, the horrific shooting in Charleston “has given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves.”¹⁵⁶ Obama implores his listeners to take advantage of this opportunity and to “make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove [them]selves worthy of this gift.”¹⁵⁷ And so, he admonishes the audience to “mak[e] the

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

moral choice to change” and to “do something” to correct the nation’s flaws. He also asks listeners to remain dedicated to improvement for as long as the process takes. “None of us can or should expect a transformation in race relations overnight,” he explains. “There’s no shortcut. [...] But it would be a betrayal of everything Reverend Pinckney stood for [...] if we allowed ourselves to slip into a comfortable silence again. [...] To settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change—that’s how we lose our way again.”¹⁵⁸

Obama’s eulogy is thus deeply aspirational—a near complete departure from the accomplished exceptionalist conventions that typified his earlier memorial rhetoric. Instead of praising the nation unconditionally, as he did in his first-term memorial addresses, Obama now offers critique and condemnation. And where he once encouraged thoughtless, self-assured celebration, he now calls for self-assessment, self-critique, and amelioration. The resulting eulogy is a masterful combination of criticism and commitment—a speech that reveals *both* Obama’s frustrations *and* his deep hope that the United States can, and will, “break the cycle” and pursue “a roadway toward a better world.”¹⁵⁹ It thus represents the crystallization of Obama’s aspirational thought and marks his complete transformation from accomplished to aspirational exceptionalist.

This remarkable shift shows, once again, that the aspirational tradition is alive and well in the contemporary United States, and that prominent public figures (from NFL players to the president) draw upon and utilize its tropes. But Obama’s rhetoric also reminds us that aspirational exceptionalism remains vulnerable and misunderstood. Because despite his near-perfect adoption of the aspirational exceptionalist mode, Obama was, to the end of his

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

presidency, criticized for being an un-American, un-patriotic apologist. His aspirational rhetoric was not, in other words, interpreted as an articulation of patriotism, love, or devotion. Like Kaepernick, then, Obama fell victim to prevailing accomplished exceptionalist norms and was written off for his critical, reflective, and sometimes harsh messages. That Americans never embraced him as an exceptionalist suggests that aspirational exceptionalism still occupies a tenuous and uncomfortable position in America's political and discursive culture: like Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin, it seems, today's aspirational exceptionalists are destined for pariahism.

III. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have identified and explored aspirational exceptionalism, a new and previously unrecognized form of American exceptionalist rhetoric. I have argued that aspirational exceptionalism is, like more traditional exceptionalist rhetoric, committed to the idea that the United States is special, chosen, and called to fulfil some unique role or mission. But unlike traditional, accomplished exceptionalism, this mode is caustic, critical, and attentive to flaws and fractures. It is premonitory and cautionary and is often articulated in harsh and uncomfortable terms. It also treats America's excellence as a possibility, but not a guarantee, and it suggests that America can and might fail to actualize its exceptional potential. Still, aspirational exceptionalism remains hopefully committed to the country's promising future. It thus encourages critical thought, calls for citizen action, and challenges audiences to strive to achieve America's exceptional potential.

By recovering and exploring this new mode of exceptionalist rhetoric, I have aimed to accomplish two things. First, I have hoped to challenge the conventional understanding—both in the academy and in society *writ large*—that American exceptionalism is always and necessarily self-celebratory, complacent, and uncritical. At present, academics and non-academics alike

largely assume that American exceptionalism is, and must always be, conservative, self-assured, and hyper-patriotic. Because of this, thinkers and public figures who are critical, who question the country's infallibility, or who suggest that America might have room to improve are condemned as being poor exceptionalists, or of lacking exceptionalists commitments.¹⁶⁰ By identifying a second, more critical mode of exceptionalism, I have tried to create space in the exceptionalist tradition for thinkers who, though devoted to the United States, are less assured of its inevitable greatness. I have, in other words, aimed to complicate the prevailing conception of American exceptionalism, and I have hoped to show that even critical, thoughtful figures contribute to the exceptionalist tradition.

Second, and more importantly, I have aimed to activate and create space for new modes of American citizenship. In the contemporary United States, American exceptionalism and citizenship norms are tightly linked: indeed, the quality of an individual's citizenship is often gauged by how well he or she conforms with exceptionalist norms.¹⁶¹ And because accomplished exceptionalism is the dominant mode of American exceptionalist discourse, its conservative, self-celebratory, and uncritical norms provide the governing framework for American citizenship practices. By identifying and studying the aspirational exceptionalist mode, then, I have not simply aimed to expand the American exceptionalist canon. I have also hoped to activate and create room for more active, thoughtful, and progressive citizenship practices—behaviors inspired by and consistent with aspirational exceptionalism's self-critical and ameliorative orientation.

¹⁶⁰ Again, the Obama/Romney exchanges are illustrative. See Introduction.

¹⁶¹ Hence why flag-burners and anthem protesters are viewed as unpatriotic—though they may feel love for and devotion to their country, they do not behave in ways consistent with accomplished exceptionalism's self-celebratory, uncritical conventions.

To these ends, I have offered readings of three unlikely exceptionalist thinkers—figures who are not typically considered exceptionalists but who typify the aspirational exceptionalist mode. I began with Frederick Douglass. Through close readings of “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” and “To My Old Master,” I argued that Douglass is an exceptionalist thinker: he believes that the United States is special and superior, and he suggests that it has been chosen to fulfil an important sociohistorical calling. But I also showed that Douglass employs rhetorical and stylistic techniques that are characteristic of aspirational American exceptionalist rhetoric, and that he regularly engages in sharp critique, bold criticism, and shocking exposure. I then discussed the nature and source of Douglass’ exceptionalist commitments and argued that his exceptionalism is grounded in his recognition of (and frustration with) the nation’s lofty promises and unrivaled hypocrisy. Lastly, I explored the distinct mode of citizenship that Douglass’ aspirational exceptionalism activates, and I suggested that Douglass uses both analytical and affective rhetorical strategies to endorse and model six basic citizenship practices: engaged involvement, active resistance, commitment to liberty and equality, frank speech, non-dogmatism, and hopeful optimism.

I next turned to Ralph Waldo Emerson, a thinker who has been excluded from the American exceptionalist tradition largely due to his reputation for apoliticality. As with Douglass, I showed that Emerson believes American is great, chosen, and superior. I also explored the basis of Emerson’s exceptionalist commitments and argued that he finds America exceptional because it offers ideal conditions (historical, geographic, and cultural) for individuals to cultivate and enact self-reliance. I then offered close readings of four Emersonian speeches (“Emancipation in the West Indies,” “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” “The Fugitive Slave Law,” and “The Fortune of the Republic”) and showed that, like Douglass, Emerson relies heavily

on aspirational exceptionalist tropes. Finally, I identified and described four distinctive citizenship practices that Emerson's aspirational exceptionalism activates: amelioration, action, resilience, and love.

Lastly, I analyzed James Baldwin's aspirational exceptionalism. Through close readings of Baldwin's essays and writings, I showed that he, like all exceptionalists, is devoted and committed to the United States. I further suggested that Baldwin's affection for the United States lies in his appreciation for the country's shifting indefiniteness and fluidity—a distinctly American social phenomenon which, according to Baldwin, equips the United States with limitless opportunities and possibility. I showed that like Douglass and Emerson, Baldwin works within the aspirational exceptionalist tradition, and that he regularly utilizes the aspirational tropes of exposure, critique, warning, and hope. I then suggested that Baldwin's aspirational rhetoric activates and a specific set of citizenship practices and encourages citizens to be self-reflective, interconnected, and actively involved in political life.

In addition to these three chapters, I have offered brief portraits of Colin Kaepernick and Barack Obama—two contemporary figures who embody the aspirational exceptionalist ethos. In so doing, I have demonstrated that there is room for aspirational exceptionalism in the contemporary American polis, and that even nation's most prominent statesmen and public figures occasionally speak in aspirational registers. But I have also shown that both Kaepernick and Obama have been criticized and condemned for their aspirational orientations, and that their respective use of aspirational tropes has been a source of national controversy and debate. It thus seems that the same forces that have kept Douglass, Emerson, and Baldwin out of the exceptionalist canon threaten to silence contemporary aspirational exceptionalists, as well. So,

although the aspirational tradition persists in the modern American state, its existence is tenuous, and it occupies a vulnerable and contested space in America's discursive culture.

But if this is true, then it is all the more crucial that contemporary readers, thinkers, and political theorists acknowledge and guard the aspirational exceptionalist tradition. As I have argued throughout the dissertation, language is a force that constructs reality and creates (and perpetuates) relationships of power and dominance. And because American exceptionalist rhetoric is, perhaps, the most prevalent and abiding rhetorical tradition in America, it has had (and can yet have) a profound influence on America's culture, citizenship practices, and politics. Thus far, the accomplished exceptionalist mode has dominated public discourse and has, accordingly, become the source of and standard for "good" American citizenship. But aspirational rhetoric has the potential to offset accomplished exceptionalism's self-assured and uncritical tone and to activate citizenship practices that are thoughtful, productive, and progressive. Anyone invested in the nation's past, present, or future thus ought to take aspirational exceptionalism seriously, for, though it is endangered and misunderstood, it offers new and promising opportunities for America to shape its identity and construct its continued existence.

Bibliography

- @jenniferleechan. 2016. "This team formation for the National Anthem is not Jeff Fisher approved. #HardKnocks." *Twitter*. 7:02 PM, August 26.
<https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769354272735531009>.
- @JustinPugh. 2016. "It's disrespectful to all the men and women who put their lives on the line to protect this country." *Twitter*. 9:30 AM, August 27.
<https://twitter.com/JustinPugh/status/769572893479018496>.
- @MikeGarafolo. 2016. "He's actually done it all preseason. No one noticed. First time in uniform was last night." *Twitter*. 4:34 AM, August 27.
https://twitter.com/MikeGarafolo/status/769498231243993088?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ninersnation.com%2F2016%2F8%2F27%2F12669048%2Fcolin-kaepernick-did-not-stand-during-the-national-anthem.
- @ProFootballTalk. 2016. "Colin Kaepernick sits during national anthem, one day after comparing American and Confederate flags on Twitter." *Twitter*. 11:48 PM, August 26.
https://twitter.com/ProFootballTalk/status/769426405008572416?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ninersnation.com%2F2016%2F8%2F27%2F12669048%2Fcolin-kaepernick-did-not-stand-during-the-national-anthem.
- @realDonaldTrump. 2017. "I asked @VP Pence to leave stadium if any players kneeled, disrespecting our country. I am proud of him and @SecondLady Karen." *Twitter*. 11:16 AM, October 8.
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/917091286607433728?lang=en>.
- @VP. 2017. "I left today's Colts game because @POTUS and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem." *Twitter*. 10:08 AM, October 8.
<https://twitter.com/vp/status/917074120084516865?lang=en>.
- Associated Press. 2017. "Colin Kaepernick Opts Out of Contract, Becomes Free Agent." *ESPN*. March 3. Accessed June 26, 2018. http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_id/18818589/colin-kaepernick-opts-contract-becomes-free-agent.
- . 2016. "Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem Over Treatment of Minorities." *The Guardian*. August 27. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/27/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest>.
- Boedeker, Hal. 2013. "Barack Obama in Boston: His Greatest Speech." *Orlando Sentinel*. April 18. Accessed June 27, 2018. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/blogs/tv-guy/os-barack-obama-in-boston-his-greatest-speech-20130418,0,2963180.post>.
- Boren, Cindy. 2017. "Vin Scully Vows He'll 'Never Watch Another NFL Game' Because of Anthem Protests." *Washington Post*. November 5. Accessed June 26, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2017/11/05/vin-scully-vows-hell-never-watch-another-nfl-game-because-of-anthem-protests/?utm_term=.31d69a9339c8.
- Boyer, Nate. 2016. "An Open Letter to Colin Kaepernick, From a Green Beret-Turned-Long Snapper." *Army Times*. August 30. Accessed June 26, 2018.
<https://www.armytimes.com/opinion/2016/08/30/an-open-letter-to-colin-kaepernick-from-a-green-beret-turned-long-snapper/>.

- Branch, John. 2017. "The Awakening of Colin Kaepernick." *New York Times*. September 7. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-protests.html>.
- Breech, John. 2016. "LOOK: Kaepernick Gets Mercilessly Booed For an Entire Half in San Diego." *CBS Sports*. September 2. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/look-kaepernick-gets-mercilessly-booed-for-an-entire-half-in-san-diego/>.
- Devaney, Jason. 2016. "Rep. Steve King on Kaepernick: 'Activism Sympathetic to ISIS'." *Newsmax*. September 13. Accessed June 27, 2018. <https://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/steve-king-kaepernick-activism-sympathetic/2016/09/13/id/748107/>.
- Douglass, Frederick. 2016. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." In *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola, 50-71. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Dubin, Jared. 2017. "Colin Kaepernick Opts Out of Contract with 49ers, Heads to Free Agency." *CBS Sports*. March 1. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-opts-out-of-contract-with-49ers-heads-to-free-agency/>.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 2016. "The Courage of Colin Kaepernick." *The Undeclared*. September 6. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://theundefeated.com/features/the-courage-of-colin-kaepernick/>.
- Flaherty, Brian. 2017. "From Kaepernick Sitting to Trump's Fiery Comments: NFL's Anthem Protests Have Spurred Discussion." *Washington Post*. September 24. Accessed June 26, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/sports/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protests-and-NFL-activism-in-quotes/?utm_term=.051d7620364d.
- Fleming, Colin. 2017. "Maybe Colin Kaepernick Is Just Not That Good." *New York Times*. September 1. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/colin-kaepernick.html>.
- Florio, Mike. 2018. "Kaepernick Collusion Case Proving that Teams Viewed Him as a Starting Quarterback." *Pro Football Talk NBC Sports*. May 21. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2018/05/21/kaepernick-collusion-case-proving-that-teams-viewed-him-as-a-starting-quarterback/>.
- . 2016. "Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem." *Pro Football Talk NBC Sports*. August 27. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2016/08/27/kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem>.
- Fox News Insider. 2016. "Colin Kaepernick Sat During National Anthem to Protest America's 'Oppression'." *Fox News Insider*. August 27. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://insider.foxnews.com/2016/08/27/nfl-quarterback-colin-kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem-protest-america>.
- Gregory, Sean. 2016. "All Across the Country, Athletes Are Fueling a Debate About How America Defines Patriotism." *Time*. September 22. Accessed June 27, 2018. <http://time.com/4504023/athletes-america-patriotism/>.
- Heitner, Darren. 2016. "Colin Kaepernick Tops Jersey Sales in NFL." *Forbes*. September 7. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2016/09/07/colin-kaepernick-tops-jersey-sales-in-nfl/#3b6115ac7aad>.
- Howard, Brandon. 2016. "Dolphins Owner Steve Ross Supports and Encourages Players' Right to Protest." *DolphinWire*. September 11. Accessed June 26, 2018.

- <https://dolphinswire.usatoday.com/2016/09/11/dolphins-owner-steven-ross-supports-and-encourages-players-right-to-protest/>.
- Hyde, Dave. 2016. "Four Protesting Dolphins Joined by a Big Fifth – Owner Steve Ross." *Sun Sentinel*. September 11. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/sports/miami-dolphins/fl-hyde-dolphins-seahawks-column-0912-20160911-column.html>.
- Jaffe, Greg. 2015. "Obama's New Patriotism." *The Washington Post*. June 3. Accessed June 26, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/?utm_term=.8ba3fc20b338.
- Jakobs, James W. 2017. "NAACP Voices Support for Colin Kaepernick, Plans Push to Remove 'Star Spangled Banner' as National Anthem." *ABC News*. November 8. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://abc7news.com/politics/naacp-voices-support-for-colin-kaepernick/2620092/>.
- Jeffries, Hakeem. 2017. "First Principles." *Speech to House of Representatives*. September 25. <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2017/9/25/house-section/article/h7439-1?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22steph%22%7D&r=1>.
- Jennings, Patrick. 2017. "Colin Kaepernick: From One Man Kneeling to a Movement Dividing a Country." *BBC Sport*. October 11. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/american-football/41530732>.
- Kaepernick, Colin. 2018. "Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award." *Speech*. April 21. <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2018/04/Colin-Kaepernick-Speech-Ambassador-of-Conscience-Final.pdf?x66178>.
- Kamal, Sameea. 2017. "Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee Kneels on House Floor in Solidarity with NFL Protests." *Los Angeles Times*. September 26. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-rep-sheila-jackson-lee-kneels-on-house-1506449211-htmlstory.html#nt=card>.
- Lahren, Tomi. 2017. "Final Thoughts on Sunday Kneeling by NFL Players." *Final Thoughts*. Fox News, September 11. <http://insider.foxnews.com/2017/09/11/tomi-lahren-final-thoughts-nfl-players-protesting-national-anthem>.
- . 2016. "Sit Down Colin Kaepernick." *Final Thoughts*. The Blaze, August 29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU62YQtC18>.
- Loraux, Nicole. 1986. *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Maiocco, Matt. 2016. "Kaepernick Takes Stand on Civil Rights, Sits During National Anthem." *NBC Sports*. August 27. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/49ers/kaepernick-takes-stand-civil-rights-sits-during-national-anthem>.
- McKirby, Euan. 2016. "NFL Star Colin Kaepernick Sits in Protest During National Anthem." *CNN*. August 28. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/28/sport/nfl-colin-kaepernick-protest-sit-down-national-anthem/index.html>.

- McMaster, Andrew. 2017. "These Celebrities and Leaders Are Joining the #TakeAKnee Movement." *GlobalCitizen.org*. September 26. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/colin-kaepernick-takeaknee-celebrities-protest/>.
- Nakamura, David. 2012. "In a Disaster, How the Commander in Chief Becomes the Healer in Chief." *Washington Post*. July 20. Accessed June 26, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-a-disaster-how-the-commander-in-chief-becomes-the-healer-in-chief/2012/07/20/gJQAq8b8yW_story.html?utm_term=.bd83811faefa.
- Obama, Barack. 2011. "Remarks at Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, AZ." *Speech*. January 12. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>.
- . 2012. "Remarks by the President After Hospital Visit." *Speech*. July 22. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/22/remarks-president-after-hospital-visit>.
- . 2012. "Remarks by the President After Surveying Damage from Hurricane Sandy." *Speech*. November 15. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/15/remarks-president-after-surveying-damage-hurricane-sandy>.
- . 2013. "Remarks by the President After Touring the Tornado Damage in Oklahoma." *Speech*. May 26. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/26/remarks-president-after-touring-tornado-damage-oklahoma>.
- . 2011. "Remarks by the President at 'A Concert for Hope'." *Speech*. September 11. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/11/remarks-president-concert-hope>.
- . 2013. "Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA." *Speech*. April 18. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-interfaith-service-boston-ma>.
- . 2009. "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood." *Speech*. November 10. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/remarks-president-memorial-service-fort-hood>.
- . 2013. "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service--Waco, TX." *Speech*. April 25. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/25/remarks-president-memorial-service-waco-tx>.
- . 2012. "Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil." *Speech*. December 16. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/16/remarks-president-sandy-hook-interfaith-prayer-vigil>.
- . 2012. "Remarks by the President at the American Red Cross." *Speech*. October 30. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/30/remarks-president-american-red-cross>.
- . 2013. "Remarks by the President at the National Peace Officers Memorial Service." *Speech*. May 15. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/15/remarks-president-national-peace-officers-memorial-service>.

- . 2012. "Remarks by the President at the Pentagon Memorial Service in Remembrance of 9/11." *Speech*. September 11. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/11/remarks-president-pentagon-memorial-service-remembrance-911>.
 - . 2015. "Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney." *Speech*. June 26. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>.
 - . 2013. "Remarks by the President to First Responders and Volunteers in Boston, MA." *Speech*. April 18. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-first-responders-and-volunteers-boston-ma>.
 - . 2013. "Statement by the President." *Speech*. April 19. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/19/statement-president>.
 - . 2013. "Weekly Address: America Stands with the City of Boston." *Speech*. April 20. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/20/weekly-address-america-stands-city-boston>.
 - . 2013. "Weekly Address: Giving Thanks to our Fallen Heroes this Memorial Day." *Speech*. May 25. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/25/weekly-address-giving-thanks-our-fallen-heroes-memorial-day>.
 - . 2012. "Weekly Address: Recovering and Rebuilding After the Storm." *Speech*. November 3. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/03/weekly-address-recovering-and-rebuilding-after-storm>.
- O'Reilly, Bill. 2017. "Anthem Protestors Disrespecting Flag, Country." *Hannity*. September 26. Transcript available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2017/09/26/bill-oreilly-anthem-protesters-disrespecting-flag-country.html>.
- Patmas, Michael. 2011. "2011 NFL Draft Results: Nevada's Colin Kaepernick Drafted by San Francisco." *Bleacher Report*. April 29. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/684755-nevadas-colin-kaepernick-drafted-by-san-francisco>.
- . 2011. "NFL Draft 2011: Why Nevada's Colin Kaepernick Is the Best of the Bunch." *Bleacher Report*. March 7. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/629296-2011-nfl-draft-why-nevadas-colin-kaepernick-is-the-best-of-the-bunch>.
- Reid, Eric. 2017. "Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee ." *New York Times*. September 25. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html>.
- Romney, Mitt. 2011. "Romney's Foreign Policy Speech." *Weekly Standard*. October 7. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/romneys-foreign-policy-speech/article/595152?page=2>.
- Sandritter, Mark. 2017. "A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest and the Athletes Who Joined Him." *SB Nation*. September 25. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl>.

- Seifert, Kevin, and Dan Graziano. 2018. "New Policy Requires On-Field Players, Personnel to Stand for Anthem." *ESPN*. May 24. http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/23582533/nfl-owners-approve-new-national-anthem-policy.
- Stableford, Dylan. 2011. "Even Fox News Loved Obama's Tucson Memorial Speech Last Night." *The Wrap*. January 13. Accessed June 27, 2018. <http://www.thewrap.com/media/column-post/even-fox-news-loved-obama-tucson-speech-last-night-23867>.
- Stiehm, Jamie. 2012. "Obama's Newton Shooting Speech Was Best of His Presidency." *US News*. December 18. Accessed June 27, 2018. <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/jamie-stiehm/2012/12/18/obamas-words-offer-solace-in-the-wake-of-newtown>.
- Stow, Simon. 2007. "Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning." *American Political Science Review* 101 (2): 195-208.
- Tatum, Sophie. 2017. "Trump: NFL Owners Should Fire Players Who Protest the National Anthem." *CNN*. September 23. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-alabama-nfl/index.html>.
- Thomas, Jeanna. 2017. "Colin Kaepernick Has Some of the NFL's Best-Selling Merchandise Even Though Teams Don't Want Him." *SB Nation*. August 1. <https://www.sbnation.com/2017/8/1/16074976/nfl-colin-kaepernick-anthem-protest-jersey-sales>.
- Triplett, Mike. 2016. "Drew Brees 'Wholeheartedly' Disagrees with Colin Kaepernick's Method of Protest." *ESPN*. August 29. Accessed June 26, 2018. http://www.espn.com/blog/new-orleans-saints/post/_/id/23063/drew-brees-wholeheartedly-disagrees-with-colin-kaepernicks-method-of-protest.
- Wagner, John, and Mark Maske. 2018. "Trump: NFL Players Unwilling to Stand for Anthem Maybe 'Shouldn't Be in the Country'." *Washington Post*. May 24. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-nfl-owners-doing-the-right-thing-on-national-anthem-policy/2018>.
- Wagner, Kyle. 2017. "Colin Kaepernick is Not Supposed to Be Unemployed." *FiveThirtyEight*. August 9. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/colin-kaepernick-is-not-supposed-to-be-unemployed/>.
- Wagoner, Nick. 2016. "Bills Fans Boo Colin Kaepernick, Chant 'USA' Before He Kneels." *ABC News*. October 17. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/bills-fans-boo-colin-kaepernick-chant-usa-kneels/story?id=42866573>.
- . 2016. "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments About Sitting During National Anthem." *ESPN*. August 28. Accessed June 26, 2018. http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_/id/18957/transcript-of-colin-kaepernicks-comments-about-sitting-during-national-anth.
- Wagoner, Nick, and Associated Press. 2016. "Colin Kaepernick Protests Anthem Over Treatment of Minorities." *ESPN*. August 28. Accessed June 26, 2018. http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17401815/colin-kaepernick-san-francisco-49ers-sits-national-anthem-prior-preseason-game.

- Watkins, Eli. 2017. "Pence Leaves Colts Game After Protest During Anthem." *CNN*. October 9. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/08/politics/vice-president-mike-pence-nfl-protest/index.html>.
- Wells, Adam. n.d. "Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem Before Packers v. 49ers." *Bleacher Report*. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2660085-colin-kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem-before-packers-vs-49ers>.
- Wilson, Ryan. 2016. "Esiason on Kaepernick Sitting: 'It's About As Disrespectful as Any Athlete Has Ever Been.'" *CBS Sports*. August 31. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/esiason-on-kaepernick-sitting-its-about-as-disrespectful-as-any-athlete-has-ever-been/>.
- Wyche, Steve. 2016. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During National Anthem." *NFL.com*. August 27. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem>.
- Zirin, Dave. 2017. "The NFL Wants You to Think Colin Kaepernick Isn't Being Sidelined by Politics. The NFL Is Wrong – Again." *Los Angeles Times*. September 8. Accessed June 26, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-zirin-kaepernick-20170908-story.html>.