Promising America:
Imagining Democracy, Democratizing Imagination

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Political Science in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This project interrogates the conditions of democratic imagination in the United States. I evaluate the role of imagination in political theory and in United States history, contextualizing my theoretical arguments through analyses of the Revolution and Founding and through a case study of the Populist movement of the 1870s-1890s. I treat imagination as a productive and representative social power that is constituted in relation to the everyday terrain on which subjects, discourses, and material realities are formed and practiced. Imagination plays a paradoxical role in the history of political theory: it is a fundamental condition of political community, and yet it has the potential to transgress any given configuration of political order. Democratic theorists commonly respond to this paradox by moving to one side of it. Those concerned with democratic stability and belonging seek to ground imagination in some incontestable cultural authority; those concerned with democratic dynamism and freedom take the power of imagination to be illimitable. Constructing a conversation between Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Bakhtin, Hannah Arendt, and Populism, I argue that freedom requires attending to the everyday tensions between the stabilizing and dynamic powers of imagination. Contemporary mergers of capitalism, technology, and administrative power centralize political imagination by incorporating, concealing, or destroying competing cultural forms and practices. For the promise of freedom to survive, and at times even flourish, it is thus crucial to cultivate dynamic traditions, institutions, practices, and dispositions that can harbor emergent imaginings of democracy.
For my father, William Francis Grattan, whose spirit is
alive in these pages, and for my mother, Marcia Grattan,
who reminds me daily to hunger for beauty.
Yes, it is bread we fight for -- but we fight for roses, too!

—James Oppenheim
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Acknowledgments

This dissertation is an imperfect expression of the relationships, experiences, and conversations that begat it. I suspect that I may never have written it, or at least that I would have done so much less sanely, if it were not for several people.

Anyone would be lucky to have an advisor who is as passionate and challenging in his thinking, as generous with his time and ideas, and as supportive personally and professionally as either Rom Coles or Peter Euben. To benefit from the mentorship and friendship of both is a rare gift. In different ways, each refuses to let political theory rest easily in its academic ruts. Without their efforts to create spaces that heighten and clarify the stakes of political thinking and doing, I could never have dared to undertake a project on political imagination. My own imagination of politics has also been sharpened intellectually over the years by several others, not least of all my early mentors, Cathy Melanson, Joel Schwartz, and John Dedrick. As I framed this particular project, my thinking benefited in its formative stages from conversations with Mark Reinhardt and George Shulman and from an especially probing response by Jason Frank to a conference paper on Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, and Populism. My dissertation defense provided incredibly constructive feedback from two new readers, Tom Spragens and Susan Bickford, and I’m grateful to them for critiques and extensions that should add both rigor and generosity to my writing in the next stages of this project. Finally, I am indebted to the Earhart Foundation and the Kenan Institute for Ethics for financial support at various stages of my graduate training. I am also grateful that these fellowships
brought me into closer conversation with Ruth Grant, whose voice was often with me as I wrote.

I would not be a political theorist today, nor could I have written this particular dissertation, if not for my engagements with two networks at the intersections of theory and practice. My time as a research assistant at the Kettering Foundation directly influenced my decision to pursue a career in academia by introducing me to faculty who are connecting rigorous scholarship with public life. During graduate school, I had the good fortune to deepen my exchanges with many of them through a working group on deliberative democracy and civic engagement in higher education. At the same time, seven years of community organizing with Durham CAN (Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods) and Duke Organizing has been fundamental to my development as a political theorist. What I will remember most about my time in Durham is this vibrant group of community activists, service employees, students, and faculty who put their bodies on the line time and again to change cultures of learning, working, and acting across racial, ethnic, class, and campus-community divides. Their questions, angers, passions, provocations, and imaginings animated this project.

I have my friends to thank first and foremost for getting me through graduate school and hopefully coming out a better person on the other side. I am especially grateful to Betsy Albright, Ali Aslam, PJ Brendese, Jason Cross, Jessica Levy, and Conor Seyle. Each has done his or her share of listening patiently to my ideas, passions, and frustrations; of encouraging me to keep going or challenging me to find new directions;
and of laughing with me and even at me when it was most needed. I’ve also been fortunate to learn from them as they struggle daily to connect their academic and professional lives to their political hopes and strivings.

Car manufacturers and railroad companies figure as villains in this story, but I come from a family whose livelihood has depended on them in many ways. My dad’s grandparents and uncles were Irish immigrants who worked on the railroads in Kansas, and my mom grew up in Warren, Michigan, within walking distance from the General Motors Technical Center. For my family still living in “the brave, the bold, the battered/heart of Chevrolet,” the stakes of democratic imagining have never felt higher. I hope this project does some justice in conveying not only their hopes and fears for America, but also the heartland generosity they have shown me all my life. On a more personal note, I’m grateful to my parents, my brothers, and their families for providing a root system that still nourishes me in the best sense. And I feel incredibly lucky to have gained a Canadian family whose humor is a new source of inspiration. I’m especially grateful to Tom and Kathy Barnett for welcoming me into a family more generous in their support and encouragement than the Canadian Council.

As I began writing this dissertation, I became ever conscious of the ways in which I am the biggest exception to many of my claims in these pages. Fortunately, in politics and love, we don’t act alone. This project, like many parts of me, would be less complete and much less daring were it not for Fiona Barnett, who challenges me like no one ever has to imagine doing the impossible and who supports me every step of the way.
PREFACE

The Cracked Mirror of Democracy

By raising awkward questions about modern forms of democracy, and often representing the ugly face of the people, populism is neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy, but a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all, and find out what it is about and what it is lacking.

—Francisco Panizza

Like the American dream itself, ever present and never fully realized, populism lives too deeply in our fears and expectations to be trivialized or replaced. We should not speak solely within its terms, but, without it, we are lost.

—Michael Kazin

Sheldon Wolin once argued that “populism is the culture of democracy.”

Lawrence Goodwyn has called it America’s Democratic Promise. For those familiar with Thomas Frank’s bestseller, What’s the Matter with Kansas, you might ask: What's the matter with Wolin? Or, for those who’ve seen populist icon John Mellancamp’s song, Our Country, appropriated first by Chevrolet, then by John McCain, and finally by Hilary Clinton, you might ask: Is Goodwyn really that naïve?

Goodwyn and Wolin were writing about the Populist movement of the late-nineteenth century, which was arguably one of the most massive, most sustained

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moments of democratic imagining in United States history. For about two decades, from the 1870s through the 1890s, the National Farmer’s Alliance organized some 40,000 local alliances across 43 states and territories. It created a widespread network of cooperative economies; nurtured a mobile system of grassroots education, deliberation, and protest; and formed coalitions, if tenuous ones, with black farmers, immigrant workers, socialists, and suffragettes, among others. These coalitions resulted directly in the People’s Party of the 1890s. The Populist movement enabled hundreds of thousands of Americans to imagine new forms of democracy—based on an egalitarian political economy, a protective state, and institutions of civil society in which people could address common problems across socioeconomic, religious, and ideological divides. That was, until its agenda was appropriated by the Democratic Party of William Jennings Bryan in 1896. Or perhaps the movement’s new imaginings of democracy were simultaneously de-democratized as early as 1877, when the Farmer’s Alliance, the eventual organ of Populism, constituted itself to the exclusion of black Americans.\(^5\)

There is certainly cause for ambivalence about the links between populism and democracy in America. If populism is at base a politics of the people, it tends to be promiscuous about its ideological affiliations. Today the term is appropriated by urban community organizers, grassroots environmentalists, people engaged in efforts to pluralize economic power, but also conservative and libertarian participants in “tax day tea parties,” citizen border patrollers, and right-wing Christian fundamentalists, among

\(^5\) *Ibid.* Note: I use Populism in the major case to describe the late-nineteenth century movement, and populism in the minor case to describe a mode of political rhetoric and organizing.
others. Hardly a monopoly of the grassroots, populism is repeatedly deployed as a mainstream discourse to define American democracy. In the 2008 Presidential election cycle, for example, the term populism was used frequently by the media to describe the following disparate imaginations of American democracy: Barak Obama’s grassroots campaign for a New America, John Edwards’ socio-economic narrative of Two Americas, and Sarah Palin’s small-town rallying cries to the Real America. Not to be left out, Hillary Clinton, Mike Huckabee, Sam Brownback, John McCain, and even Ron Paul were all branded populists at one point or another. As Michael Kazin laments, even the language of populism has by now been co-opted by corporate-media and major-party spin doctors, who “try to pitch populism to a broad segment of the national market.”  

Perhaps this spin-doctoring of populism is merely another sign of the commodification of American democracy by a capitalist culture. A recent cover story in Newsweek put this question succinctly: “Do populist outbursts like the one sparked by the AIG bonuses represent a threat to capitalism—or an opportunity?”

As Kazin suggests in the epigraph, populism brings to the surface deep ambivalences not only about populism, but about how we imagine America, how we imagine democracy, and even how we imagine imagination. That ambivalence animates this project and orients its central questions: What are the interrelationships between power and imagination? How are new imaginings—of democracy, America, populism, and so on—constituted in relation to the differences at their edges? How do centralizing

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6 Kazin, 279.
modes of imagination variously conceal, incorporate, or erase those differences? How can they be decentered? How do counter-current imaginings struggle to emerge in relation to democratic and anti-democratic forces that vie to pull them in competing directions? What cultural spaces, practices, relations, and traditions could be resources for democracy, in the specific sense of cultivating opportunities both to imagine democracy and to democratize imagination? And how could they, in turn, be tended? I address these questions in several iterations, contextualizing my theoretical arguments through reflections on popular culture, analyses of the Revolutionary and Constitutional era, and finally, a case study of the Populist movement. By the time I come back to Populism, these questions will be inflected with additional conversations: about the spatial and temporal practices of power and powerlessness; the habituation of bodies and imaginations; the dynamics and performativity of action and discourse; and the generative tensions between concepts such as authority, belonging, and freedom.

My ambivalence about imagination is not new. For theorists as diverse as Plato and Thomas Hobbes, imagination figures as a central and yet deeply ambivalent power in political theory and practice. I draw Plato and Hobbes together in the introduction to elaborate what I consider the constitutive paradox of imagination at the heart of political theory and politics: imagination is not only pluralizing and transgressive but also fundamental—when harnessed to centralizing forms of knowledge, language, subjectivity, or culture—to founding, ordering, and controlling political society. In this respect, politics entails not only organizing collective life, but also organizing the power to imagine it. And imagination’s centrality to politics places it at the center of many of
the deepest debates in political theory and practice, including the relationships between universality and particularity, stability and dynamism, order and disorder, and belonging and freedom. Throughout the project I use the paradoxical quality of political imagination to interrogate the common tendency, identified in the works of Plato and Hobbes and in much of democratic theory, to conceive order in relationship to universality, stability, and belonging, and disorder in relation to the particularity, dynamism, and freedom.

Theorists tend to respond to their ambivalence about imagination by limiting its role in politics—that is, by protecting and enabling the forms of imagination they find desirable, and by constraining or even controlling those they fear. The specific anxieties one attaches to the paradox of political imagination depend significantly on how one understands imagination and its role in politics, as well as what hopes one attaches to the political. Political theorists often conceive of imagination as a representative faculty that makes present what is absent to us, often by synthesizing a manifold of particular perspectives on a thing into an image or idea of the whole. We also conceive of it as an active power or capacity to produce things in the world: new ideas, images, discourses, identities, traditions, objects, and so on. Imagination is less often taken as an embodied capacity, one that is shaped in relation to our practical experiences in the everyday contexts and rhythms of material and cultural life. I take all three concepts of imagination to be interrelated, but I emphasize the last in my analyses.

I interrogate the limits on imagination throughout the project, in relation to a variety of political hopes that overlap and diverge in different texts and contexts. My own cautious hopes and anxieties center on questions of how to practice and organize—and
how to imagine at all, or less obtusely—democratic modes of power and freedom. My understanding of democracy will gain flesh as I go, but as a barebones definition, my debts are to a tradition of democratic theory best articulated by Wolin. For him, democracy today is about the work of freedom amidst growing, merging, and rapidly innovating concentrations of global capital, state expansion, technological power, and corporate media. That work requires tending the cultural sites and practices that enable people to share in the power of caring for common goods, differences, and “emergent irregularities.” This is a formative and transformative “politics that is rooted locally, experienced daily, and practiced regularly,” but has its broader horizons set on wielding power to steer and radically restructure the machinery of the state. Since the cultural sites and practices of democratic freedom are hard won and always in danger of extinction vis-à-vis the corporate state, democratic politics develops practices of conserving and caring for democratic traditions, institutions, and habits, so as to enable democracy’s emergence in the future. As such, the spaces and practices of democracy are democratizing, in that they pluralize and create new forms of power, culture, subjectivity, and imagining.⁸

My anxieties about democracy are bound to my anxieties about America. Our ability to distinguish the spaces and practices of democratic and anti-democratic imagining in the United States is crucial given the ubiquitous deployment of “America” to both promote democratic freedoms and severely restrict participation in decisions about their content and scope. I use my reflections on American history and culture to

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trace two motifs that describe how democratic theory and practice have commonly understood the limits of democratic imagination: at one extreme, a radically dynamic belief in the unlimited power of democracy and imagination; at the other, an often orthodox concern for their stability.

The motif of stability describes modes of classical republicanism, communitarianism, and liberal nationalism associated with theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Samuel Huntington. It emphasizes the need to cultivate stable forms of order and belonging as prerequisites for imagining freedom. It explicitly places certain forms of cultural authority beneath the reach of inquiry and critique. But it is less explicit about the effect such truncations have—on our everyday orientations and dispositions to others and the world, on our habits of thought and action, and on what is left unthinkable and unsayable to us. These evasions raise two crucial questions: What are the constraints on imagination, and freedom, of not acknowledging those everyday habits and dispositions that are undemocratic? And what happens when we fail to habituate ourselves to recognize and respond to emergent imaginings of collective life?

The motif of dynamism celebrates what Thomas Paine characterizes as the unbridled power of imagination, or what social theorist Roberto Unger calls “restless experimentalism.” Its benchmark for freedom isn’t a common beginning ground; it’s the endless capacity for natality, that is, to inaugurate new political beginnings. But if democracy romanticizes imagination as an illimitable force of the future, it risks reproducing the very logics of power it hopes to displace. If dynamic imagination can
indeed be democratizing, it is more often the prerogative of centralizing modes of
corporate and state power. This kind of radical dynamism dislocates and disorients
imagination, disposing it to what Sheldon Wolin has called “normalized agitation.”

While both motifs contain crucial insights about democratic imagination and its
relationship to freedom, neither sufficiently negotiates the tensions between ordering and
disordering imagination. I develop an alternative theory, in which the forms that organize
democratic imagining are dynamic, mobile, and pluralizing enough to animate new
possibilities for democratizing imagination. In particular, I elaborate the relationship
between the spaces and practices of radical democratic natality and the spaces and
practices of caring for a more durable world that can harbor—and contest—future
potentials for acting and imagining. I begin this work by constructing a conversation
between Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Bourdieu and Arendt can
be read, respectively, as caricatures of stability and dynamism. I read each against the
grain to elaborate not only the limits of imaginations that are inescapably embodied in
and habituated by the world, but also their political and ethical possibilities for imagining
freedom. I mediate and extend this conversation through Bakhtinian interjections.
Bakhtin describes not the tension between stability and dynamism, but rather the
dynamics of centripetal and centrifugal forces of culture and language that constitute
every new act, opening it to futures we cannot control. In this, he compels us to ask what
spaces, practices, and bodies of imagination could buoy performances of natality that are
dialogically contested from the start?
In the final chapter, I elucidate and extend these questions, as well as my concerns about democratizing imagination in America, through a descriptive evaluation of the late-nineteenth century Populist movement. In an era of destructive dynamism and previously inconceivable concentrations of power, as well as persistent patriarchal relationships and resurgent forms of white supremacy and nativism, Populism affirmed and built countercurrent cultures of democracy, political economy, and progress. But the movement emerged in fields of centripetal and centrifugal powers that sought both to centralize and to decenter its imagination. As a result, its most radical democratic imaginings contained profound myopias. I evaluate Populism’s spatial, temporal, discursive, and coalitional practices, for insights on which had potential to democratize imagining—both in relation to the dominant cultural forms it sought to change, and in relation to the limits those forms placed on Populism’s own imagining. But the story I tell is a cautious one. I am not primarily interested in the hopeful possibilities suggested by the movement, nor do I think we should let Populism disappear from the exemplary moments of radical democratic struggle in America. My concern throughout the project is to understand what it would mean for radical democracy to live with its fears and expectations for democratic freedom, without letting its imagination be overrun by romanticism or cynicism.

My own hopes for democratic imagining come from my sense that Populism is neither the mirror of democracy, nor even one instantiation that offers sole terms through which we could speak about democracy. Rather, the mirror of Populism was cracked from its many inceptions; its terms were constituted by blacks, Eastern European
immigrants, socialists, suffragettes, and others whose imaginings decentered the
movement and whose traditions have not gone out of the world for good. My aim for this
project is to suggest some of the ways in which such traditions could be cultivated as
resources for radical democratic imagining today.
CHAPTER ONE

American Anxiety:

The Paradox of Political Imagination

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.
--Leonard Cohen

An American Anthem: “Our Country, Our Truck”

America is a light-duty, full-size pickup truck rolling down an open road. This is the tagline of, “Anthem,” a Chevrolet Silverado television advertisement unveiled in 2006 as an extension of the company’s “An American Revolution” marketing campaign. The ad pairs John Mellencamp’s “Our Country” with a montage of images from the United States’ past and present: vintage photographs of the Statue of Liberty and Wall Street, news footage of Martin Luther King, Jr., delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech and Richard Nixon waving from his helicopter after his resignation, video frames capturing the heights of America’s first spacewalk and the depths of its natural wonder in the Grand Canyon. In one sequence, a photograph of Rosa Parks at the front of a bus rests easily next to idyllic, white-1950s leisure scenes, while Mellencamp sings, “I can stand beside ideals I think are right.” He continues, “And I can stand beside the idea to stand

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and fight,” as the ad cuts seamlessly between footage of American soldiers in Vietnam, the draft-dodging boxer Muhammad Ali back home, and hippies dancing to a presumably more peaceful tune. Fast-forward to the present and a rousing chorus of “This is our country” carries us through images of disaster and resiliency: forest fires raging out West, Hurricane Katrina flooding the Gulf Coast, volunteers rebuilding homes, the two towers of light beaming above New York’s skyline, a team of firefighters, a soldier reunited with his daughter. The ad comes to a close as a Chevy Silverado rolls to a stop in an open wheat field, a young white boy looks up from the driver side window, and a voice-over provides the tagline: “This is our country. This is our truck.”

Perhaps the symbolic power of “America” has become so ubiquitous that it’s hardly provocative to begin a dissertation on the politics of imagination in America with the statement: “America is a light-duty, full-size pickup truck rolling down an open road.” Perhaps the symbol, at least, has become so confused that it is at once light-weight (meaningless enough to have lost its ethical and political vigor, mobilizing people only to turn off their television sets to buy a pickup truck) and larger-than-life (powerful enough to comprehend all that would contest either its semantic boundaries or the dominance it continues to justify on the world stage). This concern is an important animus for my project, as my theoretical engagements with grassroots democratic social movements will lead me to interrogate, challenge, and finally recuperate—in strange and surprising forms—the promising of America as one vital resource for imagining democracy today.

But I want to begin by asking, in the first place, why Chevrolet has produced this particular imagination of America at this particular moment in time. The company’s
“Like a Rock” marketing campaign, long-running but less lofty, had already helped make the Silverado the second best selling truck of its kind. Why did Chevy believe it could do better, now, by aligning its iconic brand with an appeal to and imagination of America? I take this question to have three parts: Why now? Why this particular imagination? Why Chevy? What I offer, briefly, are not answers but a set of initial thoughts and extending questions that might help us begin to reflect on the conditions, challenges, and possibilities of political imagination in America.

Why now? Chevy offers a celebration of America—its values of democracy and freedom, its economic prosperity and ingenuity, its voluntarism and patriotism, its military might and righteousness—during a decade that has widely been marked by the nation’s crisis of confidence at home and abroad. The ad invokes many of the moments past and present that have shaken America to its core and draws a parallel between the tumultuous era of the sixties and seventies and today. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the ecological and social disaster of Hurricane Katrina are only two of the recent events that have forced America to face its limits as a physical territory, as a set of cultural, economic, and political norms and institutions, and as an ideal. A decade inaugurated by an election debacle that challenged the legitimacy of our democracy at home has engaged us in two wars that undermine our image abroad, has paralyzed us around an immigration debate that exposes the porosity of our territorial, economic, political, and cultural borders, and has awakened us to an ecological crisis that threatens our posterity. Americans are feeling vulnerable and anxious—perhaps at a deep level about the power of our imagination—and Chevy has stepped in to assure us that “we’ve
had some bruises and scars, yeah, but we’ve gotten up and gotten on with it.”

Might we, then, add Chevrolet to a long tradition of political theorists and practitioners, from Plato, to Thomas Hobbes, to the American founders, to Martin Luther King, Jr., who have taken up the task of imagining political society during times of loss, crisis, and revolution?

And if Chevy is indeed tapping into a sense of instability in America, what might we learn from the imagination of America it has produced in order to rebuild? Is it not, after all, a wager to promote positive brand recognition around images that might stir up in many people a sense of vulnerability, loss, discord, corruption, and violence, even as the very same images or those spliced into their mix evoke a sense of security, pride, solidarity, wholeness, and awe? If Chevy’s advertisement imagines a nation united, how does it understand the differences it represents? How is its imagination of “Our Country” able to create a sense of common purpose out of conflicts that have rattled America? And what and whom has it had to edit out all together to sustain its narrative of a nation rebuilt and fortified? What would become of Chevy’s America, for example, if its memorials to Parks and King as symbols of racial harmony and national unity were supplemented by the bitter narratives of institutional racism and abandonment still surfacing in the Gulf Coast today? We might wonder too whether and how Chevy’s America could account for recent mass mobilizations of illegalized immigrants and their allies in cities and towns across the country.

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4 The absence of Latinos (or at least anyone coded as Latino) from the ad is striking, though it should not be overlooked that Chevy has long considered Latinos a target market—developing advertising campaigns
But Chevy does not want to leave us feeling incomplete—the twin towers of light are perhaps the most profound symbol of healing one can summon today—and its imagination of America represents a spatial and temporal wholeness. The scars on our soil have been repaired, the threats to our borders edited out, and the discord of red and blue America replaced by Mellencamp’s patriotic chorus circumscribing us “From the east coast/ To the west coast/ Down the Dixie Highway/ Back home/ This is our country.” As “Our Country” shores up its spatial borders, so too does it solidify its master narrative, recasting and even erasing all that would contest America’s progressive upward reach toward a national destiny invoked in the ad’s initial establishing shots of the Statue of Liberty and Wall Street.

Is it not fitting, then, that Chevy should take up the task of imagining America? Its media campaign participates in a rich tradition of identifying patriotism both with the automobile and with buying American. But, of course, Chevy and its parent company, General Motors, are multinational corporations, and large portions of its “American Revolution” line are manufactured outside the nation’s borders. For Americans whose work and livelihood depend on the production calculations of multinational firms, Chevy directed toward them and sponsoring Latino music and sporting events. During the 2004 World Series, Chevy aired a television ad in Spanish, called “Subete,” or “Come Onboard.” Rather than resolving my questions and concerns, this in many ways extends them, as I suggest below. The ad’s title reveals an assimilationist approach, in which new immigrants are welcomed into a pre-existing structure on terms that have been pre-set. As Chevy symbolically extends the invitation in “Subete,” and its acceptance takes the form of buying a truck, those terms appear to be corporate regulation of the flow of immigrants, and immigrant imaginations, into America and the relegation of citizenship—and our participation in imagining America—to the economic realm. See Paul Eisenstein, “Automakers Target Hispanic Market,” *The Car Connection*, December 13, 2004, [http://www.thecarconnection.com/article/1006604_automakers-target-hispanic-market](http://www.thecarconnection.com/article/1006604_automakers-target-hispanic-market) (accessed March 24, 2009).
might paradoxically signify the weakening hold of the traditional form of the nation-state over its affairs—and over its own imagination. To ask, why Chevy, is to ask not only about what we imagine, but about how and where we imagine, and about who imagines. It is to understand imagination not only as representation but as production—involving actors, stages, relationships, tempos, and times. How do we, as an audience, participate in Chevy’s imagination of America? How might we enable and reproduce, or question and rearrange, the edited symbol of America placed before us? What does it say about our understanding and practice of citizenship, and imagination, if we respond to the ad’s patriotic spirit by buying Chevy, while continuing to opt out of the political process? If we are not Chevy’s target market, to what degree, in what ways, and in what locations might our participation in imagining America count? And what, finally, does it mean to take part in “An American Revolution” today?

These questions remind us, of course, that Chevy’s imagination of “Our Country” is by no means comprehensive of the politics of imagining America. That the ad’s own mode of production relies on montage belies the message of spatial and temporal wholeness it represents. As a practice of editing in film and media, montage aims to produce narrative and aesthetic effects by juxtaposing selected images and sounds, in deliberate spatial and temporal relationships, oriented or disoriented by choices in duration, tempo, and rhythm. Every montage, like every production and representation of imagination, edits its final take in relation to the irreducible material, discursive, and aesthetic world in which it is implicated. It creates its overall imaginative effect by strategically foregrounding and backgrounding different elements of that world, including
its own artifice and techniques of production. Chevy’s montage relies on continuous and invisible editing techniques to foreground its master narrative of America as a land of freedom, opportunity, and progress. From its establishing shots of the Statue of Liberty and Wall Street, through its seamless cuts of standard duration, easy tempo, and consistent rhythm, to its parting shot of a young white boy at the wheel of a pickup truck, the ad invokes and reinforces the linear futural trajectory of this familiar narrative. Potentially divergent and disruptive images are instead woven together by recurrent motifs—hats, crowds, sitting, waving, dancing—and reigned in by Mellencamp’s feel-good, unifying lyrics. The final take is a pre-packaged imagination of America, neither asking nor enabling much in the way of critical, deliberative, or creative participation by the audience. By masking the ad’s structural dynamics, including its own investment as the bankrolling multinational corporation, Chevy markets as a holistic representation of “Our Country” what is, instead, a monopolistic production by part of it.

A bevy of critical reviews of the ad in the journalistic media and a ripple of creative re-edits cast over the internet conversely recall the roots of filmic montage as an experimental, politically engaged artistic movement. Films in this tradition deploy discontinuous and often visible editing techniques—disjunctive jump cuts, achronological sequences, interruptive rhythms, and so on—to emphasize the breaks and

5 The concept and practice of montage, in film theory and practice, originated in the 1920s, with an avant-garde school of Soviet filmmakers, such as Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov. Their movement lasted into the 1930s, when the Soviet government, under Stalin’s direction, consolidated its hold on artistic production, promoting readily accessible, realistic forms and censoring experimental, critical ones. Today montage refers to an editing practice widely used by everyone from Hollywood, to the advertising industry, to experimental film, and on. See, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 305, 339-344, 478-81.
collisions between images and sounds gathered in relation to each other. Filmmakers seek
to represent unsettling ambiguities of space and time, to provoke emotional conflict and
critical reflection, and thereby to engage the audience in the collective act of producing
the film’s narrative, aesthetic, and material effects. My own approach to the politics of
imagination emphasizes a similar play between continuity and discontinuity. Analogous
to experimental montage, I seek cultural forms and modes—traditions, institutions,
habits, practices, dynamics, dispositions, and so on—that foreground their constitutive
discontinuities and engage pluralistic actors in imagining collective identity and common
life. Politically, I heed the relationships between the counterculture Soviet filmmakers
who invented montage and the Stalinist regime that censored their artistic movement, and
also between the decentered discourses and technologies that daily imagine America and
the corporate media conglomeration that monopolizes it. I thus attend to the ways in
which every political imagination represents, at its elusive center, a contest among the
different and unequal forms, modes, and relations of power that produce it.

This project begins with Chevy’s commercialized “Anthem” and works iteratively
toward more democratic imaginings of America, of democracy, and of imagination—
beginning with a countercultural “Anthem” by Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard
Cohen at the end of this introduction, and continuing in successive chapters with
reflections on the revolution and founding, on underutilized resources in democratic
theory, and on the late-nineteenth century Populist movement in the United States. The
key terms of my project—politics, imagination, democracy, America—are themselves
imagined in space in time; they are political productions as much as theoretical concepts.
As such, their emergence requires not only provisional definitions, but also the kind of historical, contextual, discursive development I propose to undertake in this dissertation. Chevy’s marketing campaign, then, serves as more than a point of departure; rather, my iterative reconstruction of the imagination of democracy in America is based on a deconstruction of Chevy’s ad. In this sense, my project itself takes the mode and form of a montage. In this introduction, I elaborate the constitutive paradox of political imagination in political theory, drawing on the disparate canonical works of Plato and Thomas Hobbes, and I bookend my discussion with analyses of the anthemic montages of Chevy and Cohen. I treat these two remarkably different performances of popular culture as analogies for and, more importantly, instances of the politics of imagination. Their juxtaposition with each other, and with Plato and Hobbes, serves two interrelated purposes. Formally, it enables me to unpack the structural dynamics of political imagination and thereby to develop a set of tools and a provisional architecture for the reconstructive work of the project. And it enables me to do so, substantively, in a way that clarifies the project’s stakes, and my own investments in them, in the politics of imagining democracy in America.

The Paradox of Political Imagination

To place Chevy behind the wheel of today’s “American Revolution” is to challenge the very terms of a project on political imagination. It calls us to reflect, first, on what force the “political” can bring to imagination? Perhaps not much. Sheldon Wolin has mourned the “invasion” of the public realm by private power, resulting in an
“economic polity” in which the citizen is reduced to consumer and the state rearticulated vis-à-vis corporate power and vision. As John Mellencamp sings in a less reassuring anthem, likening the depreciation of freedom to the sanitized dream of “little pink houses” for everyone, “Ain’t that America”? It is hard to dismiss such concerns outright. The advertising industry spends 460 billion dollars a year to provide Americans every opportunity they can dream to Chase Freedom\textsuperscript{SM} in the consumer realm, while politicians—rather than offering bold or constructive visions to guide the nation—too often remain co-opted by moneyed interests and bogged down in rancorous, party-line policy debates over tax rates and budget allocations. For many Americans, cynical about politics-as-usual and about its relevance to their lives, the term “political imagination” might seem no more than an oxymoron. But if we’re not ready to relinquish America to commodification by the brand wars, it may be that political imagination, and our clarity about its limits and possibilities, is more important than ever.

Indeed, it has historically been the task of political theory and practice to imagine and organize collective identity and political community—and in so doing to imagine difference, to imagine the actors, spaces, forms, and practices of political imagining itself. For writers as diverse as Plato and Thomas Hobbes, imagination figures as a

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\textsuperscript{8} Benedict Anderson, for example, makes a compelling case for the necessity of imagination to collective identity and nationalism given both the fallacies of primordialism and the impossibility of knowing everyone with whom we share a political community. He also reminds us of the historical role of capital and media in nationalist projects. In reclaiming the “political,” I’m not suggesting that we should, or could,
central and yet deeply ambivalent power in political theory and practice. For both thinkers, our capacity to inhabit spaces and times not yet our own conditions both our greatest political possibilities and perils. Our imaginations are capable of redeeming us from ignorance, corruption, and violence, but also distracting us from the dangers of political contexts in which these vices hold sway. The same imaginative faculty that enables us to envision worrisome and deteriorating political dynamics, as well as constructive alternatives, often tempts us to abandon the collective actions and institutions necessary to change our conditions.

If this paradox of political imagination is compelling, it may strike some as a strange rendering of Plato and Hobbes, both traditionally depicted as lovers of political order who seek, rather unambiguously, to limit the transgressive role of imagination in politics. Both fear the particularity, contingency, and dynamism of cultural and political realms—characterized by discordant experiences, knowledges, visions, and powers and by corrupted habits, superstitions, traditions, and institutions—that constrain rather than enable ethical and political ends such as justice, freedom, and security. Though in markedly different ways, both stake their most fervent hopes for a well-ordered body politic on a science of politics capable of bringing universal forms of reason to bear on inconstant human actions and institutions. But neither, in dreaming of order, eliminates ignore these sites and modes of power and imagining, but that we attend more closely to the organization of public life (by a variety of forms and modes of power) as it conditions imagination. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
imagination from politics altogether. What I take to be their ambivalence about imagination reflects, instead, their recognition not only of its pluralistic and transgressive character but also of its paradoxical centrality—when harnessed to universalizing forms of knowledge, language, subjectivity, or culture—to the foundation, ordering, and control of political society. If imagination threatens to distract us from the necessities and possibilities of political order, the possibility of political order necessarily has its grounds in imagination.

As a brief excursion into the works of Plato and Hobbes will show, imagination is at the center of many of the deepest questions and debates in the history of political theory and politics, for example, the relationships between the one and the many, universality and contingency, reason and desire, authority and freedom, form and chaos. That imagination is both constitutive of political order and yet imminently capable of transgressing it reveals the anxieties that haunt, and at times even structure, Plato and Hobbes’ political theories. And the underlying anxiousness of their political theories calls us to interrogate the common tendency, exemplified in their works, to imagine order in relationship to the one, the universal, reason, authority, and form, and disorder in relationship to the many, the contingent, desire, freedom, and chaos.

In this regard, what may seem like a strikingly discontinuous jump-cut from the material commodification of imagination by Chevrolet to the theoretical discourse of imagination in Plato and Hobbes also has crucial continuities and potential re-orderings at stake. If Chevy holds an ambiguous relationship to America—now the unifying all-American brand, now the multinational corporation responsible for dislocating jobs and
communities—so to do the legacies of Plato and Hobbes. For some, they are precursors to strands of utopian idealism, benevolent technocracy, or liberal realism that promise to counteract the veiled, destabilizing, monopolistic powers of commodification and, in one way or another, to order political imagination according to sound, universal principles of morality, reason, or rights. For others, they validate a crusading, neo-conservative administration that aggressively expands and polices a hegemonic imagination of America amidst heightened discourses of panic and terror: immigration crackdowns, orange security alerts, rogue nations, moral crisis, and so on. Political imagination in America, like the canonical legacies of Plato and Hobbes, stands on uncertain and anxious grounds. By juxtaposing the cultural imagination of America by Chevy, and later by Leonard Cohen, with the theoretical imaginations of Plato and Hobbes, we can examine across a variety of contexts not only how anxiety constitutes imagination, but also how different imaginations of politics mobilize different ethical, discursive, and material strategies in response. This unusual montage, in its discontinuities and continuities, has the virtue of both complicating and clarifying the forms of order and disorder that imagine politics—and imagine America.

Plato is considered exemplary of a tradition of “architectonic” political imagination, which looks to shape culture and politics according to universal standards

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that lie outside conventional spaces, times, and experiences. The allegory of the cave, in Book VII of *The Republic*, is Plato’s famous metaphor of the necessity and possibility of philosophized politics: A just society must educate some of its members to transcend the opinions and images that parade as truth in everyday life and, through rational discourse, seek universal forms of knowledge; so too must a just society compel its educated elite to engage in politics, rather than isolate themselves from it, so as to order society according to the standards of universal reason.

On the surface, the role of imagination in philosophized politics appears dim, in the double sense that Plato delegitimates certain modes and forms of imagination as incapable of accessing universal reason and that he offers a hazy account of the role imagination does play in philosophy and politics. As to the first sense, the allegory of the cave reveals an ontological and epistemological schema that separates appearance and reality and that situates visible things—and artistic representations of them—among those objects that produce imperfect, corruptible forms of knowledge about reality. Socrates and his interlocutors devote considerable attention in *The Republic*, and especially in Book X, to a critique of “imitative” forms of artistic and poetic imagination, for example, painting, drama, myth, song, allegory, and metaphor. These imitative forms, at best, offer incomplete accounts of reality insofar as they represent visible objects that are themselves

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10 This is Wolin’s claim in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 19.
only particular appearances of universal forms; by copying what are already imperfect copies of the real, art and poetry further distort an already distorted truth.\textsuperscript{11} The danger of imitative imagination is not only its limited perspective, but more significantly, that it fails to recognize or represent that partiality.\textsuperscript{12} Quite the opposite, artists and poets—not to mention today’s multi-media marketing and advertising industry—have at their disposal unparalleled forms and techniques to lure and deceive our imaginations with false certainties that parade as truths. And they capture our imaginations, often without our full awareness, by working bodily and affectively on the irrational level of our senses: The images, lyrics, and rhythms of art and poetry have the power to “settle into [our] natural habits in speech, body, and mind.”\textsuperscript{13} It is for this reason that Socrates recommends dialectics as a mode of philosophical discourse and argumentation that aims to “drag the eye of the soul out of the odious ooze in which it lies buried and lead it upward” toward universal truth, toward “the source itself.”\textsuperscript{14} What we leave behind in dialectics is not imagination itself, but its attachments to sense, habit, and custom. For neither Socrates, nor Plato through him, ever claims that we become one with “the source”; even the philosopher who ascends from the cave is said to experience

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\textsuperscript{11} Plato, \textit{The Republic}, trans. Raymond Larson (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1979), 599a. My reading of Plato is indebted to Peter Euben, who analyzes Plato’s arguments about and use of imitative poetry in \textit{The Republic}. Euben shows how rhetorical tropes are not subservient to reasoned discourse, but frame, augment, lead, and even challenge its use in the dialogue. And he characterizes philosophy in \textit{The Republic} not as the possession of universal knowledge, but as the search for it by people in conventional times and places. See his, \textit{The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Less Taken} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
\textsuperscript{12} Plato, \textit{The Republic}, 598c-e.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.} 395d.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.} 533d.
\end{flushright}
reality through the mediated form of “divine contemplation.” Dialectics thus rationalizes, or purifies, our power to imagine universal truth, and from it a utopic future republic. If imagination is too often chained to our sensual attachments—whether wooed erotically or shackled deceptively—so too might it be courted and trained in the service of philosophized politics.

But the proper relationship between imagination, on the one hand, and philosophy, truth, and politics, on the other, appears ever elusive in The Republic, as do the prospects for philosophized politics. Even if we stick to a conventional reading of Plato, philosophized politics engages in a precarious double standard with respect to imagination: if rationalized imagination produces the universal blueprint from which to order society, the construction and maintenance of that order require tools that manipulate and habituate imagination. Socrates’ “myth of the four metals” is the text’s paradigmatic example, for it defends a “noble lie” as crucial to reproducing a well-ordered society. To ensure that citizens dutifully perform the roles appropriate to their capacities and training, Socrates suggests a myth whose central metaphor—souls mixed

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15 Ibid. 517d. Though not dealing with political imagination, specifically, John Sallis also takes Plato as an early exemplar of philosophy’s attempt to establish a “double directionality” of imagination—“bringing about illumination and elevation, on the one hand, and deception and corruption, on the other.” However, Sallis notes that The Republic lacks a unified word, such as imagination, that would “gather the terms of this tension.” Translating back, Sallis uses “imagination” to gather together both the commonly used εἰκόν (image or likeness) and a term that is rare in the text, εἰκασία (the apprehension of images in their revelatory capacity). Both, he says, have to do with looks: the former puts looks in place of the original, thus concealing the original from vision; the latter looks like the original, thus drawing vision to it. Both, then, situate vision in relation to an object or form that represents the original, in more deceptive or more revelatory ways. My claim that Plato wants to rationalize imagination might be translated, in language closer to his own, to mean that he wants to rationalize the forms of conventional life (discursive, institutional, etc.) so as to guide vision toward reality. See, John Sallis, Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 46-52.
at birth with gold, silver, iron, or bronze—is meant to essentialize social rank and to orient citizens toward common goods rather than class antagonisms. The myth of the metals is no mere deception. As Socrates elaborates, it becomes clear that he envisions it as a master narrative, taking root in society over generations and across a range of cultural forms: religious rituals, marriage customs, governmental regulations, education practices, processes of subject formation, traditions of honor, standards of social mobility, and so on. Rationalized imagination, then, cannot fully escape the “odious ooze” of sense, habit, and custom; to the contrary, it must enlist them politically to orient conventional imagination toward the means and ends of a well-ordered society. The project of architectonic centralization is thus an uncertain one, at best, for as Socrates concludes offhandedly, the myth’s manifestation in culture and politics will go not necessarily according to design but “wherever public opinion will take it.”

If this same conventional world is the terrain not only of politics, but also philosophy, the prospects for philosophized politics face an even more fundamental, epistemological challenge. Indeed, Socrates and Plato are aware that philosophical knowledge, rooted in conventional spaces and times, may always be incomplete and imperfect. Even in a dialogue that pins its greatest political hopes on dialectical reason, philosophy often stands—metaphorically speaking—an “unwed and forsaken” lover, abandoned by her best suitors and left to be “defiled” by “unworthy strangers.” Socrates himself abandons rational discourse time and again, relying on similes, metaphors,

17 Ibid. 495c.
allegories, and myths to make his arguments. The allegory of the cave, of course, is a rhetorical trope that deploys images of darkness and light, blindness and vision, imprisonment and liberation, evil depths and virtuous ascents; these images are attended by states of dizziness, confusion, suffering, anger, pity, contempt, contemplation, divinity, striving, and murderous resistance. The allegory thus dramatizes an abstract philosophical argument and lends it an affective power that has carried it through centuries, rather than letting it perish in unintelligible obscurity—which is where Plato thinks philosophical truth remains for most of us.

But what, precisely, do we inherit from the allegory of the cave? On the one hand, the use of poetic language opens the way for the interlocutors in Plato’s dialogue and the readers of his text to access philosophical ideas about truth and the good and to understand their stakes. On the other hand, it distorts those ideas: What are we to make, for example, when Socrates asks his interlocutors to draw in their minds the image of a line, so that he can explain to them a division of knowledge and existence that discredits images as a form of knowing reality?\textsuperscript{18} Plato’s legacy is a paradox: His architectonic project of philosophized politics hinges on the epistemological premise that the power of imagination can be rationalized toward the end of universal knowledge. But both the noble myth at the base of his political order, and more principally the rhetoric embedded in his philosophical discourse, suggest that poetic imagination is an irreplaceable part of that project. Plato’s mixing of rhetorical and dialectic forms highlights the importance of

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 509d.
poetic imagination in framing and translating philosophical ideas in conventional spaces and times, even at the unavoidable risk of distorting philosophy. But the paradox is knottier still, for as we plumb the subterranean layers of structure and meaning in allegory of the cave, it becomes apparent that poetic imagination is not only a functional tool for conveying and accessing philosophical ideas, but also an elemental condition for producing them.

If philosophical ideas are somehow external to politics, the cave is storied as a conventional state of pure interiority. Its cultural forms are arranged to develop and discipline subjects who are disposed not to question the given order of things, not even to imagine doing so. Shackled to convention from childhood, prisoners are ignorant of their own chains and of the possibility of any existence beyond them. We must inquire, then, about the unnamed “force” that compels the prisoner of convention to “stand up” from his customary place in the world and “turn his head” from the shadow of false certainties, a force strong enough to “drag him out of” the habitual comforts of the former position and set him on the path toward universal truth. John Sallis argues that the “force of imagination” is central to the very form of Platonic dialectics. The movement of dialectics requires a kind of “double-seeing” at every level of ascent toward philosophical truth: the prisoner sees the images on the wall, but also comes to see them as images, that is, as incomplete representations of reality. It is the imagination’s capacity to “turn toward” the universal—that is, beyond the limits of a given order—that animates

\[19\] Ibid. 515c-e.
dialectics at its beginning and each step of the way from partial toward universal knowledge.\textsuperscript{20} But if the universal is never immediately present, and if it is at once the result \textit{and} precondition of dialectics, then double-seeing—seeing that our seeing is incomplete—must have some alternative, or at least additional, source.

Indeed, the imagination’s turn toward universality, toward rational discourse and philosophical ideas, is never fully rational; it must have its grounds in the experience of being incomplete—often through dissonance, conflict, or loss that calls into question the limits of a given order of things. Just as Chevy imagines the unity of “Our Country” during a period of vulnerability and discord, Plato imagines the universal form of the just polity from his position within the unjust polity that murdered his friend. He understands that to recreate this experience for his contemporaries, to dislodge them from the false certainties that have “settled into” their “habits” of sensing, seeing, and thinking, he must first unsettle those habits by appealing to the poetic sensibilities of their imaginations. Where Chevy’s imagination of America reassures us of our spatial and temporal wholeness, by casting deep scars as temporary setbacks, or else obscuring them altogether, Plato’s poetic aim—at least for philosophers, if not always for those made of inferior metals—is to incite and hold open the experience of incompleteness.

He reveals this method most explicitly in the passage where Socrates defends his use of \textit{simile} to explain the necessity of \textit{philosophy} to the just city. Socrates argues that the condition of philosophized politics is “so acute that there’s nothing else like it” in

\textsuperscript{20} Sallis, 47-50.
conventional existence. Instead he must “strain for an image . . . gathering materials from all over and slapping them together like a painter who paints goatstags and other mixed monsters.”\(^{21}\) There is, as we saw with the allegory of the cave, an element of translation at work here, the need to make philosophical arguments in conventional terms and to recognize that doing so often has a distorting effect. And yet, the philosopher must “strain” to be part artist and poet all the same, even if it means situating rational discourse on unpredictable grounds. For the strange aesthetic conjured by the image of “mixed monsters” reminds us that the work of philosophy *can only begin* for those whose imaginations have been surprised and unsettled, that is, compelled to question the limits of their sense of reality. To finesse the point: Socrates and Plato do not merely rely on metaphor to make sense of philosophy; they model a practice of philosophy that is, more anxiously, conditioned and structured by metaphorical thinking.

The metaphor of “straining for an image” is apt to describe the structure of double-seeing within the text that conditions the double-seeing of its readers. Plato and Socrates refuse, finally, to settle on any one philosophical idea of justice or of its manifestation in the ideal republic. Instead, they offer successive, incomplete approximations that, at best, provide new metaphors for how to think about the problem of a just society: for example, the concept of the many and the one, the search for the shape of the good, the line separating visibility and reality, the allegory of the soul’s ascent from the darkness of the cave to the light of the sun. Each of these metaphors, in

different ways, strains to imagine what is external to the chains of conventional times and places; gathered together in their variety, they strain to construct the very concept of externality that conditions the double-seeing of dialectical imagination. In so doing, it invites—even incites—the dialogue’s interlocutors and readers to what for many is the unfamiliar, unconventional experience of imagining beyond the limits of a given order. As we saw in the cave allegory, the experience of imagining beyond a given order is loaded with intense, affective associations: the abundance of encountering existential beauty, divine contemplation, or liberated knowledge; the lack that comes with recognizing one’s chains, losing touch with one’s ideals, or being hated for one’s ideas. These varied metaphorical experiences of lack and abundance generate the sense of incongruence, or double-seeing, that acts as the “force of imagination” in philosophy, and in the text of *The Republic*. They enable—at least for Plato, and he hopes for his readers—a radical confidence in an ontological condition of external reality for which no one, finally, has rational proof. And they nourish, in their own incompleteness, an epistemological skepticism about any claims to have a lock on that reality.

We might interpret Plato’s paradox of political imagination in two ways. It is likely that Plato views imagination as a dangerous necessity to politics, since his hopes for a just political order hinge on our ability to apply knowledge of universal forms to a conventional world of inconstant, partial desires and visions. The force of imagination, in its capacity of double-seeing, pulls us out of habitual ways of thinking and acting, which are themselves conditioned by powerful forces that capture our imaginations and settle us into false certainties. The danger is that, even if the power of imagination compels us to
question our sense of reality, and even if it animates our search for truth, no society can
go far enough in rationalizing and universalizing the imagination of its members to
achieve a just political order. In the “mixed monster” that is Plato’s metaphor of the
“topsy-turvy ship,” even if the many, discordant members of the crew come to see,
through some persuasive vision, that their current chaotic state is undesirable, they will
not by extension organize themselves according to universal principles of navigation.
Rather, the power of poetic imagination is so pervasive that they will be traded from one
false prophet to the next, praising as their navigator whoever has the sharpest rhetorical
powers.\textsuperscript{22} Enter Chevrolet. Plato’s would-be philosopher-king, meanwhile, often cuts a
hapless, helpless figure in \textit{The Republic}—either dismissed as a “useless, babbling
stargazer,” or else, if his radical meanings are understood, forced by murderous masses to
take refuge “under a little wall in a storm,” where he is left to pursue justice in harmless
isolation.\textsuperscript{23} Philosophized politics, we might conclude, teeters between romantic idealism
and cynical despair.

Yet, the textual performance among the actual philosophical interlocutors in
Plato’s dialogue calls political theory away from either of these fates, away from the
obscurity of unintelligible abstraction, away from the irrelevance of detached spaces and
practices of doing theory. For it is also likely, in considering the paradox of political
imagination, that Plato doubts the epistemological premise at the basis of philosophized
politics. While the allegory of the cave might lead us to believe that philosophers can

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 488a-e.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 488e, 497d-e.
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“linger” in “divine contemplation” of universal forms, such as justice, before returning to the conventional world to apply them to politics, the interlocutors in *The Republic* never enjoy such a luxury. Justice itself remains elusive throughout the text, “disappearing into the brushes . . . into dense, shady places” where it can be seen only partially—a universal ideal that is held out as a promise for motivating and organizing philosophical discourse, but that only ever appears in distorted form.24 This is, as we have seen, both the constraining and enabling condition of philosophical knowledge in conventional society, and it does not spare Plato’s community of philosophers. We might say, then, that Plato situates political imagination neither in relation to the interior darkness of chaotic desire, nor in relation to the exterior light of universal reason, but more ambivalently, at the mouth of the cave, in the movements and translations between the many and the one. As the allegory of the cave suggests, this may be the most anxious position our imaginations can inhabit; it leaves them, metaphorically speaking, on edge, denying both the habitual comfort of false certainty and the impossible security of universal truth. And yet, political anxiety may be, paradoxically, the most solid ground Plato bequeaths us for imagining political order.

What reverence we owe this strange legacy is a matter of debate, for as Hobbes would have us believe, “if it be well considered, the praise of ancient authors proceeds not from the reverence of the dead, but from the competition and mutual envy of the

living.” In Hobbes’ considered judgment, Plato withstands the test of present time, for “that best philosopher of the Greeks” relied on scientific principles, rather than mere taste, to guide his moral and political theory. Hobbes understands his own effort to construct a science of politics to be a result of Plato’s legacy. And yet, the ontological and epistemological grounds of Hobbesian political order turn the Platonic schema on its head. Hobbes’ reality is the most dystopic rendering of Plato’s cave, the endless conflict of bodies, passions, and wills in motion. Moreover, appearance is all we will ever know of reality, for we have no recourse to forms of knowledge or universality that transcend the imperfect, contested, corruptible medium of language. The grounds of Hobbesian political order are thus anxious from the start: His science of politics is cut from an ontology of dystopic fear, not utopic hope, and the Leviathan is markedly different from the Republic in form, content, justification, and end.

But if much is dissimilar between the two visions of politics, the centrality of imagination to the possibility and peril of political order is perhaps the strongest unifying principle. Hobbes, like Plato, is infamous for his critique of the limits and dangers of imagination for ethical and political ends—for Hobbes, freedom and security. Far from being a sight of human and political agency, imagination is wholly deterministic, mere “decaying sense” in relation to the inertial motion of external objects. In its tendency toward decay, imagination obscures the world rather than illuminating its truths; so too

26. Ibid. 481. Hobbes praises Plato, in particular, for requiring his students to know geometry, on which Hobbes himself mirrors his science of politics.
does it remain impotent to interrupt the endless chain of causality with any creative futural directions of its own.\(^{27}\)

And yet, if Hobbes believed this to be the case, his contemporaries had not yet heeded his logic. The *Leviathan* is significantly a response to the seditious ideas and actions of groups such as the Reformists, Papists, Aristotelians, Levelers, and Diggers—all of whom surface in the margins of his text to conjure the discord, strife, and civil war that beset the England of his day. These groups persisted in what Hobbes took to be the idealistic and misguided quest for truth as a means to freedom. But they had at their recourse only the mediating form of language, that imperfect tool of human imagination tending naturally toward disagreement. Left to the diverse sense experiences and particularistic passions of humankind, language is at best erratic, discordant, and irreconcilable when mobilized for ends of political organization. More dangerous still, demagogues have historically capitalized on the inconstancy of language and the ignorance of the people about its uses and abuses; through the strategic deployment of rhetoric, corrupt authorities have time and again appropriated individual imaginations toward impossible fantasies of freedom and glory. And as Hobbes notes, finally, in his dystopic vision of England’s descent into a warlike state of nature: When the power of the pen inevitably fails to convince one’s opponents, competing factions perpetually settle their disputes with the sword.\(^{28}\) As the story commonly goes, Hobbes wrote the


Leviathan—and opened it with a critique of imagination, truth, and freedom—in response to the naïve and dangerous belief of his contemporaries in the power of imagination.

But the common story, as several readers of Hobbes have pointed out, misconstrues the role of imagination in his politics. If he posits a sovereign political order as the necessary ground for negative freedoms in the realms of economic exchange and private life, he does not write imagination out of politics. He simply displaces it, from pluralistic actors and centrifugal logics to sovereign and centripetal ones; indeed, Hobbes conceives of sovereignty as a form of political power so hermetic it would negate all other sources of authority for political imagination, including economic and private interests. Hobbes is adamant that political order and the science of politics require a common language of meanings and rules. He thus figures his absolute sovereign as a Great Definer, the sole legislator and interpreter of words and laws in a given political community. And he dreams that his own Leviathan, co-authored by a sovereign capable of giving it discursive and material reality, might provide the definitive text.

If centralized and standardized meaning is purportedly the foundation of rational, ordered politics, Hobbes’ statement of this case, couched in the dystopic vision of England’s descent into a war of all against all, is not without its rhetorical power. As David Johnston has shown, Hobbes recognizes the centrality of rhetorical language for transmitting knowledge: he believes visual images to be more powerful than conceptual precepts in making arguments, not because they better demonstrate the truths at hand, but

29 On the sovereign as Great Definer, see Wolin, Politics and Vision, 232.
because they imprint them on the minds of readers and listeners.\textsuperscript{30} Given his theory of imagination at the basis of human understanding, he not surprisingly deploys persuasive techniques that will leave the most “predominant” impressions on the senses.\textsuperscript{31} From the book’s opening metaphors of the state as an artificial man, a great Leviathan, with an absolute sovereign at its soul, to the dystopic vision that necessitates such an awesome and fearful artifice, Hobbes lays the overwhelming imaginative groundwork within which his political arguments will almost inevitably carry traction. In so doing, he establishes the reductive theoretical and political forms within which all thinking about and imagining of politics is possible.\textsuperscript{32}

Substantively, Hobbes envisions a broad political transformation of culture, beginning with the disciplinary logics of sovereign language and weaving into the public and private spaces in which individual and political subjectivities are cultivated. He pins his hopes for political order not only on the figure of the sovereign ruler, but also on the sovereignty of language and its ability to mobilize centripetal power in the farthest extremities of the body politic.\textsuperscript{33} If Hobbesian sovereignty sets up no-trespassing signs to ward off wild, pluralistic imaginings that would hope to gain access to the public sphere, it must work more fundamentally by disciplining and normalizing individual imaginations in the cultural and private realms. For the practical realization of Hobbes’

\textsuperscript{31} Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, 24.
\textsuperscript{33} Euben, \textit{Corrupting Youth}, 141.
blueprint for political society requires a form of power that can turn the particularistic, fractious, active subjects of the state of absolute war into compliant subjects fit to inhabit his vision of absolute political order. Rather than securing private spaces of freedom, Hobbesian sovereignty thus obsesses over the governance of imagination, emotion, and opinion. It does so, formally, through cultural modes that normalize social precepts, standardize education, and privatize all religious doctrines inconsistent with public morality. It does so, substantively, by habituating subjects to adopt an unnatural concept of freedom, extinguishing our fierce, inherent desires to struggle over a world we imagine and shape and disposing us instead to covet private pursuits of freedom detached from political power. And, finally, sovereignty’s radical depoliticization of the self and its imperatives of absolute order require that we become complaisant subjects, that we strive “with all [our] hearts” for conformity in “striving to accommodate [ourselves] to the rest.”

We might interrogate, as I will below, whether Chevy’s America falls far from Hobbes in aligning notions of sovereignty, citizenship, and freedom with the economic opportunity to buy the most popular pickup truck on the road?

The tragic paradox at the heart of Hobbesian politics is this: If imagination is radically dangerous to political order, it is no less fundamental to it. To inhabit Hobbes’ ambivalence, if not the absolutely ordered world he would create out of it, is to conceive of a politics of imagination: Imagination itself is thoroughly politicized, that is, produced and contested by competing modes of power, but politics too can, indeed must, be

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34 Johnston, 128-29.
35 Hobbes, 237, 118.
fundamentally imaginative. If politics is always, as Hobbes recognizes, a contest between centripetal and centrifugal forces of imagination, the possibilities of imagining political order, of any kind, are perhaps inextricably attended by the logics of anxiety about whatever might disrupt it.

Hobbes’ own anxiety about his grand blueprint for political society surfaces in the margins of his text, in the form of those unruly stylistic devices and seditious political characters that give the lie to his smoother language of a rationally, scientifically ordered politics. In metaphorically likening the subjectivities brought together for construction of political society to the “stones brought together for the building of an edifice,” he hints at the limited recourse for absolute, centripetal sovereignty in the face of centrifugal imaginings that would contest it: If they cannot be disciplined to fit the mold, such irregular imaginings must be “cast out of society” by the sovereign like the troublesome, jagged stones cast away by the builders of a wall.\(^{36}\) This is no pragmatic design for stability, but an unconditional desire for control. Sovereign love, Hobbes tells us, should be a jealous love, one that guards its loyalties as suspiciously and blindly as an aggrieved spouse.\(^{37}\) Absolute order thus requires both total commitment by those who would belong to it and relentless anxiety by the sovereign who would protect them. For if the laws and traditions at the foundation of absolute order themselves encounter unforeseen knots in their unifying power, old forms must repeatedly be severed by the sovereign and new

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
\(^{37}\) Ibid. 250.
ends tied—as “Alexander did with his sword in the Gordian Knot.”

The discipline and absolute power at the basis of Hobbesian sovereignty might thus open the world not to unassailable order, but to violences and dynamisms as unpredictable and dangerous as the dystopic prophecy it would preclude.

Hobbesian sovereignty demands, at once, both an anti-conservative ethos and dispositions of radical unreason. Recalling his estimation of Plato, conservation and reason are intimately linked: that which stands the test of time is that which is built on foundations solid enough to hold up against both the whims of taste and the reasons of argument. The imperative of absolute order, however, requires subjects who don’t argue, who never voice reasons that break with the dictates of sovereignty. Subjects are primed, instead, to break with the foundations of their own reason, to abandon reason in an instant to keep in line with every new severing and cinching of the Gordian knot. The force of imagination, in this sense, capriciously propels us outside the limits of any extant order, like a frantic herd charging to keep pace with its leader. To be kept within the orbit of absolute sovereignty, subjects thus cannot afford to cultivate forms of reason rooted in places, relationships, practices, or dynamics they hope to conserve. They must instead learn to be split-second calculators, habituated to comply not with reasoned order but with absolute power, rational only in the sense that they are disposed to master sovereignty’s game but not to question its ground rules. If absolute sovereignty demands a fast-paced culture of radical unreason, then the Leviathan’s own relevance as an

38 Ibid. 205.
authority requires that it be elastic enough to change with the times. Hobbes would likely fail to recognize himself in Chevy’s unlimited imagination of America, but his larger-than-life imagination of power has been, I will contend, light-weight enough to travel the distance.

*The Anxieties of Political Imagination*

Politics, for Plato and Hobbes, entails not only organizing collective life, but more fundamentally, organizing the power to imagine it. Their characterization of politics as a contest between particular and universal powers of imagination, or centrifugal and centripetal ones, draws our attention to anxiety as a constitutive limit on political imagination. Anxiety, in its double direction, worries and desires. It marks the uneasiness caused by the multitude of spaces, practices, relationships, institutions, and subjects of imagining that are left uncounted or unattended by any one imagination-organization of collective life, which solicits and cares for desired sources and ends. Anxiety thus significantly shapes political imagination by influencing, often with little reflection, what stands in the foreground and what gets shifted to the background of a given representation or production of collective life. If I desire political goodness, I might shine a light on ideal or exemplary forms and eclipse or obscure what might corrupt them, but can I prevent corruptibility from surfacing as a nagging doubt in the shadows of my text? If I desire political security, I might dictate precise rules of order and establish sovereign forms of power to guard them, but how am I to stifle the revolt of unruly and seditious forces that threaten my text from its margins?
Plato’s and Hobbes’ answers to these questions, which I’ve characterized as Plato’s move to agnosticism and Hobbes’ recourse to discipline and violence, provide further insight into the anxiety at the heart of political imagination. For each mobilizes imagination differently in response to his anxieties: the force of imagination in *The Republic* conditions and animates new imaginations of philosophy and politics in the face of ignorant and corrupt closures; in the *Leviathan*, the force of imagination acts to enlist or suppress all other imagining in the service of a jealous sovereign power. Plato and Hobbes thus provoke us, in different ways, to reconsider our common assumptions about the concepts of order and disorder in politics. Taking Hobbes first, if political order can require that we discipline our centrifugal imaginings toward centripetal ends, or risk even more violent exclusions, we need to ask difficult questions about what each movement toward the center must displace or destabilize to create the order it desires? On the other hand, if Plato’s agnosticism calls us to appreciate incomplete forms—even strange, unsettling ones—as provocations to seek better ideals, we might investigate which forms of dis-ordering can solicit, institute, and care for the forms of collective life we desire? The politics of imagination takes imagination and order as mutually constitutive; the anxiety at its heart, then, challenges us to rethink not the possibility of political order, but its conditions, directions, forms, and modes. For, as the political imaginations of Hobbes and Plato can attest, to love order obsessively often belies, even creates, the conditions of disorder, just as efforts to disperse entrenched order require mobilizing and orienting strange, divergent parts.
What are we to make, then, in a decade of heightened American anxiety, about Chevy’s celebratory imagination of “Our Country”? The ad foregrounds national unity and sovereignty, through its feel-good, patriotic lyrics and through a narrative trajectory that carries us from heady days of harmony and prosperity, past periods of conflict, crisis, and loss, toward a reassurance of our spatial and temporal wholeness. But what can we learn—even as the ad’s refrain, “This is our country,” repeats incessantly in our heads—from the images and sounds Chevy shifts to the background of its imagination of America?

Left entirely outside the borders of “Our Country” are the stories of contemporary immigrant laborers, not to mention the extra-ordinary political spectacle, in 2006, of millions of brown, black, and white bodies waving diverse flags of the Americas throughout the nation’s streets. That “Our Country” cannot countenance such immigrant imaginations reflects America’s anxiety about its economic and cultural sovereignty. And it points to the hypocrisy at the core of an advertisement that sells Americans a renewed sense of security, while obscuring and even reinforcing Chevy’s hand in creating the surplus of insecurity now on the market. The reliance of transnational corporations on temporary, low-wage, unprotected labor—from foreign laborers within the nation and foreign labor markets beyond—has fueled economic integration and increased the movement of capital, goods, bodies, and ideas across borders. The uneven and incommensurable distribution of costs and benefits, for citizens, residents, and non-residents alike, contributes to instability at the heart of Chevy’s America. But it is one
crisis Chevy doesn’t acknowledge: Instead, its ad suggests, without irony, that Chevy has “been standing side by side with all the things America goes through, ups and downs.”  

If strangers threaten to destabilize “Our Country” from its margins, the differences celebrated within Chevy’s America are rendered entirely unstrange. Turn the volume down on Mellencamp, for a moment, and up on King: We might hear not only Mellencamp’s reassurance, “I do believe there’s a dream for everyone,” but also King’s exhortation that such a dream is impossible unless we first tend to a “deep malady within the American spirit.” We might hear that “an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring,” not simply re-packaging in old form. For King, who linked racism and poverty with capitalism, that restructuring would have deep roots in alternative imaginings of political economy. Perhaps Chevy cannot afford to remember, even as it foregrounds King’s iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, that he delivered it at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, soon after the crowd heard from Walter

39 The quote is from Kim Kosak, Chevy’s general director for advertising and sales promotions. See, “Chevy Silverado ad goes for reaction: Some offended, others feel patriotic,” The Detroit Free Press, October 28, 2006, http://www.targetmarketnews.com/storyid10300602.htm (accessed March 24, 2009). In their study on U.S. immigration policy toward Mexico, Douglass Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan Malone chart what they call the hypocritical equation at its center since the early 1900s: With one hand, government officials enact policies (and leave others unenforced) to appease the demand by businesses for immigrant labor. With the other hand, they appeal to mobilized nativist sentiment by at least giving the pretense of enforcing strict border control. The authors argue that the burdens and instabilities of Mexican immigration to the United States, for immigrants and many Americans alike, has heightened as increased economic integration since the 1980s has been met by more rigid border controls. With its appeal to a narrow patriotism in “Our Country,” side by side with the lobbying of its parent company, General Motors, to extend NAFTA to other hemispheric countries, Chevy plays its cards on both sides of the equation. See Massey et al., Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Integration (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002). For more on GM’s position regarding economic integration, see Paul Kengor, et al, Trade Liberalization: The North American Free Trade Agreement's Economic Impact on Michigan (Midland, Mich: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 1999).

Reuther of the United Auto Workers Union. Nor could its homage to multiculturalism deploy King’s favorite analogy for the uniformity of social imagination: America’s confusion of social distinction with driving a bigger and better car. Nor, for that matter, could Chevy let King’s dream of racial harmony contain his outspoken criticism of the Vietnam War. While dancing hippies and peace marchers make an appearance in the ad’s taste of Americana, King’s anti-war critique might dampen the mood. It would be difficult to sublimate his outrage at a political economy that turns people into “things,” from America’s beginnings on the backs of slave labor, through its economic and militaristic imperialism in Latin America and Vietnam. It would be difficult to secure a master narrative of freedom, opportunity, and progress with a voice-over from King providing the tagline: This is our country, “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

It is Mellencamp’s voice, however, that hums in our ears on our way to work, the mall, the auto dealer. Chevy’s imagination of America is indeed so familiar to its audience that we could stamp it on our common currency: E Pluribus Unum, “Out of Many, One.” But unlike Plato, and even Hobbes, Chevy won’t let us linger in anxiety about the potential incommensurability of America’s many faces. The ad’s broad commercial appeal, its feel-good familiarity, aims to render “Our Country” utterly unparadoxical. Far from producing a strange, divergent form of America, one that might unsettle our false certainties, the ad erases, obscures, and co-opts difference and crisis. It

conjures overtly social and political conflicts of the nation’s past, and paints them in harmonious brushstrokes, to reassure us that now, as always, our crises can lead us to heal, even grow, as a nation. Chevy thus enlists insurgent, disruptive imaginings of America—whose remainders might be sources of today’s centrifugal imaginings—and employs them instead to shore up the nation’s center. By naturalizing the ecological and social disaster of Hurricane Katrina, the featured crisis of the day, the ad further obscures social and political critique from the work of imagining and constructing America. The narrative and promise that paint crisis and struggle as sources of wholeness can only function, then, by incapacitating difference, that is, by turning its disruptive and creative potentials toward reproductive ends.

And politics, too, must be incapacitated. If the concept of political imagination lends “the political” a primary role in organizing the power to imagine and shape collective life, Chevy’s imagination of America shifts much that matters to politics to the background of its representation and production of “Our Country.” Chevy’s ideal practice of citizenship in today’s world, finally, aligns not with the dissident historical figures the ad reins in, nor even necessarily with its less disruptive images of voluntarism and heroism, but with its alluring parting message: buy Chevy. Of course, Chevy is not alone in consigning citizens to the passive role of consumers; Americans have long been told to “vote our dollars” and to form our judgments in the “marketplace of ideas.” Rather than hopping on the bandwagon of this trend, however, Chevy is behind the steering wheel. Its centripetal imagination of America—which obscures and co-opts active, disruptive forms of imagining—also enlists the state that might otherwise protect and enable these forms.
The state cuts a shadowy figure in Chevy’s America. It surfaces indirectly as the motor of American expansionism in Vietnam and the space race, in the protective guise of soldiers and fire fighters defending the nation’s soil, and as the object of insurgent mobilizations for social and political change. It is the absent carrier of a national sovereignty that is both promised in the ad’s narrative and undermined in its performance—that is, the act of a transnational corporation imagining “Our Country.”

If an active, disruptive citizenry and an enabling state might be the limits on Chevy’s power to capture the imagination of America, Chevy appears anything but anxious. In this sense, Chevy outdoes Hobbes, whose anxieties about unruly language and seditious imaginings surface time and again to challenge the scientific principles and the territorial and cultural sovereignty that constrain his political imagination. Hobbes’ absolute sovereign cannot, finally, countenance the kind of difference and disagreement that Chevy integrates into its own centralizing narrative. His jealousies demand a love that is both unconditional in its loyalty and narrow in its desire: all eyes must be on the sovereign all the time. Chevy, on the other hand, conceals its own limits by mocking limits altogether: all the eye can see is America’s unlimited freedom, but not any source that might have authority or responsibility for protecting and enabling it. It is telling that Richard Nixon, waving to America after his resignation, is the ad’s most obvious symbol of the state. Chevy needs a state that is willing to bend and break the rules for it, or at
least stand by when they get broken. And it needs to promote an ideology that permits and reinforces this relationship. Nixon’s wave is not only lauded in “Our Country.” It is universalized in the subsequent frame by the mirror-image of a young man, dressed in cowboy attire and straddling a tin drum, waving as if from a rodeo in the Wild West. The pairing of these iconic images of America suggests that its greatness, and the possibilities for expanding that greatness to unclaimed territories, require a disregard for limits built into the image and performance of America at all levels. In this spirit, the depths of the Grand Canyon and the heights of outer space become the ad’s only limits on what America can do—limits whose spatial and temporal expanse is unfathomable.

Chevy’s imagination of America thus refuses the limits of both Plato’s strange forms, which might question the ideology that sustains “Our Country,” and Hobbes’ absolute sovereignty, which remains too jealous to lust after powers that might negate it.

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43 Ted Nace documents the “corporate revolution” in the United States (1850-1900), during which often-corrupt legislative and judicial rulings released corporations from the limits that had controlled their charters since the nation’s founding—e.g., limits on function, life span, size, capital accumulation, geographic scope, inter-company ownership, etc. See Ted Nace, Gangs of America: The Rise of Corporate America and the Disabling of Democracy (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005).

44 Instructive here is the Chase Freedom Credit Card marketing campaign, which promises a limitless form freedom to American consumer-citizens. Witness the voice-over for one of its television ads: “It’s time to feel free with Chase Freedom. Feel free to choose points for rewards like travel. Or feel free to choose cash back. Then feel free to change back again, without losing a thing. That’s freedom. That’s Chase Freedom. Get it free at chase.com/freedom.” But, of course, the fine print on the company’s website lists around a dozen dizzyingly precise rules that circumscribe the sphere within which consumers are free to move: for example, only if we make travel arrangements 21 days in advance and stay over on a Saturday night, only in relation to other specified bonus rewards categories, only when retailers classify their merchandise in accord with those categories, only back and forth between rewards and cash once a month, and also in relation to an additional set of Rewards Program Rules and Regulations, which is mailed after you sign up for an account and again every time you switch between rewards and cash. The allure of the ad, set against the backdrop of a paradise island, works both to promise a freedom without horizon and to attach it to the economic realm—not to mention yet another routine of learning how to maximize the rules and rewards of that realm, thus disciplining and distracting our imaginations toward economic choices and games rather than political judgment and struggle. For the fine print see, [http://www.chasefreedomnow.com/rewards/details_other.asp](http://www.chasefreedomnow.com/rewards/details_other.asp) (accessed March 24, 2009).
Instead, we might view the ad—and the relationship between its representation and performance of America—as an effort to reproduce what Wolin has called “formless forms” of power. Corporate power, in its monopolistic and globalizing modes, has woven its way, with new breadth and depth, into the interworkings of law, policy, defense, social services, and communications: mocking campaign finance reform and lobbying regulations; assuming increasing control over foreign and domestic surveillance, security, and penalization; managing ever more of the nation’s health, education, and energy services; and monopolizing the media and advertising industries. As forms and modes of corporate and state power have fused, the functions and discourses of economics and politics have become increasingly indistinguishable. The result is a disorganization of traditional sites of authority, responsibility, and freedom within America, and often a disregard for territorial borders as limits on national sovereignty—both outwardly, in subtler and more pervasive forms of economic and cultural expansion, and inwardly, in America’s heightened sense of its own economic and cultural instability.

In this context, in these times, America’s political imagination appears to have more than anxiety at its core; it seems balanced, or imbalanced, on bipolar extremes. At one pole, America sustains the pretense that it is a nation without limits. If Chevy’s ad translates loss and conflict into delusions of grandeur, Americans daily receive messages that downplay struggle altogether. Writing in the 150th anniversary issue of The Atlantic,

45 Wolin, Politics and Vision, 559-61, 588-90.
dedicated to “The Future of the American Idea,” inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil promises limitless frontiers: “Despite well-publicized obstructions, the American drive to push beyond frontiers is alive and well, and represents the dominant philosophy in the world today, with continued exponential advance on the horizon.” The nanoengine behind this drive is the revolutionizing combo of capitalism and technology, which progressively shrinks the size and cost of tools of information and production, giving Americans more imaginative bang for their buck. “The means of creativity,” Kurzweil opines, “have now been democratized.” America thus speaks a techno-economic language that promises equal opportunity for imagination and unlimited access to its sites, forms, and modes. But, swinging to the other pole, key resources of democratic political imagination have been critically depressed, disorganized, and displaced. If difference is often inactivated or co-opted as a source of productive and divergent imagining, and citizenship largely confused with passive and reproductive roles of consumption, the more fundamental concern is with the totalizing and formless forms of power that make this possible. In its totalizing dynamics, contemporary power monopolizes access to key economic, cultural, and governmental sites of imagination, thus disempowering political imagination for most people. For those democratic mobilizations of power that are able to imagine alternative forms of politics and economy, the field of struggle all too often appears formless—concealing, obscuring, and co-opting the institutions and discourses that have responsibility and authority for change.

Democracy in America, in this context, in these times, seems increasingly impossible to imagine.\textsuperscript{47}

This, at least, is my anxiety. And it shapes the direction, form, and content of this project. For the paradox of political imagination is at the center of political theory, no less than political organization. I do not mean to collapse these two activities, although it is impossible to know their precise limits: indeed, they share many spaces, actors, forms, modes, logics, dangers, and possibilities. One of my underlying assumptions, in a dissertation on the politics of imagination in grassroots movements, is that work of political theory is not confined to the halls of the academy, just as the work of political organization is not confined to the halls of government. In a given context, political theory and political organization exist in fields of power that, while not entirely the same, are common and overlapping. Both have the paradoxical task of gathering together desired forms and modes of collective life amidst divergent imaginings that might disrupt

\textsuperscript{47}The array of You Tube videos parodying “Our Country, Our Truck” poses a set of questions that both deepen and challenge my claims in this pivotal paragraph. The edgier representations of America in the videos awaken many of the differences and tensions that Chevy puts to sleep; the performative aspect of the videos, produced and distributed on You Tube, further challenges Chevy’s monopoly on imagining America. Of course, the latter point supports Kurzweil’s claim. But it doesn’t, by extension, diminish my concerns; it merely complicates them. I take the democratization of technological tools of information and cultural production to be one vitally important source of democratizing political imagination throughout history. Many grassroots populist movements today use the internet as a basic tool of organizing; the Populist Movement of the 1870s-90s had its lifeblood not only in a traveling lecture circuit that gathered people in face-to-face meetings, but also in hundreds of movement circulars that diffused news, political-economic critiques, and stories of hope more rapidly and broadly. What relationship exists between the democratization of cultural technologies, on the one hand, and the monopolization of other sites and resources of imagination—the mainstream media, the advertising and marketing industry, but also administrative agencies, legal and judicial procedures, workplaces, public spaces, etc? How are grassroots social movements making connections between, on the one hand, the alternative forms of space, time, and relationship offered online, and on the other, the mobilization of people to form political judgments, make commitments, and build institutions that re-organize dominant forms of cultural, economic, and government power? I will address these kinds of questions in future revisions of this project.
or disperse them. Each has shown that it can do this in ways that are expansive or narrow, strange or familiar, orderly or disorderly. Each, perhaps, needs the other in order to imagine its limits and so, I will argue, to imagine democracy. Political theory assumes spaces and practices of critical and creative reflection that political organization does not always allow, but must allow more often if it hopes to account for its constitutive exclusions. Political organization engages in relations of power—sometimes urgent, visceral, and affective; sometimes sustained, reflexive, and negotiated; often times routine and normalizing—from which political theory can neither afford nor pretend to abstract itself entirely.

Political theory, that is, cannot forget its own politics. Even for Plato and Hobbes, who obscure the paradox of imagination at the center of their theories, the stakes are too high to forget it entirely: both contest the fields of power in which they find themselves, and against which they write, by deploying rhetorical powers to narrow or expand the grounds of reflection and argument. If Hobbes, like Chevy, performs a centripetal imagining of collective life, and does so to settle us into an order that absolves itself, and us, from the anxious work of question and critique, Plato gives more imaginative play to the contingencies that reveal and clarify limits and that animate discursive reflection in unwonted directions. My own anxiety about the obscured limits of democratic imagination, amidst totalizing and formless forms of power, leads me to move the paradox of political imagination from the background to the foreground of my political theory. Formally, this entails moving imagination from the margins of my textual practice to its center, and writing at the intersections of rhetoric and argument, allowing each to
do work on the limits of the other. Substantively, I foreground my own imagination of
democracy, at the end of this introduction, as a world-opening and world-forming gesture
within and against which the reflective, argumentative, and constructive work of the
project takes place.

Let me first reshape the paradox of political imagination—and its constitutive
anxiety—in democratic terms. For my own anxieties about the would-be-limitless powers
of political imagination call me to solicit and care for the modes and forms of democratic
imagination in particular. If politics is importantly about organizing the power to imagine
collective identity and common life, then democratic politics—the idea that the people
govern themselves, or share power—suggests that we share in the power of imagining.
And this elicits norms of equality, pluralism, inclusion, participation, disruption, and
contestation that render a more dynamic, and difficult, negotiation and practice of
collective life than Chevy, Hobbes, and even Plato would allow. To understand
democratic politics to be about sharing in the power of imagining our common life
requires not only that we imagine democracy differently, by moving imagination to the
center of its theory and practice, but also that we imagine imagination differently—its
subjects, spaces, relationships, practices, tempos, and times. To see imagination as a
sharing in power is to begin to open our eyes to the ways in which it is both conditioned
by our relationships with others and the world and productive of those relationships. A
democratic power of imagination, then, leads us away from the reproductive relationships
at the base of Chevy’s America and toward traditions, institutions, and dynamics that
hold the seeds of emergent imaginings of democracy in America.
But, of course, the very embeddedness of imagination reminds us—as does America’s attenuation from a democratic promise to a household brand name—that the utopian impulse to imagine democracy, and to imagine imagination, is itself often at odds with the realities of imagination in theory and practice. There are limits on our power to imagine democracy. My concern that “America” has become a “light-duty, full-sized pickup truck” is not only, then, with the dullness and bluntness of the dominant symbol through which “our country” imagines its common life and the insufficiency of that symbol for the vision and practice of democracy. It is more fundamentally with what this says about how we have understood, or failed to understand, democratic imagination itself and its limits—those that constrain it, either in the name of democracy or below its radar, and those that protect and enable its transgressive and productive potentials. But if it is imminently difficult to imagine democracy in America today, why limit my own political imagination to its orbit?

Michael Kazin has written that America is at once “the most idealistic and the most conservative nation on earth.” His concern is the conservatism of social movements that typically deploy the promise of America to restore rather than fundamentally challenge the nation’s core ideals. I share Kazin’s concern. But my deeper anxiety is with a less stable America that, in recognizing no horizons on its ideals of freedom, democracy, and progress, progressively depletes their democratic roots. My project thus explores, and significantly reconfigures, the “conservative” elements of

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social movement politics in response to two prominent trends that disregard the
democratic promise of America in different ways. The first, with Chevy, is driven by
contemporary political-economic modes of power that both monopolize and trivialize our
imagination of democracy, putting it up for sale. Promises, if they have traction at all in a
world of fleeting fads and rhetorical spin, are not limits rooted in a world of historical
beings, institutions, and traditions, but merely alluring temptations and fantasies that
distract us—from the natural and conventional forces that beset us, from the ethical and
political commitments we make. If Plato and Hobbes were wrong, as I think they were,
about the security and order afforded by centralizing modes of power, they were prescient
about the need for some limits on our imaginations to enable us to promise and sustain a
common political life, including the life of democratic politics.

A second worrisome trend, found in prominent forms of leftist struggle against
the first, nonetheless disregards the democratic promise of America by showing its own
brand of contempt for the countless historical contingencies, dispersed practical
knowledges, and variegated cultural resources that make up centuries of democratic
inheritance. To conserve this unwieldy inheritance would be to acknowledge its limiting
force, both as a check on centralizing modes and forms of power, and as a seedbed that
nourishes emergent powers of imagination. But many on the left have disavowed such an
inheritance, as well as the present and future it engenders and portends. Here we might
include the scientific rationalism of progressive reformers—including those who seek to
package and export democracy today—whose well-intentioned but myopic confidence in
large-scale models and technical efficiency misses much about the multiplicity and
complexity of the world they hope to develop and democratize. And we might locate the pervasive culture of critique among leftist academics, whose protective stances of cynicism, despair, and moralism cause them to dismiss, or miss, the extant cultural resources of political transformation. If most theorists on the left are suspicious of the anti-democratic implications of Platonic and Hobbesian theories, too many of them fall into the same trap of believing their theories and forms to be superior to the variegated world they too conceal from the vantage point of their distanced, critical postures.

The promise of America, then, is potentially more dangerous and more cynical than the conservative idealism that stirs Kazin’s anxieties. My conservative move, against these heightened odds, is not to preserve an inviolable ideal of America to which new and different subjects might progressively gain membership. I ask, instead, what kinds of limits—which ethical dispositions and commitments, which habits and practices of being, which forms and modes of belonging, which traditions and dynamics of collective life—are capacious enough to hold up the utopian ideal of democracy, while holding it open to democratic critique, disruption, and reconstitution. I ask this question in the context of America because it is, in important respects, emblematic of the dangers and constraints of political imagination, including political imagination that invokes the name of democracy. And I do so, constructively, to recoup an unwieldy democratic inheritance—

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one that often, but not always, invokes the name of America—whose capacities to protect
and enable emergent imaginings of democracy have been disavowed, forgotten, co-opted,
and malnourished.

My emphasis is different from traditional conservatism, and from what I take to be key constraints of liberalism, in two important respects. First, unlike both, I am not principally concerned with the conditions and possibilities of belonging to any of the established identities that structure human life: self, family, community, church, tradition, nation, human, past, future, etc. Each of us is claimed by and makes claims to a variety of such identities, with different salience, intensity, and overlap; each of us joins with others to justify and defend the orders of belonging that protect and enable whatever we hold most dear. I do not doubt that there are better and worse orders of belonging, or that the work of democratic politics is, in part, to preserve the best of extant orders and to achieve orders that are more inclusive, equal, just, pluralistic, free, and so on. But, a democratic politics that is about sharing in the power of imagination takes the accent off belonging-to and stresses more fundamental questions about the conditions and implications of belonging-with. Belonging-with assumes the incompleteness of every effort to imagine and organize collective identity and common life. It therefore requires us to commit not to an established order. It calls us to a less settled, and at times unsettling, coexistence with those who claim a share in the power to create, interrupt, reform, or transform a world in common. To belong-with is to orient political imagination not only toward the center of that world, toward a familiar home or a universal end, but more fundamentally toward its edges—marked by disparate and divergent, yet inextricably linked and
potentially productive identities, directions, transgressions, consolidations, and emergences.

And this, secondly, demands a different conception of the limits of political imagination than we generally find in conservatism or liberalism. The limits of belonging-to aim, first and foremost, to preserve and promote an identifiable, stable orientation for political imagination—for example, by erecting borders to fortify national sovereignty and to constrain pluralistic imaginings; by conserving shared histories, religions, and languages that form the root system of fellow-feeling and common purpose; by consenting to and securing foundational ideals, institutions, and procedures that protect and enable dissent, reform, and progress. Belonging-with recognizes, respects, and defends many limits of this kind. But it finds them inadequate to the labor of sheltering and nurturing the manifold inchoate, unrecognizable, and disorienting imaginings that lay claim to democracy. That labor requires limits that are themselves pluralistic, capable of pluralizing identities and affects, often at cross-purposes, not always consensual, at times anti-foundational, and constitutively oriented toward difference. The limits of belonging-with are thus closures that forge openings for and cultivate openness to emergent imaginings of collective life. They might, for example, develop an ethos of caring for a world of lost treasures and strange surprises; form dispositions and habits of receptivity, anticipation, audacity, and solidarity; practice modalities of listening, promising, provoking, and negotiating; nurture traditions of cooperative self-help, agonal coalition-building, and theatrical protest; institute a bill of freedoms, along with discourses that raise expectations for and rituals that make
customary its periodic revision. This conception of limits, then, affirms the need to find and defend usable forms and modes of belonging-to democracy, but these are subordinate to the conditions and possibilities of belonging-with others who share in the power to imagine democracy.

Why, finally, am I, an American who is admittedly uncomfortable in the limits of her own skin, writing on democratic imagination in America? In great part, because I am both drawn into and agitated by Chevy’s imagination of “Our Country.” Watching it, I’m stirred by cadences of a less sanitized King, who with Langston Hughes promised: “America never was America to me/ And yet I swear this oath—/ America will be!” King’s promise took the uneasy and reiterative form of “creating the kind of tension in society” necessary to build and sustain “beloved community.”51 With King’s words on my mind, I’m outraged at Chevy’s America. Because, having gutted houses and built relationships in New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward, I take no national pride in yet another ritual forgetting of what are, to me, visceral narratives of ongoing institutional racism and abandonment and of stubborn grassroots activism and hope. And I am in wonder, because even though I’ve descended into the depths of the Grand Canyon and scraped its layers of rock two billion years old, I know I will never fathom its limits. And I’m baffled that Chevy takes that prerogative. Chevy’s imagination of America gets under my skin; it calls me out of myself, despite my cynicism about Chevy, toward our country; it alerts me to hold myself open to emergences of strangers within it, and beyond its peripheral


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vision. I am imagining democracy and imagination in America because I am hoping to
greet the stranger at its core.

An American Anthem: “Democracy is Coming to the U.S.A.”

Perhaps Leonard Cohen, the Canadian singer-songwriter-poet, best captures my
sentiment toward Chevy’s “Anthem” with these lines from his song, “Democracy”: “I
love the country but I can’t stand the scene.” In contrast to Chevy’s totalizing
imagination of “Our Country,” I find much more of sustenance in the montage that
orients and disorients Cohen’s imagination of democracy in America. If Chevy forgets
democracy in glaring fashion, it seems democracy cannot forget Chevy:

    It’s coming from the silence
    on the dock of the bay,
    from the brave, the bold, the battered
    heart of Chevrolet:
    Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

Chevy’s hand in inaugurating democracy in America is not, here, as the
sophisticated marketer of our country’s shiny image; it is, rather, as the iconic brand that
has sold America out. Cohen conjures up an American heartland battered by decades of
corporate restructuring and silenced into so many ghost towns of closed plants, dried-up
docks, and abandoned support infrastructures. But it is precisely from those bruises and

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53 Picture Flint, Michigan, where Michael More filmed Roger & Me, a documentary about the closing of several General Motors plants during the 1980s due to corporate downsizing and outsourcing. These production calculations cost 30,000 people their jobs and economically devastated the city. See Moore et al., Roger & Me (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1990).
silences—and the refusal to forget or conceal them—that the promise of democracy might emerge. It is coming from “a hole in the air” of America’s airtight image, from a “crack in the wall” of its ideological armor, from the nightmares—Cohen invokes crime, poverty, and the epidemic spread of HIV/AIDS—America has perpetuated through its “wars against disorder.” It is coming from the disorienting sense of its own incomplete promise, from the feeling that it “ain’t exactly real/ or it’s real, but it ain’t exactly there.” Its sense of disorientation differentiates it from the mollifying promise, marketed by Chevy, that democracy is incomplete only in that it has not yet fulfilled its pre-ordained destiny.

Indeed, if Chevy’s ad aims to shore up a master narrative of national progress, and to secure its own role in that story, the “battered heart” of the multinational corporation’s legacy belies that myth: its limits are not in the protective economies, empowered communities, and capacious subjects it promises, but in the constrained and depleted resources of democracy it leaves behind. Cohen solicits the dislocated lives and disoriented dreams cast off by the promise of Chevy’s America, which is airtight only in the sense that it preserves oxygen enough for a few, but not many. He gathers them together, as they re-imagine democracy’s limits. What Cohen sees is a promise of democracy constituted, animated, and sustained by its gaps—not only as mis-recognized ghosts come back to haunt established order, but also in the ways those ghosts connect with other strange spirits to re-iterate the promise of democracy across time and space. In the text of the song, Cohen uses a repetitive form to connect these strangers; each time the promise of democracy is reiterated in the chorus, it follows a colon spoken by a
different set of actors in a different context. In the song’s performance, the insistent, percussive, incantational chorus—“Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.”—acts both as a transgressive, disorienting threat and as an orienting promise born/borne in diverse times, sites, practices, bodies, senses, and dynamics. Among them are alternative sites and bodies of democratic imagining: the blighted city, the plant slated for closing, the unruly streets, the “holy places where the races meet,” the contagion of queer bodies, the gender politics of the kitchen, the liberationist congregation, Tiananmen Square, the Canadian Cohen. These sites are infused with different modes and senses—love, thirst, bitchin’, prayer, contagion, congregation—sustained by times and dynamics that range from “visionary floods,” to contestational disruptions, to silent and kneeling pauses, to restorative moments.

It is a restorative note, if a characteristically questioning one, on which Cohen ends the song:

I’m sentimental, if you know what I mean
I love the country but I can’t stand the scene.
And I’m neither left or right
I’m just staying home tonight,
getting lost in that hopeless little screen.
But I’m stubborn as those garbage bags
That Time cannot decay,
I’m Junk but I’m still holding up
This little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

If democracy is a wild promise born—and borne stubbornly—in the junk of America’s past and present, we are called in the song to bear witness to and be inspired by, to conserve and care for, those resources in the world that might give it shelter and
hold it up. As the chorus reminds us, democracy is both fundamentally incomplete, and fundamentally active; it will always be coming. And its coming into the world insists that we be more than passive recipients of the promise of American democracy, as if we already knew what it were; Cohen reminds us of our complicity in America’s more reproductive and destructive deployments if we let ourselves “stay home” with Chevy and “get lost in that hopeless little screen.” Instead, democracy’s coming requires that we be active participants in promising America—animated both by a disorienting receptivity to the ways in which we might just be junk and by our orienting efforts to recommit to and reconstitute a world in which democracy’s wild bouquet might flourish.

Cohen’s “Democracy” is anything but “sentimental,” in the dismissive sense of the term. But if the song foregrounds brokenness and struggle in ways that render them edgy, active, and creative, it also recognizes in us, no less than Chevy does, a deep, affective need to belong. In the unforgiving spaces, amidst the unsatisfied hungers of Cohen’s America, belonging can seem a scarce good, for “it’s here the lonely say/ that the heart has got to open/ in a fundamental way.” When it doesn’t open, which is often, the desire to belong can bleed into resignation toward a seemingly inevitable, and narrow, fate: it still is either left or right, and increasingly, those confined paths outline futures to which few people feel they can wholly belong. Indeed, belonging-to seems like either an exclusive fantasy or a precarious dream in Cohen’s America. And he knows that, faced with the anxieties of not-belonging, many of us do often opt out. We opt to “stay home” in a passive cynicism that’s more comfortable, more at home, than risking the wild hope that we might belong to something better, that we might indeed—with hearts open in a
more fundamental way—*belong-with* others in creating it. If the circumscribed belonging advertised by Chevy’s America structures the very dislocations that call some of us to question its order, it also breeds in many more of us, or much more of the time, the passivity that helps reproduce that order.

But there are worse fates than Chevy’s America. Cohen foresees, more dystopically, that when loneliness becomes endemic in a society, when people find few sources of connection to others, few securities of belonging, conditions can swing perilously between poles of relativism and fundamentalism. Cohen’s “Democracy” thus holds a precarious, if vitally important, relation to “The Future,” the title track of the album on which the two songs are tightly juxtaposed. In his dystopic scenario of the future, Cohen imagines a world that has lost all common referents in culture or creed:

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Things are going to slide, slide in all directions
Won't be nothing
Nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
has crossed the threshold
and it has overturned
the order of the soul
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In this limitless future, things slide in all directions *but one*—the center—thus causing no mere anxiety, but a radically unparadoxical uncertainty. From the throes of that uncertainty, Cohen sings, “It’s lonely here/ There’s no one left to torture.” As the soul loses its bearings in a world with no thresholds of belonging, the self “explodes,” displacing both its “secret life” and its regard for others. As to the latter, Cohen prophecies, “I’ve seen the future, brother:/ It is murder.” And amidst the radical disorder of this relativistic vision, he demands radical order: “Give me back the Berlin Wall/ Give
me Stalin and St. Paul/ Give me Christ/ or give me Hiroshima.” It is thus, Cohen suggests, perhaps small change between the extreme disorientation of relativistic difference and the extreme orientation of regimes that have attempted to collapse difference into totality. Both scenarios deny or destroy the limiting conditions of distinction; both fundamentally disregard what is other to them; each is parasitic on and food for the other.

If Cohen recognizes acutely, and empathetically, that political order is born in part of our deep need to belong, he calls us to an edgy membership, one that works on the limits of any given order of belonging to tweak open, ever more, its regard for its constitutive differences. At the same time, if our differences are a critical limit for imagining more democratic orders, they are only so in regard to what lays beyond them, that is, in regard of others with whom we share a common fate. The limits of Cohen’s songs—the polyvocal insurgency of democracy’s promise, the incongruous sites and dynamics it solicits and gathers, the ethos of tending self and other that orients its disparate yearnings toward a better common future—harbor the unsettled and unsettling imaginings of a world that might just be, in its “strange multiplicity,” beautiful enough to love, to belong-to.54 But the form that world takes in any given instantiation is always subordinated, in the tenor of Cohen’s uneasy, haunted performances, to the radical love of belonging— with those who bear the power to imagine it. The moral of “The Future”— offered as an impossible gift in what Cohen characterizes as the perennially

misunderstood voice of Christ—takes us back to that fundament: “I’ve seen the nations rise and fall/ I’ve heard their stories, heard them all./ but love’s the only engine of survival.”

It is love toward which Cohen calls political imagination, but an uneasy love compared to Chevy’s self-congratulatory image and tone. Returning to “Democracy” in America, then, how might the heart of the nation open in a more fundamental way? If the promise of democracy calls America to sustain a more proximate relationship between orienting and disorienting forms and modes of imagination, one that works at and on the edges of each, how might that relationship be borne? Cohen, in the song’s refrain, foregrounds a carrier that Chevy would rather obscure:

Sail on, sail on
O mighty Ship of State!
To the Shores of Need
Past the Reefs of Greed
Through the Squalls of Hate
Sail on, sail on, sail on, sail on.

In Cohen’s imagination of it, America is a “cradle of the best and of the worst”; it is at the same time a “cradle” of democracy’s promise, because it’s “here they got the range/ and the machinery for change/ and it’s here they got the spiritual thirst.” Cohen does not mean, primarily, the machinery of a police state, engaged in “wars against disorder,” nor of an administrative state, circumscribed by narrow left/right logics that discipline divergent spaces, bodies, practices, and dynamics of imagining. Instead, he imagines the state in a protective and enabling capacity born/borne in more receptive and unwieldy relationships with the streets, the kitchen, the workplace, holy places, and even
shores beyond the nation’s borders. Far from Chevy’s arbitrary and formless state, the “Ship of State” in Cohen’s America is limited in its direction: “To the Shores of Need.” And if the state “sails on” purposefully toward that end, it finds itself on waters that are anything but smooth or clear. It does not stop for greed or hate, but its course is continually contested and redirected as it encounters democracy’s vital sources: “spiritual thirsts,” “wells of disappointment,” “silences on the dock of the bay,” but also “visionary floods of alcohol,” depths of lovemaking that cause rivers to weep, tidal floods in “imperial, mysterious, amorous array.”

If Cohen, then, foregrounds suffered, edgy, creative difference as the wellspring of democracy, he also inseparably foregrounds the state as one crucial “cradle” for its promise. The two serve as co-orienting principles in the song’s double refrain: Democracy’s “coming to the U.S.A.” is born of difference, and borne by the “Ship of State” that protects and enables the bodies, spaces, relationships, and dynamics from which different, even divergent, imaginings might emerge in relation to each other. For the proximate relationship of disorientation and orientation at the heart of Cohen’s democracy is not only the commitments that insurgent social movements make toward each other to disperse entrenched forms of order, but also the broader claim they lay on the “machinery” to re-orient and steer democracy toward a better common fate. The state, in this conception, pluralizes the most capacious limits of political imagination and is in turn pluralized and enlivened by them; it is a state-of-difference in the double sense of conditioning and being conditioned by difference. This is a fundamentally distinct imagination-organization of America from the totalizing one Chevy performs, in its
double move of incapacitating difference by obscuring and co-opting citizenship and the state. But it is also distinct from many constitutional imaginations that put the state at the center of democracy. From Hobbes to the American founders to strains of contemporary liberalism, the search for a more legitimate balance of powers too often results in some form of universal sovereign state being superimposed over a manifold of cultural modalities of citizenship.\(^55\)

We need look no farther than Cohen’s own unwieldy inheritance for a ship of state that fundamentally reorients the centralizing and decentralizing powers that imagine democracy. But we have to squint, all the same, to recognize it in the uncanny form of *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, a sculpture whose name translates loosely as “the spirit of the home of the people.”\(^56\) Bill Reid, a Canadian citizen of European and Haida descent, conjures a tradition of imagining collective life that was junked as a result of the conquest and genocide of indigenous peoples across the Americas. His life-sized bronze sculpture—a black casting displayed at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and a jade casting at the Vancouver International Airport in British Columbia—depicts an overcrowded dugout canoe. Its thirteen passengers are mostly figures from Haida mythology, each with its own cultural identity and narrative, and the ship also enlists the Western figure of the ancient reluctant transcript memorialized in Carl Sandburg’s *Old Timers*. The motley crew is assembled in a tangle of inextricable but disjointed relations: each passenger is clearly distinct from the others, but the precise lines of separation are

\(^{55}\) Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 20.

\(^{56}\) *Ibid.* 18. My description of Reid’s sculpture is taken largely from Tully, 18-34, 201-208, and also from my own viewing of it at the Vancouver International Airport in British Columbia.
far from certain. The wolf, its claws clenched in the beaver’s back, pushes its way between the dogfish woman and the chief to bite the wing of the eagle, who in turn attacks the paw of the grizzly bear, as he and the part-human bear mother protect their cubs. The trickster raven perches on the stern, precariously charged with steering the canoe, while the ancient transcript paddles reluctantly beside its right wing and the mouse woman peers out from under the shelter of its left wing. The frog, who crosses boundaries between worlds, finds a place for itself at the edge of the canoe; the chief, whose identity is uncertain, holds the speaker’s staff at ship’s center. The passengers thus “squabble and vie for position in the boat,” but as Reid points out, “somehow manage to appear to be heading in some direction,” their paddles in unison.\(^{57}\)

Canadian political theorist James Tully reflects on the *Spirit of Haida Gwaii* both to disorient and orient his own imagination of constitutional diversity, and he invites us too to wonder at the “strange multiplicity” contained in the ship’s form. He describes his experience of belonging—with the ship: viewing its endless juxtapositions of cultural perspectives without ever being able to settle on any comprehensive frame of reference; feeling himself drawn in among its crew of intersecting, hybrid passengers who never quite belong to their own identities; sensing the “play of his imagination awaken” in each encounter with the “irreducible diversity” of its limits.\(^{58}\) Tully at times sublimates the raw power and violence of the sculpture, its angles of fear, alienation, and deception. Like the mutiny of Plato’s topsy-turvy ship, it evokes—at least for this Western viewer—a

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\(^{58}\) *Ibid.* 22, 204.
gnawing unease at the ship’s imposing disorder and an anxious fascination in how its story will end. But from whatever lens, the sculpture’s performativity, its capacity to provoke astonishment and critical reflection, is the result precisely of the unsettled and unsettling form of its montage. Not only the ship’s current arrangement is visible, but more fundamentally, the appearance of never-ending contestation and renegotiation between the passengers who constitute it and are constituted by it.\textsuperscript{59} \textit{The Spirit of Haida Gwaii} thus draws our attention to the subconstitutional politics harbored and enabled by its ship of state: the dynamics, practices, relationships, institutions, and traditions that daily reinforce its more formal constitutional architecture and, as often as not, boil up, exceed, and even overflow it. Its gamble, emerging from historical oblivion, is that foregrounding the disjunctures in its provisional scaffolding is more conducive to its own conservation, even in strange form, than whitewashing them, disciplining them to fit the mold, or casting them away.

Tully contrasts the textured constitutional activity of the Haida ship of state with modern, Western constitutionalism. In shoring up the sovereignty of the nation-state, the most prominent models of the latter insufficiently recognize the productive limits of subconstitutional politics—its multiplicity of cultural authorities and the variegated bodies that represent them, its densely woven implications and associations with supranational currents and traditions.\textsuperscript{60} But it is, for Tully, precisely in these intercultural, subconstitutional waters that new forms and modes of collective life are cultivated and

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.} 25.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid.} 28-29, 194-95.
new imaginations of democracy emerge. He thus elaborates a ship of state, in *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, in which cross-cutting layers of constitutional activity orient collective life and, at the same time, raise their own constitutive differences to the surface. Rather than foregrounding an original contract, or certain threshold institutions and procedures, or some unity of culture, the Haida ship of state showcases a variety of more situated, negotiated, and provisional agreements and commitments, each representing a different configuration of cultural traditions and each subject to revision. It relies not on the interpretive glue of a national metalanguage or master narrative, but on dispositions and practices of speaking and listening that allow overlapping but distinct cultural identities to emerge, gain voice, and be heard on their own terms. It harbors a common belief that participating in regular, intercultural exchanges will foster civic capacities to inhabit the edges and cross the boundaries between cultures, to see a world in common from multiple perspectives, to anticipate and receive insurgent strangers, to make claims on but also heed the voices of reluctant transcripts, and to cultivate dispositions of reflexivity, critique, and provocation that upset habitual forms of misrecognition.\(^{61}\)

By foregrounding the subconstitutional politics of its passengers *and* their co-constitutive existence with the shared hull and heading of the ship, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* evokes what are, for Tully, two public goods of the state. The first is an abiding sense of belonging, which derives from participating in a constitutional association in which one’s cultural identities are recognized both on their own terms and as constituent

of the larger association. But the very interdependence implied in this experience of belonging-with inculcates, in turn, a persistent sense of the limits of that belonging—in one’s difference from the strange multiplicity of other spirits that constitute the “home of the people,” and not least of all, one’s difference from one’s own identities. The dissonance of belonging-with, then, engenders the second public good of the state: the critical freedom to question, negotiate, disrupt, and reconfigure the cultural inheritance and constitutional association one calls home. Just as belonging-with is a condition of the freedom to imagine democratic life, the critical and constructive freedom of democratic imagining sustains and animates those forms and modes of belonging-with that are irreducible to any one constitution of democracy.

The re-orienting of America that Cohen sketches in “Democracy” hinges, like The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, on a concept of the state that overturns the configuration of centralizing and decentralizing powers that imagine democracy in Chevy’s America. This concept is succinctly captured in “Villanelle for our Time,” a song whose title and lyrics are taken from a poem by the Canadian socialist, poet, and statesman, Frank Scott. Both the song and the poem leave nation and territory undefined, but I draw it into my discussion of America hoping that this juxtaposition of Haida Gwaii, Canada, and the United States unsettles our imagination of democracy, at least somewhat, from the traditional form of the nation-state. Since the lyrics are brief, I include them here in their entirety:

62 Ibid. 202-207.
From bitter searching of the heart,  
Quickened with passion and with pain  
We rise to play a greater part.  
This is the faith from which we start:  
Men shall know commonwealth again  
From bitter searching of the heart.  
We loved the easy and the smart,  
But now, with keener hand and brain,  
We rise to play a greater part.  
The lesser loyalties depart,  
And neither race nor creed remain  
From bitter searching of the heart.  
Not steering by the venal chart  
That tricked the mass for private gain,  
We rise to play a greater part.  
Reshaping narrow law and art  
Whose symbols are the millions slain,  
From bitter searching of the heart  
We rise to play a greater part.

The “faith” of “Our Time” is commonwealth, foregrounded as a junked promise that both animates and orients political imagination and action. The promise, itself, has been junked in two senses. First, what roots it had in the world have been depleted: Societies have been steered by private wealth that sells false goods to the common; they’ve been pulled apart by differences that refuse to look beyond themselves; they’ve been purged by forms of law and culture that establish narrow borders and police them violently. This is not a landscape that inspires much hope of belonging-to something better, let alone belonging-with the strange multiplicity of others who might create it. Instead, in a second sense, cynicisms, myopias, and violences have junked the promise of commonwealth by precipitating a crisis of faith in its possibility and value.

The promise of commonwealth is thus born not of a blind faith, nor even a narrow faith, least of all an easy faith; it is born of and borne by a faith-in-question—by a
“bitter searching of the heart” that wrests and holds its love open to others and to common goods. Cohen’s imagination of commonwealth, once again, moves the “venal chart” from the steering wheel to the trunk, neither fully disowned nor naively forgotten, but carried by a different configuration of powers. Foregrounded among these powers are, first, actors who rise “from bitter searching of the heart,” not entirely above or beyond it, to “play a greater part.” And they play that part, secondly, by “reshaping narrow law and art,” by steering the state, broadly conceived, that will protect the forms and modes of cultural life from which new and divergent imaginings of commonwealth might emerge.63

The imagination of commonwealth may be universalizing in its claim, but it is never complete: the two alternating, rhyming refrains of Cohen’s villanelle emphasize the

63 Cohen performs his own “reshaping of narrow law and art” in the formal innovation of the song. The genre of the villanelle has its earliest roots in 16th century Italian and Spanish peasant songs, called villanellas or villancicos, which were often improvised and had no fixed form. In the late 18th century, a cadre of English poets and scholars standardized and mobilized the villanelle in a heavily politicized aesthetic debate with the more dogmatic, conservative formalism of the time. A tradition of the fixed-form villanelle took shape on the heels of their efforts, and it contained a much narrower and more elite field of artists and interpreters than the popular peasant songs of old. The genre received its most recent revival in the 1980s, with a New Formalism movement that works at the innovative edges of formal verse and popular accessibility. Frank Scott wrote “Villanelle for Our Time” on the precipice of this movement. Cohen, Scott’s student at McGill University, returns the villanelle to its earliest and most popular roots by re-casting it in the form of a song. And he directs it towards the future, by repeating the lyrics, in random order, after the villanelle’s first iteration in the song. This interruption and innovation in form is substantively interesting, as well, for the traditional form of the villanelle intends to drive it, with increasing intensity, toward the final couplet. Cohen’s out-of-order reiterations both disorient the form from its initial trajectory, and reorient/recommit to its promise of commonwealth. The historical and particular movements between form, interruption, and innovation in the genre of the villanelle, and in Cohen’s performance of it, provide an analogy for his sense of the necessary, unending translation between belonging-to and belonging-with—between precious continuity and searching discontinuity—in the political form of commonwealth. On the history of the fixed-form villanelle, see Julie Kane, “The Myth of the Fixed-Form Villanelle,” Modern Language Quarterly 64:4 (December 2003); and Amanda French, Refrain, Again: The Return of the Villanelle (PhD diss, University of Virginia, 2004). My reading of Cohen’s “Villanelle for Our Time” is indebted to key insights by Tom D. Stiller on the website, A Thousand Kisses Deep, http://www.leonardcohenorganization.com/villanelle.php (accessed March 24, 2009).
dis-orientation and re-orientation, the anxiety, at the heart of commonwealth. The bitterness of the heart attends the threat to and loss of loyalties that, if lesser, nonetheless provide dear comfort. The heart’s desire, however, is not only to achieve commonwealth, for when won too easily, the result has been no less bitter; more fundamentally, the heart “quickens with passion” at searching for and rising to the occasion of commonwealth, at questioning and acting with others in the name of creating it. As Harry Boyte writes about the commonwealth tradition in the United States, “In the past there was a fiery contest about the word. Whatever people meant when they used it, ‘commonwealth’ referred to the fact that what was being contested mattered, in some deeply communal, supra-individual way. It conveyed passion, even political life or death.”64 Cohen’s political imagination thus revives an old tradition—in the words of a Canadian socialist, and recalling the strange multiplicity and passionate plurivocity of the United States and Canada’s junked past and present—of the promise of democratic commonwealth. Unwilling, any longer, to “love the easy and the smart,” Cohen’s commonwealth loves the very question and contest at its heart.

Cohen, finally, offers us not only a democratic imagination of America, one that foregrounds many of the worries, desires, commitments, actors, forms, and modes that inform my own political imagination in this project. He also calls political imagination-organization to an unusual relationship to its constitutive paradox. More than Chevy, Hobbes, or even Plato, Cohen foregrounds the anxiety of political imagination amidst its

orienting and disorienting forms and movements. But unlike any of them, he asks us to love the anxiety at its heart. The dangers of not doing so are evident in the more traditional connotations of anxiety, in the ways it can affix us narrowly on an all-consuming desire and cause us to defend it obsessively from threats. At the one pole, we might place totalizing and limitless powers of imagination, whose anxieties manifest as pre-emptive strikes to conceal their limits before they can emerge: Chevy’s America, Cohen’s dystopic future, Hobbes’ Gordian knot. At the other pole, we might see powers that obsess over their own form, to the point of reactionary backlash against anything that threatens it: a more circumscribed Hobbesian sovereignty, the false certainties of Plato’s cave, but also Plato himself, to the extent that the anti-democratic strains of his imagination lash out at the citizenry that murdered Socrates.

A loving anxiety toward the paradoxical experience of political imagination, on the other hand, shifts anxiety’s narrowest logics toward multidimensional and multidirectional ends—and so, toward new beginnings. Cohen tells us in another song on The Future: “Every heart, every heart/ to love will come/ but like a refugee.” Loving anxiety, then, cradles both desire and uncertainty: it solicits both, cares for both, and protects both. Thinking of anxiety in loving terms emphasizes anxiety’s double directionality, shifting more attention toward its dispositions and practices of desire, solicitude, and care, but also giving its protective worries and defenses more regard for strange, refugee desires. If loving anxiety is, at its core, more receptive than other anxieties, it is also less cynical; it engages passionately, even across fiery contest, with what matters to it. And it is, at the same time, or in other moments, calmer than most
anxieties—able, like the Ship of State, to work purposefully amidst uncertainty, with “brain and hand” made “keener” by question and contest. Finally, loving anxiety loves fiercely. It is willing to protect the things it loves—primary among these, the uncertain spaces and dynamics of emergence themselves—from utterly unparadoxical claims on their existence. Loving anxiety harbors no uncertainties about hate or totalizing greed.

If the paradox of political imagination situates it amidst orienting and disorienting modes and forms of imagining, democratic imagination senses the paradox. It must strain to do so, because it desires to belong not only to a present order whose forms, modes, and relationships of power it helps reproduce. It may indeed want to conserve many of them. But democratic imagination also belongs to, and seeks to build relationships of power with, both the junked past that shapes its limits and a more promising future toward which it rises to play a greater part. Cohen’s “Anthem” of democratic imagination, then, draws our hands and brains away from shoring up the borders of “Our Country,” and pulls our eyes down from the false lights towering over its skyline. In so doing, with Cohen, it reorients our hearts: “Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering/ There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in.” The loving anxiety of Cohen’s political imagination does not obsess over repairing or perfecting the broken limits of America; rather, it gathers their worthy and working remainders, tends to their rough edges and glistening imperfections, and anticipates the shards—sometimes rays—of light struggling to emerge.
This project is an effort to recoup, anticipate, and reorder the limits of democratic imagining in America. Doing so requires the kind of deconstructive and reconstructive work begun in this introduction. It means both complicating and clarifying the relationships between political order and political imagination. It is, in the first place, too naïve to characterize democratic imagination as primarily dynamic and transgressive in relation to cultural and political limits. Chevy exemplifies the ways in which dominant modes of power combine both monopolistic consolidations and dislocating dynamics largely to reproduce the conditions of their own dominance. Oftentimes, these exclusive and even antidemocratic powers operate by constraining, obscuring, and co-opting democratic spaces, practices, discourses, institutions, traditions, and dynamics. In the second place, then, if we fail to understand what kinds of cultural and political limits can protect and enable democratic imagining, we render it ineffective to resist and reconfigure the forces of more totalizing imaginations. Cohen and Tully underscore this lesson: democracy stakes its vitality on its ability to invent and conserve dynamics and consolidations of power that not only protect democratic forms but also nourish ongoing and emergent democratic imagining. But what consolidations and dynamics, what modes of conservation and emergence, are capable of democratizing imagination in America? Which threaten to de-democratize imagination? How do new imaginings of imagination, democracy, and America struggle to emerge in relation to democratic and anti-democratic forces that pull them in competing directions?
The stakes of this last question are evident in the juxtaposition between the two American Anthems in this introduction. We might think of Chevy and Cohen as contrapuntal themes, which nonetheless contain moments of harmony that would be unsettling to both. I’ve tried to unmask the false continuities, overproduced rhythms, and invisible edges of Chevy’s montage of America by juxtaposing it with Cohen’s more disjunctive and interruptive techniques. In this way, it is possible to see the countless inflections that could and do decenter totalizing modes of imagination. But just the same, the discordant and insurgent voices of Cohen’s America always risk being pulled back to the center by the centripetal pull of Chevy’s America. In more concrete terms, when it comes to cultural power, the underground music scene inhabited by Cohen is yet a whisper compared to the mass marketing industry deployed by Chevy. That whisper can easily get caught up in the swirl of the mainstream music industry, as it did when Cohen joined Mellencamp as an inductee to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame’s class of 2008.65 The same year, the unruly edges of Cohen’s promise of “Democracy” were sanded down in a YouTube video that turned his lyrics into the voice of Ron Paul’s grassroots “Revolution” to “Restore the Republic.”66 Standing behind Paul’s proposals for strong national sovereignty, a weak protective government, and radical deregulation or markets and corporations, Cohen becomes the voice of Chevrolet. But isn’t America both Chevy

66 The Ron Paul video can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0qlpHRycEc (accessed April 16, 2009).
and Cohen? The juxtaposition of the two reveals that America is constitutively a state-of-difference, but culturally controlled by totalizing forces that work ceaselessly to dull the edges of its differences. New imaginings of democracy and America always emerge from this contested field of centralizing and decentralizing dynamics, of cracks and barriers, of junked remnants and wild bouquets. Those bells that still can ring sound their notes through cracked edges, but their notes always emerge both with overtones of major chords trying to rein them back in and with polyphonic accents they may barely perceive.

I extend these themes and my cursory treatment of America in the next chapter, analyzing the influence of American exceptionalism on the imagination of democracy in America. My primary engagements are with Revolutionary and Constitutional debates, along with reflections on key trends in the nation’s history. Against the backdrop of the unruly and many-sided struggle that constituted America, I use the lens of exceptionalism to evaluate two absolute narratives that are commonly deployed to centralize the imagination of democracy in America: that is, democracy as a limitless ideal and as a constitutionally limited model. Taking each narrative as an ideal type, I draw out the relationship between four characteristics: its idea of America; its dynamics and practices of imagining; the material and cultural world that would enable those modes of imagining while constraining others; and its strategies for responding to the anxieties produced at its constitutive limits. I conclude by sketching the conceptual beginnings of a third and more haunted form of democratic exceptionalism: it evokes the incompleteness of the promise of America, mobilized and tended by emergent radical democratic imaginings long before and throughout the nation’s history. My aim in this chapter is to establish a clearer
understanding of the discursive, spatial, and temporal practices of power that structure the
possibilities of imagining and practicing democracy in America. But in the final section, I
begin to engage ethical questions about the relations and practices of power that could
democratize emergent imaginings. I remain cautious about the project of radical
democratic natality. As with Chevy and Cohen, America is not three ideal types but one
field of myriad dull and jagged edges that pull every new beginning in both centralizing
and decentering directions.

The remaining two chapters work iteratively to develop a theory of radical
democratic imagining. In particular, I elaborate the relationship between the spaces and
practices of radical democratic natality and the spaces and practices of caring for a world
that can harbor future potentials for acting and imagining. I begin this work by
constructing a conversation between Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, and Mikhail
Bakhtin. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus gives us a language for understanding how
imagination is deeply inscribed in the cultural processes by which societies distribute
modes power and powerlessness; generate and maintain social spaces, times, and
practices; shape cognitive and bodily dispositions and habits; and develop common
meanings, as well as limits on what can be thought and spoken. If these processes tend to
reproduce centralizing modes of power and imagination, I read Bourdieu against the
grain to begin to imagine the spatial, temporal, and discursive practices that might
generate more pluralistic, dynamic, and disruptive forms of habitus. I turn to Arendt and
to develop the ethical and political dimensions of such a project. Arendt ties the
conditions of collective action, but also its performance, to an ethos of caring for the
historical and cultural world in which future action and future imagining can emerge. This calls her to conceive forms of natality that are less constrained by logics of domination, and instead enabled by pluralistic and relational forms of power. And yet, taking Bourdieu seriously requires reworking Arendt’s best insights to include care of habitus as elemental to care of the world. I mediate and extend this conversation by turning to Bakhtin. He describes centripetal and centrifugal forces of culture and language that constitute every new act, opening it to futures we cannot control. In this, he provides an opening to ask, vis-à-vis both Bourdieu and Arendt, how radical democratic habitus could buoy performances of natality that are dialogically contested from the start?

In the final chapter, I elucidate and extend these questions, as well as my concerns about democratizing imagination in America, through a descriptive evaluation of the late-nineteenth century Populist movement. In an era of destructive dynamism and previously inconceivable concentrations of power, as well as persistent patriarchal relationships and resurgent forms of white supremacy and nativism, Populism affirmed and built countercurrent cultures of democracy, political economy, and progress. The movement thus inherited and acted within the same field of centripetal and centrifugal forces that historically conditioned democratic imagining in America. As such, its most radical critiques and practices faced not only overwhelming external forces, but also the limits of its own imagination. How did Populism understand the limits that enabled and constrained its imagination of democracy, and how did it variously protect, traverse, and challenge them? I trace its competing debts: to the alternative historical authorities it mobilized in its efforts to decenter absolute narratives of democracy; to those same
centralizing modes of power and imagination it contested; and to more insurgent and often unnoticed voices at its own edges, which worked to decenter and inflect the imagination of Populism. In light of these debts, I evaluate the movement’s spatial, temporal, discursive, and aesthetic practices. It understood, vis-à-vis Bourdieu, Arendt, and Bakhtin, that new imaginings must be born of and borne by competing habitus—which are developed, nurtured, forgotten, and recovered over time as uneven bodies come together in unfamiliar spatial arrangements, called by surprising discursive ideas and practices, via unsettling modes of power and powerlessness, in untold relationships to their shared and contested histories. I thus evaluate the spaces, practices, relationships, and traditions—as well as the insights and oversights—in and through which Populism cultivated its radical democratic habitus of imagining.
CHAPTER TWO

American Exceptionalism:

Imagining Democracy, Containing Imagination

It’s coming to America first,
The cradle of the best and of the worst….
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
—Leonard Cohen

Millennialist preachers, enslaved Africans, frontier mystics, dockside tars, German-speaking privates in Washington’s army, mixed- and full-blooded Indians, urban craftsmen, indentured servants, agricultural workers, ascetic Quakers, disgruntled women, born-again men and women calling themselves Christ’s poor—all became caught up in the inner dynamics of the Revolution. If we conceive of them as so many grabbers of quill pens, eager to write on the blank sheet, we can see that the American Revolution was not only a war of independence but a many-sided struggle to reinvent America. It was a civil war at home as well as a military struggle for national liberation.

—Gary Nash

This is a project about democracy, not exceptionalism. Yet it would be difficult to say anything about how democracy is imagined in the United States without accounting for American exceptionalism: the amalgam of sacred and secular ideology that casts America as a social and political experiment of world-historical importance. In its most minimalist usage, the idea of exceptionalism refers to the triumph of the liberal creed in a nation whose unique material conditions primed it for a radical break from the feudal and

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territorial limits of the Old World. In its more expansive sense, born in the destinarian language of English Puritanism and secularized during the Revolution and constitutional debates, exceptionalism permeates American culture and drives the nation’s idea of itself and its role in the world. Exceptionalism is thus one of the dominant forces that has shaped the imagination of democracy in America—from the symbol of the New World as a promised land of freedom, through the struggle to institutionalize that promise on an unprecedented national scale, to the rhetoric that has justified expanding the promise of freedom to new frontiers. By the early 19th century, the language of democracy was diffuse in popular discourse as the ideological and institutional condition of freedom. By the end of that century, Walt Whitman proposed to “use the words America and democracy as convertible terms,” boldly positioning them as unfinished texts whose narratives must be written in relation to each other.

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4 Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” In Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 930. Democracy is, of course, an anachronistic term when applied to 18th century and early 19th century America. Herbert Storing argues that the term “democracy” is too ambiguous to be analytically useful as a concept describing the intentions of the Founders. He notes that Federalists and Anti-Federalists spoke of “popular government” to reflect the ideas of the consent of the governed and majority rule. Within this frame, the idea of democracy was used, often disparagingly, to suggest direct rule, whereas the idea of republicanism was used to suggest the more favored representative and checked forms of government. But Storing’s argument is limited by his own narrow frame of analysis, which emphasizes debates among elite actors about formal government. Historians like Gary Nash and Gordon Wood use the term democracy to describe the broader cultural shifts that took place prior to and during the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras. For both, democracy characterizes the more egalitarian social linkages that were being demanded and forged among people and between people and government. In slightly different ways, both see a democratic culture beginning to emerge as people took it in their own hands to demand better forms of equality and political freedom, to create their own local and often counter-current forms of politics, and to put pressure on elites to institute wide and diverse forms of participation in government. I use the term democracy to refer to these broader strains of democratic culture and their
This chapter interrogates the link between exceptionalism and democracy. I ask how exceptionalism has functioned, and how it might function differently, in imagining democracy in America. I argue that the nation’s culture of exceptionalism has historically demanded and produced an absolute imagination of democracy, one that excludes, conceals, or appropriates much that came before it and whatever rises to contest it. In this sense, exceptionalism faces the paradox of political imagination. It operates according to the Hobbesian logic that centralizing imagination—including the imagination of democracy—is crucial to founding, ordering, or controlling collective life. And just as Hobbesian sovereignty jealously guards against pluralism, transgression, and contingency, American exceptionalism has always been anxious about its own limits. Thinkers as different as Alexander Hamilton, Alexis de Tocqueville, Walt Whitman, and Seymour Martin Lipset have characterized the promise of democracy in America as double edged, that is, prone to unprecedented success or tremendous failure depending on the discourses, practices, and institutions that appropriate it.

pervasive anxieties about democracy’s failure have helped structure this master narrative, and how they might disrupt it—for better and for worse. And finally, I ask in what sense America itself has been a cradle for imagining democracy. How have material and cultural forces been deployed to contain the imagination of democracy, by protecting and enabling certain forms of imagination and democracy, while excluding or controlling others? I treat these tasks as interrelated throughout the chapter, but let me briefly elaborate each.

Exceptionalism has historically steered the discourse and practice of democracy between two poles. They are held in tension in the thought of Thomas Jefferson, for whom America’s exemplary democracy was both the radical seed of an “empire for liberty” and a precious form to be guarded from “any blot or mixture” by unnecessarily “entangling alliances.” The drives to universalize and to protect democracy have coexisted in America, surfacing at times as polar opposites, at times as strange bedfellows, in such contested discourses as expansionism, isolationism, manifest destiny, the Monroe Doctrine, exporting democracy, and controlling the nation’s borders. If these drives are poles of an immensely more complicated field, they nonetheless offer two analytically instructive ideas of the promise of democracy: on the one end, as a limitless ideal, and on the other end, as a constitutionally limited model. A third analytical idea

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emerges from the contested field between the first two, that is, from temporally and spatially situated efforts to realize the ideal of democracy. As marginal identities, discourses, practices, and institutions have been excepted from the imagination of democracy in America, social movements have organized to take exception with it. In this third sense, then, exceptionalism evokes the incompleteness of the promise of democracy, tended and mobilized by emergent imaginings throughout the nation’s history. The incompleteness of democracy has always constituted its promise and the promise of America. As the epigraph from Gary Nash reveals, over a century passionate, many-sided struggle fueled the American Revolution, co-authoring and decentering the discourse of democracy in America from the start.

My emphasis in this chapter is on the first two ideas of democracy, because both are conditioned by logics of exceptionalism that imagine democracy in absolute terms. That is, each in some way places the power to imagine democracy beyond contestation—as either unaccountable to any material or cultural limits or grounded in some fundamental material or cultural authority. I take the two in turn, situating my analysis largely in the context of historical trends and intellectual debates during the Revolution and Founding but also highlighting key contemporary issues and texts. My main interest is how each idea of democracy conceptualizes and draws relationships between the idea of American exceptionalism, the role of imagination in politics, and the material and cultural conditions of democratic imagination. At the end of the chapter, I begin to elaborate the third idea of democracy according to this same pattern, in order to set the
stage for my theoretical contributions and my evaluation of American Populism in the remaining chapters.

My intention is not to suggest that any of these ideas of democracy have ever existed in pure form. Rather, they have been imagined over time in relation to modes and forms of collective life that are always already entangled. I separate them analytically, treating them as ideal types, to parse the different material and cultural conditions that enable and are enabled by each: that is, each foregrounds certain discourses, practices, relationships, institutions, and traditions, while shifting many others to the background. But I also consider the ideas together to account for the complicated and often contentious material and cultural relationships that condition every effort to imagine democracy in America. By reflecting on the anxieties that attend each idea of democracy, I emphasize how each is structured not only by its own form and content, but also by drawing limits on imagination in response to an ever broader and more uncertain field. By evaluating how each idea responds to its anxieties, I elaborate the strategies of

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6 Nor am I suggesting that these are the only ideas of democracy in America. Though I only systematically elucidate the three sketched above, two additional ideas find their way with some regularity into my analyses in this chapter and the larger project. At one extreme, the underworld of American exceptionalism evokes a dystopic vision—the “American nightmare” prophesied by Malcolm X and Tupac Shakur—which exposes the inseparability of America’s imagination of democracy from its history of conquest, genocide, slavery, oppression, and imperialism. Belying the very language of extremes elicited by the idea of exceptionalism is a more modest tradition, storied by the time-honored veneration of the “middling sort” and, in less audible tones, by the singular voices of the un-storied, rank-and-file authors of America’s best, worst, and most mediocre moments. This is a tradition with roots both in the leveling forces of capitalist democracy unearthed by Alexis de Tocqueville and in populist forms and modes of power that have, in times and places, been as extraordinary as they are ordinary. See Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” In *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1994); and Tupac Shakur, “Words of Wisdom,” *2Pacalypse Now* (New York: Amaru Records/Jive, 1991).
containing imagination it deploys to hold together, protect, and sustain what it desires, and to prevent, constrain, or conceal what it fears.

To ask about containing the imagination of democracy, then, is to ask not only about imagining democracy, but also about imagining imagination. This task runs central to my analyses in the chapter and in the larger project. Political theorists often conceive of imagination as a faculty that represents material things as ideas or images, and we sometimes conceive of it as an active capacity to produce things in the world: new ideas, images, discourses, identities, traditions, objects, and so on. Imagination is less often taken as an embodied capacity, one that’s embedded in particular subjects and in a larger material and cultural context. I take all three concepts of imagination to be interrelated, but I emphasize the last in my analyses. Bound together with each idea of democracy in America is a different understanding of imagination itself and its role in political life. Each idea of democracy also projects the world that would have to contain it, that is, protect and enable it, if it hopes to flourish. In this chapter that world is America, taken both as a discursively contested symbol of democracy and as a materially and culturally contested cradle for imagining democracy. While “contain” and “cradle” carry different connotations, I emphasize the polyvalence of both terms and at times use them interchangeably to describe the embedded quality of imagination. I do so as a reminder that material and cultural limits act in different ways, and often at the same time, both to constrain and to enable the imagination of democracy.

I have tried in these first few paragraphs to offer a sketch of how I’ll organize the material in this chapter, but also to provide a glimpse of the entangled and contested
development of my key concepts: imagination, democracy, and America. If exceptionalism has historically demanded and produced an absolute imagination of democracy, my aim is to understand both the processes by which it has done so and the conditions under which new imaginings of democracy might emerge. I am asking, in other words, what it means to say that something cannot be imagined in a given time or place and what it takes to imagine the unimaginable. Answering these questions presents a methodological quandary, because it requires political theory not only to analyze and evaluate the facts and concepts before it, but also to look for and make present what is not there. My approach is to develop theoretical arguments in relation to contested narratives of American history and culture, because it is in these contests that things are produced as unimaginable or imaginable. I do not intend to make decisive claims about historical or cultural factuality, rather I draw connections between competing narratives of America and competing ideas of democracy. Throughout the chapter, I also bring to the surface what is unimaginable within the narrative confines of each of the first two ideas of democracy. In doing so, I ask what democratic exceptionalism would need to become and how it would need to be practiced in light of what is unimaginable to it. At the end of the chapter, I recover the unruly and untold narrative of America revealed by Nash. This America, contested at its core by insurgent imaginings and many-sided coalitions, suggests a more haunted, and yet more promising, idea of democratic exceptionalism.

My aim is not to romanticize the unimaginable in an uncritical fashion, though I do need to aestheticize it to some degree. Because many things are unimaginable within dominant linguistic and affective structures, I mine the relationship between argument
and aesthetics. I analyze and deploy rhetorical language and affect to enhance the capacities and insights of political theory. But there is nothing to promise that emergent imaginings of democracy will be any more conducive to freedom than the absolute imaginations of democracy they seek to disrupt. Indeed, they might be less so. My broader aim in this project is to understand which emergent imaginings of democracy might be ethically conducive and politically capacious for the work of freedom, and how they might be so. To that end, I undertake theoretical analysis and argument, in turn, to identify the limits of aesthetic ideas and powers. What distinguishes my approach from many in democratic theory—and in democratic politics—is that I attend to the tensions between argument and aesthetics throughout rather than assuming some uncontestable set of boundaries between them from the start.

To imagine democracy and imagination in America, then, I sift through what Martin Luther King, Jr., has called the “beached bones and jumbled residues” of our neglected past. I aim to recoup a tradition that, in Leonard Cohen’s terms, has largely been “junked” from the master narrative we reiterate of American democracy. In each section, I slightly recast the narrative of the Revolution and Founding, each time highlighting different debates and assumptions about the idea of American exceptionalism, the role of imagination in politics, and the material and cultural conditions of democratic imagination. I draw connections between this contested history and more contemporary imaginations of democracy in order to illustrate how a master narrative of democratic exceptionalism has developed and survived over time in relation to what remains unimaginable to it. I close by gesturing toward a theory and practice of
radical democratic imagining that affirms a more incomplete and haunted form of
democratic exceptionalism.

The Fashionable World of Imagination

America has historically taken itself, politically and economically, to be at the
cutting edge of progress. The Revolution inaugurated, in Thomas Paine’s words, a “new
era for politics” and a “new method of thinking” whose luminousness was eclipsing. If
American political thought and practice marked a radical break in history, its new
beginning was expected to reverberate across space and time: “The sun never shined on a
cause of greater worth. ‘Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom,
but of a continent—of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. ‘Tis not the concern
of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest.” Elaborating
America’s new “science of politics,” the authors of The Federalist Papers echoed Paine’s
twin themes of ingenuity and expansionism. The Constitution would achieve the
unprecedented: a government that combined norms of freedom, equality, reason, and
consent with scientific and technological approaches to the administration and
management of democratic politics on a national scale. And its exemplary form would
position America as “the broad and solid foundation of other edifices” that would last as

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7 Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” In The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine, ed. Philip S. Foner (New
York: Citadel Press, 1945), Thomas Paine National Historical Association,
“permanent monuments” to the ideal of free government. America today takes its troika of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise to mark the “end of history” in the double sense of having achieved the world-historical telos of the “single sustainable model for national success.” This end serves as the justification for expanding its model of democracy “to every corner of the world” and as the condition for unleashing the “entrepreneurial energy,” “productive potential,” and economic “dynamism” of all nations. America’s veneration of its own exemplarity has thus been tied historically, across an ideological spectrum uniting Thomas Paine with George W. Bush, to revolutionary, progressive, and expansionist dynamics that acknowledge few frontiers. America Unlimited, to label this idea of its democratic exceptionalism, understands its imagination in terms of the radically new, as if it could create ex-nihilo with few debts to or limits in the world that would contain it. As a sovereign imagination—hubristic in that it takes itself to be self-contained—it has historically sought relations with centralizing and expansive modes of power. Alexander Hamilton, writing on the “unqualified power” of the state to tax and spend in the interest of national defense, most famously champions this view of power at the time of the Founding: “A

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8 Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist 9,” In The Federalist Papers, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: A Mentor Book, 1999), 40. See also, James Madison, Federalist 37, 194. In this section, I emphasize those aspects of Madison and Hamilton’s thought that lend themselves to the strains of hubristic and expansive political imagination suggested here. In the next section, I turn to their concern for a more stable and limited form of political imagination, which can also be seen in the language of this quote. I assume an interconnected relationship between these two strains of political imagination, which I elaborate along the way.

government ought to contain in itself every power requisite to the full accomplishment of the objects committed to its care” and, moreover, there should be “no limitation of a power destined to effect a purpose which is itself incapable of limitation.”

This vision of power recalls the totalizing sovereignty at the basis of Hobbesian political imagination, and it sets the stage, as many of Hamilton’s critics have argued, for late-modern forms of “formless” power that condition political imagination in our time.

Before moving on to more contemporary analyses, however, I dwell briefly on Hamilton’s vision within the context of the rhetorical debates of 1787 to elaborate the hubristic imagination of unlimited democracy.

Hamilton does outline two limits on state power, the one a principled “regard [for] the public good and [for] the sense of the people,” the other a pragmatic recognition of the “exigencies of the nation and the resources of the community.” The limit from principle gains fuller exposition in Federalist defenses of the Necessary and Proper Clause of the Constitution. If “no axiom is more clearly established,” in James Madison’s words, “than that whatever the end is required, the means are authorized,” the people must be understood to play some role in judging that authority. Madison situates that role in the context of popular election as a check on the abuse of power; Hamilton

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10 Hamilton, Federalist 31, 161-163.
11 I elaborate Hobbesian political imagination in the introduction and briefly discuss Sheldon Wolin’s notion of formless forms of power, e.g., Superpower and inverted totalitarianism, which “regard” the people without creating relationships for their active imagining of politics. Wolin is not the only critic to link U.S. Constitutional history to forms of power that abuse their limits. See also, Stephanson, Manifest Destiny; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
12 Hamilton, Federalist 31, 161-163.
13 Madison, Federalist 44, 253.
envisions less direct pathways of public influence through judicial review of the Constitution and through the moderating force of “common sense” on leaders “who daily mingle with the rest of their countrymen and who participate with them in the same feelings, sentiments, habits, and interests.”14 But the scale, degree, and quality of popular election and the relationship between the formal Constitution and the social constitution of the people were two of the most hotly contested issues of the day—bound up in debates over the role of the states under federalism, the nature and institution of representation, and the broad grants of federal power in the Supremacy Clause and the Necessary and Proper Clause. Many of Madison and Hamilton’s contemporaries worried that a “preposterous combination of powers” in the national government would belie the Federalist’s rhetorical justifications by undermining the cultural and electoral authority of the people.15 Rather than being tempered by tradition, leaders stood to become “habituated to power” of a kind that held them “completely independent of the people.” Instead of securing channels for popular voice, government would appeal to people’s consent to secure its own establishment, but thereafter “regard” their complaints as no more than “the whistling of the wind.” The most wary prophecies saw in Hamilton’s vision of power a contempt for democratic limits so strong that, from the Constitution, it would be “nothing less than a hasty stride to a Universal Empire in the Western World.”16

15 This potential for the abuse of power was even admitted by Federalists, as evidenced by these words from Federalist Edward Carrington on the Executive and Senate. Quoted in Wood, Creation, 519.
The second limit on state power was, for Hamilton, a question of the pragmatic limitations of political imagination: “The contingencies of society are not reducible to calculations. They cannot be fixed or bounded, even in imagination.” But Hamilton’s was, at best, a disdainful respect for contingency, one that fueled his Hobbesian aspiration toward a sovereign imagination secured by the unlimited power of the national government to respond to illimitable exigencies. Sovereign imagination would, crucially, be rationalized by centralizing it in the state and insulating it from political contestation, in which citizens’ “passions and prejudices” could “entangle” and “obscure” knowledge and reason. Hamilton’s new “science of morals and politics” thus linked a rationalized sovereign imagination to centralized, expansive state power in order to provide some “degree of certainty” in predicting, preempting, and defending against contingency. His critics, however, wondered just what kind of relationship this political imagination would have to the resources and needs of the nation. On the one hand, Anti-Federalist arguments questioned a view of reason that directed imagination toward distant, extreme possibilities rather than everyday, ordinary circumstances. On the other hand, they challenged a view of sovereignty that appeared increasingly focused on an abstract promise of the grandeur of America rather than on the more limited promises made by and to its diverse inhabitants. Rationalized sovereignty, many worried, was a hubristic imagination of politics—as contemptuous of everyday matters and contingencies as it

17 Hamilton is quoted in Storing, 29.
18 Hamilton, Federalist 31, 162. Wolin argues that Hamilton’s vision of “constitutional rationality” is tied to a vision of power “that has been dissociated from politics and absorbed into reason.” Wolin, The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 118.
was comprehensive of them, “reaching into everything that concerned human happiness.”

But what kind of world might contain an imagination that seeks to contain in itself every power requisite to its representation and production of America? It is worth noting that the “new era for politics” prophesied by Paine was followed, just over a decade later, by another revolutionary moment: “The case and circumstances of America present themselves as in the beginning of the world…We are brought at once to the point of seeing government begin, as if we had lived in the beginning of time.” The first revolution had cleared out old colonial ideas and relationships, like the useless “almanacs of last year,” to make way for diverse state constitutions and the Articles of Confederation. But those, in turn, quickly became the “old fabric” of government torn down and replaced “with little or no inconvenience” by the Constitution. Paine’s sweeping rhetoric can be explained, in part, by the distinction in his own thought between the artificiality of formal government and the deep strata of the social character of a people. But its broad appeal and influence exposes the deeper societal cross-currents of a dual revolution at the time of the Founding: the first a military war pitting the developing principles and social conditions of republican democracy against the arbitrary power and

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19 Brutus II, quoted in Storing, 66. Both critiques are modified from Storing’s discussion of Anti-Federalist arguments against the Necessary and Proper clause, and in particular their responses to the Federalist’s definition of national power. See Storing, 29. My point isn’t to hold up as an alternative the Burkean conservatism evident in much Anti-Federalist thought, nor even to reappropriate their rhetoric as fully as does Sheldon Wolin in The Presence of the Past. My concern here and in this section is to elaborate the forms and modes of the more hubristic strains of political imagination in America.


21 Paine, “Common Sense.”

22 Paine, “Rights of Man.”
weakening grasp of monarchical rule; the second a battle between centralizing and
 decentralizing forces to imagine and shape the meanings of the Revolution and
 Constitution.\(^{23}\)

Paine’s own vision of radical natality puts this second battle into perspective. The
 idea of America as a “new beginning of the world,” with a “blank sheet to write upon,”
 enabled a centralizing imagination of America that his own egalitarian democratic
 leanings sought to disavow.\(^{24}\) Indeed, the irreverent rhetoric of his pamphlet, Common
 Sense, animated countless more unruly revolutionaries, who fought not only to wipe the
 slate clean from colonial rule, but also to author a new world that was free of slavery,
 genocide, patriarchal oppression, and class domination. His vision of radical natality was,
in turn, energized by and caught up in these more insurgent struggles. Branded an
 enthusiast and a miscreant for his “absurd democratical notions,” Paine fought side-by-
 side with artisans to wrest control of the Pennsylvania legislature; drafted legislation
 aimed at weakening the institution of slavery; and advocated more egalitarian and
 participatory forms of government than most elite revolutionaries could conceive. In

\(^{23}\) In different ways, Wood, Wolin, and Storing each characterize the Constitution debates as a battle to
 control the social forces unleashed by the revolution. Storing does not see as great a contradiction between
 the Revolution and Federalist arguments for the Constitution. The Revolution, he argues, was not fought
 against government as a general principle, but against a particular tyrannous government. Where Wood and
 Wolin locate seeds of undemocratic and anti-democratic power in the Constitution and in the political
 thought of Madison and Hamilton, Storing finds these arguments less convincing. Taking a slightly
 different stance than all three, and profoundly countering Storing’s argument, Nash identifies the stirrings
 of a many-sided revolution dating back decades before the Revolutionary War.

\(^{24}\) This is not to dismiss Paine’s more direct complicities in radically dynamic modes of imagining. His
 vision was driven, in part, by a commercialism that was tied both to territorial expansionism and to efforts
 to deregulate finance and business. Isaac Kramnick places Paine at the “left fringe” of bourgeois liberalism,
 emphasizing that Paine’s distaste for government coercion was attached to his efforts to protect
corporations from government oversight. This included his strident defense of the Bank of Pennsylvania, to
 the consternation of his Jeffersonian friends who worried about the economic power it would wield over
1805, after the Constitution had placed America into the hands of more concentrated powers, Paine issued a scathing rebuke of the government he had helped usher in, accusing them of betraying “the altar of Seventy-six.” Looking out at America during the same year, but seeing an unhealthy profusion of democracy unleashed by the Revolution, a disgruntled John Adams placed the blame squarely on the spirit of 1776: “Call it then the Age of Paine.”

The battle lines of that second revolution were thus drawn, in part, by the ways competing sides imagined the social forces that gained power during the first revolution. Federalists hoped the new national government would salvage and preserve the political liberty won by the struggle for independence, against what they perceived as its excesses: “licentiousness, faction, turbulence, and other violations of the rules of society.” Anti-Federalists looked to the local and state governments established before and during the Revolution as exemplary institutions for inculcating and representing the moderate virtue of common citizens; the Constitution, in their most censorious rhetoric, was both the pinnacle of a corrupting “phrenzy of innovation” sweeping a commercializing nation and a blueprint for the usurpation of liberty by an excessively ambitious, moneyed elite.

Conjuring a radically “democratic and egalitarian” image of the most populist actors of the era, those whose voices were not heard in formal debates and who were “defenders of the most intimate participation in politics of the widest variety of people possible,” Gordon Wood and Sheldon Wolin describe the revolutionary nature of the Constitution as

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26 Storing, 71; Wood, Creation, 475.
27 Quoted in Storing, 7. See also, Storing, 18; Wood, Creation, 488.
a rebellion against difference as a limit on centralized power—in the form of diffuse state and local authorities; competing policies on commerce, taxation, war, and the like; diverse cultures and narratives of time and place. Whether the new organization of power and imagination under the Constitution would be responsive to these competing visions of America was, at the time, a matter of intense speculation and debate. That intensity suggests that the Constitution was revolutionary in at least the sense that the centralized national government it introduced had little foundation in experiences, practices, or political and cultural life forms in America. New ones would need to be fashioned to support it.

America’s hubristic imagination, then, imagines the world not as a limiting force but as a fashionable container in which its ideas can realize themselves without bound. The world of unlimited America is fashionable, first, in the sense that it is viewed as raw material to be manipulated. Paine’s image of America as the “beginning of the world” and the “beginning of time” provides the starkest relief of this view, in which space and time are empty receptacles to be filled. Wolin ties this vision of space and time, at the Founding, to prominent strains of Cartesian reason evident in the Federalist’s science of politics, which replaced the historical and biographical textures of “place” with the

29 I refer specifically here to the centralized national form of government introduced by the Constitution and am not claiming that the document as a whole had no precursor in colonial culture. Gordon Wood describes a colonial culture that was so “thoroughly republicanized” that shedding monarchy and taking up republicanism was done “with as much ease as would have attended throwing off an old and putting on a new set of clothes.” But Wood, Wolin, and Storing each documents the newness, in relation to colonial culture, of national forms of government, subjectivity, citizenship, and collective identity. See, Wood, *Radicalism*, 109; Wood, *Creation*, 471-75; Storing, 85, fn. 28; and Wolin, *Presence*, 86-87.
mathematical, dehistoricized abstraction of “space.” This distinction is perhaps best seen in debates over the scale of government. Anti-Federalists emphasized decentralized models that would attend to the “various climates, products, habits, interests, and opinions” cultivated over time in diffuse localities; Federalists proposed, instead, an “enlargement of the orbit within which [popular systems of government] are to revolve.” By “extending the sphere” of government to the nation, insurrections would find little soil in which to take root, factions would cancel each other out, and leaders would develop broad, impartial vision. Citizens themselves thus became part of the empty material of a fashionable world. For the subject of Cartesian reason is also abstracted from its social context, no longer the active subject of local politics but now the passive object of a

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30 See Wolin, Presence 111-114. Of course, Cartesian principles vied with a variety of other influences on the political thought of early Americans. Paine’s thinking offers just one example of a tensional relationship between abstract principles (e.g., of “government founded on a moral theory, on a system of peace, on the indefeasible, hereditary Rights of Man”), one the one hand, and an attention to social organicity, virtue, habits, affections, on the other. Norman Jacobson provides a useful, if reductive, contrast between two varieties of political thought at the Founding, arguing that Paine’s more humanistic concerns for habit and sentiment have historically taken a back seat to the Federalist’s abstract, systematic, and scientific model. Different appropriations of Montesquieu by the Anti-Federalists and Federalists also play out this contrast: Where Anti-Federalists appeal to his requisites of commonality and moderation to argue for republican government on local and state scales, Federalists appropriate and apply his theories of constitutional design to a social field they imagine to be modern, factious, and expansive. In this sense, as Gordon Wood chronicles, the Federalists are indeed at the forefront of a shift from common conceptions of an organic and developmental society, in the tradition of Montesquieu, to a more rational and mechanistic society, in the contractarian tradition, that abstracts institutional and governmental politics from associations with society. And yet, The Federalist Papers carries tensions within its own science of politics. For example, Publius’ arguments for natural aristocracy combine the Enlightenment concept of impartiality with classical notions of virtue, moral character, and even social affinity (in Hamilton’s case) as conditions of impartial vision. Tracing the influences of David Hume and Benjamin Rush on the Founding, Jason Frank elaborates Publius’ attention to aesthetics and the cultivation of citizenship and national identity. I deal with Frank’s insights in the next section. The point here is to draw out the effects of Cartesian thought on one prominent strain of political imagination in America. See Paine, Rights of Man; Norman Jacobson, “Political Science and Political Education,” American Political Science Review 57:3 (Sept. 1963): 561-569; Wood, Creation, 29, 606-607; Jason Frank, “Publius and Political Imagination,” Political Theory 37:1 (2009), 69-88.

national administration that pursues its ends by managing the resources of its citizenry.\textsuperscript{32} This idea of political subjectivity is most evident during the Founding in Hamilton’s vision of insulated politics. If the “fabric of American empire” was to be sewn from the consent of the people, the constitutional moment would figuratively strip the people in order that the government be “clothed with all the powers requisite” to the administration of national glory.\textsuperscript{33}

Tocqueville also marvels that the New World must have “seemed yet the empty cradle of a great nation” to the eyes of its early settlers.\textsuperscript{34} But that way of seeing the world persisted amidst the bustling society and rising commercialism of his age, leading him to identify it as a distinctive characteristic of American culture. In Tocqueville’s analysis, the “continuous activity” of democratic life loosens or entirely disrupts all the old relationships and traditions that tie individuals to their historical and social contexts. In this sense, he too sees America as natural soil for cultivating Cartesian “mental habits,” which privilege the authority of individual reason over the authority of tradition, community, or class. He describes Americans as being so distrustful of other sources of knowledge and judgment that “each man is narrowly shut up in himself.” But in this prized individualism, Tocqueville sees the seeds of conformity and despotism.\textsuperscript{35} When distinction is measured by private pursuits and narrowed by the leveling power of money, as was increasingly the case in America during his day, citizens become distracted from

\begin{enumerate}
\item Wolin, \textit{Presence}, 111-114, 104, 134.
\item Hamilton, Federalists 22-23, 120-122.
\item \textit{Ibid.} 429-431.
\end{enumerate}
the public deliberation and participation that are crucial to defending against despotism.\textsuperscript{36}

It was precisely citizen’s widespread involvement in administering to the public affairs of everyday life that, for Tocqueville, marked the promise of democratic freedom in America. Combining an increasingly commercialized society with the kind of administrative centralization proposed in Hamilton’s vision of insulated politics threatened to “enervate” citizenship and “yoke” it to totalizing forms of power and imagination.\textsuperscript{37}

American history provides many other examples, across the ideological spectrum, in which extant traditions, customs, and forms of subjectivity are denuded by a hubristic imagination of America—and whatever is comprehended in its enlarged orbit. The mythos of manifest destiny, most generally, has provided a discursive tradition from which to imagine nationalism against the backdrop of unlimited of space and time. In the words of John O’Sullivan, who coined the term manifest destiny, “The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness.”\textsuperscript{38} The horizons of American nationalism have spread, rhetorically and materially, from the westward march of Jefferson’s “empire for liberty,” through the hemispheric supremacy of free government claimed by the Monroe Doctrine, through expansionist Cold War policies aimed at protecting liberalism and capitalism, to the United States’ late-20\textsuperscript{th} century global hegemony as the watchman of democratic freedom and prosperity. There has, of course, been ambivalence and contestation over America’s identity at each stage. But one

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid}. 614-15, 57.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid}. 88-98.
\textsuperscript{38} Quoted in Stephanson, 40.
dominant strain of its political imagination has nonetheless promised to universalize democracy while, at the same time, deploying technological, militaristic, and capitalist expropriations of space and development.39

The rise of the administrative state helped transform the cultural exuberance of manifest destiny into a more rationalized and regulated principle of domestic and foreign policy. This principle gained early theoretical voice in Herbert Croly’s 1909 treatise, The Promise of American Life, which influenced the politics of Woodrow Wilson and the intellectual schools of progressivism and technocracy. Croly identifies the promise of America in its vision of free political institutions, egalitarian prosperity, and continued moral progress. But he sees that promise waning, in the new century, amid a culture of irresponsible individualism and concentrated wealth. Redemption, in his explicitly prophetic rhetoric, would require a centralization of political, economic, and cultural organization under the leadership of a rational, efficient bureaucracy. Croly’s political imagination thus applies a Hamiltonian view of power to modern, egalitarian concerns: National sovereignty, in place of individual or majoritarian concepts of sovereignty, would enlist every aspect of society toward the “collective purpose” of the nation.40 Like Hamilton, and like Hobbes before him, Croly understood that no less than a cultural revolution would be necessary for such a centralization of power and imagination. Textually, he marshals longstanding national rhetorics of moral redemption and scientific progressivism to persuade his readers that they must “be prepared to sacrifice to

39 Stephanson, xii, 20, 28; See also, Murphy; and Hardt and Negri.
[America’s] traditional vision even the traditional American ways of realizing it.”

Materially, the “machinery” of the modern democratic nation—including fundamental legal revisions, policy incentives and coercions, the formation of new associations and habits, and even a “vigorous and persistent” protest politics—should be constructed as a “schoolhouse” for “teaching men how they must feel, what they must think, and what they must do” to preserve the “integrity” of the “nationalized democratic ideal.”

Croly’s politics are no doubt more democratic than Hamilton’s, both in their egalitarian sensibility and their openness to a wider degree of participation in evaluating and steering the course of national life. And yet his nationalized democratic ideal of America, in its unassailable integrity, figures as an external compass for a political imagination that radiates from the center—and ultimately from the top down—to organize, produce, and repeatedly revolutionize time, space, and subjectivity. An active tension does remain in Croly’s thought between the need for centralized administration and the broader democratic purposes it is meant to achieve: raising the level of human association and civic spirit, responding to problems that are comprehensive in scope, and improving the general welfare of the nation. In this sense, Croly might prefigure Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, which represented a compromise between the social democratic demands of the Popular Front and the powerful voices of social regulation and unregulated capitalism. But Croly’s insistence on the “national integrity” of America’s democratic ideal also invites a more Hobbesian form of centralized

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41 Ibid. 5.
42 Ibid. 280-88.
administration, one that refuses to ground its decisions in competing facts or claims that merit compromise.\textsuperscript{43} This vision was advanced more recently by U.S. Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, who derided what he calls the “reality-based community” for holding the outdated belief that facts guide national administrative decisions. In Rumsfeld’s words, “That’s not the way the world works anymore. We’re an empire now, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities.”\textsuperscript{44}

The centralization of the democratic ideal, and its rationalization by an administrative state, has in this way fueled America’s efforts to expand its promise beyond its borders. Hannah Arendt exposes one example of this trend in her analysis of the political imagination of military technocrats and public relations managers during the Vietnam War. She posits that imagination, as the mind’s representation of worldly reality, is the condition both of deception, which denies facts, and of action, which changes them.\textsuperscript{45} What she describes in Vietnam is a “deadly combination” of the two, in which judgments and actions were so “remote from reality” that they “completely displaced reality.”\textsuperscript{46} As Arendt understands it, imagination is trained by the company it keeps with different relations of power. It was an “arrogance of power” that led technocrats and propagandists to exert an “image of [America’s] omnipotence” unlimited

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. 210, 279.
\textsuperscript{44} Rumsfeld is quoted in Wolin, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 20.
by any fact, contingency, or resource other than public opinion. The pursuit of unlimited power, in turn, yielded an “arrogance of mind,” exceedingly contemptuous of the capacity to learn from concrete, everyday experience and “irrationally confident” in the ability of political science to calculate and manipulate reality. What was required to conduct and promote the Vietnam War, in other words, was a worldly reality that could no longer “bring the forces of imagination down to earth.”

It was, instead, a world of subjectivities to be deceived and bodies, relationships, and institutions to be ignored, concealed, and even destroyed by a political imagination that refused any such limits.

The deception and self-deception evident in Arendt’s analysis of the Vietnam War has broader implications for an era in which marketing—of goods and services, images and ideas, corporate and political identities—is the modus operandi of cultural life. Indeed, the “All New Chevy Silverado,” remodeled to drive a re-imaged nation into the future, suggests a second sense in which the imagination of America Unlimited requires a fashionable world—fashionable in the sense of current, up-to-date, and rapidly adaptable. Wolin writes that the triple powers of corporate capital, technology, and science have appropriated the “tempos of revolution.” Where modern political and social revolution sought to replace the “frenzied time of revolution” with the “measured tempo of consolidation,” today’s corporate economy “promotes a conception of permanent revolution, of revolution as continuous, not pausing for consolidation.”

Tocqueville famously wrote of 19th century America that it loved change, but dreaded revolution.

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47 Ibid. 39, 8.
Today’s hubristic imagination acts by normalizing the experience of the radical new, by “normalizing agitation,” so that it can reinvent itself constantly in the form of the latest technological breakthrough, the most up-to-date model, the boldest corporate restructuring plan.

A fashionable world, by connotation, forgets its roots in “fashion” as the ways or customs of a people. As hubristic imagination keeps itself current in relation to rapidly restructuring forms of power, it necessitates a world whose places are mere place-markers for the next corporate relocation, whose vocations are replaced by casual labor, whose citizens are taught to reinvent themselves in order to adapt and survive. So too does such imagination require political forms lightweight enough to keep pace with its dynamics. On one end of the spectrum might be city governments, with severely inadequate legal and economic power, whose survival depends on how easily they can remake their image and adjust their development strategies and resource allocations to attract corporate wealth. On the other end might be federal norms and regulations deemed inconsequential by a government whose imagination of unqualified power renders obsolete even the limits it places on itself. Is it an implausible leap, then, from Alexander Hamilton’s notion of unlimited power for illimitable purposes to the laudatory image of Richard Nixon waving from his helicopter in a Chevrolet commercial? In a world

49 I discuss this scene in the previous chapter. I use it here as just one example of the endless high-profile scandals—for example, Watergate, Iran Contra, HillaryGate, the Abramoff lobbying scandal, the Plame Affair—that have become synonymous with American politics. Hamilton himself would likely despair at this scene today. His critique of commercialism largely tied it to what he considered democratic failures, but it also stood against the aristocratic values he thought would govern the country with a steady hand. But as these values were overridden by commercialism, he complained in 1803 that “this American world was
shaped by the dynamism of economic productivity, by a rapidly reinvented imagination that paradoxically secures the form of America as nation and symbol, it may be limits themselves that have become unfashionable. It is in such a world that the Constitution can be manipulated, beyond anything Hamilton himself could have imagined, to justify the executive privilege, institutionalized secrecy, widespread surveillance, misleading intelligence, unauthorized detention, black site imprisonment, and illegal interrogation that mark American politics at the dawn of the 21st century.50

Wolin notes that “where U.S. power was once preoccupied with ‘containment,’ now its leaders dream of remaking the world.”51 But as his own work has shown, America’s sense of its power, and its imagination, as self-contained has been one dominant strain running rough-shod throughout its history—including through a Cold War whose explicit policy of ideological containment sought to preserve and expand the soil on which its own idea of capitalist democracy could “remake the world.” My argument, which I’ll flesh out in the next few pages, is that America’s conceit of self-containment implicates it in a radically dynamic mode of imagining that consumes the world for its own reproduction. For indeed, as the consumptive mode suggests, the imagination of America Unlimited has been neither entirely nor exceptionally creative; it

has, rather, tended toward the reproductive and destructive. The “American Revolution” of 2006 brought us merely the newest model Chevy Silverado, concealing the massive wave of plant closings and job cuts following in the wake of its overproduction.52

America’s first Revolution, extraordinary in its democratic promise and experimentation on a national scale, nevertheless substantially reproduced Enlightenment principles and forms, right down to the constitutional models it borrowed from England.

So too did it reproduce many Enlightenment blindesses and brutalities—most notably, the refusal to recognize or preserve the diverse life forms, cultural forms, and political forms inhabiting the spaces and times the Enlightenment’s colonizing impulse would occupy. Nearly a century before the United States was constituted, John Locke imagined America as the promise of a new beginning, in which Enlightenment Europe could reproduce its own principles and forms. Locke’s depiction of America as a state of nature was part of his justification for colonial expansion: America was a wasteland, and settlers pursued the will of God and the law of reason by developing its fertile soils toward the ends of human prosperity and happiness. Locke’s ethical and political vision, in which indigenous peoples figured as specters but not full humans, concealed the human, cultural, and political forms that would be devastated by colonialism.53


Tocqueville’s portrait of the New World as “the empty cradle” of European expansion, Locke’s vision evinces a way of seeing that is not distinctly American in its origins. If Tocqueville found in 19th century America a cult of the new, one that worshiped progress at the expense of the past and present, he saw it through the eyes of one of its progenitors. For the erasures contained in his own vision of the New World implicate him in an Enlightenment mode of imagining that similarly places Europe at the cutting edge of progress—thereby discounting the past, and much of the present world around it, as backwards and uncivilized.

An imagination sovereign enough to be self-contained—to exclude alterity altogether—must therefore deploy a variety of strategies for containing a world replete with alternative sites, practices, and powers of imagining. It is rarely explicit about these containments, for the hubris of unqualified power is sustained by an imagination of the world in which the very concept of limits has little traction. Instead, its own forms and modes must conceal—through erasures, appropriations, and evasions—both the utter diversity of the world and its depletion of that diversity. To uncover these concealments is to expose a hubristic imagination that is not only destructive but naïve.

human development and their relations with each other and with European colonizers are governed by a state of nature. Not only do Europeans have every right to appropriate lands that are vacant, by which Locke means uncultivated according to European standards of private property and commercial agriculture. Colonizers have an obligation to do so, since Native Americans are wasting the land. See Tully, Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70-78.
It is naïve because in cloaking the world it obscures its own limits in two senses. First, an imagination that conceals the limits of its power refuses to acknowledge its own insufficiencies; by the same logic, it leaves precious few resources to ignite its creative potentials beyond an endless reproduction of variations on the same model. Unless it is possible to create ex-nihilo, a power that receives nothing new can create nothing new. But hubristic imagination is neither godly nor receptive. Rather than transcending its limits in the world, it acts by incapacitating the material and cultural resources that could enable new imaginations of democracy. Its hubris depends on its disavowal of history, experience, and fact. The cultural narrative of newness and rebirth exemplified by Paine has, despite his better imaginings, repeatedly propelled American imagination beyond the obstacles that stand in the way of its ideals and beyond the violences it commits in the name of those ideals. This narrative reinforces what literary critic R.W.B. Lewis calls a national habit of forgetfulness and a tragic myth of innocence. The greatest tragedy, in his analysis, is the “sheer dullness of unconscious repetition.” By seeking to unburden itself of history and experience rather than learn from them, writes Lewis, America “consumes [its] powers in hoisting [itself] back to the plane of understanding reached a century ago and at intervals since.”

James Baldwin, citing this same pattern of forgetfulness and innocence, focuses on the tragic undersides of unconscious repetition. He argues that “the establishment of democracy on the American continent was scarcely as radical a break from the past as

was the necessity, which Americans [later] faced, of broadening this concept to include black men.\textsuperscript{55} America’s democratic exceptionalism, that is, reproduces the racialized imagination from which it originated far more than it calls into question its own claim to universality. Only by disavowing a part of itself—the democratic capacities of those it cannot afford to imagine, as well as its own capacities for domination and violence—can America resolve the contradiction between its universal idealism and its narrower manifestations of white supremacy.\textsuperscript{56} The problem for hubristic imagination, however, is that the “sheer dullness of unconscious repetition” is always being punctuated by countless appropriations of the same terms. Exemplary here is Paine, for if his sweeping rhetoric enabled centralizing forces to penetrate the deep strata of society at whim, his own actions and inflections cut against that grain. Contra Locke and Tocqueville, he joined in drafting anti-slavery legislation that declared America not a cradle of progress, but rather a society whose “practice of domestic slavery … [was] highly detrimental to morality, industry, and the arts.” Even as the nation was winning and instituting new rights for some, it remained “the scene of this new invasion of the rights of mankind after the spirit of Christianity had abolished it from the greater part of Europe.”\textsuperscript{57} The radical natality of hubristic imagining thus yields a double-edged sword. Each time it is brandished, its dull edge blunts democracy by concealing its irreducible capacities and

\textsuperscript{55} Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” In Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 171,
\textsuperscript{56} George Shulman makes this argument in American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{57} Quoted in Nash, 323.
putting many of them to sleep, while its sharper edge slices relentless criticism at the edges of each sweeping cut.

Indeed, the very presumption of being able to resolving its constitutive contradictions marks the second sense in which hubristic imagination remains naïve to its own limits. While it does its best to reduce the world to raw material, the world is anything but that. And even a fashionable world can strike back. The hubris of democratic exceptionalism eclipses everything that falls outside its orbit, but it has always been haunted by the shadow world it creates. Early on, that world was the “vast” and “howling” wilderness that stood between settlers and the promise of freedom.58 Into that wilderness, early Americans projected the harsh contingencies of nature and the moral chaos of savage peoples. If indigenous peoples were written out of ethics and politics, as they were for Locke and Tocqueville, they surfaced in more terrifying ways as threats to survival and to progress. The danger for early Americans was not only natural death, but the more figurative specter of reverting to savagery and pulling back the progress of civilization. As Roderick Nash remarks in his study on Wilderness and the American Mind, nothing less than nation, race, and God were at stake in conquering the wilderness and its inhabitants.59 Even as America’s racialized imagination propelled its

59 Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 24, 28-29. Thomas Hietala makes a similar argument with regard to both Native Americans and Mexicans. Fears of racial amalgamation led many Americans to caution against expanding the country’s southwestern border. See Hietala, Manifest Design, 132-34.
expansionism forward, then, it cast a long shadow of anxiety and fear over its uncertain future.

America thus lives with the “sleeping terror” of the limits it refuses to imagine and the limits it multiplies for itself. As Tupac Shakur sings, “America’s Nightmare/ I am what you made me.” According to Baldwin, the more hubristic American imagination gets, the more self-destructive its anxieties become. He characterizes exceptionalism in America as climbing a “peculiar ladder . . . a kind of rung-by-rung ascension to some hideously desirable state.” One misstep means “slipping back not a rung, but back into chaos”—into a dissolution of individual and national identity marked in Baldwin’s time by black Americans, who “tell us where the bottom is . . . how far we must not fall.”

Every step up the ladder is thus propelled not by some romanticized American Dream, but by an elevated social paranoia about all that America has sought to purge from its national imagination. Rather than pausing in the face of such anxieties—for fear of being “overtaken” and “paralyzed” by them—America has all too often rushed blindly into the future by erasing, appropriating, and evading all that would undermine it. We might then understand developments such as shock therapy economics, pre-emptive incarceration, and first strike national security as evidence of America’s fear of its internal and external limits, rather than as a sign of its sovereignty.

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60 James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority,” In Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Vintage International, 1961), 133. This “sleeping terror” might also conjure Oedipus’ blindness to, and later by, the contingencies of a world he sought to order hubristically according to clear, empirical logics.
61 Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority,” 128, 133.
The Conventional World of Imagination

Of course, American political theory and practice during the Revolution neither sought nor foretold a legacy of permanent revolution; it sought, rather, to establish a “permanent monument” to the ideals of political equality, civil liberty, and individual prosperity. And as Hannah Arendt reminds us, it is indeed the form those ideals took in political, economic, and social institutions and not the spirit of revolution that dominates our imagination of democracy in America.62 When Tocqueville traveled to America, it was that form that captured his imagination: “I saw in America more than America; it was the shape of democracy itself which I sought, its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions.”63 But what does it mean to give shape to democracy in America? Tocqueville’s response—illuminating America’s vibrant civil society and local political participation and uncovering the resources of its spirited democratic imagination in its rich and textured cultural forms—is markedly different than the dominant imagination of American democracy today. The “single sustainable model” advertised in the National Security Strategy of the United States would house the prime ideals of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise in the minimalist institutions of equal political rights, free

63 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 19. My emphasis. Tocqueville also saw a citizenry already in a state of “normalized agitation,” one that “loved change,” as he put it, but “dreaded revolution”—one that thus had an astonishing capacity for reproducing itself. His double vision of America, as exemplary form and permanent revolution, suggests the contamination of the first and second ideas of America and the reproductive logics of both. This argument unfolds in fuller detail below.
elections, and free markets plus the basic infrastructure of health care and education needed to unleash the productive potential of individuals.  

Given that the shape of democracy in America *is* contestable and contested, it is perhaps best to begin with the impetus to give shape to democracy in the first place. Hamilton puts it succinctly when he makes the basic claim that “free government” is not only a consistent notion but also a necessary one. The desire to protect and enable freedom through order was a response first to the memory of monarchical rule, to the “advocates of despotism” who would negate citizens any share in the power of imagining their common life. It was stirred, secondly, by the specter of historical republics, whose “popular systems of civil government” had elevated “continual agitation,” “perpetual vibration,” and “anarchy” to norms. Hamilton and other Federalists hoped the Constitution, with its systems of representative government, checks and balances, and national sovereignty, would be the “model of a more perfect structure” of stable democracy.  

For Anti-Federalists, much like Tocqueville, both stability and freedom would require a more considered and tightly woven relationship between formal government and the associations, traditions, modes of communication, and attachments of place that

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64 In a section called, “Expand the Circle of Development by Opening Societies and Building the Infrastructure of Democracy,” the *National Security Strategy* suggests a reciprocal relationship between capitalism, development, and democracy. It ties aid to challenges for national reform, requiring governments to “rule justly, invest in their people, and encourage economic freedom.” Agricultural development is added to health and education as requisites for good governance.  

govern everyday life. Theirs was a classical republican ideal that linked constitutionalism with the habituation of citizens and the development of civic culture. So too did the everyday makeup of the people—its size and connectedness, commonality or difference, moderation or ambition, private interest or public spirit—influence whether government would be stable or not and whether it would protect or usurp liberty. If habit, place, and culture carry less analytical weight in prominent ideas of stable democracy, I bring them to the forefront of my analysis as crucial forces that give shape to the imagination and organization of democracy in America.

Surfacing in these contests over the shape of democracy is an understanding of how Model America understands imagination. Frightened of both despotic power and pluralistic power, which give citizens either too small or too great a share in imagining their common life, many theorists and practitioners of democracy dream of separating politics and imagination altogether. By the late 18th century, many Federalists had grown cynical of the ideal of a virtuous, organic society and had instead developed a modern view of society as heterogeneous, discordant, and competitive. The Constitution was thus designed not with the hope of inculcating civic virtue, but rather as a set of institutions, procedures, and norms for regulating the conduct of self-interested citizens and channeling it toward the public good.66 By elevating the sovereign individual as the legitimate bearer of imagination, this vision of democracy sets borders on where and how

66 Storing, 47, 71-73; Wood, Creation, 471-475. This statement generalizes in two ways, which I discuss in greater detail below. First, the Anti-Federalist’s made passionate arguments for local and state government in party because they understood the institutions of government to play a role in shaping virtuous citizens. Second, many Federalists hoped that national government would cultivate citizens toward national views.
imagination can be shaped and practiced. Against arbitrary forms of power, its ideal 
forms carve out and protect inviolable spaces for individuals to imagine and pursue 
happiness. But the integrity of these private spaces requires that the imperatives of 
public order trump those of public participation. For sovereign individual imaginations 
appear incapable of sharing power democratically: they either swarm together as a 
tyrannous majority threatening the few at the behest of the many, or they engage in such 
heated battle that they would destroy the very order meant to protect them. Order can be 
secured, then, only through a depoliticization of the public sphere—and of imagination.

Model America has thus primarily adopted a representative form of imagination, 
gaining its legitimacy and stability from the consent of individuals whose competing 
interests are checked and balanced—or, in thicker versions, universalized—according to 
standards of legal, institutional, and discursive proceduralism. In its goal of preserving 
order, this model of democracy seeks to cordon off legitimate subjects, spaces, and 
modes of imagination. The private individual supplants the public citizen as the subject of 
imagination; representation replaces participation as imagination’s mode in politics; 
uniform proceduralism absorbs pluralistic power; democratic imagination is rationalized 
and stabilized. The intended effect is twofold: Pluralistic imagination is depoliticized,

Of note here is a legacy of liberalism inherited and expanded by American political theory, which takes 
the primary end of government to be the protection of private spaces to pursue one’s freedom and 
happiness, whether this be enjoying one’s private ownership over his person and the products of his labor 
(John Locke); practicing individual freedoms of religion, speech, and association (Bill of Rights); attending 
to new experiments in living (John Stuart Mill); adhering to one’s comprehensive doctrines (John Rawls); 
pursuing one’s inviolable individual rights and voluntary associational relationships (Robert Nozick); 
exercising one’s responsibility for her own destiny (Milton Friedman); or finding one’s creative energies as 
a strong poet (Richard Rorty). Below I will engage several prominent voices in the liberal tradition without 
claiming to offer a representative sketch of it.
that is, isolated and protected from the fray of powers that vie for control of public life. It is, in same move, rendered politically unproductive, that is, incapable of contributing to—or undermining—public order.

But if the productive power of pluralistic imagination threatens to disorder democratic government, the move to a representative form of political imagination threatens to enervate it. Wolin writes of Madison’s brand of constitutionalism: “It was so intent on checking power that it could not give a satisfactory account of how government could generate power for positive goals.” Thomas Spragens similarly charges the school of “democratic realism”—which he traces in the United States from Madison and Hamilton to contemporary liberals such as Robert Dahl, Judith Shklar, and Richard Rorty—with promoting a “politics of containment” that requires a more energetic production of civic culture than its proponents allow. If the imperative of democratic realism is to develop “lines” and “schemes” to keep pluralistic conflict from destabilizing society and incapacitating government, so too must it produce a citizenry capable of maintaining those forms and procedures amidst conditions of social entropy. And this, in turn, demands a thoroughgoing cultivation of norms and habits conducive to order and stability. We might recall, here, the paradox of political imagination for Hobbes: to preserve order and stability would require not ridding politics of imagination, but rather centralizing the imagination of politics. So too would the Federalists need to balance political constraints on imagination with a more productive role for it in politics if they

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hoped to solicit it to the cause of their most ambitious form—democratic national sovereignty. And for this, Model America would need not only formal governmental tools to channel individual imaginations toward public ends but, as the Anti-Federalists knew, cultural ones as well.

Model America thus imagines a *conventional container* for itself in the basic sense that it acknowledges its roots in the gathering of unlike persons around a common object—security, freedom, commonwealth, etc—and the coming to agreement among them. A conventional world differs from a fashionable world in several important respects. First, while it serves as material for the artifice of representative imagination, it is a more resistant fabric, with textures and snags that potentially open up pluralistic sites and powers of imagining. As such, it places more limits on political imagination, which can less easily carry off the hubristic conceit of its sovereignty. And finally, in limiting imagination—and containing it in relation to a common object—a conventional world seeks not the permanence of revolution but the stability of order. What are we to make, then, of the shared Constitutional underpinnings of hubristic and representative imagination and their avowedly different relationships to the material world? Recall the juxtaposition of Chevy’s America and Cohen’s America: the centralizing imagination of the former and pluralizing imagination of the latter both make claims on the conventional tools of the state—from its formal juridical and political institutions to its broader cultural traditions of economic, social, and political life. This contestation of powers adds up, as I have argued, to political imaginings of America born of and borne by forms of collective life that are always already entangled. My aim in this section is to unpack the ways in
which Model America tries, however precariously, to steer a course between both extremes, to ensure the incorruptibility of its forms by what it renders illegitimate powers of imagination.

The conventional world’s most explicit strategies of containment operate through legal and political institutions designed to limit and protect both pluralist, private imaginations and representative, public imagination. At the base of these limits are contractual and procedural schemes of representation aimed at holding public imagination accountable to the sovereign individuals who constitute and legitimate it with their powers of consent. And yet, across a variety of theoretical forms, representative imagination risks abstractions of time, space, and subjectivity that recall the containment strategies of a fashionable world. Hamilton’s constitutionalism is riskiest in this regard. He offers a theory of representative imagination grounded firmly in the Constitution, as the originary political act by the supreme political authority, as a sovereign law created by a sovereign people. But as we have seen, he thereafter disempowers the authority of citizens in the ongoing production of political imagination and instead establishes an “energetic” role for national government in interpreting and

70 Examples include an electoral system that manages the filtration of pluralist imaginings into legitimate representation and legal rules that distribute imagination into public and private spaces and modes according to a given issue, be it family policy, reproductive rights, economic decision-making, education standards, foreign policy, etc.

71 That abstracted vision dominates contract theory is evident in the smooth backdrops painted for a Constitutional ratification debate that took place amidst extant and hotly contested cultural and political forms. Paine, as we have seen, returns America to a veritable state of nature; John Jay opens The Federalist Papers by imagining not empty space and time but a “uniform” and “united” people “connected” spatially by their “widespread country” and temporally by their common ancestry. See Jay, Federalist 2, 6.
administering sovereign law. Central to his theory of constitutional representation is a strong, independent executive emboldened to “act his own opinion with vigor and decision” and an insulated, independent judiciary designated as final arbiter of the originary will of the people. Weakened in Hamilton’s constitutionalism is the legislative body, whose great size, internal diversity, and proximity to the people render it susceptible to “infections” by the “symptoms” of democracy: passion, impulse, impatience, ill-humor, and faction. By exercising their power of consent, then, citizens paradoxically abdicate the power of active, productive, pluralist imagining as a vital source for political life. If that power is transferred to a form of representation that anxiously inoculates itself against contagion, the conditions are ripe for Hamilton’s representative imagination to don into its more hubristic, Hobbesian face.

It is Madison, however, who famously elaborates the representative imagination of the Federalists, and we might identify his constitutionalism with two schools of thought. In line with other democratic realists, his representative scheme has the pragmatic end of public order. Enlarging the orbit of representative government ensures not a greater, more productive role for citizens in imagining public life. Rather, it secures a stable system in which countervailing powers of imagination cancel each other out or otherwise fail to gain enough support to take hold of public imagination. As an inheritor of the Enlightenment, Madison argues that the same representative scheme has the added,

72 Hamilton’s representative imagination has its contemporary successors in thinkers such as Herbert Croly, as we’ve seen, and also in the expert cultures of democracy advocated by Samuel Huntington (who shares Hamilton’s concerns about “democratic distemper”) and Walter Lipmann (who shares Hamilton’s disregard for the ability of localist and particularistic citizens to confront national problems).
73 Hamilton, Federalist 71, 399-401; Federalist 73, 411-12; Federalist, 79, 434-40.
principled benefit of “discerning the true interest of [the] country.” If his theory of justice, as the “end of government,” is much thinner than those of contemporary Rawlsians, he nonetheless sketches a theory of public reason as the legitimate procedural source of political judgment and action. Madison sees a thorny metaphysical landscape, in which “sense, perception, judgment, desire, volition, memory, imagination are found to be separated by such delicate shades and minute gradations that their boundaries” are elusive. But he believes that representative government can establish conditions of reason—e.g., natural aristocracy, independence, temperateness, deliberateness, respectability—that filter public opinion toward broad, impartial vision. This is not, Madison argues, a recipe for producing a homogeneous imagination of public life. To the contrary, reason produces more nuanced, differentiated public opinion than the tyrannous, leveling forces of mass democracy. And yet, in filtering out the “excesses” of democracy—including its passions, impulses, particularities, and distempers—Madisonian representative imagination extracts from a multitude of resources only those that secure the established means and constitutional ends of the commonwealth.

74 Madison, Federalist 10, 50-52.
75 Spragens, 59. Unlike Rawls’ theory of distributive justice, writes Spragens, Madison’ sketches a minimal theory of justice as “the absence of tyranny . . . . Political regimes are just when they derive their powers from consent and when they respect the lives, liberties, and estates of their citizenry. Institutionally, justice so understood is achieved . . . . by free elections, bills of rights, and countervailing power.”
76 Madison, Federalist 37, 195.
77 Madison, Federalist 50, 287. Anti-Federalists disagreed. On the one hand, many valued non-distinction and moderation over excellence and ambition. But on the other hand, they saw these values—as well as tools of local representation, shorter terms, frequent rotation, and more likeness between representatives and constituents—as procedural and substantive bases of more nuanced and democratically differentiated representation.
To the extent that representative imagination understands itself wholly through such constitutional norms, procedures, and ends, it comes to imagine itself in a standardized relationship to a uniform world. And indeed, so standardized, the textures and snags of the conventional world lose much of their power over political imagination. The theory and practice of constitutionalism in America participates primarily in a tradition of modern constitutionalism that abstracts democratic imagination from its cultural, biographical, and historical sources. Central to this tradition is an understanding of the constitution as a formal precondition for democracy, rather than as a form to be reworked through ongoing, active contestation in relation to variegated and changing subjects, spaces, and times. Subjects authorize political imagination through consent, either in an original contract or according to established norms and procedures of representation. As many critics have argued, this consensual model understands subjects as abstract, undifferentiated individuals, not as particular, biographical, social beings. The abstractions of modern constitutionalism treat not only subjects, but also the spaces and times they inhabit. National systems of uniform law and politics are superimposed over older, irregular forms that hold together varied and overlapping

78 This paragraph takes its framing from James Tully’s characterization of modern constitutionalism in Strange Multiplicity. I also draw extensively on Wolin’s critique of constitutionalism, contract theory, and institutionalism in Presence of Past and in his “Norm and Form.” In Peter Euben, et al., eds., Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Finally, I’m influenced by Hannah Pitkin’s discussion of procedural consent theory and substantive consent theory. Pitkin’s attention to the substantive criteria for evaluating government shifts the terrain of politics from consent to promise, defined as a particular, social practice that emphasizes the act of taking an obligation, rather than reifying the form of the obligation. A promise is broken at times, but doing so considers other circumstances, including the original oath, but also including other obligations, alternative options, and new consequences. Promising, as I elaborate in the next section and the next chapter, acknowledges the mutually constitutive relationship between imagination and the material world. See, Pitkin, “Obligation and Consent—II,” The American Political Science Review 60:1 (1966), 39-52.
jurisdictions of authority. This spatial abstraction maps onto a temporal one: a linear view of history in which erasing and standardizing old forms is part of a self-completing mechanism of progress.

Louis Hartz’s thesis on American exceptionalism is instructive, here, both as a critique and a manifestation of the imagination of Model America. Hartz renders America unique in its possession of a “fixed, dogmatic liberalism,” characterized by an “irrational devotion” to the doctrines of John Locke: a contractually limited government and an atomistic, individual liberty. At the root of this “absolute liberal faith” is America’s storied escape from the material conditions of the Old World, which spared it from the motley traditions and dynamics of feudalism, socialism, conservatism, and social revolution. This radical break, in turn, inaugurated dominant traditions of constitutionalism and legalism that have become the bulwarks of a “moral unanimity” underlying the “American Way of Life.” Hartz develops America’s “absolutism” in two directions. The nation secures the universality of its liberal ideology, outwardly, in relation to a foreign world whose legitimacy it refuses to recognize. At both intellectual and practical levels, the “absolute language of self-evidence” permeates America so strongly that it “refuses to pay its critics the compliment of an argument.”

79 Hartz, 6, 9. Hartz is aware the internal tensions within Locke’s thought, for example, of his theory of the state as both a defense and a limitation of its power (60). But Hartz understands “Americanism” as a partial appropriation of what remains in his work, for the most part, a caricature of Locke.

80 Ibid. 9-11. Hartz’ references to a culture of “constitutional fetishism” and “constitution worship” reinforces my claims about the obsession with form underlying the imagination of Model America and suggests the aesthetic elements and religious aspects of cultural life that orient individual imaginations toward a common, constitutional form. I address these in more detail shortly.

81 Ibid. 58-59.
operates, internally, by constructing a “liberal community” that relies on the “power of the liberal norm to penetrate” members of every socioeconomic class. Individuals thus come to identify themselves as equal “participants in a uniform way of life.” Thick notions of liberal individuality are reduced to a thin notion of atomistic individualism, making the conditions ripe for an outbreak of the “conformitarian germ.” For when the classic liberal problem of the “tyranny of opinion” is fed by the centralizing imperatives of the modern nation, the liberal community “transforms eccentricity into a sin.”

One of Hartz’s primary concerns is to discover whether America “can compensate for the uniformity of its domestic life by contact with alien cultures outside it.” This is both the strength and the weakness of his imagination of America. On the one hand, he challenges the inviolability of liberal ideology during an era when the very Cold War politics that intensified it also revealed the global forces that would “shatter” its universality. Hartz is hopeful that America’s international engagements will help it appreciate the limits of its ideological and cultural forms. And yet, built into the logic of this hope is a reification of America’s ideological, cultural, and territorial borders—with the effect of rendering America internally unstrange to itself. Hartz does not deny that domestic conflicts exist in America, but he argues that they have, by and large, been contained within the framework of liberalism. That framework, he adds, has been sustained as much or more by moral unanimity as by the formal institutions and

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82 Ibid. 11-13, 55-57.
83 Ibid. 14.
procedures of the Constitution. Indeed, competing traditions, such as radicalism and conservatism, have been “twisted entirely out of shape by the liberal flow of American history.” The result, in Hartz’s analysis, is a veneration of liberal ideals of rationalism and uniformity, and a loss of variety—in either the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, or the radically democratic tradition of Cohen, Wood, and Wolin. Hartz is not alone in making these kinds of observations. But in so doing, he reduces the imagination of America to a static ideology, occluding any gaps, remainders, and residues of time, place, and subjectivity, and rendering them powerless to imagine alternative Americas.

If Hartz grounds the uniqueness of America’s liberal ideology in the unusual material conditions of the New World—its break from the weight of history, its expansive spatial frontiers, its clean slate of social and economic relations—he thereafter establishes a mutually reproductive relationship between the nation’s material life and its political imagination. Hannah Arendt identifies a similar relationship, tying it to the all-consuming desire of the Federalists “to assure stability to their new creation, and to stabilize every factor of political life into a ‘lasting institution.’” If the Federalists had progressive aspirations, Arendt finds in many modern and contemporary institutions logics of rule that perpetuate, rather than disrupt or reconfigure, the “overwhelming odds

84 Ibid. 15, 85.
85 Ibid. 50, 57.
86 Michael Kazin, whom I discuss in the previous chapter, argues that America’s social movement tradition has largely critiqued American society from within the confines of its founding ideals. See his The Populist Persuasion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
87 Arendt, On Revolution, 229, 234.
of statistical laws and their probabilities.”

Her concern with liberal democracy is that, despite Madison’s best designs, the economic and social logics of mass society have co-opted institutions of representative and administrative rule, thereby reducing the potentially agonal and creative spirit of the public realm to a normalizing and reproductive regime of the same. If a uniform public realm is in some sense what stable orders are willing to trade to protect private spaces of pluralistic freedom and imagination, Arendt sees their calculus as nonetheless misguided. For, in her estimation, the reproductive logics of mass society have largely penetrated not only the public realm, but the private realm as well. Whether or not we are disposed to see with Hartz and Arendt an American society so thoroughly enthralled with its own reproduction, it is more difficult to dismiss their doubts that liberal institutions are equipped to preserve even private spaces for the individual cultivation and expression of imagination.

89 If liberal democratic theorists like Rawls and Rorty hope that imagination can flourish in private life and civil society, each limits the ability of such imaginations to influence public life. For example, Rawls filters them through substantive and procedural norms of public reason, allowing them more comprehensive shape only during relatively infrequent periods of civil disobedience. Rorty understands public institutions as pragmatic bases for organizing social life—with the dual aim of protecting private spaces for self-becoming and social transformation while limiting the cruelty made possible by such diverse, unwieldy expressions. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
90 There is recognition of this within various strands of liberalism. For example, John Stuart Mill understands minimalist, libertarian forms of government to secure freedom only if negative liberties are attended by active habits of dialogue and contestation, through which individuals can distinguish their own opinions from the social power of mass conformity. John Tomasi argues, vis-à-vis Rawls, that political liberalism’s reliance on a sphere of overlapping consensus not only privileges those whose values are the closest to secular liberalism, but also has the effect of weakening the discourses and practices that sustain the variety of other cultural traditions whose values are more distant. See Tomasi, *Liberalism beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). My discussion of Tocqueville, below, also addresses this concern.
Nor is it clear, in Model America, that this is their full intent. For to seek containment in a conventional world is also, as I suggested above, to recognize the role of culture both in calling together our assemblages around common objects and in shaping our aesthetic taste for them. It is to acknowledge, unlike more hubristic imaginings of America, that the world—its subjects, spaces, times, relationships, habits, traditions, institutions, and dynamics—can and indeed must be sources of political imagination. Model America always, if often implicitly, relies on cultural tools to shape imagination, but it prioritizes forms and modes that stabilize and control imagination’s productive power. Jason Frank offers an early example of this in his compelling reading of The Federalist Papers. Revising prominent interpretations that highlight Publius’ anxiety about the transgressive power of imagination, Frank elaborates the authors’ appeal to the constructive potential of imagination to reconstitute public authority in the new national government. In response to the conundrum of how to negotiate the unruly power of pluralist imaginations and the energetic imperatives of national sovereignty, Publius’ solution followed the blueprint laid by Hobbes. America would not only limit the influence of pluralistic imagination on government but, more productively, level it and enlist it through disciplinary and habituating administrative and cultural forms.91

These included, among other strategies, the production of “public veneration” for national authority by “stabilizing” and “orienting” imaginations around common objects, ———

91 Frank traces David Hume’s influence on Publius, and especially his concept of imagination as, in Frank’s words, “at once the human faculty of transformative malleability and of securing a sedimented stability.” See Frank, “Publius and Political Imagination,” 78.
such as public institutions and popular observances.\textsuperscript{92} What Hartz today calls “constitution worship” and “constitutional fetishism,” for example, has its roots in a constitutional tradition that, in Paine’s rendering, revered foundational documents as “political bibles”—possessed by every family, carried in the pocket of every lawmaker, and recited whenever a legal debate arose.\textsuperscript{93} As the pervasive, reiterative character of Paine’s description suggests, harnessing the productive power of imagination would also require a micro-politics of administering to citizen’s ordinary, everyday concerns in order to refocus their sentiments and attachments from local to federal authority. Publius was keenly aware of the power of state governments to habituate the imagination of their subjects, by exercising a “constant activity before the public eye.” He saw a like need, on Frank’s account, for the new national government to administer to citizens in the “common occurrences of political life,” and indeed to “enter into those objects which most touch the sensible chords” of the people.\textsuperscript{94} By doing so, as another Federalist supporter put it, the Constitution would not adapt to pre-existing habits of the people, but

\textsuperscript{92} Frank, 70, 86-90. The reference to “public veneration” is taken from Madison’s claim that it is imperative to prevent the appearance of any defect in the national government: “As every appeal to the people would carry an implication of some defect in the government, frequent appeals would, in great measure, deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on everything, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability. If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depend much on the number of which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion.” See Madison, Federalist 49, 282-83.

\textsuperscript{93} This image, from Paine’s “Common Sense,” is potentially disingenuous in two senses: first, Paine refers here to state constitutions, not the authority of a national constitution, and second, he uses this image to paint constitutions as mechanisms by which the people controlled governments, less than the other way around. But, as a descriptive image of early America, the image is indeed striking in terms of the daily, ritualistic processes by which a people developed a sense of its identity in relation to a common institution. And, next to Hartz’s compelling characterization of contemporary constitutionalism in the U.S., Paine’s description is instructive regarding the ritual, reiterative production of national authority vis-à-vis the national Constitution.

\textsuperscript{94} Quoted in Frank, “Publius and Political Imagination,” 84.
rather “introduce a code of laws that would induce those habits of civilization and order” amenable to “national views.” In this light, the crux of the debate between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the form of representation did not only concern differing views about the atomicity or organicity of human nature in modern society. It centered on a more mutual question: through which tools and toward what ends should the Constitution habituate political subjectivity and imagination?

As Frank notes, the persuasiveness of the Federalists’ arguments for Constitutional ratification depended not primarily on reason but on Publius’ aesthetic interpellation of his readers as a national political body. This claim recalls the textual practice of Plato and Hobbes, both of whom rely on rhetorical devices as much as reason or logic to orient their readers toward universal ends. And it carries broader significance about the limits and conceits of representative imagination: If the authority of national government is justified in terms of its orderly and reasonable representation of sovereign individual imaginations, that authority is constituted by unifying and harnessing the power of those imaginations toward centralizing ends. Formal constitutional procedures, such as voting or paying taxes, become national spectacles through which citizens regularly entrust power to representative and administrative government.

95 A Federalist, quoted in Storing, 85, fn. 28.
96 Jay’s unifying vision of the space, history, and people of America, at the very outset of the Federalist Papers, is the most deliberate of such productions, but the idea of a nationally sovereign people both implicitly and explicitly underlies the entire document. This idea itself was strategically produced by the Federalists as a way to avoid the conceptual problem of “splitting” sovereignty between state and national governments. See Wood, Creation, 527, 547.
97 I discuss this concept in much greater detail in the next two chapters in relation to Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of cultural authority, discourse, and habitus.
Countless daily discourses and rituals—abiding laws; accepting police protections and punishments; meeting federal requirements for tax incentives, welfare support, or marriage licenses; listening to politicians extol the “American people” and their “American values” on the nightly news; having one’s anxieties stoked over “the nation’s borders” or its “dependence on foreign oil”—all vie, amidst countless competing forces, to produce the political authority of the nation-state. Representative imagination, then, inescapably overlaps with habituated imagination. If it is possible, as I will argue, to habituate political imagination through irregular, cross-cutting practices and in disjointed, open-ended directions—and thus to generate more dynamic, contested representations—Model America prefers to orient it toward relatively stable, uniform ends.

A brief return to Tocqueville will begin to differentiate the possibilities and dangers of habituated imagination. His concerns about democracy’s tendency to nurture habits of individualism and conformity lead him to ask how democracy might, instead, foster habits of public spiritedness and agonal politics. He reminds us that actors first need to be able to imagine that they belong to a common fate or share a common good—freedom, for Tocqueville—before they’ll have any incentive to care for its survival, contest its contours, debate how to achieve it, or protect it from encroachments by totalizing forms of power. Tocqueville’s interest in the habits of democracy thus has crucial democratizing impulses, including an attention to the everyday cultural requisites of vibrant participatory democracy and an appreciation of difference and disagreement as potential resources for imagining freedom rather than obstacles to it. And yet, as if to mistrust these impulses, he seeks to contain the unwieldy and unpredictable work of
democratic imagination not only in common mores and habits, but in some more fundamental cultural authority. He maintains that democratic participation and debate—and hence, freedom—can only flourish if societies share some such authority, which remains unquestioned in everyday life.98

In Tocqueville’s vision of 19th century America, the nearly complete acceptance of Christian morality provides this authority. Its universal doctrines and everyday practices habituate subjects toward equality, obedience, restraint, and order, and these become “primary assumptions” that serve as “insurmountable barriers” to imagination. Religion acts, in other words, as mechanism by which imagination is policed and, in turn, polices itself: “The imagination of Americans … is circumspect and hesitant; it is embarrassed from the start.” In America, at least, this self-policing facilitates democracy, for the limits it places in the heart and in the home transfer to society and politics. The universality of Christian mores is rivaled, in Tocqueville’s account, only by the prevalence of bold, enterprising, and acquisitive spirits. Without the moral restraint offered by Christianity, the more hubristic imagination of unlimited democracy would run rampant in America and pose a great danger to freedom. But in Tocqueville’s understanding, at least, no one in America had yet “dared profess the maxim that everything is allowed in the interest of society.” He continues, “While the law allows the

98 Tocqueville, 287.
American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare."\textsuperscript{99}

If Tocqueville is explicit that fundamental cultural authorities can and should produce certain things as unimaginable, he draws normative lines based on whether limiting imagination enhances or constrains the variety of human life and the public spiritedness of society. Love of money, which acts as another kind of unquestioned authority in America, steers society toward individualism, perpetual agitation, and an increasingly narrow range of interests and practices. In this way, commercialism poses a threat to democracy. But if Tocqueville is clear about where to draw the normative line between what is imaginable and unimaginable to democracy, he conceals or evades several occasions in which he crosses his own line. His account of America’s social geography, again, disposes his readers to see emptiness where diverse forms of indigenous culture, morality, and politics existed. His conventionally gendered account of moral education, in which women domestically reproduce the moral order upon which democracy depends, suggests that the democratization of civil society must stop at the household door. And while he acknowledges that racial conflict might disrupt his account of the common foundations of order and freedom, he segregates the everyday experiences of racism to the margins of his analysis—as tangents, in his words, to the subject of democracy.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. 290-294.
\textsuperscript{100} Mark Reinhardt, \textit{The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
Tocqueville shows us that unquestioned cultural authority is not merely a stable and passive touchstone for belonging; it operates tacitly but pervasively at all levels of society to police imagination. It does so by truncating many of our basic capacities: our everyday orientations to the world around us, our habits of thinking and seeing, our perceptions of others and our dispositions toward them. Tocqueville’s own evasion of what must remain unimaginable within the logic of his text raises two crucial questions for my project: What are the constraints on imagination, and freedom, of not questioning those everyday habits and dispositions that are undemocratic? And what happens when we fail to habituate ourselves to recognize and respond to emergent imaginings of collective life?

Rather than sufficiently addressing these questions, contemporary liberal and communitarian discourses reveal the stabilizing cultural forms and processes that continue to lie beneath the imagination of Model America. While liberal theorists often underappreciate the embeddedness of imagination, abstracting it in the unencumbered or autonomous figure of the sovereign individual, many assume the need for at least a thin concept of political culture to orient political imagination. Rawls, for example, imagines a “public culture” that would align the hearts of individuals with the background institutions of liberal society and the moral agreements of the public sphere of reason. Such a culture might be “comprised [of] the political institutions of a constitutional

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101 Reinhardt sketches the proliferation of these discourses beyond the academic realm and into presidential advisory panels, political party rhetoric, best sellers, editorials, talk radio, sermons, etc. See, Reinhardt, “The Song Remains the Same,” In Cultural Studies and Political Theory, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
regime and the public traditions of their interpretation (including the judiciary), as well as historic texts and documents that are of common knowledge.”

If Rawls fails to see the extent to which even his thin concept of public culture can extend outwards, exerting a unifying influence on private conceptions of justice he hopes to protect, his critics do not lack such insight. Some worry about the spillover effects of a culture of political liberalism—for infringing on libertarian freedoms, or inculcating a predominantly consumer model of freedom, or crowding out the cultural resources available to other viable forms of life. Others operate under the assumption that political liberalism is, on the contrary, too reluctant in its use of cultural tools. They propose thicker versions of political culture, drawing on common institutions and traditions of social life—for example, Christianity, civil religion, social capital, or civil society—to cultivate shared understandings and moral commitments among citizens. When these local, constitutive associations are subsumed under a teleological project of harmonizing or repairing the social fabric of the nation, as is often the case, they fail to account for the unruly variety

102 Rawls, 15.
103 The references are, in order, to Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Ronald Beiner, *What’s the Matter with Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice*. Beiner would build more robust social democratic norms and institutions into liberal political culture. Tomasi would broaden public culture to consider norms beyond justice and create spaces for citizens to negotiate the relationships between public norms and their thick moral commitments. Friedman, who would abstract politics altogether from social norms, nonetheless rests his faith in the progressive movement of libertarianism on the ability of market forces to clean up extraneous or out-dated social tastes (e.g., inefficient or poor standards of production, racist hiring practices, etc.).
of subjects, spaces, times, relationships, habits, traditions, institutions, and dynamics that imagine America.\textsuperscript{104}

Model America, then, not only procedurally cordons off the spaces of legitimate political imagination; it also explicitly and implicitly, actively and passively fills them in. The procedural strategies of containing imagination in a conventional world have the explicit aim of protecting both spaces of democratic order \textit{and} spaces of imaginative capacity, and ensuring proper communication between them. Such containments hope to enable the ideal of democracy as “free government.” And yet, many theories and constructs of democracy in America deploy strategies that not only constrain the movement of imaginations across spatial, institutional, cultural, and ideological borders. At a more fundamental level, they attenuate and conceal, through reproductive logics of administrative rule and cultural stabilization, those spaces in which new imaginings of democracy might be generated. In some respects, then, the conceits and limits of Model America reflect its failure to grapple sufficiently with contemporary modes of power that cross most normative lines of protection and make inroads into spaces of imagination and democracy.

But this failure, itself, may stem from the tendency of Model America to reduce its conventional world of imagination to orthodoxy. The democratic promise of a conventional world is its potential to recognize its own contingency, and to cultivate spaces, practices, habits, and dynamics that take that contingency as a resource for new democratic imagining. The shape of democracy, in this sense, is drawn both by its traditional forms and by their jagged edges, jutting into unwieldy pasts, presents, and futures. The danger is that conventions, when they become too stable and solidified, will tend to naturalize themselves as true or right. In forgetting its contingent and contested origins, an orthodox world of imagination misrecognizes its continued implications in relationships of power and violence. And, by the same process, it conceals from itself its own limits. The result, in Model America, is an idea and practice of democracy that takes the sovereignty of its form as self-evident and that polices its borders from heterodox imaginings.

But if Model America is like America Unlimited in that it reproduces its own imagination through strategies of concealing and attenuating alternative imaginings, it is different in its obsession with solidity rather than radical newness and in its preferred dynamics of radical order rather than permanent revolution. It thus imagines and presumes to build a different world for itself. And it is startled awake by the “sleeping terror” of a different American nightmare. The anxiety of hubristic imagination is the very hint of any limits, even its own, that might paralyze its endless expansion or send it spiraling from its permanent ascent. But what orthodox imagination fears most is the contagion of its own form. For it threatens to expose the unsteady scaffolding of Model
America’s solid order. Crucial to this scaffolding are the nation’s founding myths of necessity and legitimacy, buttressed by the everyday “bloodhounds of order”—a Marxist critique of liberalism brought home when Martin Luther King, Jr., chastised a nation that kept the peace through fire hoses and police dogs. Commenting on those moments of “national hysteria” when civil liberties collapse before the nation’s eyes, Louis Hartz writes that they merely reveal “the dynamite which normally lies concealed beneath the free and easy atmosphere of the American liberal community.”

In this sense, America secures the material and symbolic sovereignty of its juridical order by creating a state of exception to its rule of law. In Giorgio Agamben’s analysis, to make such an exception is not simply to exclude something from a juridical regime, but in the very act of doing so, to incorporate it in that order under terms of domination rather than terms of right. Sovereignty thus uses its capital on legitimacy to create zones of safety for those who have the status of full citizenship, but also to discipline and control those bodies, races, classes, sexualities, and so on, that pose a threat to a given order. American history has generated no lack of examples: institutionalized racism, widespread labor violations, a massive prison-industrial complex, the arbitrary illegalization of immigrants, inconsistent and often brutal deportation policies, the criminalization and policing of alternative sexualities, the retrenchments of right-wing populisms around the disruption of cultural forms, and so on. Facing the threat of destabilization, then, sovereign orders respond by creating or

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105 Hartz, 59.
sanctioning conditions of confinement, disorder, disorientation, invisibility, and violence. Just as hubristic imagination thrives only by reproducing and expanding its own form, orthodox imagination survives only by wreaking havoc on the world that would stabilize it. As conventional fashion would have it, the two dominant ideas of America today engage each other in depleting a world that could contain their best aspirations—and the promise of democracy.

Promising America, Promising Democracy

The promise of America, as a promise of democracy, might indeed seem cynical today. The two most renowned ideas of that promise—as a limitless ideal and as a constitutionally limited model—now conspire to package, export, and police a dogmatic, neoliberal democracy across the globe. The cynicism of neoliberalism is its refusal to recognize the viability of alternative imaginations of democracy, whether it actively evades, conceals, and depletes them, or passively fails to conserve and animate a world in which they might flourish. But myriad grassroots social movements—cultivating radical political ecologies; redesigning the intellectual commons; building transnational linkages on issues of gender, migration, hunger, etc; restructuring municipal and regional political-economic powers; and more—believe this myopia. They open, instead, a world replete with emergent imaginings that draw sustenance from and experiment persistently with old and new discourses, relationships, institutions, traditions, and dynamics of collective life. That many of them also appropriate the promise of democracy begs the questions at the heart of this section: What culture of exceptionalism, if any, might cradle emergent
imaginings of democracy? And can it also democratize imagination, including the
imagination of democracy?

America’s claim to exceptionalism is, in itself, entirely unexceptional. Reflecting
on democracy in Europe, Jacques Derrida proposes that every cultural identity, no matter
how small, understands itself as exemplary, in the sense that it presents its particular form
as the unique inscription of universal human ideals. Rather than denying exemplarity’s
universalizing motion, Derrida affirms that human social existence, so far as it is
linguistically mediated and historically finite, is bound to logics of identity, universality,
and teleology as one crucial component of ethics. But he also probes exemplarity’s
“other heading,” that is, its incompleteness in relation to whatever, inevitably, exceeds its
grasp. Exemplarity, in this sense, implies a double directionality. The exemplarity of
democracy does not lie solely in the universal claim to it by Europe, or America, or any
carrier: such claims always fix our imaginations on and aim to reproduce some privileged
center of collective identity and common life. Nor does it lie merely in proliferating a
multitude of marginal identities, movements, and cultures: such decentralization, for its
own sake, risks fetishizing what can amount to painful dislocations and violent
antagonisms. Rather, democracy is conditioned in the contradictory experience of being
claimed by multiple headings at the same time—that is, by a given order of things and by
whatever takes exception with it—and, just as crucially, in the impossible experiment of
gathering together and caring for a common world amidst these cross-winds. If it is to be

1978), 128-29, 133.
exemplary, in the sense of being responsive to its double directionality, democracy can only ever, but must always, take “the structure of a promise.” But what is the structure of that promise, in a world where promises are all too often made falsely, broken recklessly, or played with a carrot and a stick? And what structure might that promise lend democracy?

Derrida is clear that an exemplary promise of democracy bears little resemblance to the promises of either America Unlimited or Model America. It does not, with the former, take the structure of an abstract ideal, casting the imagination ever forward toward some future state that is always certain and yet never finally achieved, fashioning everything in its path toward its next frontier. Nor does it, with the latter, claim privileged access to an originary moment of consent, which it alone bears the responsibility to remember, shape, and regulate. Democracy, then, belongs not to the order of the future, nor to the order of the past, nor to any single order in the present that claims to speak for either. For democracy to be exemplary, the structure of its promise must instead harbor “the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.” As Derrida works the term, to-come, it means something that has yet to emerge, even to be thought—something that is unimaginable. It can come from yesterday, today, or tomorrow, and from sites that are internal or external to the discourses, practices, and institutions by which a cultural identity gathers itself amidst difference. It is carried not only by identifiable others, those socially and politically defined strangers who cross well-

109 Ibid. 78, 47.
demarcated borders and trigger well-rehearsed postures and policies of closure. It emerges, all the more, with those indeterminate events that reveal previously obscured or unrecognized limits, whether to lay bare dominations and exclusions or to render perceptible alternative ethical-political projects.\textsuperscript{110} If human experience is, indeed, shaped by a fundamental need to belong, it is marked no less by interruptions that deconstitute and reconstitute the limits of that belonging, for better and for worse. To respond to both experiences, the promise of democracy must \textit{belong-to} multiple headings at once, or since that is impossible, it must nonetheless \textit{belong-with} whatever it does not, or cannot yet, promise. And it might do so by “inventing gestures, discourses, [and] politico-institutional practices” that cultivate responsiveness to—and, crucially, remember and preserve—emergent imaginings of democracy.\textsuperscript{111} To take \textit{belonging-with} as a structure for democracy, then, is to open the imagination and organization of democracy to a more haunted form of exceptionalism.

Cultural critic Greil Marcus, in a brief essay in \textit{The Atlantic}, evokes a haunted exceptionalism as no less than constitutive of the idea of America. He recasts the nation’s history as “the story of previously enslaved, excluded, marginalized, degraded, and despised people” invoking the principles of the Constitution in their own struggles for freedom. These struggles “prove that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were at once a genie that could never be put back in a bottle and a promise all Americans must keep for themselves … That is the nature of America: For every battle carried forward,

\begin{thebibliography}{111}
\bibitem{DerridaOther} Derrida, \textit{Other Heading}, 44.
\end{thebibliography}
none is ever settled.” At once universal and historical, irrepresible and binding, foundational and unsettling, given and wrought: the promise of America conjured here brings us back to the paradoxical imagination of Thomas Paine, for whom America symbolized the “power to begin the world over again.” This is, no doubt, a dangerous proximity. But mustn’t an ethics and politics of belonging—with the unimaginable engage in what Hartz has called as a “traditionalism” of “new beginnings”? Hartz, with his vision of social unanimity, undercuts much that is potentially haunting about such a tradition. Marcus does not, or does less so: Even as he locates an originary moment in the Constitution, he understands that America is “up for grabs,” that for every “autocratic” consolidation, there are “manifold possibilities” incubating—genie-like—toward the imagination of greater freedoms. The democratic promise of America, its “birthright” and “burden,” is thus born and carried in its most haunted tradition—of taking exception with itself.

Marcus imagines the promise of democracy as a genie: a new beginning that emerges not ex nihilo, but after being cultivated in the dense shadows of social space and the sedimented concealments of historical time. Each time the genie of democracy resurfaces, it takes exception with the present by tying back to promises made in the past. New beginnings are in this sense repetitions, which carry forward much that is old even as they struggle to create something new. The more haunted natality of radical democratic imagining is often buoyed by the manifold possibilities covered over in the

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113 Hartz, 48.
114 Marcus, 42.
sediments of time, just as the insurgent revolutionaries in the epigraph to this chapter were buoyed by a century of unruly struggle that generated alternative authorities for radical revolt. But if radical democratic imagining belongs with whatever it does not promise, this includes the historical and social contexts of the fashionable and orthodox worlds it contests. For these ideal types are part of the same world in which its imaginings are cultivated, the same world it struggles to create anew. And radical democratic natality too cuts with a double-edged knife. Every effort to decenter hubristic and orthodox imaginations of America will inevitably contain some of the sheer dullness of their unconscious repetitions, leaving even the most incisive imaginings with myopic residues of the past. But like Leonard Cohen’s vision of commonwealth, which loves the bitter questioning at its heart, the sharp edge of radical democratic natality cuts in two directions. In cultivating a tradition of new beginnings that do not presume a complete break from the past, radical democracy spurs relentless criticism at the sleepy and often unconscious limits of imagination, including at its best, the duller limits of its own imagining.

Recasting America’s tradition of new beginnings enables us to situate its more haunted exceptionalism within the context of a world that could give rise to the relentless critical and world-disclosive imagining it promises. The task is not only to conceive radical democratic forms of natality. More fundamentally, it is to build and care for a world that nurtures such natality, by tending the everyday soil from which the genie of democratic imagining can reappear in the future. Historian Gary Nash elaborates some of the material and cultural conditions that enabled this more haunted form of
exceptionalism during the revolutionary era. Retexturing Paine’s political imagination, the motley cast of revolutionaries in his epigraph generated overlapping but incongruent traditions and practices of radical democratic struggle. Boston mobs designed a theatrical politics of ritual effigy, mass demonstration, and barn-raising in a persistent campaign to wrest sanctioned, deliberative town hall spaces back from elites. Backwoods denizens organized tenant uprisings, civil disobedience, and paramilitary action while crafting principles of moral economy and cultivating dispositions of opposition to corrupt establishment. Indigenous peoples moved strategically between aggression, accommodation, negotiation, and internal cultural revival, while enslaved peoples appropriated revolutionary vocabularies, mobilized repeated insurrections, and carved routes of freedom. Women played key roles in religious revivalism, early abolitionism, and import boycotts, generating new public subjectivities and developing relational networks in the process. Emerging before elite revolutionaries picked up their quill pins, and clamoring at the margins all the while as they wrote, these movements tended the land and its variegated cultural histories, searched for and developed alternative sources of political authority, created counter-current institutions of self-governance, and passionately contested the idea of America’s promise. Their “unknowing rehearsals for revolt” were, more fundamentally, so many acts of imagining and transforming political cultures in cities, seaports, farmlands, backwoods frontiers, and underground spaces across the land.  

115 It is amidst this cultivated difference, both rooted and unruly, that

115 Nash, *Unknown Revolution*, 2, 18, 32, 37, 68, 72, 80, 139, 170.
America is always already co-authored by those who have been excepted from its promise of democracy.

One of the earliest and by far the broadest of these movements, the Great Awakening of the 1730s-40s stitched into the fabric of America a “pattern for radical expression” whose dynamics, sensibilities, practices, forms, and ideas would later inspire and inform the politics of the Revolution and beyond.116 Its religious enthusiasm introduced effervescence, experimentation, and emotion into a colonial culture lodged ideologically and locally in hierarchical institutions, orthodox customs, and rationalist rhetoric. From its messianic revival of God’s immanence for all believers, no matter how common, to its practical manifestations in everyday life, the Great Awakening upset established relationships in family, religion, society, and politics.117 And it did so, fundamentally, through collective experiences that cultivated and habituated new subjectivities—notably, the defiant individual and the active agent of social change—and that had lasting effects on political practice and form. In making this argument, Patricia Bonomi helps us draw out some of these experiences: beginning as insurgent minorities in hierarchical and orthodox congregations, traveling across parish lines as itinerant mobilizers, listening to each other in common conversation and building alliances, provoking emotion and action through censorious rhetoric, generating novel arguments.

116 The quote is from David Lovejoy, “‘Desperate Enthusiasm’: Early Signs of American Radicalism,” In The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism, eds. Margaret Jacob and James Jacob (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 232. This discussion is also informed by Lovejoy, Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Patricia Bonomi, “‘A Just Opposition’: the Great Awakening as a Radical Model,” In Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism.

117 Extraordinary economic development and demographic shifts beginning in the 1740s contributed to the unsettling of established relationships. See Wood, Radicalism, 125.
about the rights of minorities and alternative interpretations of American history, *constructing* parallel and extra-legal organizations and counter-public spaces, and *launching* a mass movement.

The antinomian messianism of the Great Awakening had important spill-over effects on, and an uneasy belonging with, the civil millennialism, nascent nationalism, ardent localism, and rationalist idealism of the revolutionary period. If America, indeed, symbolized the power to begin the world anew, that power was built through complex dynamics of disorientation and reorientation, as competing traditions and emergences of imagination came into contact with each other. The radical democratic inheritance of enthusiastic politics, itself, wove into the fabric of America what Jason Frank has called a countercurrent of “incommunicability and glossolalia”—one that resisted both the orthodoxy of the Old World and the rationalist constitution of freedom taking shape in the new representative government. If Frank describes an elementally indeterminable and irrepressibly haunting countercurrent in the political imagining of America, he does less to interrogate how it emerges in relation to and inspirits more responsive, edgier forms of tradition and organization. Or to distinguish how it has also, at times, joins forces with shriller, more hysterical mobilizations of bodies, affects, rhetorics, and forms.

But a complex dynamic of disorientation *and* reorientation has, indeed, surfaced throughout America’s history, as emerging identities and movements have reformulated

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118 Lovejoy, “‘Desperate Enthusiasm,’” 236-239.
the affects, dispositions, rhetoric, practices, and strategies of political imagination. For example, the itinerant preaching and tent meetings of the Great Awakening have a lineage in the traveling lecture circuit and cross-border encampments of the agrarian Populist movement, the freedom rides and mass protests of the black freedom movement, and the mobile geographies and strange congregations of today’s urban organizing across race, ethnicity, religion, and class. If these movements unsettled imaginations of democracy monopolized by corporate power, white supremacy, and rigid nationalism, their own imaginings of democracy are haunted in turn. Not least of all by modes of white supremacy and nativism that lingered in the democratic beginnings of the second and third Great Awakenings and Populism. But also by a legacy of right-wing populist movements—the Ku Klux Klan, McCarthyism, the rise of the Christian right—that have proliferated social and religious institutions of gathering and generated anti-liberal discourses in an effort to decenter, but also to narrow, cultural and political imagination.

We might, then, recoup a more haunted tradition of exceptionalism not by restoring or renewing the promise of America, as if we could locate that promise in any one form, but by taking part in a promising America—animated both by its disorienting receptivity to emergent imaginings of democracy at the limits of its own imagining and by its orienting efforts to recommit, time and again, to caring for a world where democracy might flourish. To share in the power of promising America might open us to a radical democratic imagining that contains something of both the newness and dynamism of hubristic imagination and the limiting and enabling forms and modes sought by representative/habituated imagination. Paradoxically, radical democratic
imagining aspires neither toward the radical new nor toward radical order. It is, on the one hand, attentive to its variegated roots, whose embedded fibers, strange assemblages, cross-cutting routes, and gnarly outcroppings might unsettle, provoke, and animate imaginations lodged in more solid, choked grounds, but might also hold together and nourish new imaginings that would otherwise perish in the irrelevance and fatigue of isolation. It practices a newness and dynamism that recognize many old and extant modes and forms both as fundamental and energetic resources and as limiting and enabling challenges, rather than as grounds to be faithfully reproduced or obstacles to be forgotten, destroyed, or evaded. On the other hand, radically democratic imagining stretches its senses to be attentive to the internal cracks, interstitial spaces, and rough-hewn edges of its own consolidations—which it dreams, promises, builds, and tends for itself—in the anticipation that strange, new imaginings might emerge. It practices a consolidation that allows its own fundament to be touched.

But what kinds of consolidations might let what is fundamental to them be touched, and through what modes, practices, relationships, and dynamics might new imaginings touch—politically and ethically—the world they hope to enter and reconstitute? We find mostly cautions in the models of hubristic imagination and orthodox imagination, which would conceal, incapacitate, and deplete all other foundations while forcefully policing their own. And we might meet with disappointment in the conservative idealism of many theories and practices of democracy in America, which as Michael Kazin notes, have imagined and realized freer and more capacious lives for people without straining to encounter those who ask more fundamental questions at
It is the relationship of touch that interests me here, and which I think can lead us to a more ethically and politically illuminative concept of imagination itself. Radical democratic imagining recognizes its fundamental rootedness in the world, though it imagines those roots and that world to be more dynamic and more familiar with strangeness than do other theories that seek to ground democracy and imagination in cultural sites, traditions, habits, and practices. A radical democratic theory and politics, animated by people’s sharing in the power of imagining the world, might thus locate the power of imagining not in the faculties of the sovereign subject, nor in the totalizing disciplinary forces of a conditioning world, but in the intercorporeal relationship between the two. To distinguish radically democratic imagining from more disciplined notions of habituated imagination, we might conceptualize an intercorporeal relationship in which both imagination and the world can be dynamic without being radically destructive to each other, in which each attends to the other with a concern for its restoration and its emergence in new modes and forms, and in which the transgressions and orientations each brings to the relationship meet not in strict opposition but in generative tension.

Martin Luther King, Jr., calling America to account for its foundations in racial and economic power and violence, and calling for a radical “restructuring” and “revolution of values,” deflects the cooption of his image by the centralizing forces of “Our Country” and calls us to think what it would mean to share in the power of promising America. He intones, “Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to

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120 See my discussion of Kazin in the previous chapter, also referenced in fn. 86 of this chapter.
121 For example, Burkean conservatism or common readings of Bourdieuan habitus.
the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world.”122 Tying the power of collective imagining and acting to a haunted, and yet utterly compelling, promise to struggle over and care for a new world, King inspirits us to the work of asking what kind of world might contain radical democratic imagining? How might democratic theory and practice cultivate worldly spaces, times, practices, habits, traditions, institutions, and dynamics in which imagining itself plays a fundamental role and from new imaginings can be generated? How especially when every new beginning cuts into the world with a double-edged blade, which dulls imaginative capacities and lulls many subjects to sleep, even as it punctuates unconscious repetitions and provokes many others to join in the struggle for a new world?

These questions animate my remaining chapters, which deal iteratively with questions of natality, performative repetition, radical democratic cultural authority, and care of a world in which future acting and imagining can emerge. I begin in the next chapter by constructing a dialogue between Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, and Mikhail Bakhtin, three contemporary theorists who differently address the edges between culture, politics, and natality. My concern is to understand how new imaginings can emerge at all amidst the agitated and reproductive dynamics that structure and habituate cultural life and political subjectivity in America. Relatedly, I ask two questions: How can new beginnings avoid the hubristic presumption that they are escaping existing social forces, which nonetheless pull them in centralizing and decentering directions that they, like

King, cannot fully control? How could we care for a world of cross-cutting roots, strange assemblages, and gnarly outcroppings whose soil contains the critical buoyancy to animate radical democratic forms of natality? I move on in the next chapter to work through these questions concretely in relation to the late-nineteenth century Populist movement. I’m interested in how it took exception with dominant imaginings of modernization in America by cultivating alternative traditions, spaces, practices, and imaginings of modernity, political economy, and democracy. But I also ask how Populism’s most promising beginnings negotiated their debts both to hubristic and orthodox contexts they struggled to create anew, and to the many more marginal voices that sought to decenter and appropriate the terms of Populism.
CHAPTER THREE

The Radical Democratic Habitus of Imagination

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the world are rising up as never before. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” We in the West must support these revolutions…If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

King’s promise contains the manifold tensions that constitute radical democratic imagination, which in every instance bears both the frailty and the recklessness of the world it would begin anew. His words carry echoes of the contested beginnings that have promised America throughout history, and they help frame the theoretical conversation I’ll construct in this chapter between Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, and Mikhail Bakhtin. King bears witness to the aesthetic capacity of collective action to rupture and reconstitute the world. His call to solidarity beyond borders insists that such power can and should be used to anticipate and forge new beginnings for freedom, without controlling or concealing quite so much the unexpected and unwieldy bodies, sites, relationships, and practices in and through which freedom appears. King’s exhortation

was in part a response to the “giant triplets” of racism, capitalism, and militarism that had come to dominate America and its role in the world. The devastation these forces had inflicted on histories, cultures, and lives loomed as a “judgment against [America’s] failure to make democracy real and to follow through on the revolution [it] had initiated.”

More immediately, King aimed to animate a black freedom movement stalled by indecision over the Vietnam War and splintered by conflict over its own relationship to separatism and violence. His rhetorical appeal to the “fierce urgency of now” was thus cried into “anti-revolutionary” winds whose gusts were “deaf to every plea,” and it would have to rouse the “bleached bones and jumbled residues” of democracy left in their wake.\(^2\) Against these odds, King sought to animate a new beginning of the world that was different from both the radical dynamism of his day, and the radical stasis it demanded.

I use the epigraph from King to transition from the historical and cultural context of America to the theoretical discussion in this chapter, because it crystallizes key questions around which democratic struggle and democratic theory need to be imagined and practiced in light of each other. In particular, it reflects two qualities that interact in complex ways to constrain and enable radical democratic imagining, and whose tensions and debts merit greater conceptual and analytical clarity. First, it reflects the double-edged sword that has always characterized American exceptionalism and its promise of natality. King understands, with Paine and Arendt, that the capacity to begin the world all over again is crucial to creating new forms of freedom. But he sees better than both of

\(^2\) \textit{Ibid.} 240-43.
them that the bright light of natality always produces and conceals regions of darkness, which can dim the prospects of freedom for some people and dull new imaginings to potential implications in logics of domination and violence. Sounding resonances of Bakhtin, King also sees that every new beginning lives “eternally in the red,” that it has “everlasting [debts] to known and unknown men.” He thus stories natality in relation to radical democratic practices that strain to hear the multitude of shirtless and barefoot people who give voice to freedom, that seek out strange solidarities and forge uneasy coalitions across borders, and that call imagination to relentless questioning at its dullest edges.

Second, King binds the possibility of natality to its limits in the very world it would rupture and reconstitute. His urgency, in part, reflects his growing despair at how deeply Americans, white and black, had been conditioned to accept arbitrary structures of power and powerlessness, psychic states of hatred, fear, and suspicion, and social trends of consumerism and conformity. In this sense, he acknowledges limits on imagination and action that are weightier than Arendt admits, ones that Bourdieu ties to logics of social regulation and control that almost inevitably reproduce the world all over again rather than beginning it anew. But where Bourdieu mostly sees constraints in the frail bodies, everyday practices, and cultural traditions that structure imagination, King finds

3 King, “Where Do We Go From Here,” In Testament, 626.
4 These were all common themes in King’s speeches and writings from the beginning. However, the heightening conflict between white supremacy and black power in the United States and the nation’s increasingly hegemonic stance in the world, combined with the continued unresponsiveness of much of society, contributed to depression near the end of King’s life. See David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2004).
beauty in the long and bitter struggle to build and care for a world in common. The metaphysical beauty of beloved community is embodied and wrought, during King’s day, in the “echoing demands” of millions who were “rising up” and “sitting in” across the globe, but also in the history of suffering and insurgency to which each new beginning is indebted. The struggle for justice and equality is thus animated by a beauty that may be impossible to achieve in this world, but whose “creative tension” has the potential to awaken society to unexpected dialogues, strange solidarities, and previously unimaginable freedoms. King’s urgency, then, also reflects his vision of a world whose limits are capable of inciting and enabling new beginnings, ones that are broadly and deeply contested and therefore a little less myopic and forgetful from the start.

King’s promise inspirits democratic theory and practice to the ongoing work of envisioning, building, and caring for a world in which radical democratic imagining might survive and at times even flourish. But what ethical and political visions of the world might animate this work? What modes of power are needed to build a world whose limits not only constrain undesirable forms of imagination and protect desirable ones, but also enable new imaginings of collective life? What are those limits? What bodies, practices, discourses, institutions, and traditions can harbor the promise of democracy by provoking relentless critique and generative struggle at the limits of the imaginable and the unimaginable?

I turn to Bourdieu, Arendt, and Bakhtin to address these questions and to begin to elaborate the conditions and possibilities of radical democratic imagination. I start with Bourdieu, because I take seriously his caution that imagination bears the weight of what is inevitably a frail and reckless world. He gives us a language for understanding how imagination is deeply inscribed in the cultural processes by which societies distribute modes power and powerlessness; generate and maintain social spaces, times, and practices; shape cognitive and bodily dispositions and habits; and develop common meanings, as well as limits on what can be thought and spoken. If these processes tend to reproduce orthodox imaginations, along with their darkest corners and dullest edges, Bourdieu also identifies fissures and shocks that can unlock the dynamic potentials of bodies, languages, spaces, and times to animate more critical and creative imaginings. But his skepticism about natality largely prevents him from pursuing this work. Radical democratic theory has similarly heeded and at times sought to respond to Bourdieu’s skepticism, while doing less to explore the possibilities his conceptual apparatus suggests for cultivating bodies, languages, spaces, and times that are more capacious for radical democratic imagining. That is the primary work of this chapter. I reconstruct the most promising insights within Bourdieu’s textual imagination before turning to Arendt and Bakhtin to deepen and extend them. Neither escapes the constraints identified by Bourdieu, but taken together, their theories illuminate modes of power and processes of

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6 My thinking is influenced by some of the most promising work being done by theorists who explore not only the constraints but also the unruly possibilities of conventional traditions, habits, discourses, spaces, and times. Among these are Romand Coles, Sheldon Wolin, Mark Reinhardt, Peter Euben, George Shulman, P.J. Brendese, William Connolly, JK Gibson-Graham, and James Scott.
cultural formation that are heterodox to the core and so less inherently tied to logics of
regulation and control. In this cultural field, new beginnings for freedom might just be
light enough to travel—bearing the more haunted weight and the irreducible energies of
debts they strain to remember, anticipate, and tend.

*Bourdieu, Habitus, and the Limits of Imagination*

Bourdieu provides a sociological account of cultural reproduction that places the
body at the center of the dialectical relationship between imagination and the world.
Social structures, in their immanent regularities, inscribe themselves on bodies as habitus,
systems of cognitive schemes and bodily dispositions that are conditioned by the world
and that condition our responses to it. These basic schemes and dispositions endow us
with a kind of corporeal knowledge or practical sense by which we anticipate the
probabilities and potentialities of social space and time and generate implicit strategies of
response. In this way, habitus also sets the limits of consciousness, drawing the line
between the unthought social information we carry in our bodies and the domain of social
facts and cultural meanings we can imagine, critique, deliberate, and change. For
Bourdieu, we are agents with the capacity to negotiate, improvise, and construct social
reality within the limits of a social reality that has always already constructed our
capacity to do so.⁷ There are openings here for the transformation of both society and

⁷ Bourdieu’s insight, vis-à-vis Emile Durkheim, is that if social facts can indeed be treated as hard,
objective reality, those social facts that are most fundamental to a given order are often those that act below
the registers of individual and social consciousness. See Craig Calhoun, “Pierre Bourdieu,” In *The
Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists*, ed. George Ritzer (Malden, MA:
habitus. But, we are also beings bound to a “law of human behaviors” that tends “universally” to adjust our expectations and hopes to the objective chances offered by the world.8 This is primarily a sociological law, embedded in the dialectical relationship between structure and habitus.9 But Bourdieu also gives it metaphysical grounding in his later writing: the fears of insignificance and loneliness that attend human mortality compel subjects to seek recognition and belonging in society, no matter what objective chances it offers.10 And so, there are profound closures to the transformation of habitus and society as well.

The notion of practical sense suggests for Bourdieu an immediate coincidence between habitus and the situations to which it adjusts. To find one’s way in a field (household, economic, political, etc.) is to convert its rules into everyday strategies or action plans without resorting to thought or will. Bourdieu describes the knack for using a tool:

To be able to use a tool (or do a job), and to do it ‘comfortably’ . . . one has to have ‘grown into it’ through long use, sometimes methodical training, to have made one’s own the ends inscribed in it as a tacit

Blackwell, 2003),
http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405105958_chunk_g978140510595814
(accessed March 25, 2009).
9 Bourdieu has obvious debts to Marxism and structuralism, but he draws a distinction on this point. He argues that debates about subjectivism and objectivism stand in the way of the concept of habitus, which emphasizes the spatial and temporal *practices* through which subjects and the world are formed in relation to each other. His point is that unconscious adjustments in this relationship are happening and do organize everyday life. Bourdieu does, however, have a Marxist critique of alienation at the center of his critique of structural power. See Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 83-84; and Calhoun, “Pierre Bourdieu.”
‘manual’, in short, to have let oneself be used, even instrumentalized, by
the instrument.\textsuperscript{11}

Practical mastery of a field suggests skill, dexterity, intuition, even the ability to
improvise, but it also requires that we take as our ends the ends of the objective structures
with which we interact. These ends profoundly contribute to our subjectivities,
knowledges, orientations, and movements. It is by the same logic that a field—for
example, economic relations—arises only in relation to the construction of a “body of
specialized agents” with the interests and capacities to keep it in motion.\textsuperscript{12} In Bourdieu’s
account of cultural reproduction, then, the everyday operation and temporal extension of
a field requires relationships of domination and submission. “Having adapted to the
demands of the world which has made them what they are,” he writes, subjects “take for
granted the greater part of their existence.” For this reason, he challenges “the
methodological voluntarism and optimism which define the populist vision of the
‘people’ as a site of subversion,” arguing instead that “the dominated are always more
resigned than the populist mystique believes.”\textsuperscript{13}

Bourdieu’s critique of “populist naivety” about the voluntaristic action of
“ordinary people” stems in part from this insight that we operate, immediately and
overwhelmingly, on a subterranean register below the dictates of consciousness, which is
itself determined by habitus.\textsuperscript{14} The body is a “memory pad” for the social injunctions of
the world, and it reproduces them through its indelible dispositions and postures of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. 143.
\textsuperscript{12} Bourdieu, Outline, 184.
\textsuperscript{13} Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations, 231.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 2, 173.
conformity, obedience, and resignation.\textsuperscript{15} We thus communicate bodily with people and things, and the affectivity immanent in these transactions engenders in us emotional investments and visceral attachments to the social world and our positions in it.\textsuperscript{16}

Bourdieu’s is a social order in which body, space, and time remain relatively immobile. It is a “signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes and impassable barriers.”\textsuperscript{17} And while some in this world have a capital on stability, each seeks the best fit possible between her dispositions and her objective surroundings, between her expectations and her objective chances. Space is thus the reification of social divisions reproduced regularly by agents with a sense of their proper place in the world. And social time is organized by the overwhelming presence of the past, which pervades social structures, habitus, and the rhythms of reproduction that preserve and extend an inherited order.

Social transformation, for Bourdieu, is thus “conditioned and conditional,” and freedom has none of the “unpredictable novelty” that characterizes Arendtian political spaces.\textsuperscript{18} Our imaginations are weighted in bodies trained to adopt habits of perception and action, in durable postures that stir only a limited range of thoughts and emotions, in spatial and temporal matrices that remain relatively static. Imagination can never be fully liberated, nor consciousness easily raised—and neither without extensive “countertraining” of the body and its habitus. But what such countertraining might entail

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 141.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 145, 167.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 225.
\textsuperscript{18} Bourdieu, Outline, 95.
Bourdieu only seldom guesses, for the forces of social order are too stacked against it. Instead, his sociological critique largely reinforces the account of orthodox imagination given in the last chapter. We inhabit social orders that tend to naturalize their own arbitrariness and to present themselves as self-evident. And we carry on in a “doxic slumber,” indisposed to recognize the contingent, content to take for granted the tacit beliefs posited on “the hither side of all inquiry.” On those matters most essential to the preservation of social order, we do not even think to question; these make up the realm of commonsense, all that “goes without saying because it comes without saying.”19 What can be said—the more heterodox field of public opinion and critical discourse—is established at the borders of common sense, as things struggle to emerge into consciousness and often recede from it.

Bourdieu thus gives an account of how the line between imaginable and unimaginable is produced and policed. He situates the field of doxa at the center of political struggle, which is the struggle over the symbolic power to control the vision of the world, to delimit the realm of possible thought and possible discourse. At a persistent, micro level, those who have accumulated capital in a given field seek to steer the immense preparatory machinery by which it durably transforms bodies to recognize certain sights, sounds, tastes, touches, smells—certain common senses—and not others. The cultural authorities that preserve a given symbolic order then need only reiterate the self-evidences of common sense lodged in the durable dispositions of the people, which

act as practical authorities in everyday life: That’s unnatural. Those are the laws of the market. Be reasonable. Don’t rock the boat. That’s un-American. In the event that questions or crises arise, such appeals to common sense return us to the practical recognition of limits long ago accepted tacitly—this return to domination often manifesting itself visibly in bodily emotions of shame, timidity, or anxiety that betray the “subterranean complicity [of] a body slipping away from the directives of consciousness.”

At a macro level, the state, which holds “the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence,” becomes a major site and stake in the struggle for the symbolic power to monopolize imagination.20 Those who are dominated by a given configuration of state power can hope to “push back the limits of doxa,” to expose some of the arbitrariness taken for granted by a given order and make it more heterodox. But as we can never become beings without habitus, such struggle always comes with the wager that the reconstituted habitus will be better and with the tragic remainder that some things will always be pushed back into the unthinkable and unsayable.21 Bourdieu takes our “primary experience of the world as self-evident, natural, taken for granted” to be evidence of the “extraordinary acceptance that the established order manages to maintain.”22 This acceptance is no mere passivity, but often the unwitting reproduction of logics of domination and violence in actions that carry the banner of resistance and social change. For reasons I’ll elaborate below, Bourdieu thinks that the “populist illusion” of

collective action unbound from social and economic forces “conceals one of the most tragic effects of the condition of the dominated—the inclination to violence that is engendered by early and constant exposure to violence.”

But, of course, Bourdieu’s attention to political struggle is suggestive of a latent messiness in the dialectic by which objective social structures and incorporated dispositions of habitus reproduce a world of (otherwise) “indisputable regularity.” In describing the “redundancy of the social world,” he points to “habitus that are (mostly) coherent and (relatively) constant (over time) and (more or less precisely) orchestrated, which tend (statistically) to reconstitute the structures of which they are the product.”

In these parenthetic exceptions to Bourdieu’s argument are the innumerable, surprising gaps between expectations and experience that constitute the “principle of the transformation of habitus.” These gaps result from economic and social crises, from the movement of habitus between fields or the displacement of an agent from one space to another, from inter-generational conflict, from the resurgence of dispositions or reflexes buried in traditions and meanings that have become overlaid throughout history, even from misfirings and hesitations in everyday adjustments between practice and field. Habitus thus “changes constantly in response to new experiences,” but never radically and always within the limits established by previous experience. And these limits, in Bourdieu’s imaginary, overwhelmingly reassert themselves over the (negligible) “space of possibles.”

23 Ibid. 233.
24 Ibid. 214.
25 Ibid. 149.
that emerges in the disadjustments between habitus and society. The result is a (relatively) inertial world, in which crises are readily contained, critique quickly stifled, outcasts systemically disconnected from each other, resistance easily marginalized.

If Bourdieu chastens radical democratic imagination, he also plants the seeds of heterodoxy within his own theory of habitus. But he makes it our task to cultivate them. For, when the États Généraux du Mouvement Social organized the unemployed of Paris in an occupation of the École Normal Supérieure in 1998, Bourdieu could only offer an Arendtian explanation for their action. It was a “miracle” and an exemplary act by which a “new subversive idea appeared on the scene” with the hope of inspiring future revolutions. My aim is to understand the possibilities of such a miracle within a human condition characterized by embodied and habituated imagination. To do so, we need not only to rethink radical democracy through habitus, but also to rethink habitus as more dynamic and dialogical in relation to radical democratic theory and practice.

**Suspending Imagination: Lucidity about the Limits of Habitus**

What if we were to remove the parentheses surrounding the exceptions to Bourdieu’s rules, or at least hold them open a bit longer to listen for the unruly voices coming from the marginalized spaces within his own theory of habitus? My aim in this section is to mine the disadjustments in his texts, and in the logos of adjustment at the heart of his theory of cultural reproduction, to reconstruct habitus in more dynamic and

internally heterodox terms. The point is not simply to build greater or more frequent gaps into the dialectic between habitus and society, as if they would ultimately reach or aggregate toward some threshold for social transformation, and as if this would necessarily result in desirable outcomes. Bourdieu often adopts these kinds of quantitative tropes to describe disadjustment: everyday misfires are rarely errant or regular enough to register in consciousness; crisis is the threshold condition of inquiry and critical discourse; chronic uncertainty can destabilize habitus too much and cause subjects to lose all bearing in the world, and so on. For the most part, he refrains from making qualitative assessments: “one must suppose that the extent of [a] gap and the significance attributed to it depend on habitus,” which differs across time and place and across various social fields. Bourdieu, here, shows his suspicion of philosophical methods that apply only abstracted, general principles to things that are at least as much the domain of practical knowledge. His own theory is developed in dialectical relation to empirical research on social practice. But it is not clear that these methodological commitments should prevent him from pursuing any sustained effort at all to disaggregate modes and registers of stabilization and destabilization in habitus, or to qualitatively evaluate their specific meanings, entwinements, and effects.

Nor does Bourdieu lack normative commitments to democracy that could serve as a basis for making qualitative distinctions regarding habitus. In the words of his student Loïc Wacquant, he conceives of democracy as the ongoing, historical effort “to make social relations less arbitrary, institutions less unjust, distributions of resources and
options less unbalanced, recognition less scarce.” Wacquant thus identifies key goods around which Bourdieu’s critical enterprise revolves: psychic securities of recognition and belonging; equality not only in institutional politics, but also in domestic, economic, and cultural fields; capacities for critique and judgment that reach all the way to fundamental social structures; and opportunities for greater freedom afforded by each of these goods. More generally, democratic practice produces and is enhanced by the emergence of fields that are heterodox and dialogical, and its chances recede as these fields suffer in intensity and sometimes fade away. Bourdieu is thus both inheritor and critic of the Enlightenment. He elucidates the substratum of cultural reproduction and bodily habituation that need to be engaged and reworked by democratic politics, if it hopes to generate capacities and propensities for political judgment and action and to widen the sphere of democratic dialogue and contestation. In this sense, and in his many polemical writings and engagements, Bourdieu’s sociological method of critique provides crucial tools for unmasking systems and sites that ought to be at the heart of democratic struggles for freedom.

What are we to make, then, of his reticence to rework habitus as part of that method, either by distinguishing which continuities and gaps might combine to achieve more durable transformations of habitus, or by evaluating which might be built into habitus to sustain and enhance democratic imagination and practice? Does Bourdieu’s

Loïc Wacquant, “Pointers on Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics,” In Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics, ed. Wacquant (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005). Italics original, though they reinforce the overall quantitative bent of Bourdieuian analysis, even as this quote begins to identify goods (e.g., justice, belonging, capacities for judgment) around which democratic life might be evaluated and contested.
own conceptual lens at times constrain his ability to appreciate radical democratic practice where it occurs? How, for example, would habitus have to change if he were to foreground the grassroots movements he occasionally addresses in his polemical essays, but largely dismisses as illusionary or reactionary in his theoretical writings? What if he strained to see through and around the relations of domination that do by and large structure habitus, not only to unmask them as arbitrary but by extension to recover the irreducible countercurrents they mask? Bourdieu proposes this very kind of work in an early political essay: “We underestimate the properly political power to change social life by changing the representation of social life and by putting a modicum of imagination in power.” Arguing against a strict economism, he refers here to a potentially “demystifying and liberating use of symbolic power” to introduce new “subversive ideas” into the world, through the imperfect political art of trying to discover and give voice to countercurrent capacities and ideas already emerging in the practices of “the voiceless.”29 The risk, even if we democratize Bourdieu’s highly centralized concept of representation, is that emerging voices will be dispossessed or usurped. The alternative, however, is that new practices of power and new ideas of freedom never gain reality.

29 The end of this quote, from an interview in 1977, has been interpreted in two different ways, and I’ve yet to find an original copy. This version is from Wacquant, “Pointers.” The other translation ends with “by giving imagination a bit of power.” It can be found in Bourdieu, Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action, trans. David Fernbach, eds. Franck Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo (London: Verso, 2008), 73. Either translation seems appropriate given the discussion, in which Bourdieu argues against theories of power that are overdetermined by economic measures. In both instances, he can be read to suggest that social transformation requires conceiving of power in ways that aren’t overdetermined by economic structures. My choice of translation is based on his further distinction between potentially liberating uses of symbolic power and the “conservative use of symbolic strategies” by established regimes. See also, “Protest Movement,” 90.
To take Bourdieu’s insights about political representation as an analogy for the production of theoretical knowledge would likely stir his ambivalence about the best ways to maintain the relationship between scholarly distinction and political voice. But doesn’t Bourdieu risk stifling emerging practices and ideas within his theory if he cannot allow subversive imaginings into his own concept of power—for example, if more decentralized forms of radical democratic struggle always figure as “populist illusions” in his texts, only to recede back into the margins? Isn’t it also part of the work of democratic theory to strain, however imperfectly, to identify, discern, evaluate, and even creatively imagine new—and better—forms of social life? By cultivating the wayward seeds of imagination within Bourdieu’s theory of social domination and reproduction, we can begin to develop tools to evaluate which openings and closures in culture and habitus are most promising for the democratic work of freedom, in which combinations, with what tensions and possible outcomes. But this task also requires radical democratic theory to put more than a modicum of habitus into its theory of imagination, that is, to wrestle with difficult questions about what kinds of closures freedom may need.

Bourdieu locates the biggest dangers to freedom not merely in social processes that seek to control habitus, but in those that do so by rendering it inoperable. This is clearest in his reflections on the subproletariat, who are chronically unemployed in a world where employment culturally defines and materially secures many social functions, demands, interests, goals, and attachments. Pervasive insecurity deprives the unemployed of reliable objective chances, thereby collapsing the dialectic between expectations and chances that sustains habitus and, through it, orients subjects in the world. The result of
this radical open-endedness is a “destructuring of existence” and a “deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time, and space.” As body and psyche are torn out of their social bearings, a kind of “dead time” settles over the unemployed. Lack of immediate securities and assurances loosens their grasp on the present, and radical uncertainty disrupts their capacity to project themselves into the future. The loss of a socially recognized function carries a kind of existential death as well, marked by the experiences of indignity, isolation, and invisibility. Having footholds in neither the present nor the future—and only a limited sense of humanity, solidarity, or worldly reality—the unemployed are “scarcely capable of being mobilized.” With one exception: the very same dislocations that lead to quiescence can fuel the more virulent forms of recognition and belonging and the reactionary forms of revolt contained in racist, nativist, and patriarchal backlash.30

Widespread demobilization and outbursts of reactionary backlash are extreme closures on democratic imagination that result from the same strategy: the radical destabilization of habitus. While radical destabilization is hardly a novel technique of domination, new “insecurity-inducing strategies” of global capitalism have made it an increasingly widespread and ubiquitous quality of contemporary life. State-of-the-art innovations in corporate flexibility—restructuring, downsizing, deterritorializing, outsourcing, outdating, and so on—rely on a growing pool of adaptable and casualized labor. Bourdieu highlights the conditions facing the unemployed as only the most

extreme and visible case of a “generalized and permanent state of insecurity” throughout the workforce: aimed at full-time, part-time, temporary, and migrant workers; spreading from blue collar into white collar positions, and from private into public sectors; and spanning industry, commerce, education, media, entertainment, and on. He thus returns us to Sheldon Wolin’s critique of the “formless forms” of globalizing corporate capitalism, which enlists the managerial state and the rapid innovations of science and technology to make “continuous, unrelenting change” the “organizing principle” of social life. Capitalism’s celebrated dynamic of “continuous mobility” is a technique of “perpetual demobilization,” when seen from the vantage point of those who experience the disruption and uprooting of everyday forms of work, leisure, practice, belief, community, and place. In Bourdieu’s terms, this normalized agitation “destroys its victims, wiping out their defenses and their subversive dispositions.” Capitalism’s organizing principle is thus “organized aggression”: it “manages democracy” by preemptively incapacitating the citizenry that could contest its continuous expansion.

It is against this backdrop that Bourdieu develops his pessimistic vision of social protest. The experience of temporal and social death leads some people to seek direction, a sense of control, and social recognition through resistance. But when resistance is coupled with eviscerated capacities for critique and reform, it registers as reactionary

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backlash and fails to break the surface of social life. Bourdieu is skeptical that anything more than reaction or fantasy can come from people who suffer daily exposure to the “inert violence” of economic and social structures, which repeatedly shock and awe basic dispositions and defenses while tightly policing symbolic hierarchies. With few doors open for relief or security, resistance against everyday disorder coincides with the need to find some constant, stable, collectively guaranteed world. And so resistance movements all too often end up policing their own margins rather than targeting deeper social structures. He describes urban youth gangs, for example, as groups that tend to adopt rigid speech patterns, codes, and rituals; that often perform a cult of male strength; and that thereby enforce both a sense of their own self-evidence and an aggressive posture toward difference. As a result, their “revolt, when expressed, stops short at the limits of the immediate universe and, failing to go beyond insubordination, bravado in the face of authority, or insults, it targets persons rather than structures.” More generally, Bourdieu thinks that most resistance movements adopt practices and views that largely conform to the dominant social order, reinforcing the form and often the content of its social hierarchies and mimicking its aggression and violence with varying quality and degree.\(^{35}\)

In these discussions on job insecurity and reactionary backlash, Bourdieu shows how extreme and relentless disadjustments in habitus, far from altering fundamental social structures, have become mechanisms through which new modes of power secure their hold over social life and reproduce their own dominance. In relation to the formless

forms of postmodern power, he points to the crucial role habitus plays in protecting and enabling possibilities for freedom, and he suggests the need for a more subtle accounting of the complicated entwinements between gaps and continuities in habitus and openings and closures in imagination. Habitus does largely reproduce existing social orders, but it also contains the dispositions and strategies through which we inhabit the social world at all, appropriate it practically, and extend both it and ourselves into the future. These potentialities make up our basic defenses against social disintegration, and they enable us to cultivate and sustain subversive dispositions, as well as dialogical and receptive ones. If habitus is the basis for reproductive imagination, then, it is also the condition of having any social imagination at all, including critical and creative imaginings that don’t just repeat the same old narrow hierarchies and violences. But to say this is also to say that reproducing significant components of habitus is a crucial part of any radical democratic project. In this respect, Bourdieu suggests the need to identify which continuities in habitus are necessary to build and sustain capacities for awareness, discernment, and critique in the face of the increasing shocks and dislocations that mark contemporary life. And he might call his own theory to account more for which disadjustments in habitus create new opportunities for imagining freedom, rather than demobilizing or narrowing freedom’s possibilities.

Bourdieu acknowledges a range of habitus—individual habitus with different dispositions and strategies for accommodating or resisting social order, collective habitus with various kinds and degrees of differentiation. Moving this range toward heterodoxy is one condition of democratic politics, for “there is no genuine democracy without genuine
opposing critical powers.” Since it is at the level of body and practice that orthodoxy takes root, Bourdieu moves us toward a body politics of “making practice explicit.” That is, the arbitrariness of a given order must be exposed “practically, through first-hand experience, in the very heart of the routine of the everyday order, of the possibility of doing the same things differently, or . . . of doing something different at the same time.”

But could we cultivate forms of habitus itself that enhance our capacities to experience the possibility of difference? Bourdieu is deeply suggestive, here, that doing so would require developing new practices in registers that are both asynchronous and synchronous with everyday life. On the one hand, this means experimenting with practices that pluralize bodily experiences, in part by disordering temporal rhythms and spatial frameworks. But this requires, on the other hand, that we tend a range of more durable traditions, habits, and dispositions—ones that enable us to anticipate and provoke play in the dialectic between body and world and to discern the possibilities and dangers unlocked in dynamic bodies, spaces, and times.

He suggests first, and most basically, the need for a kind of calisthenics that might open our bodies to multiplicitous postures and rhythms and thereby awaken our imaginations to alternative possibilities. When habitus is controlled by unquestioned cultural authorities and discourses, it regulates desire by excluding the “most improbable practices” and cultivating in us a “love of necessity,” accompanied by dispositions of

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37 Bourdieu, Outline, 203, fn. 49; 233, fn. 16. Footnotes act as another kind of parentheses for Bourdieu.
accommodation. But our bodies are capacious, and there are always different, even improbable, positions they can take. Bourdieu uses the analogy of exercises in theater rehearsals that “seek to induce a suspension of intellectual, discursive understanding” and thereby lead actors to “rediscover postures of the body . . . capable of stirring up thoughts, emotions, and imagination.” The notion of suspension is crucial here, and Bourdieu uses the term more generally to describe those moments in the dialectic between body and world in which “the relationship of immediate adaptation is suspended.” Suspension connotes buoyancy, of a body or thought or feeling that can be held up and supported without apparent attachment. It also connotes the pleasurable excitement of anticipating an outcome that cannot be predicted. What the theatre analogy describes is a moment in which actors loosen habituated attachments built up under social logics of regulation and control, but in which they do so with enough support to become buoyant rather than falling into social disintegration. These moments of buoyant suspension are ones in which dispositions—so often the sedimented deposits of social hierarchies of belonging—can be stretched through new ways of being together in time and space. These more elastic experiences of bodily and social in-betweenness are an elemental condition of opening our senses to new stirrings of imagination, and also of cultivating more durable dispositions of anticipation, receptivity, and responsiveness. They identify a need for more purposeful traditions and practices that enable subjects to carve out spaces less ridden by social control, to experiment with unfamiliar practices.

38 Bourdieu, Outline, 77; Pascalian Meditations, 142.
39 Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations, 144.
40 Ibid. 162.
that have uncertain ends, and to experience the psychic benefits that come with some
degree of disadjustment in sedimented habitus. The pleasurable excitement and
anticipation that often attend experiences of buoyant suspension suggests that subjects
may even come to develop a hunger or taste for these experiences, to develop
dispositions toward more elastic belonging.

But to suspend also means to interrupt. Anyone who has been to a theatre
rehearsal knows that its exercises tend to be unusual, sometimes absurd, often
exaggerated. For Bourdieu, exaggeration is often a condition of social transformation,
because it can awaken subjects from the “doxic slumber” induced by more disciplinary
material and discursive logics.\textsuperscript{41} This is most evident in his discussion of the symbolic
power of “heretical discourses” that introduce new ideas into the world. “Extraordinary
discourses” are needed to challenge everyday order, and with it the language of order,
because only these discourses can “give systematic expression to the gamut of extra-
ordinary experiences.” In many ways, extraordinary discourse acts like ordinary
discourse. Even in heretical movements, unformulated experiences come to make sense
only in relation to objective discourses and realities, and actors gain a sense of their
power by having their experiences recognized and crystallized in relation to others.
Often, Bourdieu centralizes this process around key figures—the prophet, the political
leader, the union spokesperson—who mobilize and organize group expression. But like
all symbolic power, “heretical power” is constituted in the “dialectical relationship

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 173.
between authorized, authorizing language and the group which authorizes it and acts on its authority.”

What heretical discourse does do differently in Bourdieu’s theory is mark the moment of disadjustment in the dominant symbolic order at which extraordinary bodies and experiences exceed ordinary language—and at which extraordinary speech gains a degree of social authority. It opens a gap in the dialectical constitution of authority in which marginalized groups speak with some authority, without being authorized to do so by dominant social configurations.

But it also disjunctively calls attention to the largely reproductive performativity at the basis of Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and speech. Judith Butler raises this issue in *Excitable Speech*, where she criticizes Bourdieu for enclosing the performative power of habitus and speech within established, hierarchical contexts of social authority. Butler does not pause at the gaps in Bourdieu’s account of habitus, and she misses his account of the dialectical constitution of authorized speech. On her reading, his theory “fails to recognize that a certain performative force results from the rehearsal of the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways.” And as a result, he fails to acknowledge “the situation of constrained contingency that governs the discursive and social formation of the body and its (re)productions.”

If Butler overstates her case against Bourdieu, she nonetheless pinpoints areas that need significant recuperation in his theory of the performativity of habitus. Specifically, he does largely suppress the body’s capacity to exceed the discourses and practices that constitute it. By the same logic, he fails to grasp

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fully the transformative force of speech, which is itself bodily. Where Bourdieu importantly recognizes bodily habits and dispositions as limits on what is thinkable and sayable, Butler also turns the matter around: the rhetorical effects of bodies that speak cannot be predicted or governed, even by the speaker.

Butler’s account of the performativity of the body and speech reveals the irreducible and ungovernable potentialities of democratic action that Bourdieu barely sees. And it decentralizes these, in ways his notion of heretical power does not, to include the divergent and contingent expressions within resistance movements. Bourdieu forces us to consider how the emergence of these potentialities—of the ineffable, of unregulated desire, of improbable imaginings—is limited by the relationship of play in the ongoing dialectic between actor, audience, and stage. Butler calls us to the more purposeful work of conceiving practices of radical democratic staging that can, in certain moments, intensify that play. These are moments in which actors rhetorically exceed ordinary symbolic orders, and even their own intentions. And so they compel collective recognition of what is not already institutionally recognized, in ways that do not presume complete control over what gains recognition. Butler cites the universalizing move by which marginalized groups expropriate the terms of modernity from which they have been excluded: freedom, justice, equality, and so on. In doing so, they draw on authoritative forms of speech and gesture, hoping to inflect or diffract them by adopting disjunctive bodily postures, by juxtaposing them with contrapuntal meanings or images, and so forth. These paradoxical scenes are marked by a kind of suspension, in which symbolic terms are loosened somewhat of their “historically sedimented” meanings, and
in which a broader public comes to see the possibility of doing things differently, or doing different things at the same time.\textsuperscript{44} And indeed, for Butler, the aim is not mere assimilation; it is to unsettle a polity by making it aware of what it has not-yet embraced, and thereby to “configure a different future.”\textsuperscript{45} In this sense, performative stagings promise the conditions of emerging heterodoxy and enhanced dialogue that Bourdieu places at the center of democracy, but which he too often closes off within his own theory of political resistance.

And yet, Butler’s critique of Bourdieu bypasses the need, which his theory forces us to confront, to cultivate habits that are capable of the kind of performativity she desires. Without building and caring for alternative spatial and temporal practices at the edges of hierarchical contexts of social authority, we leave the already “constrained contingency” of iterable speech and practice even more constrained. But it is not clear what alternative resources Butler would have us tend? She knows that acts of resistance and expropriation always carry the risk of unwittingly reproducing hierarchical contexts of authority. Her optimism relative to Bourdieu stems from her understanding of the “temporal dynamics” of discourse and habitus.\textsuperscript{46} For Bourdieu, it is overwhelmingly the dead weight of the past, sedimented in the practical authority of habitus, that structures the conditions of performative discourse and largely reproduces authorized hierarchies of speech. In Butler’s account, the temporality of discourse is structured not only by historical sedimentation, but more fundamentally, by the unpredictable potentialities of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44] Ibid. 159.
\item[45] Ibid. 158, 160-61.
\item[46] Ibid. 141.
\end{footnotes}
habitus. It is the unpredictable performativity of habitus that enables discursive performances to “exceed and confound the authorizing contexts from which they emerge,” at times doing so with transformative force. Appropriating these authorizing contexts “opposes their historically sedimented effect” and “constitutes the insurrectionary moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with the past.”

But isn’t this break also crucially a continuity of another kind? Does insurrectionary speech break free of all authority, or must it find other sources of authority? If habitus is not so heavily tied down by the past, what is the temporal animus of its unpredictable potentialities? Butler largely keeps these qualitative inquiries to the side in her critique of Bourdieu, and so we inherit from her critique yet another trail of questions: How do performative iterations pick up an authoritative weight that is light enough to travel, especially in fields where the dominant cultural authorities of orthodox imagination have put them beyond the reach of inquiry? What traditions and narratives circulated during the revolutionary era, for example, to fuel the sporadic demonstrations by slaves who expropriated the common parlance of “liberty,” especially on a scale that was “impressive enough to strike fear in the hearts of thousands of slave owners”? Through what cultural shifts did the qualitative dimensions of those expropriations change over the next century, so that a “liberty” that had been unthinkable to most whites and even many blacks could now be conceived by millions of Americans? There are

47 Ibid. 159.
crucial pluralizing impulses in Butler’s account of the ways in which actors rhetorically exceed symbolic orders and even their own intentions. But what spatial and temporal relationships and practices might improve the chances that these excesses would democratize speech? Don’t many resistance movements exceed established orders by proliferating radically conservative parochialisms? For expropriations that do bear radical democratic inflections, how might they build and preserve space for themselves in relation to the totalizing pull of hubristic imagination, which rapidly mobilizes to expropriate them in turn? If freedom itself has become a commodity today, for example, through which spaces, practices, and relationships—through which continuities and discontinuities of habitus—could King’s promise of a new world resist expropriation by Chevrolet? Through which could his promise of freedom still ring, carrying the intonations of the shirtless and barefoot people who have long resisted colonization and imperialism by America?

Bakhtin enables us to see, in ways Butler and Bourdieu circumscribe, that established authority is never one authority, but always many authorities vying for social space, symbolic power, and often, cultural hegemony. And these contending authorities live and breathe in the historical sedimentations of culture and habitus, which are not so much thick deposits as irreducible boundaries intersecting every aspect of cultural life. Bakhtin issues an ethical injunction to imagine culture in this way, if natality is to be anything other than “empty” or “arrogant”:

One must not … imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, having boundaries but also having internal territory. The realm of culture has no internal territory; it is entirely distributed along the
boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its every aspect…. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and significance; abstracted from boundaries it loses its soil, it becomes empty, arrogant, it degenerates and dies.⁴⁹

Far more than Bourdieu, Bakhtin unsettles the “systematic unity” of culture, which acts through authorized modes and contexts of discourse to exert centripetal forces on language, imagination, and social-group formation. More akin to Butler, he locates competing potentialities in the “realities of heteroglossia,” whose centrifugal forces carry out the “uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification.”⁵⁰ But Bakhtin also attends to the historical and cultural authorities of style and struggle that give “generative force” to heteroglossia. Language is “heteroglott from top to bottom,” he writes, because it reflects the “co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions,” which are “given bodily form” in the struggles between past and present, between disjunctive pasts, between competing social groups, and so forth.⁵¹ These historical and concrete boundaries are the “soil” that gives every performative utterance its “seriousness” and “significance.” They are the sites of struggle at which “every concrete utterance” is intersected by competing authorities, by centripetal and centrifugal forces that vie to shape and give direction to its meaning.⁵²

⁴⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 301. Rom Coles discusses the ethical implications of this imagination of community in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, Christianity and Radical Democracy: Converstions Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 175.
⁵¹ Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 291.
⁵² Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 270.
Bakhtin offers a theory of performativity weighted in this historically cross-grained and buoyant culture. Discursive iterations do not merely repeat officially authorized narratives and structures of past, present, and future. Nor can they promise, in their insurrectionary moments, to carry indeterminate potentialities that break free from repeating the past all together. Instead, we inherit from Bakhtin a more tensional performativity: its repetitions are irreducibly capacious, but they are always inflected by forces that vie both to centralize and to decenter their meaning and effect. These might be democratizing inflections that decenter hegemonic claims to the world, or that call seemingly disconnected social groups to join in the struggle over a world in common. But efforts at democratic speech and action, in turn, are always contaminated and often thoroughly corrupted by hubristic inflections, which work variously to deposit myopic residues at the edges of subversive meanings, to co-opt spaces of freedom opened by insurgent actions, or to obfuscate words like freedom until they lose much of their impact. Bakhtin’s rendering of performativity thus complicates the task, for radical democracy, of theorizing habitus and natality. How would we need to conceive and cultivate habitus and natality if the world is this inherited array of continuous and discontinuous authorities, pulling every utterance and act in both totalizing and democratizing directions? I pick up these Bakhtinian insights and inflections again in my discussion of Arendt.

But Bourdieu’s theory still has some elasticity for democratizing habitus and natality. In his many parenthetical discussions, he considers what kind of worldly stage could nurture more dynamic, heterodox habitus and intensify moments for radical
democratic imagining. Key here are his efforts to reconceive social space and time. Against objective potentialities of social space that are stunningly regular—because we desire to feel ‘at home’ in the world, we reproduce social positions and physical habitats that fit us like a glove—Bourdieu surfaces the characters of the vagrant, the immigrant, the displaced, the unemployed, the temporary worker, the youth leader, the organizer, the parvenu, the déclassé, and others in “awkward positions.”53 These figures tend to feel “out of place and ill at ease,” as if they were “out on a limb.” Their emotional and bodily discordance may lead to a loss of social existence, but/and it may also provoke heightened consciousness about what others take for granted. Bourdieu juxtaposes subjects in awkward positions with those who fit comfortably into society, who can thus “abandon or entrust themselves more, or more completely, to their dispositions.” In contrast, those who are “out on a limb”—who experience cultural borders passing through the body—must “keep watch on themselves and consciously correct the ‘first movements’ of a habitus that generates inappropriate or misplaced behaviors.” Bourdieu thus suggests the possibility of some dexterity in negotiating social boundaries, developed in relation to what he calls “a disposition toward lucidity and critique.”54

But what could a disposition toward lucidity entail in a world where transparency and ambiguity often form dangerous combinations? Indeed, Bourdieu describes social conditions in which objective self-evidence and moral certainty rely on increasingly complex and disorienting techniques to mask relations and practices of domination.

53 Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations, 134, 150, 157, 163.
54 Ibid. 157, 163.
Against this backdrop, his is a more modest hope that democratic politics can bring the line—or lines—between bodily practice and cultural formation into view. A disposition toward lucidity, then, suggests the ability to suspend the confusion at the edges where body intersects world for a moment, just long enough to discern those edges more acutely. It also suggests a particular way of casting light in those moments, a kind of translucence that renders visible the lines and fragments intersecting body and world, without the pretense of making them transparent. For those who are out on a limb, that light is cast in part on habitus itself, that is, on the dispositions that are deposited, reinforced, unsettled, and stretched in the innumerable crossings between body and world. As these subjects negotiate social boundaries, they learn which movements, postures, and leanings fall into place in a given order and which are out of step; they glimpse the edges of dispositions for which they may not yet or no longer have a conscious name. They may even come to see some of the arbitrariness of the dispositions and attachments they carry, and also begin to recognize which might be disciplinary, protective, subversive, and so on. As they refuse to accept social demands and practices as self-evident, they may begin to hear other voices, see other movements, and sense other emergences.

What is most suggestive, then, about a disposition toward lucidity is the way in which it reveals dispositions themselves to be translucent: each is at once a set of small openings onto the world through which the body suffers its routines, shocks, and delights, and it is a set of closures onto the world that respond in ever limited ways and builds habits of response. As such, democratic imagining requires efforts to affirm, change, or
work on the edges of particular dispositions; to strain to forge new ones; and to juxtapose them in strange combinations that can intensify the play between body and world. It would be difficult to do this work in a thoroughly “signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes and impassable barriers.” Bourdieu often uses metaphors that draw such blunt, categorical lines. Mostly missing in his account is a Bakhtinian understanding of a world fissured with continuities and discontinuities of time and space—of social groups and bodies that are crossed, connected, and interrupted in these lines and fragments. As such, he misses much of the buoyancy that his notion of suspension recommends; he dulls the kind of translucence that would enable us to work at the edges of our dispositions to stretch and recrystallize them, to cultivate habitus itself as more elastic and prismatic.

Bourdieu does, however, sense that social spaces might be built with the cultivation of habitus in mind. Cities, for example, are spaces that favor the practical confrontation of different cultural traditions, in ways that expose their arbitrariness and have historically led to the emergence of new discourses. It is in a footnote on cities that Bourdieu shifts valences, for a moment, to consider the benefits of spatial organizations that sustain themselves through a degree of disorganization—by promoting movements within and across their borders and by creating opportunities for internal dissensus.\(^{55}\) This discordant moment in his theory (hidden as it may be) allows us to imagine within his own universe spaces that are less rigid, more lucid, and that contain dynamic potential—

\(^{55}\) Bourdieu, *Outline*, 233, fn. 16.
competing possibles—to be unlocked. Where Bourdieu focuses our attention on the ways in which cultural differentiation eventually becomes “rationalized and systematized” as part of some larger social field, the moment of practical contact and unexpected emergence point to what Iris Marion Young calls the “eroticism” of city life. Like Bourdieu, if more evocatively, Young describes cities in terms of their social differentiation, multiuse spaces, and overlapping activities, which compel people to meet practically at countless “undecidable borders.” As a result, city life can make difference erotic, in the sense of taking “pleasure and excitement [in] being drawn out of one’s secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising.”

This contrasts with the erotic attraction of community, which binds Bourdieu’s understanding of the formation of habitus and society. In Young’s terms, the ideal of community life is the familiarity of mutual recognition among people who share relatively similar and transparent experiences, perceptions, and aims. What Young reveals, vis-à-vis Bourdieu, are city spaces and practices that are designed to facilitate experiences of buoyant suspension, in which city dwellers come to develop a taste for more elastic modes of belonging—to generate dispositions and habits of familiarity with strangeness.

That work would also require efforts to intensify the gaps in time. Bourdieu acknowledges an “irreducibility of lived experiences of time” beyond a social time whose objective rhythms, referents, and chances are highly orchestrated. There is always a degree of play in the interval between internal expectations and objective chances—room

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57 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 175.
for strategies that introduce contingencies, alter rhythms, offer freedom within constraint. Bourdieu does not think these strategies and misfires prove all that unsettling for times organized overwhelmingly by the presence of the past. But it is at this most micro-level of practice that exaggerated rhythms, provocative moments, and patient work might generate new dispositions. Or they might recuperate lost dispositions and lateral pasts that were layered over in the sedimented histories that structures present times. Bourdieu is clear that everyday practice contains basic potentialities that are crucial for altering the course of time. Revolutionary projects need to have some grounding in everyday assurances and attachments to develop dispositions and strategies for confronting the future. Beyond these basic potentialities, as we’ve seen, everyday practice can unlock new imaginings only if there is transformative potential embedded in the historical sedimentation of habitus. In Butler’s terms—and more evocatively, Bakhtin’s—this would require an account of the performative temporality of habitus that attends to the embodied history of every utterance and act.

If Bourdieu ultimately provides a reductive account of the temporality of habitus, he does locate a generative tension in the relationship between utopian vision and micropolitics. By raising the bar on hope, utopian vision intensifies the play in the dialectic between expectations and chances; it thus opens spaces of “improbable

58 Bourdieu, Outline, 15.
59 Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations, 162.
possibles,” including alternative futures, which defy the “pure logic of probabilities.”\textsuperscript{60} Utopian imagining is not only, if improbably, possible for Bourdieu, it is necessary to grassroots social transformation. He makes this case evocatively in an article on the need for a unified European trade union movement. Only such a “visibly utopian” objective would call workers beyond their “short-term,” “nationalistic,” and “competitive” attachments to existing social positions and hierarchies. It could “inspire and guide the collective search for the innumerable transformations in collective institutions and the thousands of conversions of individual dispositions that would be required to ‘make’ the European social movement.” But what would the durable work of converting habitus entail, and how would it differ from more totalizing constructions of habitus?

The opening and reorienting of time in the play between utopian imagining and micropolitics coincides with a rerouting of the spaces and practices in which dispositions and attachments are formed. A sustained European movement would require no less than the “internationalization of modes of thinking and forms of action.” This means, firstly, the need to break with an “attitude of conciliation” that “valorizes social consensus” at the national level. But it does not suggest the simple realignment of habitus with international objectives. “Internationalist dispositions” would themselves be formed through “scattered and disparate” measures that open spaces of contestation within the movement. Central here would be the recruitment and inclusion of immigrants and youth in decidedly non-integrationist ways, as “active agents” of “resistance and change.” More

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 234.
generally, the movement would need to recognize and institutionalize many new spaces, relationships, and practices of conflict and coordination—between local and international trade unions, between trade unions of different industries, between union committees and grassroots spaces, between employed workers and the unemployed, between the fields of work, “health, housing, transport, training, leisure, and gender relations,” etc.⁶¹

In this discussion of a European social movement, Bourdieu decentralizes and pluralizes his own vision of democratic politics and authority. His theoretical account of heretical authority, as we’ve seen, centers on the dialectical relationship between an inchoate and largely undifferentiated group and the spokesperson that both manifests and mobilizes it. This results in rationalized forms of authority that systematize discourse and habitus, and it risks dispossessing the voices and energies of movement actors. In contrast, the internationalist movement relies on diverse actors, relationships, activities, tempos, sites, scales, and horizons that overlap in both integrationist and non-integrationist ways. It resembles what Wolin calls “rational disorganization,” a way of organizing institutions and practices so as to desystematize power and authority. It does not deny the need to organize around common ends, but it disperses various efforts to consolidate power and authority. And it builds practical sites of overlap and tension between these efforts. In his sketch of a social movement that would rework institutions, practices, and dispositions in relation to each other, Bourdieu hints at an ethos for cultivating radical democratic habitus. Against arbitrary forms of consolidation, there is

an ongoing need to develop dispositions and habits that enable us to question, scrutinize, and at times unsettle closely held attachments. But in a world where social disintegration is a threat to many people and movements, it is just as crucial to generate and protect those collective attachments that can carry the promise of democracy into the future.

To follow Bourdieu any further in pursuit of such an ethos would likely prove illusory. If his political writings and parenthetical breaks intensify the play of radical democratic imagining in his own corpus, his theoretical writings inevitably return to the modes of domination that structure his surroundings, and ultimately, his imagination of habitus. In his later writings on habitus, he gives structural domination an almost metaphysical grounding: “Condemned to death, an end (in the sense of termination) that cannot be taken as an end (in the sense of goal),” we are “beings without a reason for being, haunted by the need for justification, legitimation, and recognition.” It is this existential crisis of ends that leads us to seek our reason for being in the social world, to yearn at a fundamental level for social recognition, to align our happiness with its dictates, to become lovers of “even the harshest established order.” And it is because “God is dead” that we must, finally, seek justification for our existence in “that realization of God on earth, the State.”62 If democracy depends on a dispersal of energies and ends organized around common needs or hopes, Bourdieu is much better at explaining the converse: how isolation and loneliness can fuel the administrative centralization of ends. In reminding us that belonging is a crucial good, then, he

perversely locks habitus into a permanent debt structure that has the alienation of ends as its primary outcome. He is largely unable to see, with King, that being “everlasting debtors to known and unknown men” can also be a metaphysical and geopolitical condition of natality. If the logos of habitus cannot recognize, and even generate, strange and unimaginable ends, it is also the negation of democracy’s beginnings.

Arendt and Bakhtin, in different ways, weave pluralistic histories and encounters into the debt structure that underlies culture, habitus, and imagination. I turn to them in the next section because they add important ethical and political dimensions to the work of cultivating radical democratic habitus and imagination. I focus primarily on Arendt, whose theory of natality confounds the systematic logics of power through which Bourdieu binds imagination to tightly regulated ends. Arendt ties the conditions of collective action, but also its performance, to an ethos of caring for the world in which future action and future imagining can emerge. This calls her to conceive forms of natality that are less constrained by logics of domination, and instead enabled by pluralistic and relational forms of power. And yet, taking Bourdieu seriously requires reworking Arendt’s best insights to include care of habitus as elemental to care of the world. Bourdieu leaves us several important contributions toward this effort: most notably, his attention to both the constraints and the potentialities of habitus; his concern for developing spatial and temporal practices that foster both dehabituation and habit formation; and his understanding that this work is a condition of dialogical speech and action. Since he largely reduces habitus to its reproductive dimensions, however, these contributions are mostly provocative fragments, and I turn to Bakhtin to reinflect them.
Subject in his own life to modes of cultural domination and censorship, Bakhtin could afford to offer neither an extensive theory of cultural power, nor an explicit theory of natality. What he does offer is an understanding of culture and habitus as eternally in the red, indebted to continuous and discontinuous authorities that pull new imaginings in competing directions. In this, he provides an opening to ask, vis-à-vis both Bourdieu and Arendt, how radical democratic habitus could buoy performances of natality that are dialogically contested from the start?

*Arendt and Bakhtin: Democratizing Habitus, Democratizing Imagination*

Arendt and Bakhtin shift the theoretical grounds for conceptualizing culture and politics, and they do so in ways that draw attention to the aesthetic potentialities of habitus. This is perhaps an unlikely statement to make about Arendt, who often renders the aesthetic power of natality ontologically distinct from the logics of necessity and utility that govern Bourdieu’s account of habitus. At first glance, the two are indeed an odd couple, pairing the cultural pessimist with the political romantic. Bourdieu might diagnose Arendt with a classic case of “populist illusion” about the possibilities of political freedom unbound from economic, social, and cultural forces. For her part, Arendt would find Bourdieu’s cultural realm lacking in beauty and wonderment, and thus incapable of animating new beginnings, which always appear as miracles “against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability.”

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systematizes culture and politics through logics of regulation and control, Arendt’s aim is to locate the improbable spaces, practices, and subjects that are capable of revealing and generating new possibilities for freedom in the world. She emphasizes those political moments in which new beginnings emerge, not simply as miracles, but in connection with distinctive modes of human co-existence, relations and practices of power, and processes of cultural production.

Arendt’s aesthetic account of politics—characterized by internally elusive and externally unpredictable actors, the mobile and shifting public spaces in which they appear, the common world they contest from irreducible perspectives, and the boundless power of their words and deeds—aims to disrupt the normalizing forces and sovereign logics that govern freedom in contemporary societies. Political freedom, instead, consists in acting, speaking, and appearing under the “bright light of the constant presence of others,” and thereby revealing oneself in the constitution and reconstitution of worldly reality.64 I want to consider the ways in which Arendt’s concept of the political enables us to think differently about culture, habitus, and natality, even as she closes down other avenues of thought through her well-known analytic boundaries: for example, labor, work, and action; private and public; social and political; body and world. My aim is not

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so much to critique or stretch her theory at these limits, as it is to pause with many of them to reflect on two overarching questions that animate this chapter. What theory and practice of natality could generate new imaginings that are light enough to travel, both politically and ethically, in a world whose subjects, spaces, and times are weighted by habitus? How would habitus need to be conceived and cultivated, as part of that project, such that its repetitions could animate and work at the limits of radical democratic imagining?

To facilitate these reflections, I interject Bakhtinian overtones into my discussion of Arendt, to create threads tying her ideas of performative action, natality, and authority back to those contested by Bourdieu and Butler. The buoyant weight of Bakhtinian habitus, cultivated in the living struggle that goes on between authoritative memories of past struggle, is deeply suggestive, in ways that are near to Arendt’s own terms, as an enabling condition for her concepts of action and natality. But to see performative action in terms of such heterological repetition also enjoins us to wrestle with the ethical implications of a concept of natality that is more constitutively dialogical than Arendt allows but also deeply implicated in the contradictory forces of corporeal histories and biographies. What modes of discourse and practice, in particular, need to attend radical democratic efforts to open public spaces of freedom, if these spaces will always contain and produce many other closures? What would it mean to care for this world of corporeal histories and biographies, whose authoritative sources of action are often concealed by the bright light of publicity and are always intersected by contending forces that vie to disrupt, inflect, or control their worldly appearance?
Arendtian Beginnings

There are indeed times when Arendt’s theory of performative action wishes to escape these constraints, implying a radically dynamic and unlimited mode of imagining. Action, as the quintessential practice of politics, corresponds to the human condition of natality. The fact not just of being thrown into the world, but also of making oneself felt uniquely in it, is only possible if “each newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”

Arendt reserves action as the one creative power in societies that she, like Bourdieu, sees as overrun by normalizing forces of necessity, consumption, and regulation. Similarly, she critiques the very ideal of sovereign freedom, which begins with the illusory promise of mastering oneself and usually ends in forms of governance and logics of rule designed to master others. Where these forces are governed by means-ends logics, action has the capacity to “call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination.” It produces new spatial and temporal relationships that are both unregulated and indeterminate, and through which freedom can thus “come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance” in the world.

But action’s revelatory and productive powers also correspond to its boundlessness: its “inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.” While institutions and laws are needed to lend some stability to politics—variously protecting, enabling, and constraining action—they can never fully

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regulate or withstand its unpredictability. Nor does action, in its characteristic indeterminacy, contain internal principles for limiting its own outcomes or for protecting the world it reconstitutes: natality always appears as a miracle in and of itself, but also inevitably as an “onslaught” against the world.67

By making natality the central category of the political, Arendt breaks not only from the normative ideal of sovereignty that guides liberal conceptions of freedom, but also from the Marxist critique of self-alienation that drives Bourdieu’s sociological challenge to contemporary liberal orders. Where both are concerned with the quality of human ends, Arendt warns that political theory needs to think first and foremost about protecting and enabling human beginnings, if there is to be any hope for political freedom amidst the normalizing and alienating forces of contemporary life. This means cultivating an ethos of non-sovereignty between irreducibly pluralistic actors, and it means acknowledging the indeterminacy of ends as both a condition and result of natality. Given the implausibility that action could ever entirely avoid logics of rule, it is hard to see how a dream fulfilled for some isn’t a nightmare in the making for others. But if Arendt’s most provocative and often celebratory language renders natality with an illimitable and irreversible dynamism, her concept of political freedom cares no less for the ethical ends of mortal beings. Fundamental to both human dignity and self-realization, however, is the survival of a common world that lends objective reality to the sheer passive givenness of life on earth. Indeed, the “political question of the first order” is whether to replace the

67 Arendt, Human Condition, 190-91.
fragile gift of mere existence with a more durable human artifice that nurtures the spaces, relationships, and capacities of freedom or whether to destroy humanity and all life on earth. It is thus the “eclipse of a common public world”—that specter troubling and animating King’s promise at the beginning of the chapter—that poses the greatest threat to freedom.\textsuperscript{68}

Arendt ties the possibility of freedom to a specific interdependency between politicalness and worldliness. By worldliness, she does not refer to everyday life or social life in the Bourdieuan sense, but rather a material and symbolic artifice capable of gathering human beings together to “relate and separate [them] at the same time.” The quality of this worldly “in-between” is the endangered condition of politics in contemporary times. Against social forces that isolate and atomize subjects, the objective presence of the world can compel them to speak and act together in relation to common things, histories, and fates. But amidst the normalizing logics of everyday life and mass society, which threaten to collapse subjective difference altogether, worldly objectivity can also preserve the irreducible perspectives that condition new beginnings. These threats against worldliness resonate with Bourdieu’s critique of hierarchically regulated habitus, which separate subjects but also collapse crucial distinctions between them. It is in part because her critique of cultural reproduction possesses weaker analytical insight and carries less theoretical weight within her work that Arendt often relies on romantic characterizations of politics and freedom. But there is a reverse side of this argument: her

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. 3, 257.
hopefulness about the struggle for a more beautiful world also stems from her much richer analytical insights about the qualitative dimensions of politics. For both Arendt and Bourdieu, politics secures the objective reality of the world and gives it significance. Action has the productive power to hold open spaces of appearance and dialogue in which the heterodox meanings attached to different aspects of the world are symbolically contested, collectively judged, and potentially preserved. Bourdieu often describes this aesthetic dimension of politics in a quantitative sense, in terms of expanding the sphere of dialogical freedom. In Arendt’s inflection of the aesthetic relationship between politics and the world, freedom is not only characterized by opening more spaces for natality, but also by the purposeful work of building and caring for a world in common.\textsuperscript{69}  

In caring for the world, politics also cares for its own future. And so it must build a world that can harbor the potentialities of acting and imagining, both by holding them together against the forces that threaten them and by nourishing and animating their possibilities for emergence. Arendt writes of the “wall-like laws” of the ancient city states that they “harbored and enclosed” political life.\textsuperscript{70} On the one hand, this statement calls to mind her perplexing effort to separate politics from what she often characterizes as a pre-political material, legal, and territorial artifice, which exists to protect spaces of freedom from the logics of necessity and rule that govern Bourdieuan habitus. But on the other hand, it is deeply suggestive of a more tensional relationship between politics and the human world in which each harbors the other’s vitality. If the formless forms of radically

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 52-57, 182, 204.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 63-64.
dynamic imagination require a fashionable world and the stable forms of habituated imagination require an orthodox world, Arendt helps us elucidate the relationship between an ethos of radical democratic natality and the harboring world it requires and cultivates. A harboring world, much like the imaginative world of Arendt’s texts, contains at its core the often paradoxical tension between stability and dynamism.

The most important task of the human artifice, according to Arendt, is to “provide mortals a dwelling place more stable and more permanent than themselves.” For it is the experience of a world that transcends our mortal life-span, and a care for the survival of what we find beautiful in the world, that gives us a “premonition of…something immortal achieved by mortal hands.” To the extent that the premonition of immortality is woven into the fabric of the world—so that it can “shine and be seen, sound and be heard, speak and be read”—it disposes us to look into the future at all and to believe that we share in the power to imagine and constitute the future. The experience of permanence is thus counterintuitively what cultivates our capacities to imagine and begin the world anew. At yet, just as improbably, the permanence of the world itself can only be secured by weaving into its fabric the historical memories, political forms, cultural objects, and human dispositions that condition the experience of contingency. For it is the experience of contingency, in turn, that can dislodge imagination from the “overwhelming odds” of social laws and statistical probabilities, which diminish both worldliness and politicalness. Building contingency into the world in a qualitative sense requires

71 Ibid. 152.
cultivating memories of past beginnings, which historicize culture and politics and act as harbingers of future acting and imagining.\textsuperscript{73}

The relationship between a harboring world and the related term, harbinger—which historically meant “one who provides lodging,” and more commonly refers to a “forerunner,” or “that which announces or signals the approach of another”—conjures the anticipatory and wondrous quality of the world durable enough to house human affairs.\textsuperscript{74} Arendt writes of the “infinite improbabilities” that “constitute the texture of everything we call real,” by which she means, here, the contingencies of the natural, everyday environment that has not yet taken on worldly reality: “It is because of [the] element of the ‘miraculous’ present in all reality that events, no matter how well anticipated in fear or hope, strike us with a shock of surprise once they have come to pass.”\textsuperscript{75} The phenomenological experience of the everyday thus prepares us to become human beings from whom “the unexpected can be expected,” that is, political subjects with the capacity both to surprise and be surprised.\textsuperscript{76} But to fully cultivate ourselves as harbingers of natality—in the triple sense of sheltering newness, anticipating its emergence, and being its forerunners—we need to sharpen our everyday experiences through cultural and

\textsuperscript{73} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 43.
\textsuperscript{74} “Harbour, Harbor” and “Harbinger,” \textit{OED Online}, \url{www.oed.com} (accessed March 25, 2009).
\textsuperscript{76} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 178.
political activities that give worldly reality to the “infinite improbabilities” of life on earth.  

It is culture that must “provide and preserve the world for, foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.” Far from implying a static world, Arendt’s culture is a “dynamic mode of intercourse” between human beings and the world, which both prepares the world for human habitation and cultivates human capacities for living in the world. What it tends, most specifically, is the quality of the inter-esse, or in-between, that mediates familiarity and strangeness, self and other, body and world. The concept of inter-esse plays a crucial role in Arendt’s accounts of the ethical and political limits of judgment, imagination, and action, and so I attend to the qualitative dimensions of three different kinds of inter-esse at work in her theory. As we’ve seen, culture tends the objective in-between that physically lies between people. It includes political traditions and institutions, as well as the reification of speech, action, and human relationships in the form of sayings, poetry, written prose, material art, monuments, and other tangible records and documents. This physical, worldly in-between is also “overlaid and, as it were, overgrown” with an inter-subjective in-between, a kind of “intangible reality” resulting from the revelation of

77 Kimberly Curtis elucidates the phenomenological basis of action in Arendtian politics as well as the practices that cultivate political subjects. See Curtis, Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 36-37. 78 Ibid. 9. Arendt also includes the human activity of labor as elemental to the tasks of providing and preserving the world for strangers. I bracket this for now because she includes labor in a much more minimal sense than she does the activity of work, which transcends the logics of necessity inherent in labor and participates in the aesthetic production of worldly reality. 79 Arendt, “Crisis in Culture,” 212-13. 80 Arendt, On Revolution (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 234, 255; Arendt, Human Condition, 95.
subjects that attends world disclosure and world building. Arendt refers to this in-between as the “web of human relationships”: the discordant realm of inter-subjective communication, or common sense, into which every word and deed falls.  

Between objective and inter-subjective forms of inter-esse, culture also tends a third kind of in-between: the sensual relationships that call us into a common world, but also threaten to destroy it. The subtlety of sense perception barely surfaces in her account of the aesthetics of natality, which is brightly spectacular and vociferously communicable. Indeed, bodies occupy an ambivalent position in her theory. At once the site of bare need, inaccessible desire, and overflowing passion, bodies threaten to pervert the quality of inter-esse. At the extremes, they mark the site where the world fails: consigning subjects to complete isolation, or collapsing the boundaries between self, other, and world.  

But as we’ve seen, it is the phenomenology of everyday experience, and not speech and action, that first call us into the world and conditions us as political subjects. Arendt opens The Life of the Mind with the claim that worldliness exists at all because things “appear” and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense capacities.” Worldly reality is thus born out of a “highly charged mutual sensuous

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81 Arendt, Human Condition, 183-84.
82 Linda Zerilli offers one of the best accounts bodily lack and abundance in Arendt’s political theory. Adopting a psychoanalytic critique, she suggests that bodily remainders are “not the limit point but rather the condition of the nonsovereign subject of Arendt’s action.” I want to make a similar argument, but emphasizing habitus and corporeal practice more than bodily and psychic drives. See Zerilli, “The Arendtian Body,” In Feminist Interpretations, 180.
provocation” that goes on between members of all sentient communities. What differentiates humans is their urge to display who they are in the act of appearing, “to present themselves in words and deeds and thus indicate how they wish to appear.”

Arendt’s discussion of culture shows that acting and judging also require the more careful development of habits of seeing, listening, touching, tasting, and perhaps even smelling, politically. We might think of a sensory inter-esse, then, as overlaying and overgrowing the inter-subjective web of human relations and its common sense. Mostly implicit in her political writings, sensory inter-esse is deeply suggestive, if only that, of a concept of habitus at work in the intercourse between subjects and the world.

Arendt draws herself into uneasy proximity with Bakhtin through her evocative image of an objective world overlain and entwined with inter-subjective meanings and corporeal relationships. The proximity is uneasy because her more explicit concepts of inter-esse aim to establish a kind of distance in the intercourse between self, other, and world. That distance has its source in the aesthetic force of beauty, whose centripetal pulls gather subjects around a common object, but whose centrifugal pulls hold them apart in their singularity. Beautiful objects have the “peculiar” capacity to “arrest our

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84 This is Kim Curtis’s rephrasing of what Arendt calls a mutual “urge to self-display.” Curtis develops the ethical implications of this phenomenal worldliness, arguing that a mutual, provocative, and generative sensual relationship between human beings, while not sufficient, is crucial both to caring for a world in common and calling its irreducible particularities to emerge See Curtis, 31-37.

85 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 34. Italics original.

attention and move us.”

They claim us, calling us into the world and into the political struggle to build and care for it in common. But they also hold us in a state of suspense, soliciting us to pause in the presence of objects that surprise or delight us. Beauty generates a kind of suspended animation in the inter-esse between self, other, and world, a dynamic that relates and separates conflicting perspectives at boundaries while avoiding the more forceful touches of coercion, violence, and collapse. The interstices cultivated in caring for beauty are thus the aesthetic, and often aestheticized, condition of Arendt’s concepts of judging, acting, and imagining.

But what is the impact on these interstitial dynamics of bodies that are always both regulated and excessive: bodies that can be disciplined into willful oblivion toward beauty, bodies whose habituated deference prevents them from answering its call, bodies that rhetorically overflow orthodox claims to beauty, bodies that seize or obsessively hoard what they find beautiful, bodies that push and pull in all these ways even if they possess dispositions toward impartiality and dialogue? Bodies punctuate, collapse, surge through the suspended animation of inter-esse, not destroying its ethical potentialities but filling the interstices between subject and world with a more unruly performativity than Arendt wants to allow. If Arendt rarely acknowledges the forcefulness of these corporeal entwinements, their residues leave important possibilities and constraints in evaluating the conceptual underpinnings of her theory of natality, including action, authority, common sense, and representative thinking. Let me briefly sketch the contours and limits

87 Arendt, “Crisis in Culture,” 204, 208.
of Arendt’s interstitial spaces, in relation to these concepts, before returning to Bakhtin to accent and redirect them.

**Interstitial Limits**

Arendt’s understanding of the dynamics of action enables her optimism, vis-à-vis Bourdieu, about the political and ethical possibilities of natality. In comparison to his largely reproductive dialectic, which is either peppered with blips and misfires or radically destabilized by crises, Arendt punctuates the statistical probabilities of cultural reproduction with dynamics of competing rhythms, forces, and directions: action is irreversible but fleeting, it bursts into the world, it falls quietly from it, it sets off unpredictable chain reactions, it interrupts and is interrupted, it reveals, is deflected, thwarted, it builds relationships, it changes constellations, it opens spaces, closes others, it illuminates historical time. As we’ll see, she ties natality to dynamics that are animated in multiplicitous directions through encounters with discontinuous pasts and through dialogical relationships with a spatially and temporally pluralistic realm of common sense. And yet, she also constitutively erases many of the political and ethical complexities that attend the dynamics of action—complexities that arise, in part, from the performativity of habitus. This is most obvious in the sweeping rhetorical force with which she celebrates action as boundless and indeterminate “no matter what its specific content.”

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myriad fundamentalisms wrest more control over the public sphere than radical
democracy, threatening not only the orthodoxies but many of the protections of secular
liberalism.

Nor is it clear when action has ever possessed such unlimited possibilities in the
first place. This seems all the more so when we consider that her investment in an
unlimited concept of action results from her stubborn efforts to purify its beginnings.
Arendt famously distinguishes the etymological “stages” of action, situating beginning
and ruling as prior to carrying through and enduring.\(^\text{89}\) Normatively, she wants to set
natality apart from the administrative and technological forces that penetrate the
interstices between subjects and the objective world. But in doing so, she often obscures
the sources of natality altogether: an act “may proceed from nowhere, so to speak,” to
begin a story that is “composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings.”\(^\text{90}\) Arendt
provides more textured accounts of natality, so to speak, in her discussions of authority,
common sense, and representative thinking. But the concept of natality that emerges from
these discussions retains some of the myopic residues left by its more rarified accounts.
By suspending the unruly animation that always goes on at the interstices between self,
other, and world, that is, Arendt enables the beginnings of action to retain a kind of
inviolable or sovereign center vis-à-vis the dialogical and relational power of its prior and
consequent deeds and sufferings. This sovereignty of beginning constrains the generative
tension between stability and dynamism at the core of the Arendtian world. It lures her,

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\(^{90}\) Arendt, Human Condition, 190.
and us, into seeing radical dynamisms where sedimented bodies may instead need to be cultivated through an array of movements and rhythms, where entrenched hierarchies may need to be tricked open subtly, bored through slowly, or torn down legally. At the same time, sovereign beginnings permit Arendt to hold stable some boundaries—between self and other, at the limits of habitus, at the edges of political spaces—that might be pluralized and moved.

Arendt partly attributes the ephemeral and indeterminate qualities of action to her belief that the kinds of authority that could animate action, and so limit it, have gone out of the world. Since modernity no longer claims “undisputable experiences common to all,” she writes, the concept of authority “has become clouded in controversy and confusion.” Conjuring a previous conversation between Bourdieu, Wolin, and Donald Rumsfeld, she argues that the loss of authority “is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed since then has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else.”91 In this sense, natality takes on its miraculous character not only in relation to the statistical probabilities of everyday life, but also against the backdrop of a radically fashionable world and hubristic modes of imagining whose creative destruction Arendt hopes to escape, without remainder. She tries to do so by returning us idiosyncratically to a classical republican notion of authority as founding.

Authority is established in the act by which a people constitutes itself as a people. It is not primarily the content of an act of founding, such as a formal constitution, that determines its authoritativeness. Nor is authority preserved in the relationship between rulers and ruled, as many mistake it to be, for this conflates the obedience demanded by authority with the force of coercion. What Arendt looks for instead is whether an act of founding is able to immortalize its own spirit, that is, the exhilaration that comes with knowing that human beings can author the world at all.92

It is in this sense that practices of augmenting are crucial to her concept of authority, which she draws from Rome: “The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary ‘augmentation’ by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase.”93 Arendt takes pains to describe the sources of authority as transcending power, existing prior to any particular manifestation of power and lasting beyond its effects. She writes that “authority, in contradistinction to power, had its roots in the past, but this past was no less present in the actual life of the city than the power and strength of the living.”94 Formally, the Senate augmented—that is, confirmed and added to—the original acts of authorship, offering advice to the people, who held the power to act as antecedent authors. Conceptually, the exemplary acts of founding held an aesthetic force, whose influence did not require coercion or persuasion.

92 See Curtis, 109-111.
In this sense, authority played an interstitial role, cultivating those beginnings that were beautiful enough to be reified in their time and to be preserved as “authoritative examples” for future beginnings. The obedience of natality to authority thus required practices of tending past beginnings, letting them presence in their particularity, augmenting them through aesthetic judgment, and finally, appropriating them in one’s own terms through action. Arendt suggests something like Louis Hartz’s traditionalism of new beginnings: that is, a tradition in which the power of acting, in its interstitial relationship with authority, is concerned not primarily with “tearing down” but with “founding anew and building up.”

She writes in What Is Authority: “With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past.” If authority adds “to every single moment the whole weight of the past,” what kind of weight does Arendt hope it can lend to action? Perhaps it is because she is concerned with the loss of authority that she largely imagines it through metaphors of chains, anchors, pyramids, cornerstones, and binding forces. But what would it mean to think of authority as a thread, or threads, between past and future, guiding human affairs through both dark times and miraculous interruptions, and being torn, tied back, and rewoven along the way? Wouldn’t more discontinuous practices of authority be crucial if,

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95 Ibid. 120-24.
96 Arendt, On Revolution, 235.
98 Ibid. 122.
99 Ibid. 94-95, 98, 125.
as Arendt says of the American Constitution, most acts of founding are themselves augmentations of prior beginnings, many of which become “lost treasures” over time. The possibilities in the metaphor of threads, which I revisit with Bakhtin, might engender a response to one of her more perplexing statements about authority, which seems to despair as much as it claims to hope: “But the loss of worldly permanence and reliability—which politically is identical with the loss of authority—does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us.” In this respect, she offers more ephemeral authoritative examples of beginning for our times, if only somehow we could perceive the beauty of these lost treasures. But her scarce list of revolutionary soviets and councils are themselves marked by “the spontaneity of their coming into being.” Then perhaps, she guesses dimly, we will need to “confront anew … the elementary problems of human living-together.”

These statements knock the wind out of Arendt’s theoretical corpus, and call for a better accounting of authority within earshot of her own terms. Perhaps freedom does depend, in elemental ways, on revisiting the deep strata of the historically and socially contextual problems that attend human living-together? Human capacities for freedom are ontological, yes, but they are also necessarily cultivated through our interactions with a world that can harbor “the dimension of depth in human existence.” This includes a past that “can open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had

100 Ibid. 140.
102 Arendt, “What Is Authority,” 95, 141.
ears to hear.’” Unless we inhabit worldly traditions, unless we cultivate them and allow our capacities to be cultivated by them, we cannot begin the world all over again. We cannot even join in the struggle. Arendt wants us to see that without bearing the weight of tradition—which is both the remembrance of human authorship itself and the imperfect thread of its ugliest and most beautiful remnants—we have only the dimmest chances of imagining how to be free. Her concept of authority, then, does not inevitably chain us to the past. It does not rely, as does Bourdieu’s, only on misfires in an overdetermined dialectical relationship between authority and authorship. It does not forget, with Butler, the need to cultivate authoritative memories that could enable us to imagine beyond arbitrary consolidations of power. Instead, Arendt outlines a concept of authority whose fundamental principle, augmenting, can animate future democratic imagining and acting. She moves us toward thinking of authority itself as a practice between past and future, in the sense that it can only be world preserving if it involves both remnants of the past beautiful enough to survive in the present and subjects who have cultivated the eyes and ears to imagine with them.

How authority would cultivate the interstices between moments of authoring remains, as Arendt admits, “curiously elusive and intangible.” If both power and persuasion leave authority “in abeyance,” how are authoritative examples perceived and augmented? How do actions and judgments tie back to authoritative pasts? What weight do they carry forward, and how could we possibly carry the weight of the past

103 Ibid. 94.
104 Ibid. 122, 93.
without bearing much of its force? In another metaphor of threads, Arendt suggests how past sources of authority could have a living presence in the cultural and political life: as part of the web of human relationships that weaves a subjective inter-esse over and through the interstices of the objective world. She uses this metaphor to describe the tacit relationships of common sense and the ethical and political practice of aesthetic judgment, which constrain and enable natality.\(^{105}\) The web of relationships exists prior to action: it consists of the “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” that grow out of any common past; it can be what animates action in the first place, giving subjects hope that their stories will be received by others and play a role in the struggle for a new world. But it is also what thwarts the intentions of so many efforts to join in that struggle. Those stories that do survive find their authorship dispossessed and decentered among the multitude of perspectives and wills that inhabit the web of human affairs.\(^{106}\)

Drawing idiosyncratically on Kant, Arendt describes common sense as a kind of extra sense, an inter-subjective sense, which “fits us into a community.” It is a political sense, in that it emerges and evolves over time as common meanings and ideas of beauty are contested through collective discourse.\(^{107}\) It is also a constitutively imaginative sense, in that it is world-opening and world-communicative. It opens our bodies and our five senses to the world, enabling us to test the “utterly private and non-communicative” feelings of pleasure and displeasure they arouse against how we think others might


\(^{107}\) I’m borrowing this idea from Kirstie McClure’s essay, “The Odor of Judgment,” 76.
respond in similar instances. In stronger terms, it is the very root of our ability to say what pleases or displeases us at all; it is the basis of speech, or at least that which could be understood as anything other than nonsensical gestures and groans. In developing the mutual communication between our bodies and the world, imagination plays a key role in mediating between our five senses and common sense. Arendt uses imagination here to mean representation, referring not to creative imagining but to the faculty of conjuring or letting presence what is absent to us. Representation prepares an object for reflection, making it immediately present to our inner, discriminating senses, but keeping it at a distance so it can be judged impartially in its particularity.

What is behind Arendt’s impetus to put imagination into our senses? Formally, the process she describes gives representative imagination a kind of sovereignty over the body, in turn, giving common sense a kind of sovereignty over individual imagination. This affects not only aesthetic judgment, but also action. Performative discourse must be “transformed into a shape fit for public appearance,” and “the very novelty of the actor” depends on her ability to be perceived and understood by spectators. Here, Arendt moves her account of action closer to Bourdieu, for whom the body is opened and enabled, but also disciplined and regulated, by the common-sense reproduction of the world. Her intent, however, is to work at the limits of our senses to give them a different kind of “other-directedness” than Bourdieu generally sees, one that would enhance our sensual capacities both for receptivity in a pluralistic world and for creative imagining.

108 Arendt, Lectures, 70-72.
109 Ibid. 68-69.
110 Ibid. 62-63; Arendt, Human Condition, 51.
and acting. By cultivating the habits of the “critic and spectator who sits in every actor”—love of beauty; dispositions toward anticipating, being surprised by, and being fascinated with new emergences; but also dispositions of impartiality toward whatever emerges in its particularity—we might build internal ethical and political limits into action.

She develops this insight through her idea of representative thinking, wherein we work and rework our tastes by “training [the] imagination to go visiting” throughout the depths and expanses of common sense. As a limit on judgment and action, common sense differs both from abstract, a priori principles and from the chains of pre-existing cultural consensus that constrict cultural reproduction for Bourdieu. It is worth quoting her at some length on the practice of “thinking in the particular” that enhances aesthetic judgment:

No opinion is self-evident. In matters of opinion…our thinking is truly discursive, running, as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality…. [An] issue is forced into the open that it may show itself from all sides, in every possible perspective, until it is flooded and made transparent by the full light of human comprehension.

The realm of common sense appears, here, as a vast and disparate terrain, whose tastes and meanings are scattered shards of light connected and traversed by shimmering

111 Linda Zerilli elaborates the mostly representative nature of imagination in Arendt’s world traveling, but she stretches Arendt, vis-à-vis Kant, to suggest the “creative expansion of the concept” at work in aesthetic judgment. See Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Political Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 162.

112 Arendt, *Lectures*, 43, 73.

threads of common authority. Despite its physical and mental distance, imaginative world
traveling requires a capacious energy: running between particular times and places,
encountering possible others as they emerge in their particularity, building relationships
where they may not have been before, thereby stretching and reworking the existing
concepts we bring to judgment, and in so doing, maybe even revealing something new
about ourselves and the world.114 Aesthetic judgment is thus a mentally discursive
practice of authoring that holds an imaginative and interpretive relationship to the
internally contested and contestable authority of common sense. The enlarged mentality
that is cultivated in judgment is not confined to a given object or issue. It puts
imagination into our senses more durably, enhancing our ability to “see” the world
politically, that is, to perceive better the irreducible plurality of perspectives attending
every aspect of the world.115 In this way, seeing politically is also seeing ethically: by
developing dispositions toward impartiality, we learn to anticipate and see particularity in
our efforts to see the whole.

At least, we do up to a point. At the limits of common sense, and especially on
those issues that do appear self-evident to most people, the transparent floodlights of
human comprehension and opinion will inevitably drown out the countless shards of light
and threads of authorship struggling to reveal yet other perspectives on a world in
common. There is, more pervasively, an underlying polarity between darkness and
illumination in Arendt’s accounts of the constitution of objective and inter-subjective

114 See Arendt, “Crisis in Culture,” 223, on revelatory qualities of aesthetic judgment.
115 This point is also taken from Zerilli in the Abyss of Freedom.
reality, a polarity that too often misses the substance in the interstitial shadows. Action and judgment are the two crucial political practices by which human beings build and fit themselves into a common world, which is always spatially and temporally bounded. The bright light of public appearance constituted between actors and spectators illuminates new ideas and stories, new ways of being, new norms that are struggling mightily to emerge in the world: it is the light that enables collective authorship in a world of inherited authorities. Similarly, the bright light of communicability plays a crucial role in the ethics and politics of aesthetic judgment. It is a limit that not only constrains our imagination; the very possibility of being seen and heard also motivates us to participate in building the world and to consider the opinions of others as part of that process. And isn’t it difficult to conceive political freedom without an energetics of judging and acting that can, to paraphrase King, see and hold open a great light of beauty in dark times?

And yet, Arendt’s political ontology of illumination retains a kind of sovereignty in its claims to transparency. King reminds us that the bright light of emerging ideas and realities also produces and conceals regions of darkness, which dim the prospects of freedom for many people and dull new imaginings to their implications in force and violence. He saw that America itself was born amidst deep sedimentations of common sense that enabled new ideas of freedom, equality, and democracy to co-exist with white supremacy, slavery, and genocide. And he saw that the new freedoms of his day, including civil rights victories, stood side-by-side with widely accepted norms of racism,

\[116\] Arendt, Lectures, 75.
capitalist domination, and violence at home and abroad. His political problem was that “few members of the oppressor race could understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action.”\textsuperscript{117} He struggled to know how the “shirtless and barefoot people of the world” could shape themselves to be “fit for public appearance,” amidst realms of common sense that are manifold and cross-grained, but also hardened in their prejudices and exclusions. Arendt tells us only that such “marginal” figures will “lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence” until they do make their words and deeds communicable.\textsuperscript{118} She does little to strain her own eyes, or her thinking, to search for the potentialities that exist in the shadows of publicity and communicability, to recognize and account for their flickering emergences. But doesn’t freedom also call us to this work of cultivating more translucent media of political practice, in which new potentialities can surface and percolate without rendering quite so invisible the embodied social fragments of sensing, imagining, and protesting that lie beneath? Mustn’t we do so, as Bakhtin enjoins, if action “lives essentially on the boundaries” of cultural life, “reflecting the sun in each drop of that light”?\textsuperscript{119}

One more brief exchange between Arendt and King will lend specificity to this question. In her “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt characterizes school desegregation as a misguided encroachment of political powers on the social sphere and its rights to free human association. “Not discrimination and social segregation,” she writes, “but racial

\textsuperscript{117} King, “Letter from Birmingham,” 298.
\textsuperscript{118} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 50; Lectures, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{119} Bakhtin, \textit{Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics}, 301.
legislation constitutes the perpetuation of the original crime in this country’s history.\textsuperscript{120}

What she misses is that desegregation was not only about debating and securing rights; it was part of a broader and more fundamental struggle to introduce new relationships, practices, and ideas of equality and freedom into the world. On King’s reading, the “racial legislation” to which she refers did arise on the basis of a distorted view of society, and new visions of political justice must also emerge in relation to broader, more just social visions. He thus refuses to legitimate the boundaries between personal, social, and political drawn by Arendt. Indeed, the black freedom movement opened political spaces of different spectral shades and intensities in homes, churches, workplaces, busses, lunch counters, and on the front steps of courthouses. It built new and unexpected relationships on issues such as hunger, poverty, labor rights, literacy, race consciousness, women’s empowerment, and state violence. In this way, subjects learned to see ethically and politically through deep bodily and discursive encounters with others and with their own limits. Elemental to this work were efforts to rewire patterns of social vision that took racial difference as natural and could only see it against the illuminating standard of whiteness. It was common sense, in this respect, that enabled Arendt’s bizarre claim that the “visibility” of blacks is not only “unalterable and permanent,” but also that it gives them an advantage under the “limelight” of publicity.\textsuperscript{121} King understood that even the most basic human and political visibility for black Americans would require a common


\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 199.
world and a web of relations whose bodily and spectral shades and intensities were more conducive to the event and endurance of black freedom.

To lend corporeal lucidity to the spaces, practices, and subjects of freedom requires working at the edges and in the interstices between Arendt’s many analytical borders. It is in order to rethink political freedom—contra Bourdieu’s skepticism that anything of the sort would, in reality, be possible—that Arendt makes analytical distinctions between the realms and activities of politics and the reproductive and administrative realms of household, economy, society, culture, technology, law, and governance. As many have pointed out, these analytical distinctions prevent her from doing the work of considering how politics would relate to the very forces that endanger it. Her drive for conceptual purity presents a conundrum for those wanting to assess

122 Many theorists have helpfully stretched Arendt’s theory in relation to these analytic categories. Most take their cue from Hannah Pitkin, who suggests that we take Arendt’s categories not necessarily as ontological domains, but as modalities, rhetorics, and sensibilities for speaking and acting politically. Using this insight, others have worked at Arendt’s limits to find her useful for thinking about the following kinds of problems: 1) The role of performative action in achieving cultural resignification in areas such as identity, disease, love, sexuality, and science (Honig and Reinhardt); 2) The strategic energetics that would be needed for world-disclosive action, as well as locating within her theory the conditions for thinking about strategies without falling into logics of rule (Dietz and Reinhardt); 3) A concept of bodies as generative sources for an ethos of non-sovereign subjectivity and action (Curtis and Zerilli); and 4) Understanding judgment and action as practices of getting into community with others, in ways that require subjects to occupy—with a mix of strategic thinking and visceral unease—positions in between communicability and incommunicability (Bickford, McClure, Curtis). 5) Spatial and body practices of representative thinking that might open our senses to better modes of listening and seeing politically (Bickford, Zerilli, Coles, Young, Disch). See, Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” In Feminist Interpretations, 135-166; Reinhardt, The Art of Being Free; Mary Dietz, Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2002); Curtis, Our Sense of the Real; Zerilli, “The Arendtian Body”; McClure, “The Odor of Judgment”; Susan Bickford, “Propriety and Provocation in Arendt’s Political Aesthetic,” In Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics, 85-95; Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Romand Coles, Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought,” In Judgment, Imagination, and Politics, ed. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (New York: & Littlefield, 2001); and Lisa Disch, “‘Please Sit
her theory in light of the actual concerns that have historically driven collective action: basic bodily needs, economic and social inequality, access to cultural power, not to mention state regulation of marriage and reproduction, markets and finance, jobs and wages, trade and labor relations, science and technology, health and safety standards, welfare, education, zoning, punishment, security, and so on. Moreover, the insights of her aestheticized concept of action come with a good deal of confusion for those wanting to understand its relevance in a world that is characterized, down to the deepest joints of its social structures and mechanisms, down to the body, by politicization through logics of force and violence.

Arendt largely ignores the implications of such politicization, and she often misses it altogether. What results is a theory of politics freed from engaging as seriously as it might the intense saturation of spaces, practices, norms, identities, and bodies by increasingly sophisticated modes of micro-power. This has a double effect. First, she refuses to acknowledge the relevance of any number of issues and fields to her performative and aesthetic account of politics, and so she overlooks the possibilities for generating spaces of freedom in relation to them. But second, she misses the very

123 The latter is evident, for example, in her own naturalization of racial and sex difference. The former is evident in her description of the “somatic experience of labor,” which co-ordinates movement until each individual “feels one with all the others.” Arendt is not unaware that this “mechanization” is a result of capitalist relations of domination. But her analytical emphasis is on the movements of labor as “biological rhythms”: it is because labor is required to fulfill basic bodily needs, not primarily because capital dominates, that “nothing can be mechanized more easily and less artificially than the rhythms of the labor process.” This presumption allows her to free action from complicity in the same logics of domination. See Arendt, Human Condition, 145-46, 202.
necessity of politicizing these fields, if her account of freedom is to have any meaning in contemporary times. Though it is certainly possible to identify spaces, practices, and relationships that are less saturated by power, it would be difficult, finally, to deny the fact that the field of politics is itself always already politicized via relations of power and powerlessness. This weakens her theory ethically and politically, because she fails to wrestle well enough with sovereignty as both a constraint on natality, and an inevitable element of natality. In the same way, she refuses to take up the positive task of evaluating which kinds of ethical and strategic relationships, discourses, and practices are both necessary and ethically promising for enabling natality, world building, and care of the world. In particular, as Bourdieu has shown us in elemental ways, the body is at the center of the relationship between force and freedom. It is thus crucial to understand how the body—and its interstices with the world, authority, discourse, action, and imagination—could be cultivated to energize and enhance democratic natality. Before taking up this problem in the next chapter, through an evaluation of the cultural politics of nineteenth-century Populism, I want to elaborate its Bakhtinian overtones.

**Bakhtinian Overtones**

To get a feel for the sovereignty maintained by Arendtian speech and action, it helps to situate her interstices and dynamics in the field of performative discourse conceived by Bakhtin:

Between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate.
It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape. Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the “light” of alien words that have already been spoken by it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group.\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 276.}

This elastic environment between objects, inter-subjective communication, and particular words and deeds is not merely characterized by the friction of the “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” of speaking subjects.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 184.} Rather, it is a dialogically agitated and socially charged environment, whose objects are “overlain” and “entangled” with shared and alien words and meanings, all of which are rooted in corporeal histories, biographies, and struggles of interrelated social groups. What merges, recoils, and intersects in this palpable environment are not just words, but “concrete and living” discourses that “overflow with other people’s words,” and are “still warm” from “historical becoming and social struggle.” As such, every utterance is spoken not only by an actor, but also through a “living, tension-filled interaction” with alien words and contexts.\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 337, 331.} The story that an act begins is animated and inflected from the start—but also often denied in recoil, obscured in qualifications, or swallowed in merger—by centripetal and centrifugal forces that carry it beyond control of the speaker. In Arendtian terms, a

\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 276.}
\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 184.}
\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 337, 331.}
new beginning may survive to reveal the singularity of a speaker, or who she is. But it would be impossible to do so without also encountering, and carrying over in its very pores, the interstitial residues of social forces that condition and often discipline what she is.

What Bakhtin calls the “social life of discourse” is thus “double-voiced” in ways that will deflect the most sovereign and the most romantic moments in Arendt’s rendering of natality. This is due to the “dialogical orientation” of words, which exists wherever heteroglossia “penetrates the deep strata of discourse.”\textsuperscript{127} This does not mean simply that new words, which start out as singular stories, “fall into an already existing web” of relations in which they are inflected and shaped beyond their control.\textsuperscript{128} Rather, it is only through living interaction with the elastic environment overlaying and entangling every object that “the word may become individualized” at all. “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life,” Bakhtin writes. “It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent.”\textsuperscript{129} Every word, and every new beginning, is thus animated by an “internal dialogism” that “penetrates its entire structure.” A word cannot even conceive its object without interacting dialogically with the historically concrete and living utterances it encounters “on all its various routes toward the object.” And the meaning of a word is structured as it anticipates and directs itself toward palpable and profoundly influencing words of response or objection, which entangle the subjective

\textsuperscript{127} Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 279, 284.  
\textsuperscript{128} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 184.  
\textsuperscript{129} Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 293.
belief system of the listener.\textsuperscript{130} The internal dialogism of a word thus shapes its concrete socio-linguistic beginnings, its conceptual and evaluative meaning, and its stylistics of rhetorical expression. In other words, the natality of imagination has its origins and lifeblood in socially charged, corporeally rooted, dialogic engagements—that is, in the dialogized performativity of discourse and habitus.

Bakhtin moves us toward a theory of dialogized heteroglossia at work in the performativity of both discourse and habitus, counteracting the centripetal forces that regulate bodies and speech. If the structures of discourse and habitus have “no language-center” at all, this compels key shifts in thinking about the ethical and strategic dimensions of natality.\textsuperscript{131} Bakhtin leaves us fewer inherent protections or normative boundaries against the centralizing forces that do act on habitus and discourse to control bodies, speech, and imagining. But in dialogizing habitus and discourse from the start, he gives performative action a different weight and spectral range than either Bourdieu or Arendt. Vis-à-vis Arendt, he describes each speech act as a “ray of light” entering a “complex play of light and shadows” in the palpable, socially charged atmosphere surrounding an object; that atmosphere casts the “ray-word” into a “spectral dispersion,” understood as a “living and unrepeatable play of colors and light” in the image it constructs.\textsuperscript{132} Against Bourdieu’s cynicism about habituated imaginings of freedom and Arendt’s fixation on finding freedom amidst the bright light of publicity, Bakhtin envisions more buoyant and spectrally pluralizing modes of habitus and discourse that

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid. 281-82.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 273.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. 277.
generate endless potentialities for imagining freedom. Given the centralizing forces that do control habitus and co-opt the public sphere, however, this vision also carries his ethical injunction to imagine culture differently. It calls for a multifaceted repertoire of spatial, temporal, and discursive practices that could cultivate more dialogically weighted modes of natality.

The differential dynamics of Bakhtinian habitus enables us to accent several conceptual aspects of this repertoire, which have surfaced in different iterations thus far and will be picked up again in my discussion of American Populism. For one, the centralizing strength of unitary language compels discursive practices that can transform easily obscured interjections “into a shape fit for public appearance.”\(^{133}\) Arendt’s aversion to strategic action leaves this suggestion merely a whisper in the more forceful winds of her texts, and Butler’s concept of strategic expropriation relies on bodies whose rhetorical excess often seems wild rather than weighted. Bakhtin acknowledges that “the word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.”\(^{134}\) This means disciplined speech is always already more of a structuring limit on natality than Arendt’s aestheticized performativity can crack. But it also means that every strategic-imaginative action is structured in an elastic environment of dialogized heteroglossia that, to breathe life into Butler’s bodies, can inflect, deflect, and transform it. Not only, to accent Arendt, are strategic acts always incomplete, and often fragile, offerings into the

\(^{133}\) Arendt, *Human Condition*, 51.

\(^{134}\) Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 280.
same contingent fields of danger and possibility as world-disclosive acts. More constitutively—and this said vis-à-vis Bourdieuan habitus as well—strategic and creative imagining dialogically structure and critically inter-animate each other. Bakhtin emphasizes the point that “nothing new can be introduced into discourse” unless an utterance senses and gains the active, responsive understanding of its audience, which variously supports, resists, and accents the word. In this respect, as I’ll develop concretely in the next chapter, strategizing collective action can become one elemental, tension-filled site for radical democratic imagining.

But related to this, the weightiness of language often settles in the recesses of our minds, only dimly accessible to the direct orientation of strategic action. It settles in the palpable taste we carry in our mouths—in the interstices of our sensual crossings with others—of a word and its socially charged history. Inflecting Arendt’s concept of taste, as a common sense, Bakhtin tells us that each word has literally been in the mouths of others. They taste us viscerally and we them in ways that are beyond our articulations and yet in them. This can often be an inherited and habituated taste for discipline, mastery, deference, or normalized agitation, which lingers on the tongue even as it speaks new words. It can also be the unpleasant or bitter taste, and even the loss of appetite, that raise our guard or paralyze us in response to those alien words that are always groaning, yearning, clamoring, and striving at the edges of the thinkable and sayable. Similarly, it

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135 Mary Dietz argues this point extensively in her critique of Arendt’s nearly complete elision of strategy and violence. See Dietz, *Turning Operations*. My claim here is a bit different, in arguing that strategic action itself becomes a site of world-disclosive imagining.

can be the unbearable stench that compels us to repudiate whatever is most odious to us, whether the “stench of corporate welfare” or the stench of those dominated social groups whose difference from us marks the chaos at our limits.\textsuperscript{137} Bakhtin describes a realm of common sense that is more visceral than Arendt’s and that is experienced through social-group difference as much as individual difference. But the very viscerality of common sense returns us to Arendt’s injunction to put imagination into the senses. It is precisely because she understands taste to be one of the most world-closing and non-communicative senses that she resuscitates it by connecting it, via imagination, to common sense. Unable to inflect the literal sense of smell with any similar philosophical connotation, she drops it from her account of judgment altogether. But what would it mean to put imagination into the sense of smell?\textsuperscript{138}

It is doubtful that Arendt’s practices of imagination could do the job, especially if our bodies are both sedimented with many implacable barriers of social-group difference and traversed by countless more generative interstices. Between her more rarified accounts of common sense and representative thinking, on the one hand, and the bright light of action and natality, on the other, lies a range of dynamic and spectral practices for cultivating more receptive and more generative modes of imagining and sense-making. These practices recast Bourdieu’s parenthetical attempts to put imagination into habitus, as well as Arendt’s efforts to put imagination into the senses to enhance communication


\textsuperscript{138} The argument I make here picks up on McClure’s efforts to identify the viscerality of Arendtian judgment in its practices of thinking particulars. But I doubt that aspect can be drawn out of Arendt’s work without this Bakhtinian inflection.
between body and world. Instead, Bakhtin would cultivate the heteroglot and dialogized modes of imagining that are already constitutively generated in—and do work on the limits of—the myriad crossing, merging, and diverging interstices that traverse bodies, social groups, and common sense. The difference here goes back to a previous Bakhtinian inflected discussion of Bourdieu, who offers a deeply suggestive line of flight for thinking about translucent dispositions, before grounding it in so many impassable routes and implacable barriers. Bakhtin helps us see how each disposition is a set of openings and closings in different directions and at different depths of habitus, which encounter the openings and closings of culture, of other bodies, and of other dispositions within ourselves. If I were a white Protestant farmer in the 1880s, for example, my dispositions toward freedom and commonwealth forms of belonging might variously open to and conflict with other white farmers; recoil at the “stench” of monopolistic plutocrats and free blacks; and intersect uneasily with socialists, Irish Catholic laborers, and farm men who want to keep me in a dress.

Bakhtin urges us to recognize ourselves as these corporeal subjects whose senses, dispositions, and imaginations open and close in the pulsing, unruly, dialogical animation of our interstitial borders. And he gestures toward a variety of practices for tending the sensory interstices that overlay and entangle speech, action, and culture. For one, they can become blocked by the historical sediments of centralizing speech; they can remain or grow barren of words due to segregation or lack of use; they can be severed by violence or by formless forms of power that rapidly shape-shift the world. These conditions require more elastic and resilient modes of belonging than Arendt’s more
rarified and ephemeral account of politics allows. Instead, at an elemental level, cultivating the world-opening and world-communicative capacities of our senses paradoxically necessitates engaging in many generative moments of non-dialogized heteroglossia, which are exemplified by Bourdieu’s bodily calisthenics and, as we’ll see, by Populism’s appropriation of messianic enthusiasm. Rather than practicing our dispositions into a suspended animation at their interstitial borders, these moments of buoyant suspension build stretch and play into the interstices of habitus. They do so by developing our visceral tastes for loose ends, strange postures, proliferating languages, and unfamiliar ways of being together, all of which could in turn enable the sensual capaciousness and worldly durability she seeks.

This stretch and play in habitus also opens the possibility for distinctive practices of authority. As we’ve seen, Bakhtin’s questions on authority run deeper than Bourdieu and Butler, who ask how to appropriate authoritative contexts that command obedience from a position external to discourse. More akin to Arendt, Bakhtin wants identify alternative sources of authority that could give buoyancy to natality. His concepts of historically dialogized habitus and discourse are necessary, but not sufficient, to this task. Like Arendt, he also characterizes the specific qualities of past beginnings that might serve as examples for natality. Here, he offers “internally persuasive discourse … [whose] creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within,
and does not remain in an isolated, static condition.”\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Dialogic Imagination}, 345.} Authority thus lives, as it does for Arendt, both in the ability of a word to animate future words and in the practices that cultivate its movement between past and future.

Bakhtin similarly describes an iterative practice of tying-back to past moments, but the threads that traverse that distance are significantly different than those conjured by Arendt. First, repetitions tie back neither to a universally recognized founding that authorizes and claims obedience from a relatively bounded people, nor to a spontaneous originary moment that escapes into our memories purified of its constitutive difference and violence. Rather, each utterance ties back to a common origin that is really many origins in one and that, moreover, is surrounded by any number of other internally persuasive discourses that claim to speak for that moment. This means, contra Arendt, that practices of authority always entail an “intense struggle” within and between competing socio-ideological views and directions; these stake their claims on every repetition and at times forcefully accent it. It also means that cultivating exemplary beginnings can be far more generative, in unwieldy directions, than Arendt’s concept of augmentation allows. Internally persuasive discourses call our words back to them because their beginnings are also living questions. That is, they invite dialogic interaction about an object or event and thereby tweak open spaces, which may not previously have existed, for the “free and creative development of another’s word.” Indeed, they invite “experimental guesswork,” by those who strategize how to appropriate a historically and
socially contextualized word in ways that create “interanimating relationships with new contexts.”

The qualitative character of these interanimating relationships marks a second, and more elemental, difference in the Bakhtinian threads that iteratively traverse the continuities and discontinuities between past and future action. Bakhtin specifies the interanimation of contexts, that is, of the broad social life of a discourse that is developed in the historical and corporeal becoming of social-ideological groups. The threads that tie new beginnings back to the past, that give them weight and sometimes buoyancy, are not abstracted ideologies or perspectives. What get carried over are also remnants of both discontinuous and continuous habitus: the gestures and dispositions, spatial and temporal movements, rhetorical stylistics, and affective structures that constrain and buoy the performativity of discourse. These, and not words alone, are what enable internally persuasive discourse to “organize masses of our words” in the dialogically contested process of forming of social groups, coalitions, and movements. For it is the qualitative performativity of habitus that ethically and politically constrain and enable senses, dispositions, and imaginings. We end up, then, with an idea of natality that is not overwhelmingly prone to violence and reactionary backlash, nor romantically conceived as a contest of discursive ideas unbound from social forces. We begin to see natality as constrained and enabled by competing habitus of imagining, where habitus is both spatially contested and historically diachronic.

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140 Ibid. 345-348.
And natality, as such, takes on multidimensional practices of caring for a world that is this place of continuous and discontinuous histories, authorities, dispositions, and dynamics. This was the America that Populism tended and reshaped in the late-nineteenth century. The movement was an intense struggle for freedom and commonwealth forms of democracy that took place on a field shot through with all three modes of democratic exceptionalism in one: orthodox sectional, racial, nativist, and patriarchal modes of imagining; sweeping new corporate powers with radically dynamic and hubristic claims on imagining America; and a motley array of grassroots democratic efforts that built momentum for several decades around a host of economic, social, and political concerns. Populism’s most radical imaginings of democracy and political economy emerged amidst the centripetal and centrifugal pulls of this field. But they often took its limiting conditions as political and ethical possibilities for doing work at the edges of habitus and imagination. The movement cultivated many alternative authoritative traditions that informed and buoyed, but also profoundly constrained, the spatial, temporal, and discursive repertoires it brought to that work. By turning to Populism, I elucidate and extend the conversations in this chapter about the constraints and possibilities of a radical democratic habitus of imagining.
CHAPTER FOUR

American Populism:

Democratizing Imagination in the Body of the Commonwealth

The world, enriched by thousands of generations of toilers and thinkers, has reached a fertility which can give every human being a plenty undreamed of even in the Utopias…. Democracy is not a lie. There live in the body of the commonality the unexhausted virtue and the ever-refreshed strength which can rise equal to any problems of progress.

—Henry Demarest Lloyd

Few Reading, thinking, men in America, Deny the Slavery of the Masses, to the Money Power of our Country . . . the Masses have literally slept, the Sleep that brings on Tenantry and Serfdom.

—Alliance farmer

I want to tell my people what the People’s Party is going to do. I want to tell them if it is going to work a black and white horse in the same field.

—Melvin Wade

By many accounts, the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century began where the deep ruts of wagon wheels—the scars of lengthening caravans of farmers driven West by the millions during the 1870s—ended: in Texas, in the county of Lampasas, where the Farmers Alliance was born in 1877. Over the next two decades, the movement zigzagged across the territorial lines of the United States map and the

2 W.T. McCulloch to Ignatius Donnelly, April 1892, Donnelly papers, cited in Pollack, Populist Mind, 35. All quotes from the nineteenth century have been kept in their original form, including capitalization, spelling, and grammatical differences and errors.
3 Wade was a black trade unionist and member of the North Texas District 78 of the Knights of Labor. Cited in Goodwyn, Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 286.
sectional lines of collective memory on the fleet footsteps of traveling lecturers who relayed grim stories of hunger and suffering, radical critiques of political economy, and innovative practices of cooperative self-help. By 1890, the National Farmers Alliance had woven together 40,000 suballiances across the rural U.S., and farmers made commitments to each other and to better futures through the pioneering institutions of cooperative selling, buying, insuring, and manufacturing. In hundreds of Alliance meetings and encampments throughout these years, farmers witnessed the spectacle of what they were creating: long wagon trains, once dispersed, now gathered families by the thousands to debate the “laws of commerce,” celebrate successful alternatives, and generate collective hope. When the People’s Party forged its way onto the political scene in local, state, and national elections of 1892, it was the Alliance cooperative movement—and its uneven coalitions with black farmers, industrial laborers, socialists, suffragettes, and others—that had laid the tracks. The Populist movement reconfigured the nation’s territorial allegiances, its economic institutions, its political relationships, and even its most cherished myths. In short, it gave birth to one of the most massive, most sustained moments of democratic imaging in United States history.

But Populism was also the product of its day and the legacy of hundreds of years of radical democratic struggle in America. The movement emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, which had dismantled the legal institutions of slavery, severely weakened southern economies, massively realigned political allegiances, and left a fractured land riddled with uncertainties about its collective future. It was the “enthronement” of corporations during the war, however, that made Abraham Lincoln
“tremble for the safety of [his] country…more than ever before.”

And indeed, the “corporate revolution” in America ushered in yet another sweeping era of economic, social, and political transformation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As corporations gained unprecedented legal and constitutional rights and powers, they propelled and largely steered the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. The pace of development was dizzying and its effects radically uneven, consigning millions of small farmers, sharecroppers, wage laborers, and unemployed workers to lives of profound economic instability and social dislocation. These problems were compounded by persistent and innovative forms of patriarchy, nativism, and racial domination, which further restricted social mobility and political freedom for many. As the forms and relations of power in America were rapidly restructuring, local autonomy progressively eroded and people began to lose their grip on the cultural and political authorities that had traditionally oriented them in the world. The result was a crisis of modernity, if we take modernism in the sense that Marshall Berman has described it: “as

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5 Ted Nace dates the “corporate revolution” in the United States roughly from 1850-1900. He documents the often corrupt legislative and judicial rulings that released corporations from the limits that had controlled their charters since the nation’s founding—e.g., limits on function, life span, size, capital accumulation, geographic scope, inter-company ownership, etc.
6 Robert Wiebe characterizes the period from 1877-1920 as a time when industrialization and urbanization eroded economic and political power of local communities vis-à-vis capital and increasingly corrupt but relatively impotent national government. Gerald Frug documents the specific legal and political decisions that led to the decline of local power in the second half of the nineteenth century. Due to a combination of progressive ideals and self-interest on the part of business elites, state legislative and judicial bodies came to be seen as the best protectors of private property from both capital and democracy. Efforts in the early 1800s to draw distinctions between private and public corporations set the conditions for late nineteenth-century trends that saw the legal and political rights of private corporations rise as those of cities and towns fell. See Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); and Gerald Frug, *City Making: Building Communities without Building Walls* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world.” That crisis is captured in the epigraphs to this chapter. Together they characterize an era in which the alluring promise of unlimited progress and fulfillment for every American was matched by the pervasive but unequally distributed fear of being enslaved by forces that are beyond control. Berman, quoting Marx, calls this “the thrill and the dread of a world in which ’all that is solid melts into air.’”

In this respect, Populism was undoubtedly a modern movement, but one that contested the terms of modernity. Henry Demarest Lloyd’s exhilarating vision of progress stemmed not from a capitalist faith in competitive individualism; it reflected his social democratic belief that the fullness of human potential can only be realized by caring for the “body of the commonality.” Similarly, most of the movement’s participants placed science, technology, market growth, and nationalization among the tools of progress. But they demanded that these be steered through more diversified spaces, practices, and relationships of democratic power and toward the ends of a more cooperative commonwealth. If Populism was most immediately a response to the economic instabilities and social dislocations wrought by capitalist expansion, it was more fundamentally an effort to build alternative cultures of political economy, democracy, and progress in America. On Populism as a modern movement, see Harry Boyte, Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1989); Elizabeth Sanders, Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Charles Postel, The Populist Vision (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). On Populism as a cultural politics, see Boyte,
competing cultural and political authorities that had been eviscerated and ritually forgotten over the contested course of historical time. Sheldon Wolin fineses the point: amidst the “creative destructiveness” of capitalist progress, “memory is a subversive weapon” and “the arts of conservation” are a vital source of “renewal and radical change.”

This chapter is, in part, about Populism’s struggle to cultivate alternative traditions and practices of authority for imagining democracy in America. Crucial to the movement’s development were several insurgent traditions that emerged in the incipient stages of the American Revolution and surfaced intermittently throughout the nation’s history: various strains and appropriations of classical republicanism; an ethos of producerism that often emphasized the social nature of property; the resurgent discourses and practices of messianic revivalism; and narrative histories of grassroots mobilization, which told of slave revolts, tenant strikes, farmer insurrections, labor uprisings, and counter-current forms of democratic organization. These traditions were reanimated and rewritten by the movement’s unusual, if often tenuous, coalitions between agrarian rebels, urban unionists, prohibitionists, suffragettes, greenbackers, single-tax advocates, saloon utopianists, Marxist and Christian socialists, armies of the unemployed, and other

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“cranks, tramps, and vagabonds.” But if Populism was enabled by this array of insurgent traditions, it also inherited their constraints. These were magnified at times as the disorienting experiences of modernity led people to cling to their positions on the social ladder and grasp for a world that seemed familiar. For example, class hierarchies often restricted the benefits of cooperative economies for tenant farmers and wage laborers. The movement’s gendered discourses reinforced the notion that politics requires a masculine toughness, and they provided a language to exclude “effeminate” and “subservient” people—be they female, black, immigrant, or impoverished. Finally, a pervasive culture of white supremacy manifested itself within the movement through modes ranging from ignorance and paternalism to segregation and even disenfranchisement.

Populism’s most radical critiques and practices—and its ability to sustain its mismatched and uneven coalitions—would thus face not only overwhelming external forces, but also the limits of its own imagination. How did the movement understand the limits that enabled and constrained its imagination of democracy, and how did it variously protect, traverse, and challenge them? In its struggle to prevent corporate capitalism from making a monopoly of democracy—to keep democracy from becoming a lie, to paraphrase Lloyd—how did the movement cultivate “the body of the commonality” as a vital source of a more radically democratic imagining? By addressing

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10 This phrase was common during the day, and was used both as a derogatory characterization of unemployed and homeless people and as an accusation leveled by social movements at the society that had produced them. Here, it’s quoted from an editorial in support of Jacob Coxey’s industrial army of the unemployed, in the Advocate (Topeka), April 11, 1894, reprinted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 343.
these questions, I both elucidate and extend the theoretical conversation that has
developed thus far in the context of American history and politics. I do so by recovering a
particular kind of story about Populism, one that still has much to tell us about the limits
of radical democratic politics today.

Populism emerged in an era marked by destructive dynamism and inconceivable
concentrations of power, yet it dared to affirm and build countercurrent cultures of
democracy, political economy, and progress. The dare was that populist traditions and
authorities could survive the totalizing rise of corporate capitalism. As Alliance member
Fanny Leake described the movement’s “death struggle” for liberty: “We must build up
or perish.”¹¹ But it was also a dare that the new freedoms built up by Populism would
not, quite so much, be characterized by the urge to dominate.¹² In their imperfect efforts
to build new relations and practices of democratic power, movement actors often seemed
to be driven instead by an understanding that the world they struggled to preserve and
change was itself the fragile, constrained, and contested condition of political freedom.
This Arendtian insight was aided by the fact that these actors did not accept the America
of their day as the inevitable outcome of a master narrative of history or progress. Rather,

¹¹ Fanny Leake was secretary of the Farmers’ State Alliance of Texas. She is quoted here in Pollack,
*Populist Mind*, 45. Note: I use Populism in the proper case to refer to the American movement of the
1870s-90s, beginning with the organizing movement of the Farmer’s Alliance and ending with the elections
of 1896. I use populism as a common noun or adjective to refer more generally to the language and practice
of grassroots social movements that organize people to wield power over the fundamental structures of
their common life, often by changing the cultures of political economy, society, and government. This
definition places my work in the tradition of Boyte, Goodwyn, and Wolin, though I am more concerned
than they are with understanding the differences between what might be called democratic and
antidemocratic forms of populism. My understanding of populism owes important substantive debts to, but
also differs from, Michael Kazin’s more limited focus on populism as a style of political rhetoric. See
¹² Wolin characterizes populism in this way in “Contract and Birthright,” 286.
they engaged America as if it were the product of a discontinuous history whose most hardened realities and totalizing powers co-existed with insurgent remnants carried in the irreducible body of the people. But it was in this sense that Populism understood, with Bourdieu and Bakhtin, that new imaginings would require cultivating competing habitus, which could enable alternative modes of authority, belonging, and freedom. My aim is to evaluate the spaces, practices, relationships, and traditions—as well as the insights and oversights—in and through which Populism cultivated its radical democratic habitus of imagination.

In doing so, I re-engage the claims made by Wolin and Goodwyn in the preface to this project. Is populism the culture of democracy? Should it be? What’s the matter with Wolin? And is Goodwyn really that naïve? Buoyed by Goodwyn’s *Democratic Promise*, radical democratic theorists of the early 1980s cultivated Populism as an authoritative tradition for thinking about broad-based grassroots insurgency, the cultural requisites of democratic politics, and the linked fate between democracy and political economy.  

Goodwyn tells the story of a movement that developed locally rooted practices of economic self-help and political education, which enabled people to wield power over the fundamental structures of their common lives and challenge received cultures of democracy. In this story of Populism, radical democratic theorists hoped to harvest insights that just might, in Wolin’s words, stem “the steady transformation of America

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13 The inauguration of the *democracy* journal and Boyte and Reissman’s *The New Populism* are evidence of this flurry of interaction between Goodwyn and democratic theorists like Wolin and Boyte.
into an antidemocratic society.”14 Their efforts were attended by a rhetorical strategy of claiming populist politics solely for democracy, a strategy that seemed crucial to democratizing imagination in a society that ritually forgets its roots in social movement struggles.

Just as crucial, it seems, are critical analyses about the limits of democracy in a society that repeatedly perverts its terms. Bourdieu’s criticisms ring true with many scholars of the Populist movement, who emphasize the cultural sedimentations present in its racial and gender prejudices; the ultimate capture of Populist rhetoric by its fusion with the Democratic Party; and the conservatism of the movement’s most radical political economic imaginings in relation to the socialist critiques at its margins. A parallel strain of right-wing and anti-democratic populism in America does little to contest this memory.15 Against this backdrop, Goodwyn’s account of Populism at times creates what Bourdieu would call the “populist mystique” of a movement whose democratic promise was relatively separate from its racist and patriarchal overtones. Similarly, Wolin continues to use of the term “populism” explicitly in a democratizing capacity, largely avoiding the work of distinguishing between grassroots politics on the right and left.16 Even so, Wolin’s conservationist radicalism should give us cause for alarm. For, he compels us to ask what it would mean to abandon a tradition of democratic theory and

practice with deep roots in insurgent struggles throughout American history. This concern lies behind my own impulse to revisit Populism in this chapter. But that impulse also requires asking how current efforts to care for the habitus of radical democratic imagining remain indebted to Populism’s profoundly broken efforts to do the same.

*The Same Hard Tale: The Rules of Progress during the Gilded Age*

A lifelong reformer and proto-muckraker, Henry D. Lloyd was a critical utopianist. His dream of a democratic commonwealth that would nurture human potentiality was sharp relief against the exhausted body of the people he chronicled during his day: “The air of our beloved America has been heavy for many years with the weary footfalls of the people—the workingmen tramping about, to find no doors open for them in the palaces of industry they built—the farmer surrendering first the produce of the year, and then his farm itself to market riggers and usurers.”¹⁷ These were the same weary footfalls and patterns of acquiescence that spurred agrarian reformer W. Scott Morgan to exhort his readers, “Will you follow in the same tracks that we have been treading for the past twenty years?”¹⁸ What was it that chained the horizons of millions of farmers to the same tracks for decades, leading them to work harder, dig their ruts deeper, and migrate hundreds of miles west without revolting? What kept the bodies and minds of urban laborers in “the shackles of industrial slavery,” even though capitalist

modernization was supposed to have unleashed new and unfettered freedoms? In this section I describe some of the forces that weighed against Populism’s emergence and its impact during the late nineteenth century. There are a number of ways to address these questions, but I limit my focus to the new modes of power that were developing during the Gilded Age, their ideological justifications, and their everyday habituation of bodies and imaginations.

Populism exposed the contradictions of an era that heralded unlimited growth and development, but in which economic and social life were becoming increasingly rule-bound. The ideology of progress made popular by corporate publicists, political leaders, major newspapers, and social scientists read like a secular catechism: natural laws of the market governed modernization; survival of the fittest determined one’s place in it; the gold standard protected the stability and honor of the nation; and market and territorial expansion would propel America into the future. Classical economics and social Darwinism amalgamated in the public discourse of the late nineteenth century. The corporate revolution, not surprisingly, coincided with the growing belief that individual liberty depended on self-regulating markets that could foster pure competition according to the law of supply and demand. The catch was that pure competition seemed inevitably to lead to monopolistic control of markets. While the laws of the market themselves were marshaled to justify economic inequality—“overproduction” and the “iron law of wages” rolled off many elite tongues—it was the rise of social Darwinism in the 1880s that lent modern moral authority to hierarchies of class, race, and gender. In coining the term “survival of the fittest,” Herbert Spencer attributed its social beneficence to the fact that
“the average vigour of any race would be diminished did the diseased and feeble habitually survive and propagate.” Operating in the same discursive universe, evolutionary and laissez-faire principles combined to produce an ideology of progress in which each individual is master of his own fate and in which human perfectibility mandates letting the weak perish. This was hardly what Lloyd meant when he argued that the fullness of human potentiality could only be realized by caring for the body of the commonwealth. But as major influences on law and politics, the rules of hierarchical progress consistently justified non-intervention in response to the massive social dislocations caused by modernization.

The widespread acceptance of biological and social scientific arguments reflects the broader scientific ethos that had captured the moral vision of the age. Historian Robert Wiebe locates a “quantitative ethic” at the base of the “crisis in values” during the Gilded Age. As markets in goods, transportation, and communication expanded, the size, scale, and speed of everyday life grew exponentially. Life had to be standardized, systematized, and statistically comprehended to keep pace with progress. Even the dizzying forward motion of progress itself was given scientific rationale: “Since all organic cohesion is conditioned by growth,” the sociologist Franklin Giddings explained, “a policy of ceaseless activity is necessary . . . [for] any political cooperation.”

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19 Spencer is quoted in Nace, 118-19. Nace discusses the relationship between laissez-faire principles and social Darwinism, especially as they relate to Supreme Court decisions during the late 1800s. See also, Wiebe, 136; Postel, 245; and Norman Pollack, *Populism, Capitalism, and Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 67.

20 Wiebe, 40.

21 Quoted in Wiebe, 140.
Empiricism and rational inquiry thus gained preeminence as sources of intellectual and
cultural authority. This was not lost on Populism. If movement leaders mocked the
“statisticians [who] flood reports with bewildering figures,” they also advocated the
creation of a national bureau of labor statistics to enhance federal regulation of
business.\(^\text{22}\) Beyond pragmatics, science at times took on the power of liberation theology.
As California Populist Thomas Cator put it, “science, morality, and truth are one.” He
advocated training “the minds of the masses” in rational inquiry, for science “calls
freedom from her grave . . . it dethrones the wrong; it raises up the right; it ushers in the
inheritance of the children of toil.”\(^\text{23}\) Science was, indeed, becoming as much a part of
American faith as religion. Populism would thus encounter steep challenges to its more
subtle and persistent efforts to politicize science in relation to alternative sources of
cultural authority and to supplement expert knowledge with its own networks of local and
practical knowledges.

When the Democratic-Populist fusion candidate William Jennings Bryan lost the
presidential election of 1896, he lost to a Republican party waving the banner of “peace,
progress, patriotism, and prosperity.” At enormous “flag day” rallies across the country—
where slogans warned that “1896 is as vitally important as 1861”—Republican strategists
capitalized on emotionally charged memories of the Civil War to herald William

\(^{22}\) The quote is from William Peffer, *The Farmer’s Side, His Troubles and Their Remedy* (New York: D.
Appleton and Company, 1891), reprinted in Pollack, *Populist Mind*, 71. The Cleburne Demands of 1886,
which represented a growing coalition between the Farmers’ Alliance and the Knights of Labor, included a
plank calling for the creation of a national bureau of labor statistics “to arrive at the correct knowledge of
the educational, moral and financial conditions of the laboring masses of our citizens.” See Sanders, 130.
\(^{23}\) Quoted in Postel, 266.
McKinley as the protector of national order and the agent of national prosperity. What McKinley would protect, amidst a decade of economic depression and social upheaval, was the gold standard: no less than the basis of “sound money,” the “security of contracts,” and “the national honor.”24 Lost on many people was the irony that the international gold standard marked the erosion of national authority vis-à-vis international markets and corporate capitalism.25 Lawrence Goodwyn attributes this irony less to elite duplicity than to the corporate culture that had already begun to emerge at the turn of the century.26 Millions of Americans could still be mobilized by Bryan’s argument that “discontent is the foundation of progress.”27 Nonetheless, progress was increasingly understood in economic terms. It was business enterprise—which could fuel scientific and technological advancement and propel commercial and territorial expansion—that would steer America into the future. More and more citizens were beginning to recognize what U.S. Senator and Secretary of State William Seward had seen in 1853: “The nation that draws the most materials and provisions from the earth, and fabricates the most, and sells the most of production and fabrics to foreign nations, must be, and will be, the great power of the earth.”28 The market utopianism of corporate culture did not, with Lloyd,

24 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 524-529.
25 Karl Polanyi makes this argument in The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). And it wasn’t lost on Populist leaders, who protested allowing “foreign potentates and powers” to violate the nation’s sovereignty. See, Kazin, 45.
26 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 524.
27 Sanders, 143.
dream of a world whose fertility would bear the memory of “thousands of generations of
toilers and thinkers” and would enable society to care for the commonwealth. Industrial
modernization instead partook in a long tradition of American beginnings that sought a
radical break from the past and ran roughshod over the earth and its diverse cultural
forms in pursuit of hegemony.

These dominant ideological discourses, which established the laws, relationships,
and horizons of modernity, intertwined with new and less obvious modes of economic
and political power. During the second half of the nineteenth century, banks, railroads,
and manufacturers used a variety of legislative and judicial maneuvers to delineate an
autonomous economic sphere; increase the size, mobility, and lifespan of capital power;
invent corporate personhood and attach new rights to it; and win policy battles over
money and credit, interstate commerce, and labor and land policy. Business interests
also tightened their hold over the two major parties and the mainstream press, effectively
narrowing the limits of public discourse and political debate within capitalism. The
macro-level organs of political imagination in America had begun to crowd out
opportunities for broad and diverse participation. Quite the opposite, corporate capitalism
succeeded in creating new and uniform material realities, including a system of credit,
money supply, transportation, and marketing that seemed impenetrable to those on its

29 See Nace, 16-17, 70-86. Add Sanders citation from p. 17 fn?
30 Goodwyn makes this point, arguing that Populism was as much a response to corporate capitalism’s
monopoly over public discourse as it was to the specific economic grievances caused by its monopoly over
capital. See Democratic Promise, 538.
underside.\textsuperscript{31} It was a system whose logics of power increasingly penetrated the daily lives of farmers, wage laborers, and the unemployed—destabilizing and restructuring their habitus and colonizing their imaginations of personal and political possibility.

The massive expansion of the railroad system during this period is exemplary of these processes. Heralds of market dynamism, transcontinental trade, and national wealth, railroad companies regulated the daily tempos, outside connections, and commercial opportunities of countless communities. Many towns vied to attract railroad lines, but railroads also faced expectations of local control and at times encountered stiff opposition.\textsuperscript{32} Early on, the voices of dissent had some political influence, via charters that limited corporate activities and specified avenues for local and state supervision. But railroad companies had a variety of measures at their disposal, including trusts, pools, and watered stocks, to drive up rates and control markets. As railroads found ways to bypass restrictions on capital accumulation and mobility, they entertained transcontinental aspirations. The Pennsylvania Railroad was at the forefront of this trend, purchasing enough stock in small railroad companies to control their boards and dictate their policies. During the 1870s and 1880s, it forged integrated railroad lines across the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic. Key to such integration was the standardization of rate structures, track specifications, and mechanical equipment. It was even a joint scheduling system of the railroads that, at noon on November 18, 1883, synchronized the

\textsuperscript{31} Sanders, 101. I discuss the relationship between capitalist dynamism and the regulation of habitus in a conversation between Wolin and Bourdieu on p. 147.

\textsuperscript{32} Sources of opposition included general anticorporate sentiment, competing transportation interests, conflict with lines in nearby towns, and ire over the failure of railroads to pay dividends on the local bonds that financed them. See Nace, 58-59.
multiplicitous rhythms of daily into four continental time zones. As one Alliance lecturer put it, the railroads “assumed greater powers than those of the Deity; they abrogated time and space; they changed the geography of the country.” For farmers, this “alien power” translated locally into implacable rules governing where crops could be shipped, at which exorbitant rates, and with what returns to their stomachs, families, and futures.

But it was the crop lien system that was the towering reality in farmers’ lives. Due in great part to federal monetary policy favoring the financial industry, farm commodity prices declined and debt burdens rose in the decades after the Civil War. Northern financial centers gained economic hegemony over southern and midwestern periphery economies, and monopolistic and exploitative interest rates were the norm. Added to this, local furnishing merchants charged their own hefty commissions. Lawrence Goodwyn offers this account of the debt structure that locked millions of farmers into poverty:

Both the literal meaning and the ultimate dimension of the crop lien were visible in simple scenes occurring daily, year after year, decade after decade, in every village of every Southern state. . . . The farmer, his eyes downcast, his hat sometimes literally in his hand, approached the merchant with a list of his needs. The man behind the counter consulted a ledger, and after a mumbled exchange, moved to his shelves to select the goods that would satisfy at least part of his customer’s wants. Rarely did the farmer

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33 Nace, 56-69.
36 These policies included decisions to return to currency based on the gold standard; demonetize silver; retire wartime greenbacks; support gold payments to holders of wartime bonds that had been purchased in depreciated money; and allow private banks to create money. See Sanders, 109.
receive the range of items or even the quantity of one item he had requested. No money changed hands; the merchant merely made brief notations in his ledger. Two weeks or a month later, the farmer would return, the consultation would recur, the mumbled exchange and the careful selection of goods would ensue, and new additions would be noted in the ledger . . . the invisible scales on which the merchant across the counter weighed the central question—would the farmer’s crop yield enough money to pay off the accumulating debt?

As Goodwyn continues the account, the answer was inevitably, no. And “settlin’-up” time itself became an annual ritual, in which the fruits of the farmer’s toil would be weighed, the merchant would consult his ledger, the farmer would learn that he had failed in his effort to “pay out,” and a new lien would be signed on next year’s crop. The ritual promised to repeat itself: “The lien signed, the farmer, empty-handed, climbed in his wagon and drove home, knowing that for the second or fifth or fifteenth year he had not paid out.” And when farmers sought answers for the humiliating conditions of their lives, they encountered only experts who schooled them in the inevitable laws of supply and demand and newspaper headlines that boldly accused them of overproduction. Much like the rhetoric of Populism itself, Goodwyn’s narrative is melodramatic. But his exaggeration is pointed: in ways that often went unnoticed, the crop lien system “shaped in demeaning detail the daily options of millions” of farmers, while invisibly constituting a new system of economic organization—one with a prominent legitimating story about the conditions of individual and national progress.37

37 Goodwyn, Populist Moment, 20-23
The escalating power of corporations also consigned many factory workers, coal miners, and railroad hands to what Lloyd termed “slavery for life.”38 During the industrial era, workforce regulation was governed largely by common law legal structures, and the power of employers over their employees was considered a private relationship. Normal constitutional rights did not always apply.39 While the ambassadors of market utopianism insistently pointed out the contractual basis of labor, employees were shackled to their jobs by an elaborate system of disciplinary measures and intimidation tactics. Workers were often held in perpetual debt to company stores, and many industries maintained blacklists of employees who tried to leave their companies in search of better wages and working conditions. Moreover, so-called “tramp laws” were still widely enforced, punishing able-bodied, unemployed men and women through fines, forced labor, and imprisonment.40 Facing Draconian disciplinary measures of their own, the “army of destitute unemployed . . . [was also] the club with which [capital] enslaved all workers.”41 Since this army often included blacks and immigrants, companies frequently fomented racial and ethnic tensions as yet another mechanism to control working class resistance.42 Employed and unemployed workers alike occupied social

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39 Nace, 119-120. Workers would have to wait until the twentieth century to win many basic rights and protections, including an end to child labor, enforcement of the eight-hour day, safety and sanitation regulations, and the federal minimum wage.
40 Ibid. 120-121.
41 Farmers’ Alliance (Lincoln), March 10, 1892, reprinted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 342.
42 For example, class antagonisms ran high in New York in the summer of 1863, when local shipping companies decided to break a longshoremen’s strike by hiring black workers. The local Weekly Caucasian headed each issue by announcing that it stood “firmly for WHITE SUPREMACY, a defense of the rights and welfare of the Producing and Working Classes, now imperiled by the doctrine of Negro Equality.”
worlds whose pervasive instability, obligatory routes, and impassible barriers daily reminded them that they were replaceable and that there was no way out of their present circumstances.\textsuperscript{43} Nor did they have many legal or political options. Unemployed workers had only questionable rights of petition, and their demonstrations were widely met with public scorn and harsh police repression. With recourse to a ready supply of strikebreakers, private and public police forces, and eventually court-ordered injunctions, companies were able to put down hundreds of strikes during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{44} It must have seemed a cruel irony, indeed, when Harper’s Weekly condemned the nationwide railroad strike of 1877 by asking, “What is the difference between civilization and barbarism, between America and Central Africa, but law, and the redress of grievances . . . by prescribed legal methods?”\textsuperscript{45}

In all these cases, symbolic discourses about universal laws and horizons took root through and reinforced the “necessity” of disciplinary and debilitating micro-level relationships and practices. These examples begin to sketch the spatial, temporal, and bodily dimensions of habitus formation during the rise of corporate capitalism. Millions of farmers, wage laborers, and unemployed workers knew the uneven qualitative results of an era in which “all that was solid melted into thin air.” The disruption of everyday

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Quoted in Matthew Frye Jacobson, \textit{Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 53.\textsuperscript{43} Lloyd calls this the “public and repeated menace that other workingmen would be brought in by force to take their livelihood away from them.” See Pollack, \textit{Populist Mind}, 420.\textsuperscript{44} Sanders, 56; Nace, 125.\textsuperscript{45} Quoted in Jacobson, 168. I address the racial implications of this quote below.
spatial and temporal coordinates destabilized habitus and demobilized the dispositions through which people had previously negotiated and shaped the world around them. But corporate culture also required that habitus be restructured. Wolin has argued that capitalist time, with its rhythms of “normalized agitation,” seeks to be an empty time—tied to homogenized spaces and void of particular biographies and histories that might disrupt its overarching course.  

The coordination of continental time zones may seem like a mocking outgrowth of capitalism, but the more pervasive centralization of time and space during the era was ominous in its own right. New modes of power tore bodies literally out of old places, local tempos, and particular horizons and reconstructed them in a centralizing spatial and temporal matrix that promised universal progress. Of course, this matrix had differential vectors, a new set of signposts laying out “obligatory routes and impassable barriers” of space and time. At its zenith were the corporations that blew away limits on capital accumulation and mobility, the railroad companies that reconfigured national cartographies, and the creditors who revolutionized patterns of land ownership. All were able to manipulate the rapid change that was one of the vagaries of economic progress. On the underside were farmers and laborers whose daily movements carried them deeper into debt and poverty and often came to feel like the weary footfalls of an inevitable future.

Debt agitated farmers’ days with short-term and long-term anxieties, with crises and bitter resolve, with hope and despair. Wrote one farmer in staccato measure: “The time comes to pay, I ask for a few days. No I can’t wait; must have the money. If I can’t get the money, I have the extreme pleasure of seeing my property taken and sold by the iron handed money loaner while my family and I suffer.” And yet, as failure to pay out became a ritual, as millions of farmers lost their land, the anxieties and disruptions of life—and suffering itself—came to appear inevitable. A farmer from Texas wrote, “The same old Tale of years, is the Cotton Gone, the money is all gone, two. one greate Discouragin fact here is so many Farmers dont own theire Farms . . . And all tell me the same Hard Tale money all gone.” Farmers thus found themselves in a grim, hermetic story that was, increasingly, not of their own making. The Same Hard Tale of their pasts loomed in their horizons. What they had to look forward to was a futurity of the same, as the hegemony of a single principle of market utopia worked itself out in the daily anxieties that structured their movements and captured their imaginations. Of course, Bryan was partially right: these experiences of discontent would become the seeds of Populism. As farmers were left out of the utopian vision of economic and scientific progress, many did develop powerful critiques of corporate culture. “In an age of progress and forward motion,” writes Goodwyn, Populists “had come to suspect that

48 W. M. Taylor to editor, Farmer’s Alliance (Lincoln), 10 January 1891, Nebraska Historical Society, reprinted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 34.
49 J. C. Peoples to A. W. Buchanan, 12 December 1890, J. A. Rose Papers, The University of Texas Library, Texas Archives Division, reprinted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 22.
Horatio Alger was not real.\textsuperscript{50} Bourdieu reminds us, however, that as cultural myths inscribe themselves on bodies and psyches, the emergence of critique, let alone collective action, is anything but inevitable.

Indeed, the Same Hard Tale of the past promised a futurity of the same because it was told through deep body practices that habitually precluded alterity.\textsuperscript{51} Critiques of alienation were widespread among both farmers and wage laborers during the industrial era. An editorial in the \textit{Southern Mercury}, for example, bemoaned the fact that working-class people were beginning to lose their capacities as moral and political beings, and instead “waking up and finding that [they] are really not flesh and blood but only a machine owned and run by capital.”\textsuperscript{52} When Populist rhetoric envisioned the totalizing reach of capital, it often did so through such striking images of dominated bodies. In one speech, Tom Watson recited a folkloric labor poem to characterize the conditions of “those bent and feeble sewing women of New York City, crouched in dreary garrets and plying their needles,” earning only thirty-seven cents for a suit of clothes: “Stitch—stitch—stitch—/ In poverty, hunger and dirt;/ Sewing at once with a double thread/ A shroud as well as a shirt.”\textsuperscript{53} What seemed inevitable to many people, then, was that the cramped and repetitive motions of their daily existence might very well carry them only

\textsuperscript{50} Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 552.

\textsuperscript{51} In addition to their debts to Wolin and Bourdieu, the readings in this paragraph and surrounding ones are influenced by Karl Polanyi’s \textit{The Great Transformation}.

\textsuperscript{52} Quoted in Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 372.

to their deaths. Alliance leader Jay Burrows describes a kind of moral and physical death already operating in the day-to-day spaces and practices of capitalism:

Take a man for instance who labors hard from fourteen to sixteen hours a day to obtain the bare necessaries of life. He eats his bacon and potatoes in a place which might rather be called a den than a home; and then, worn out, lies down and sleeps. He is brutalized both morally and physically. He has no ideas, only propensities. He has no beliefs, only instincts. He does not, often cannot, read. His contact with other people is only the relation of servant to master, of a machine to its director. How can you reach this man, how kindle the divine spark which is torpid in his soul, when he knows that it is greed that enforces the material labor that is crushing him down, when he feels that it is the wage system that is stealing the fruits of his toil and abasing and enslaving him?

Burrows’ dystopic rhetoric exaggerates, even offends. But if society can deny the slavery of millions, he exhorts, “Who cares how soon the end may come”? Burrows wanted his readers to see and feel the everyday processes through which the brute force of capital disposes people to radical forms of isolation, automatism, cynicism, and deference. The torpor brought on by capitalism suggests a kind of morbid suspension of life itself, lacking any of the buoyancy that enables playful work at the limits of our attachments. Quite the opposite, Burrows describes beings with an almost singular responsiveness, day-in and day-out, to a futurity of the same. Beings who become desensitized, bodily and psychically, to others and to alternative narratives, rhythms, spaces, temporalities—that is, to alternative sources of imagination.

Farmers and workers were, in these same repetitive movements, distracted from the political roots of their hardships. As we have seen, economic power was able to naturalize itself—and so to make itself a political non-issue—by establishing a
relationship between the most minute, habitual practices in everyday lives and attendant narratives about the inevitable laws of progress. Bourdieu has shown how everyday practice itself comes to act as a kind of authority in our lives. We adjust our expectations to familiar routines—the deepening ruts of debt, the stitch-stitch-stitch of hunger, the mumbled exchanges of deference—that begin to take on the feel and appearance of objective reality. Moreover, even as they destabilized many old local routines, the new modes of economic power were able to feed off traditional customs and authorities in order to make drastic new realities appear more familiar. Writing on the blend of social Darwinism and laissez-faire economics, Wiebe encapsulates this thought: “Equal opportunity for each man; credit for hard work, frugality, and dedication; a premium upon efficiency; a government that minded its own business; a belief in society’s progressive movement; these and many more read like a catalogue of mid-nineteenth-century virtues.”

And yet, corporate capitalism would pervert these values to reconfigure turn-of-the-century America from a society that protected local autonomy to one that pursued a neo-Hamiltonian dream of national wealth and glory. Economic power thus hid its political roots, in part, by manipulating conceptions of the political itself. As national interest during the Gilded Age elided with wealth to an unprecedented degree, the rights and duties of membership in the polity were increasingly transferred to private economic spaces and practices in which each could contribute to the national good. Economic

54 Wiebe, 136.
citizenship carried a universal horizon of equal opportunity, and a blend of old and new normative explanations for the material inequality of those who failed to produce their share. Many Populists understood that revolting against these material and ideological shifts would, in turn, require politicizing the economy—and that doing so would entail regaining control over the levers of everyday life and national politics.

In both realms, however, the movement would face nearly insurmountable challenges in the form of deeply entrenched social divides. Politics itself had become the arena of the “bloody shirt,” in which the Civil War replayed itself viscerally around sectional issues and loyalties. The post-war period ushered in an era of “voting as they shot,” with the exception of urban immigrants, themselves entrenched in ethnic machine politics. The Republican Party became the bulwark of northern commercial interests, though northern white farmers joined along sectional lines. Blacks in the North, along with most southern blacks, also kept their loyalties to the Party of Lincoln, despite its waning attention to Reconstruction and black rights. The Democratic Party remained steeped in the symbolism of the Lost Cause, which attracted the allegiance of all classes of white southerners. Nostalgia for the Solid South continued to trump class interests, even as the party of the plain people fell into the hands of the Bourbon elite.

As a result of these social divisions, economic grievances that might have been, and later became, the basis of common action in the electoral realm were overpowered by

55 Northern immigrants fit precariously into the racial and sectional binaries that structured America’s historical and social imagination, but for reasons I’ll discuss shortly, they increasingly came to be defined and to define themselves in relation to it.
56 Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 5-10.
sectional ideologies that, with violent memory and resolve, would not recognize those beyond their borders. The logic of politics seemed to promise its own futurity of the same, as the bloody divides of the past cordoned off present bodies and imaginations, structuring a political horizon that appeared to hold few alternatives. Indeed, many political-economic movements found the limits of their organizing in these sectional divides. The Greenback Party of the 1870s and 1880s could find few rhetorical daggers to make its economic doctrines stand up against the affective power of the “bloody shirt.”\(^{57}\) Trade unions, under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor after 1886, limited their vision to winning rights and bargaining power against railroad companies and new manufacturing giants. And while the Farmer’s Alliance and the Knights of Labor understood that structural economic reforms would require national political power, they refused early on to let sectional politics fracture their tenuous producer coalitions.\(^{58}\)

They were more ambivalent in their attention to the fault lines of race. The power of white supremacy continued to run deep and even gained in sophistication, permeating white imaginaries, penetrating the lives of blacks, and spreading into urban immigrant society. The New South movement, comprised largely of urban professionals, gave white supremacy credence as a modern and scientific doctrine. Since racial distinction was rooted in evolutionary biology, it contended, progressive development for whites and blacks alike mandated not only strict segregation, but also recognition that “the white race must dominate forever.” This was the message that Atlanta Constitution editor

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\(^{57}\) Goodwyn makes this argument in *Democratic Promise*, 16-17.

\(^{58}\) On labor politics during the era, see Sanders, 30-55.
Henry W. Grady delivered at the 1888 Texas State Fair, to twenty-five thousand farmers who listened to his words “with rapt attention and keenest delight.” He delivered a similar speech a year later at an official gathering of the Georgia Farmer’s Alliance, to another crowd of some twenty thousand farmers.\(^{59}\) For white farmers, drawn to Populism along class lines, old Confederate loyalties and post-Reconstruction incitements of racial solidarity resonated as if they were second nature. This would have implications for the People’s Party’s efforts to win white farmers away from the Democrats, as well as for its own implications in the resurgence of legalized racism in the Jim Crow era.

For blacks, these mass spectacles of white supremacy were reinforced by pervasive segregation, disempowerment, violence, and terror in day-to-day life. In the 1890s, segregation laws took effect in railroad passenger cars, and loud calls were made for segregation in all public transport, schools, theaters, restaurants, and more.\(^{60}\) Blacks were de facto banned from serving on juries or playing any role in local law enforcement. Instead, newspapers openly advocated disenfranchisement, and white supremacist groups formed across the South to eliminate the black vote by any means necessary.\(^{61}\) Matthew Jacobson lists several of these means, taken from Louisiana Congressional reports on the election of 1876: “‘whipping and other violence’; ‘intimidation’; acts of ‘unjustifiable mischief’ (including whites ‘firing several shots in the evening against a colored church’); the organization of rifle clubs; and the nightriding activities of white-

\(^{59}\) This account, which includes Grady’s quote and a quote from local press reports, is given in Postel, 175.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

supremacist ‘bulldozers’ and ‘regulators’ carrying out ‘bloody and cowardly massacres,’ ‘whipping, hanging, shooting, and driving off colored Republicans.’”

Farmers who engaged openly in the economic mobilizations of the Colored Farmer’s Alliance (CFA) faced similar terror. In 1889, black farmers in Leflore County, Mississippi boycotted local merchants to trade with a white Alliance store in nearby Durant. After a public demonstration by the farmers, whites responded with a massacre that killed over a hundred CFA members and their families. When the Colored Alliance called a nationwide cotton-pickers strike in 1891, it led to a wave of firings and a manhunt that ended in the lynching of at least fifteen strike organizers. Neither of these economic revolts received support from white Alliance members. Against this backdrop, Michael Kazin’s blunt assessment of black participation in Populism seems almost an understatement: “Black farmers and laborers,” he writes, “had to be extremely courageous to join a rebellion against the Bourbon Democrats who controlled the land, businesses, and local governments on which the very survival of African-Americans depended.”

If the late nineteenth century saw a hardening of the black-white binary that had long structured historical and social imaginations in the United States, industrialization also led to a profound shift in the meaning of whiteness itself. The term Anglo-Saxon took on new import for many whites, as unprecedented numbers of immigrants brought

62 Jacobson, 152-53.
64 Postel, 180.
65 Kazin, 41.
Celtic, Slavic, Hebraic, Iberian, and Mediterranean languages, religions, and customs to America. The result, according to Jacobson, was a “fracturing of monolithic whiteness” not only in elite social Darwinist circles, but also in “literature, visual arts, caricature, political oratory, penny journalism, and other myriad venues of popular culture.”

Whiteness was now perceived in shades—or rather, in physical traits, group behaviors, and character dispositions—indicating not only skin color, but also degree of freedom, level of civilization, and devotion to Christianity. The newest immigrants represented “beaten men from beaten races,” who were not fit for self-care and self-government. The Irish were “savages” of “poor stock,” and their “inherited organic imperfection” made them “too lazy to work, self-indulgent, impudent, and dissipated.” Slavic immigrants were “changeable in mood and in effort—now exalted, now depressed, melancholy, and fatalistic.” Italians were “sneaking and cowardly,” having brought to America “the lawless passions [and] the cutthroat practices” of their native country.

This new white supremacy was as visceral as the old. Many urban dwellers were habitually patterned, through day-to-day interactions and discourses, to see racialized differences within whiteness that would be imperceptible today. Metaphorically and affectively, these differences could be felt in the body politic. Eugenic discourses were in their embryonic stages by 1891, when Henry Cabot Lodge fretted about the decivilizing effects of those “races most alien to the body of the American people.”

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66 Jacobson, 41-43.
67 Ibid. 73.
68 These quotes are taken, respectively, from Jacobson, 72, 48-49, 80, 56-57.
69 Ibid. 77-78.
twentieth century, immigrants from southern and central Europe, not to mention Asia, were considered thoroughly indigestible: “the stomach of the body politic was filled to bursting with peoples swallowed whole whom [the nation’s] digestive juices do not digest.”\textsuperscript{70} For many working-class whites who claimed Anglo-American origins, the arrival of millions of new immigrants during the industrial era was more a matter of hunger than indigestion. The problem, according to one labor editor from Pittsburgh, was that “Slavs and ‘Tally Annes’ . . . Hungarians and Chinamen” were “black sheep,” whom the industrialists could easily manipulate as strike breakers.\textsuperscript{71} New European immigrants, for their part, cultivated various “street-level nationalisms,” defining themselves against each other, but especially against the black and Chinese laborers to whom they were unfavorably compared.\textsuperscript{72} Looking to attract working class support, the Knights of Labor and the Farmers’ Alliance backed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It was primarily in the Northwest that Chinese immigrants competed directly for work with miners, railroad hands, and tenant farmers. But their specter alone spread fear and revulsion across the country: the perceived deference of “slave Coolies” and their willingness to work for “starvation wages” threatened to “degrade all white working people to the abject condition of a servile class.”\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Kazin, 35.
\textsuperscript{72} Jacobson, 50-62, 159.
\textsuperscript{73} These quotes are taken from Kazin, 36; and Jacobson, 158-59.
Though its manifestations were unequal, and its targets often misdirected, the fear of domination and abjection were palpable for working-class people of all races, ethnicities, and genders in late nineteenth-century America. It was in era in which unprecedented modes of capital power, elitist economic and scientific ideologies, and ingrained and innovative forms of racism gained control of the economic, social, and political fields in which habitus is formed and contested. Those on the underside of progress often suffered bodily and psychic disorientation amidst recurring economic and social crises: the dislocation of farmers from customary spaces, times, and rhythms; white supremacist backlash against newly freed black Americans; cities churning with the strife of mass unemployment and growing ethnic conflict; women stretched between the capitalist domination of the workplace and the patriarchal domination of the household; millions falling into aching ruts of deprivation and hunger. These uneven and unpredictable horizons of opportunity, and their racialized and gendered markers, came to define permissible relationships, to orient fears and anxieties, and to structure affective expectations and responses. As routes and routines narrowed, many people did lose significant control over the basic bodily practices that defined their everyday lives.

And yet, amidst the widespread crises and great upheavals of the day, infinite were the gaps and fissures in habitus that could spark social, economic, and political transformations on the scale ushered in by Populism. One of the most powerful of these, the “Great Upheaval” of 1877, came on the eve of the movement, when thousands of workers and entire towns participated in a mass wave of railroad strikes spreading from West Virginia and Baltimore through the Midwest and all the way to San Francisco.
Understanding how the movement cultivated these and many smaller disadjustments, as well as many crucial continuities, is the work of this chapter. How, against staggering odds, did it generate alternative political and ethical imaginations of democracy? How did it emerge from the contested fields of power and powerlessness that were shaping societal trends toward corporate culture, administrative governance, and racist imperialism, as well as the reform politics of the Progressive Era? Populism would struggle over these fields and over the habitus of working people, cultivating countercurrent traditions, spaces, practices, institutions, and visions. But it would also, for better and for worse, be limited by them. At times, the strained discourses and disjunctive experiences of capitalist modernization provoked incisive critiques of the incipient mergers between capitalism, technology, and the state. More often, movement actors remained profoundly myopic to their implications in modes of economic and social domination.

The paradox of imagining Populism thus resembles the paradox of imagining America. Just as America is the product of a discontinuous history of contested cultural authorities, narratives, forms, practices, and dispositions, so too was Populism really many overlapping and discordant populisms. The movement had its share of centralizing discourses, practices, and institutions: I’ll argue that some of these were crucial to the vitality of its democratizing spaces and practices; some were racist, nativist, and gendered; and many were, in profoundly constraining ways, both. But the movement also encouraged and enabled working people to wield control over the fundamental structures of their common life. In doing so, it built a mass insurgency in which actors—in diverse
localities and networks, across multiple and sometimes divergent coalitions, with visions that could be radically democratic or severely reactionary—took it upon themselves to imagine and organize Populism.

Wolin argues that “democracy should be grounded in a populist culture…not because those who live it are pure, unprejudiced, and unfailingly altruistic. Rather, it is because it is a culture that has not been defined by the urge to dominate and that has learned that existence is a cooperative venture over time.” This seems almost right. Wolin sees populism as a “culture of survival” because it strains to care for those “living beings and mundane artifacts” that are endangered by “hard times in a changing world.” As Lloyd tells us, a world that is “enriched by thousands of generations of toilers and thinkers” can indeed grow “heavy for many years with the weary footfalls of the people.” Wolin urges us to ask how “the people” can and do recurrently emerge as authors of their common world, by cultivating the historical and political arts of innovation and conservation. But what would this entail if the “body of the commonality” is both inexhaustibly enriched and often utterly weary? How could practices of conservation and innovation care for the bodies that “the people” bring to politics—bodies that are regulated and controlled, bodies that have also inherited the arts of domination? How did Populism care for the “body of the commonality” as a body that contains dispositions toward both deference and domination? How did the movement cultivate co-existence among the contradictory and irreducible habitus that have struggled unevenly, over time, to promise democracy in America? How did it work at the edges of its own universe to promise democracy with those “living beings and mundane artifacts” it could only barely
perceive? If, finally, Populism’s own promise of democracy contained many lies, what story can it tell radical democratic politics today?

Caring for the Body of the Commonwealth: Imagining Populism

When a group of farmers gathered in Lampasas County, Texas, in September 1877, to create a new economic self-help organization, they hoped to interrupt the course of time. They sought to divert “the day that was rapidly approaching” when concentrated capital would “constitute a power that would enslave posterity.” With this beginning, the gathering situated itself in the context of an inexhaustible but precarious history of radical democratic struggle in America—a history in which those who have been disabused of the promise of freedom, and often never held it to begin with, insert themselves into the struggle to build and care for a world in common. The gathering of farmers also situated itself in relation to the myriad other democratic insurgencies that were emerging around it. Although the Farmer’s Alliance became one of Populism’s main organs, and one that I’ll emphasize in this section, it by no means had a capital on radical democratic beginnings during the late-nineteenth century. Similar gatherings took place across the country, surfacing massive discontent and organizing constructive visions regarding state intervention, corporate regulation, socialist ownership, labor rights, electoral reform, economic and political equality for women, enforcement of new protections and freedoms claimed by African Americans, and more. These different

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74 Lampasas farmer J. R. Allen, quoted in Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 33-34.
movements, which would build the multiform coalitions of Populism, drew on distinct and overlapping traditions of discourse, practice, and striving.

But in relation to totalizing forms of power that were taking root in everyday lives, how was the movement able to cultivate alternative histories to generate new imaginings of power, freedom, democracy, political economy, progress, and America? Which authorities inflected Populism, what new stories were told, and through what discursive and bodily practices did they emerge? How did the movement open spaces in which unlike people could care for the body of the commonwealth, not only by meeting the critical needs of individuals and social groups, but also by making promises to each other to build better forms of freedom and democracy for future generations? At the same time, how did many actors struggle with dispositions of domination and deference in bodies that had long been practiced in routines of class, race, and gender hierarchy? Finally, how did the movement negotiate the tensions between, on the one hand, its need to organize disparate strands of discontent and striving into a coalition that could wield effective power, and on the other, its efforts to build generative elasticity into the spaces, practices, and relationships that could democratize that power?

By addressing these questions, I elucidate how Populism developed in relation both to the dominant cultural forces it sought to change and to its own unruly groups, coalitions, and counter-movements. In a Bakhtinian sense, Populism was a movement that lacked a center. Its diverse strands consolidated around contending organizational bases, and even organizations such as the Farmer’s Alliance and the Knights of Labor were shot through with contradictory visions and strategies in regional and local chapters.
and across differences of class, race, nationality, and gender. As a result, the movement operated by building institutions, relationships, discourses, practices, and dispositions that could centralize and decentralize power and imagination in various combinations, according to different ethical and political needs. I discuss these dynamics by grouping Populist organizing into four rubrics, which describe its practices of contesting historical traditions, inflecting translocal narratives, cultivating democratic aesthetics, and building dynamic institutions.

Contesting Historical Traditions

In this section, I sketch several of the historical traditions that animated and lent authority to Populism in its campaign to disrupt and reconfigure the dominant cultural trends of its day. Prominent discourses—laissez-faire market competition, the social doctrine of the survival of the fittest, the ethic of quantitative value, and the scientific measurement of truth—diminished the past as a source of cultural authority. Instead, they sought to standardize social life and unify it according to universal principles and mechanisms of individual and national progress. The new modes of power that concealed themselves in these discourses were, to an unprecedented degree, colonizing the everyday spaces and practices through which subjects develop habits of speaking, listening, and responding. But even as the heteroglossia of everyday life was being compressed, many people held on to memories of the long histories of struggle contained in words like freedom, democracy, and America. Remnants of these struggles were embedded in the customs, rituals, stories, vocabularies, relational practices, rhetorical styles, social
overtones, dispositions, and gestures that constitute and traverse social groups. They could be found where Lloyd situated Lincoln, along with generations of toilers and thinkers: “hidden in the body of the people, free to emerge and rise” when properly tended.75 These remnants of other pasts were invoked, reiterated, and accented on countless occasions—strategically, passionately, or unwittingly; by recognized leaders or by the hundreds of thousands who collectively labored, deliberated, demonstrated, instituted, and carried the movement. I paint in broad brushstrokes the main currents and some of the countercurrents of tradition that informed Populism. My concern is partly to evaluate the ideas that enabled and constrained the ethical and political imagining of the movement. But I understand these in relation to the repertoires of discursive and spatial practice that cultivated contending habitus of anticipation and response, along with contested dispositions of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and imagining.

America’s messianic and commonwealth traditions were the main strands of grassroots democratic inheritance threading their way through the discourse and practice of Populism. These strands, which emerged in the incipient stages of the revolutionary era, had repeatedly fluoresced since then in the material and psychic life of the nation: through decades of “great awakening” in the early nineteenth century and again in the 1870s and 1880s; in the numerous evangelical associations that formed around issues of charity, abolition, and temperance; through the eras of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, which elevated the producer class to the height of civic morality; and in the

trade unionism that began to organize working-class men and women in the 1830s and 1840s. These traditions were impressed into the deep strata of the languages, infrastructures, relationships, and horizons that organized the everyday lives of most people, and they played a significant role in shaping working-class and middle-class expectations about the course of industrialization and modernization. Each tradition provided its own set of authoritative discourses and practices and its own powerful resources for mobilizing the discontent and aspirations of working people. But they also combined in different ways, to intensify grassroots sentiment or to hold together loose coalitions of clashing interests—for example, the largely Protestant and middle-class advocates of temperance and the working-class immigrants who toiled in the underworld of urban life. As Kazin writes of the “unstable amalgam of social groups and political organizations” that comprised Populism, they could agree on at least two things: a powerful critique of the cataclysmic tyranny of corporate culture and the “urgent need for a messianic awakening to bring about the sweeping changes required.”

Even these shared messianic and commonwealth authorities, however, would be diffracted through the many disparate social groups who inherited, spoke, and practiced them.

Messianic revivalism was, as we’ve seen, one of the earliest traditions of radicalism in colonial America. By many accounts crucial to the cultures of egalitarian republicanism and grassroots insurgency that enabled and shaped the Revolution,

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76 This paragraph is largely informed by Kazin’s discussion of the historical bases of populist rhetoric in *Populist Persuasion*, 10-25, 30. However, as will become clear, I emphasize a broader commonwealth tradition that includes his more narrow discussion of producerism. In this regard, I am influenced by Harry Boyte’s *Commonwealth*, 15-34.
messianism has repeatedly stitched and overlaid “patterns for radical expression” into the habitus of diverse social groups. Its various manifestations—in different Protestant denominations, in black and white revivalism, and even in Enlightenment and civic enthusiasm—can be described by their shared dimensions of thought and their similar repertoires of discursive and spatial practice. In terms of content, the righteousness of messianism was historically anti-authoritarian, anti-elitist, and anti-materialist, but it could also be moralistic and exclusive in its efforts to purify society. Its emphasis on individual agency co-existed with notions of charity, fellowship, and egalitarianism, but it could also overlap with reactionary nativism. The Great Awakening of the 1880s, amidst perceived cultures of individualism and corruption, emphasized social egalitarian themes: the collective nature of sin and the value of altruistic community over individual greed. These themes were developed in relation to and ran throughout Populist discourse and practice, deployed not only by members of Protestant denominations, but also by labor organizers and union workers who never stepped foot into church. Of course, the danger with this vocabulary was that “loose” women, “drunken” immigrants, and “scheming” African-Americans could be construed as corrupt elements of society. Such attributions were not uncommon within the movement. The more fundamental impulse of Populist messianism, however, was to bring ethical discourse into politics in a society that increasingly measured progress and prosperity using quantitative values and scientific
methods. In doing so, the movement also hoped to politicize the moral and cultural authorities that guided collective life.77

The messianic tradition has repeatedly mobilized mass social movements through practices of centralizing and decentralizing power and authority. Populism inherited the insights and dynamics of messianic discourse, many of its associational networks, the routes traversed between them, and even the infrastructure of thousands of churches built during the Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. This was an inheritance in which bodies gather and disperse in profoundly different ways than intended and regulated by capital. I trace the remnants of these movements and spaces within Populism in the next section, but want to sketch a few contrasting themes here in relation to the broader messianic tradition.

Capitalism assigns bodies to categorical positions within social status, space, and time. This results in an unequal and relatively immobile structuring of the routes and barriers of everyday movement. These constraints on movement are reinforced spatially and temporally, for many, by conditions of segregation, isolation, and normalized agitation and by dispositions toward deference, all of which combine to perpetuate a futurity of the same. By contrast, messianic movements were born and carried in the dispersal of itinerant preachers and the gathering of mass congregations across lines of territory, jurisdiction, hierarchy, and difference. Its decentralizing movements sought to build new relationships, coalitions, and counter-institutions. Its centralizing movements

77 Kazin, 33, 40.
drew the dispossessed into spaces of speaking and listening, incited them to censor arbitrary authorities and abusive powers, and engaged them in collective practices of emoting, demonstrating, deliberating, and instituting. These were consolidations that disposed participants toward provocation and response, toward critique and enthusiasm, toward judgment and action.

The emotional oratory and enthusiasm of messianic awakening generated yet another dynamic of gathering and dispersal. In one register, revivalist rhetoric drew sharp lines of community and insurgency. Its cries for deliverance not only appealed to transcendent universal ideals, but also beseeched listeners to act in the name of good versus evil. The all-or-nothing quality of this rhetoric is captured plainly in these words by Jacob Coxey to his small army of unemployed workers, during a well-publicized 1894 march on Washington: “This movement will either mark the second coming of Christ or be a total failure.” Many movement actors envisioned sweeping popular participation and dramatic governmental response on the side of good, or they expected certain enslavement to the evil forces of monopoly and plutocracy. Messianic discourse thus draws powerful lines indicating the sources of moral authority in society, and it calls its followers to lay their bodies on the line.

But it does not always hold bodies taught. In another register, messianic enthusiasm threatens to transgress every line that distinguishes bodies, subjects, groups, spaces, and times. Enthusiastic speech and gesture engender dynamics of

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78 Ibid. 32.
incommunicability and glossolalia in the production of common sense. Unlike the radical dislocations and normalized agitations of capital, the disorientation of enthusiasm creates a buoyant suspension between bodies gathered together around common objects, needs, and desires. The momentary collapse of boundaries enables subjects to slip into the spatial and temporal habitus of others, and thereby to stretch their senses, dispositions, and affects in relation to each other and their surroundings. These moments would occur on numerous occasions in the spaces of Populism, building elasticity into the interstices of its fragile and contentious coalitions. In this sense, loosening the sedimented barriers that divide people would enhance the interactions and negotiations through which the movement gathered its power and authority.

Messianism had historically spilled over the lines between religion and politics: its specific content reflected whatever social and political issues beset the day, and its rhetorical style, egalitarian ethos, and insurgent practices animated the repeated fluorescence of grassroots democracy. Its development was particularly intertwined with that of the commonwealth tradition that also dated back to the incipient stages of the Revolution. Harry Boyte has described this tradition as one that combines discourses and practices of radical republicanism with a respect for the social nature of property. It surfaces when insurgent citizens and denizens collectively question who wields power over the infrastructure of common life, and when they experiment with ways to democratize that power.\(^\text{79}\) Commonwealth movements have tended strong rhetorics and

\(^\text{79}\) Boyte, 17-18.
disposition of aversion to monopolistic political economy, and they historically gathered around a recurring ethos of producerism. One of the most prominent strains of commonwealth politics into the early twentieth century, producerism provided moral affirmation that the manual labor and civic loyalty of producing classes were indispensable to the nation. Producerism generally co-existed well with ideals of individual enterprise and often sought to protect them. But it also resonated with social democratic forms of government, which use the market-shaping and infrastructure-building capacities of the state to affect a more equal distribution of wealth and power. Populism, for example, envisioned overlapping forms of political economy, comprised of free enterprise, cooperative institutions and practices, and state regulation of public services like transportation and communication.80

The ideal of a producer commonwealth authorized the “declaration of principles” of the People’s Party in its 1892 Omaha Platform: “We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with whose class it originated.”81 Populism thus reiterated the birthright of democracy through a historical counter-narrative, one that would be capacious enough to evoke the dramatic role of working people in catalyzing the Revolution, contesting its dominant currents, and creating counter-current discourses, practices, and institutions of democracy. The commonwealth tradition was repeatedly mobilized in rhetorical efforts to contradict and diffract dominant ideological discourses about the “laws of the market” and the “survival of the

80 Sanders, 411.
81 Pollack, Populist Mind, 61.
fittest.” In countless speeches, editorials, and everyday conversations, movement actors contested the mantra of “overproduction” that was used to deflect complaints about inequality, poverty, and hunger. “I will tell you where the overproduction is,” charged Tom Watson in a speech to a union of locomotive firemen. “It is in the cold-hearted and hard-hearted men who will not see anything that does not belong to their class!” In an age when capital rapaciously sought to expand its global markets while ignoring the severe hunger in America, these words may have conjured images like those of the insurgent artisans who, in 1779, forcibly challenged Philadelphia merchant and Revolutionary leader Robert Morris for shipping bread outside the city during a time of crisis. The unruly bodies that were everywhere mobilizing in contrapuntal step with Watson’s words raised the specter of a long historical struggle over public ownership and moral economy that defied the natural laws of the market.

Meanwhile, other Populists picked apart the social doctrine of the survival of the fittest, on which monopolistic privilege rested its legitimacy. “The survival of the fittest is the government of brutes and reptiles,” Lewelling claimed, “and such philosophy must give place to a government which recognizes human brotherhood.” Taking a more subtle approach, Lloyd declared his support for the “survival of the strongest,” calling it “the whole idea of State and of society.” But for Lloyd, it was the “stronger virtues” that must be preserved, along with the contributions of those who aspire to “the self-interest

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82 Ibid. 426.
83 Ibid. 50.
of the community." Populism thus sought to contest the boundaries of political discourse in America, re-igniting the insatiable questions of freedom and common good that had long animated it, and in doing so, politicizing the economic and scientific laws of progress. Its discursive deflections and inflections sought to recover, break open space for, and cultivate responsiveness to the hidden overtones, energies, dreams, and possibilities of commonwealth.

These words and resonances had their limits. The commonwealth tradition also contains discourses whose mode and content authorize prejudice and exclusion. Most notable here is its language of “manly” self-reliance, self-defense, and non-deference in a dog-eats-dog world of abusive power and arbitrary authority. This language was mobilized to cultivate dispositions of toughness that would fortify bodies and psyches in the struggle against the looming tyranny of capital, but it could also harden subjects and social groups to any forces they perceived as threatening to their strength or survival. The combined rhetoric of republicanism and producerism often omitted women, who were variously esteemed too delicate, pure, or passionate for politics and whose actual toil signified the poverty and dependence of their husbands and fathers. These discourses were also mobilized to exclude blacks and immigrants on gendered terms, or by using animalistic or childlike metaphors to undermine their fitness for self-governance. 

But the day-to-day reality was often that blacks, immigrants, and women were suffering, working, demanding, and demonstrating in spaces and through modes that

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84 Ibid. 69.
85 Kazin, 14, 35.
overlapped with those men who claimed both Anglo-Saxon lineage and the reigns of commonwealth discourse. Even as material and psychic lines were drawn and guarded within and between these social groups, the movement’s collective body was forced to confront its numerous jagged edges. Boyte offers the Bakhtinian insight that words like “commonwealth,” and “the people” who comprise it, do not represent abstract, absolute, or even indeterminate categories. Rather, they are based on “the idea of inheritance” and embedded in the body of a “historically and culturally constituted group, its memories, origins, common territory, and ways of life.” During the nineteenth century, he reminds us, the body of the commonwealth was far from uniform, coherent, or contained. Rather, there was a “fiery contest” surrounding the word “commonwealth”: “Whatever people meant when they used it, ‘commonwealth’ referred to the fact that what was being contested mattered, in some deeply communal, supra-individual way. It conveyed passion, even political life or death.” As we’ll see, the many institutional organs of Populism made explicit efforts, of varying quality and degree, to enable that contest at the edges of its own collective body.

But they were also confronted in myriad subtle and direct ways by women, blacks, and immigrants, who drew on distinctive traditions of democratic insurgency and striving both to appropriate messianic and commonwealth discourse and to accent the broader discourses of freedom and democracy in America. I discuss the impact of these confrontations on Populism in the next sections, but here I just mention some of the

86 Boyte, 31, xii.
competing traditions of narrative, practice, and habitus that animated and inflected the movement. If commonwealth and producer traditions often excluded women rhetorically, they were indebted to the political roles women had claimed for themselves through histories of working-class struggle: participating in land and food riots, signing and carrying petitions, supporting and enforcing boycotts, joining trade unions, and so on. In addition, women of different classes and races had repeatedly carved new social and political spaces, forged resurgent and shape-shifting networks, and inserted themselves into leadership roles in movements for religious revivalism, charity, abolition, and temperance—not to mention political, economic, and domestic gender equality.87 When African Americans took up the struggle for social, economic, and political freedom during the late nineteenth century, they had already inherited long historical memory and experience in appropriating the discourse of liberty. Their everyday language and rituals contained the plurality of hidden transcripts and infra-political repertoires of resistance that emerged under the domination of slavery and continued amidst the intimidation and terror of white supremacy.88 Many could also recount narratives of the countless open insurgencies that had brought an end to slavery: everyday acts of open defiance, hundreds of uprisings and rebellions, many thousands of escapes, abolitionist speeches and writings, and fighting in the war of emancipation. More immediately, black activism was sustained as African Americans inserted themselves into politics by forming local institutions and achieving electoral victories, and it took practical and ideological

87 Nash, 133-146, 232-37.
authority from developing intellectual and social cultures of black self-help.\textsuperscript{89} Finally, immigrants had access to numerous traditions of working-class struggle: including Catholic social justice theology and competing strands of socialism, anarchism, and syndicalism. But immigrant communities also worried about the vitality, even the survival, of those ways of life that constituted their cultural identities. Many cultivated multi-faceted spaces and practices, evident in Finnish hall socialism and Scandinavian folk school traditions, which combined cultural education and preservation with economic and political cooperation and agitation.\textsuperscript{90}

This cursory glance suggests the multitude of living authorities, cultural resources, and group capacities contained in the competing habitus of Populism. As different groups mobilized the infrastructure and discourses they had at hand, and strained to recover hidden cultural roots that could enable new routes of movement and imagination, Populist discourse pulsated with strange and subversive overtones. The language of “cooperative commonwealth” was refracted time and again by actors who imagined and practiced that term as if it stood for a “maternal commonwealth,” a commonwealth that was “ripe for socialism,” or a multi-racial commonwealth of “poor whites and negroes” that could withstand the tyranny of “money power.”\textsuperscript{91} There were even contrapuntal articulations of Lloyd’s subversive vision of commonwealth, which

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\textsuperscript{90} Dirk Hoerder, \textit{American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research} (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 265-266; and Harry Boyte and Don Shelby, \textit{The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference} (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2008), 66.
\textsuperscript{91} Boyte, 25; Pollock, \textit{Populist Mind}, 444; Pollack, \textit{Populist Mind}, 50.
\end{flushright}
would protect the survival of the strongest virtue. Accented by the cadences of black poet Frances Harper in 1875, Lloyd’s declaration may have sounded something like this: “The great problem to be solved by the American people is...whether or not there is strength enough in democracy, virtue enough in our civilization and power enough in our religion to have mercy and deal justly with four millions of people lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery to the new commonwealth of freedom.” 82 With words like these—democracy, virtue, civilization, power, religion, mercy, justice, oligarchy, slavery, commonwealth, freedom—being echoed in the rhythms, routes, and exchanges of city streets, general stores, church houses, social halls, and print media across the country, the potentialities were inexhaustible to democratize political culture in America and in the spaces, practices, discourses, and relationships of Populism. But how would the movement unlock these words from the implacable routes and impassable barriers set by capitalist discourse and culture, and how could it organizing their contentious imaginings even as they often sought to disorganize the dominant discourses and cultures of Populism itself?

Inflecting Translocal Narratives

One of the most effective modes of organizing and disorganizing the potentialities of working-class power and authority was the traveling lecturer system of the Farmer’s Alliance. The lecturing system was the primary organ through which the Alliance

82 Quoted in Boyte, 25.
conducted its campaign of mass education and through which it gradually proliferated and assembled local, county, and state cooperative organizations. In this respect, it was an innovative system of education, recruitment, and organizing, which appropriated the repertoires and routes of itinerant evangelical preachers and modern political lecture circuits to pursue the collective visions and practices of building a national network of cooperative economies.93 There were lecturers at the county level, and every suballiance had its own local lecturer. These men, and a few women, would travel day after day through the remote locations of rural America and meet with farmers and their families in churches and schoolhouses. Hundreds of thousands of farmers participated in weekly or bi-weekly meetings, where they discussed alternative sources of historical authority, competing theories of political-economy, unsanctioned social and political analyses, and scientific and practical advances in agricultural production. The Alliance also had state and national lecturers, who crisscrossed thousands of miles and forty-three states and territories in the late 1880s and early 1890s, first to build its cooperative movement and then to politicize it on a national scale. In addition to politicizing its own base, the Alliance lecturing circuit was one of the primary nodes used by the People’s Party to build coalitions between farmers and other laborers in the 1890s.94

93 Even in its use of traveling lecturers to generate cooperative networks, the Farmer’s Alliance borrowed heavily from earlier resources. These included, most immediately, the cooperative movement of the Grange in the 1860s and 1870s and the smaller-scale producer and consumer cooperatives tried by the labor movement at different points and in different places from the 1850s onward. On cooperative efforts within the labor movement, see Philip Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 1: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 180-182, 418-419.
94 See Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, ##; and Postel, 49-50.
As a mode of democratizing communication, the lecturing system had its limits. It
describes one instrument of communication and a small subset of the routes and modes
through which bodies and discourses traveled in the movement. The Alliance also relied
on cooperative spaces themselves, mass encampments and parades, and local political
coalitions to generate direct conversation, education, and debate. Other organizations and
coalitions developed their own instruments and dynamics of communication. Black
farmers participated in parallel lectures, suballiances, and cooperatives, which remained
largely segregated from the white Alliance. Railroad, factory, trade, and mine workers
joined lodges or locals, and engaged members of other trades, ethnicities, religions, and
races through the coordination of joint strikes and parades. Broad-based labor
movements, most prominently the Knights of Labor, carried out education campaigns
through literacy training, traveling lecturers, dramatic societies, social halls, and reading
rooms.⁹⁵ Surrounding this heightened economic and political mobilization, the “social
question” was also on the lips of preachers and congregants in thousands of urban and
rural churches and in the revivalist meetings of the Third Great Awakening. The
movement’s variegated face-to-face settings were supplemented and fueled by the
explosion of print media and the penny press in the nineteenth century. The Farmers
Alliance alone circulated over one thousand journals, newspapers, and weeklies across
the country; these were home to education materials, reprints of speeches, local and
national news, investigative journalism, lessons and stories from cooperative

experiments, and editorials and letters from thousands of rank-and-file members. The Alliance also sponsored social science clubs, literary societies, and lending libraries.\textsuperscript{96} Likewise, the labor press generated thousands of newspapers, trade journals, local circulars, and pamphlets, and it developed a vast network of reading rooms. One of the most impressive of these, the Atlanta Union Hall and Library Association, saw eight hundred people a week make use of 350-400 daily and weekly newspapers in 1885.\textsuperscript{97}

My specific interest in the Farmer’s Alliance—as one organ in an open and irregular system of discourse—has to do with its sustained dynamic of centralizing and decentralizing knowledges and narratives through a variety of sources, sites, and scales. Fundamental to this was its implicit understanding of the relationship between habitus and imagination. For the movement to generate and harbor diverse strands of power, Alliance leaders recognized, its collective discourses would need to be constituted contextually, in relation to the everyday needs, vocabularies, practices, and attachments that shape particular investments in common problems. Radical democratic forms of power, moreover, could only be cultivated if bodies and narratives traveled across borders, opened new collective spaces, and passed through the asymmetrical prisms of difference in which meanings could be gathered, inflected, and dispersed in speech and action. What the traveling lecturers intuited and facilitated, then, was the movement of living and breathing discourse through bodies and space. The translocal dynamics of their discursive practices—which, at their best, crossed lines of class, race, ethnicity, and

\textsuperscript{96} Postel, 65. Goodwyn, 368.
\textsuperscript{97} Fink, 11.
gender—enabled actors to cultivate radical democratic forms of habitus. The traveling lecture system was not only a means to develop and sustain organizational and coalitional power. Its local and translocal instantiations were also ends in themselves—as well as, on numerous occasions, unexpected means to democratize the power of imagination.

The most important movements kindled by the traveling lecturers were perhaps the smallest in scope. For decades, millions of farmers experienced the transience of their own dislocations, and they witnessed those of friends and family who lost their farms, saw their output demands rise or their wages cut by overlords, or departed in mass numbers to other towns or cities. Many social networks and associational supports weakened. The grueling demands of commodity agriculture saw to it, in the words of Alliance lecturer S.O. Daws, that farmers led “lonely and secluded lives” and “rarely [went] beyond the limits of their own farms.” Arkansas Alliance leader W. Scott Morgan summed up the alienation of modern farm cultures: “The tendencies have been for farmers to transform themselves and families into wheat, corn and cotton producing machines.”98 The tens of thousands of local suballiances across the country became countercultural spaces, in which men and women who were trapped in patterns of anxiety and isolation could now gather to talk about the conditions of their lives. Churches and schoolhouses, in which suballiance meetings were held, at times became spaces of buoyant suspension. The storytelling that emerged was visceral: The men and women who gathered were work-worn and barefooted; the stories they collected and tended

98 Daws and Morgan are quoted in Postel, 77-78.
were, at first, of anguish and loss. Nods, murmurs, and pats of recognition were more than many received in response to daily sufferings of unproductive toil and unmet hope. Bodies riddled with anxieties of times past and times future had a moment to pause, to release their loose ends, to collect themselves among others. They had, for a moment, stepped outside the futurity of the same.

In quick time, suballiances became spaces of learning, debating, planning cooperative ventures, and engaging in local politics. But how did farmers long practiced in the isolation and competition of the market come to risk their personal livelihoods to cooperative economic ventures, which often crossed class lines and relied on the participation of people in more distant communities and counties? How could people long schooled in the ethos of limited government and self-reliance, along with proclivities toward local republicanism, bend toward radical political-economic arguments for national control over money supply, transportation, and communication? How could they hear political critiques against what often remained deep party loyalties? Or social analyses that encouraged them to build economic and political coalitions with African Americans and Catholic immigrants? Or arguments from women, whose involvement in suballiance debates and actions emboldened them to begin writing and talking openly about political, economic, and domestic equality? How could farmers hear these new vocabularies, inflections, responses, and hopes, when for decades, they had been habituated to hear mostly the sounds of their treadmill routines, the loud silences of

99 On the atmosphere of “genuine shared experience” cultivated in suballiance spaces, see Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 74-75.
complaints gone unanswered, the orthodox languages of science and economics, and the “constant iteration of statu quo! statu quo! statu quo!” echoing in the footfalls of their political representatives.  

The elasticity of movement nurtured in suballiance practices—the weekly repetition of bodies gathering together and releasing their burdens—would also generate new practices of listening and imagining. As the men and women gathered let loose their anxieties, as their voices grew more animated, as they nodded and whistled in response, their bodies took on new rhythms in which new sounds became perceptible: the sounds of others, of different perspectives, of common concern. This listening opened beyond the bounds of proximate bodies, as well, for traveling lecturers would relay stories of hardship from one locality to the next, and at times, from black farmers and immigrant laborers. Over time, farmers came to texture their own stories with the stories of both friends and strangers. Connecting the groans of bodies and localities—against this town merchant or that local rail line—they were able to interpret more systemic cries. It was in this context that they encountered and discussed unfamiliar analyses of their situations, along with specific alternative practices of trade stores, buying committees, cooperative manufacturing and insuring, and so on. Local successes were storied widely. Microscopic hopes were born. Destabilizing old social, economic, and political discourses and practices thus began at a visceral level, in desedimenting bodies and in generating new senses and sensibilities, tied to new stirrings of imagination.

The translocalism of the Alliance’s storytelling practices was the impetus for the movement’s political and ethical imagination. As stories of radical critique and insurgent hope spread across local spaces, they had practical impact: sites and bodies structured around one set of narratives became textured with new and often dissonant storylines. Local spaces became less routinely familiar, they developed shifting and edgy contours, they unlocked dynamic potentialities—thus stirring new imaginings. Translocalism reshaped the potency of the local as a site of political imagination, and it did so in a way that drew local imagining and acting beyond their more parochial confines. The most significant examples of this dynamic are the development of the Alliance cooperative network and its entry into electoral politics. The broad vision for the cooperative movement came from official leaders like national Alliance president, Charles Macune, who foresaw a system of central state exchanges that would overcome the structural limits of local cooperatives by providing credit at low rates and marketing the cash crops of every suballiance at a statewide level. But the cooperative movement thrived, when and where it did, because thousands of newly empowered suballiances took it upon themselves to pioneer innovative forms of cooperative buying and selling. It was a suballiance of Bohemian immigrants in Texas, for example, whose boycott against local merchants inspired one of the most successful tactics of the cooperative movement. In these cooperative experiments and networks, farmers came to see that “being a free and independent people,” in the words of one participant from Georgia, did not merely entail
carving out spaces for private enterprise or even local autonomy, but would require collective and even direct action on a translocal scale.\textsuperscript{101}

This included political mobilization in the electoral arena, in order to achieve structural changes that could overcome the limits of cooperatives vis-à-vis creditors who refused to do business with them, commissioners who assigned unbearable interest rates, and merchants who instigated price-cutting wars. The official position of the Alliance, backed by its more conservative leaders and by Macune, was to remain non-partisan in the electoral arena. Their reasoning, born both of experience and of political moderation, was that class antagonisms and deep party loyalties would inevitably fracture political coalitions, and by extension the cooperative movement. Local suballiances however, saw completely fit to play a heavy hand in county and state politics, by creating independent tickets and even “Alliance tickets.” Alliance members in Erath County, Texas, ran a fully county ticket against the Democrats as early as 1886. In Custer County, Nebraska, an Alliance-organized independent ticket nearly swept the field in 1890. That same year, an Alliance candidate running for office in Kansas was a farmer who lived in one of the sod houses that had become synonymous with poverty in the Great Plains; he later became the speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives. His victory was symbolic of what many farmers at the grassroots base of the Alliance were coming to learn through their experiences: the cooperative movement did indeed have the capacity to enhance the power of farmers in local and state politics. Not only did economic cooperation provide

\textsuperscript{101} Quoted in Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 122. This paragraph and the two that follow are mostly taken from Goodwyn’s account of the cooperative movement in \textit{Democratic Promise}, 110-142, 189-204. On the Bohemian merchant boycott, see Postel, 184.
farmers a reason to look beyond narrow class antagonisms and entrenched party loyalties to develop political-economic power; it created spaces and practices of collective dialogue and enterprise that could build elasticity into the limits of their political coalitions. It was thus at local and state levels that the Alliance began, despite the wishes of its leaders, to translate its radical political-economic critiques and practices into electoral efforts for structural reform.

Translocalism, then, also helped deflect universalizing tendencies in the movement’s economic and political formulations. As stories and discourses traveled, they shifted in response to local experiences and particular inflections of common terms. In Goodwyn’s account of the Alliance, its increasingly radical political-economic critique and its eventual shift into national third-party politics was ignited by the movement’s lecturers, who were “seeing too much” in their travels and becoming “altered by” their own listening to stories that stumped their stump speeches. Farmers across the country were coming to see that “economic citizenship” entailed practices of collective action, power, and imagining. But as their hardships continued and they became acutely aware of the limits of cooperative economies in relation to politically administered capital, they began to ask tough and persistent questions. Some Alliance lecturers responded in the manner of Macune, counseling patience and giving long explanations of the theory of economic cooperation. Sounding a lot like the economic scientists who acted as apologists for capital, these lecturers were turning “cooperation” itself into a natural law.

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102 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 74.
The new stirrings of imagining and striving at the Alliance’s grassroots base were being dismissed as naïve fantasies by its own leaders. Indeed, the vision of a “cooperative commonwealth” must have felt in those moments like a distant dream whose likelihood was governed by the same irrefutable rules that had given rise to present hardships. A cadre of more radical lecturers, however, responded to farmers’ gnawing questions by fostering open discussions and debates that politicized the setbacks of the cooperative movement. It was this cadre of lecturers who pushed the Alliance into national third-party politics, backed by a political-economic platform that revived its radical greenback inheritance. But for this move, the Alliance would need to develop new and intensely more difficult coalitions of consolidated power, which would further decentralize its vision of cooperative commonwealth.

The centralizing and decentralizing dynamic of translocalism was at its best when the spaces being crossed were farther apart qualitatively than the geographic distances between white Protestant farming communities. If the cooperative experience planted the seeds of a radical critique against corporate capitalism, grassroots coalitions between farmers and laborers played a crucial role in constructing a response. Beginning in 1885, a new wave of suballiances proliferated across the Alliance hotbed of Texas, amidst calls for “unity of action” with the Knights of Labor. The lofty rhetoric was backed up by mass picnics at which leaders of both organizations took the microphone; a group of several thousand farmers and lumber workers established a cooperative buying store in Erath County. Against the official positions of both organizations, the new grassroots relationships quickly gained wide public notice and developed into political coalitions.
The Knights were already engaged in a statewide boycott against the Mallory Steam Ship Line in March 1886, when railroad employees began walking off the line to protest low wages, poor working conditions, and a hostile firing of one of their members. Rank-and-file members began the Great Southwest Strike from the bottom up, forcing a recalcitrant union hierarchy to follow along. For their part, many County Alliances directly contradicted the State Alliance by passing resolutions in support of the boycott, and rank-and-file farmers came to be seen as the “spinal column” of the strike due to their direct aid in the form of produce and money. The regular joint lectures and political meetings that were held during these times became the basis for many independent county tickets in the fall elections.\textsuperscript{103}

Internal Alliance debate over the implications of the boycott filled the editorial pages of numerous reform papers, where conservative leaders argued that it was “striking at the fundamental principles of American liberty” and local farmers remained insistent on the need “to put brains and numbers against capital.”\textsuperscript{104} Outside observers also clamored in with their interpretations of the joint organizing between farmers and laborers. The Weatherford Times reported on the “great fear displayed in some quarters that they should unite.” The Dallas News bemoaned that the “discontented classes … are only too ready for the most part to believe, that the remedy is more class legislation, more government, more paternalism, more State socialism.”\textsuperscript{105} Even a newspaper of the Texas

\textsuperscript{103} These discussions of the farmer-labor alliances in Texas are taken from Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 41-77.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. 62.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. 75.
Grange branded the Alliance’s heightened agitation against capital “lawless, desperate attempts at communism.”

It was indeed in their joint engagements with the Knights of Labor that farmers in Texas widely began to take on the identity of industrial laborers, whose struggle for economic power and political freedom had the dimensions of a class war. Unlike the more economically stable members of the Grange, Alliance farmers had little desire for friendship with the commercial world, and fewer hopes for achieving parity according to the rules of its game. They also had a new political analysis of those they could trust as their allies, and those they could not. As one Texas farmer put it, “Congress had to legislate for the capitalists … [because] they cannot make anything by legislating for us poor devils.”

Facing an enthusiastic crowd of thousands of Alliance farmers in Central Texas, Knights of Labor leader W. E. Farmer stated clearly what was on the minds of many farmers and laborers in 1886: “The laboring classes must either take charge of the ballot box and purify the government or witness one of the most gigantic revolutions known for ages.”

While the word “revolution” would be heard from the tongues of many working-class Americans over the next decade, its accents could not consolidate enough to win sweeping changes sought by Populism. The reasons had to do with strategic vision, as well as with engrained habits of seeing and hearing. Within organized labor, tactical and ideological differences split the largely Catholic Knights of Labor, the competing schools within the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), and the more narrowly focused trade unions of

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106 Ibid. 46.
107 Ibid. 75.
108 Ibid. 76.
the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Under Samuel Gompers, the AFL never warmed to Populism. Gompers held an avowed apolitical stance, and he disparaged the notion of farmers as laborers, calling them “woefully ignorant upon the underlying principles and tactics and operations of trade unions.”\(^{109}\) Suspicion and animosity also defined the relationship between Populists and the SLP, whose leader declared the “misnamed People’s Party” merely an attempt to transfer the goods of the “plutocratic class” to small farmers.\(^{110}\) In Chicago, however, a farmer-labor-socialist coalition did form in 1894, but not without protracted debate over a divisive socialist plank. After some creative finessing by Lloyd, the groups pledged to mobilize votes for People’s Party candidates who supported “collective ownership by the people of all such means of production as the people elect to operate for the commonwealth.”\(^{111}\) With this wording, farmers and moderate unionists campaigned for direct referenda on selective nationalization and municipal ownership, while the Chicago SLP organized workers around its vision of a more socialist Populism. The People’s Party increased its electoral strength in the mid-term elections of 1894, and its showing in Chicago compared favorably to other states. But it still won only 12 percent of the vote.

The democratizing contradictions of Populist rhetoric did not, by themselves, carry enough weight to unsettle most urban workers from their old habits and attachments, nor to consolidate their discontent in relation to a common social critique or a shared sense of fate. At the substratum of the debates among labor leaders, ethnic

\(^{109}\) Quoted in Sanders, 84.
factionalism organized the social and political lives of most immigrants. In addition to language barriers, cultural differences, and spatial segregation, entrenched political machines controlled the voting patterns of well-established immigrant communities, insulating them from third-party access. Chicago Populists took on the machines by organizing the city into wards, with precincts based in old Industrial Legions or in newly formed Populist clubs. During the 1894 campaign, 140 lecturers traveled through these precincts, speaking to thousands of workers a week. But the ambitious ward system had little preexisting infrastructure around which to build a multiethnic democratic insurgency. It had taken the Alliance over a decade to generate radical economic critique and awaken political consciousness among hundreds of thousands of mostly white, mostly Protestant farmers. Organized labor did not have comparable spaces, practices, and networks of dialogical exchange interlacing its own parallel and at times coordinated causes and actions. The Knights of Labor had come closest, organizing a broad political reform movement of some 700,000 biracial, multiethnic workers across the country during the 1880s. But a combination of factors—including brutal losses in the southwestern railroad strikes, a no-strike policy issued by the executive board in 1886, and competition over employees with the AFL—led to a precipitous decline in its

112 Goodwyn and Sanders both make this argument, with Sanders emphasizing the apolitical stance of organized labor, and Goodwyn emphasizing its relatedly weak movement culture. See Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 308-310, 418; and Sanders, 4, 411.
membership. By the height of Populism between 1892 and 1896, the Knights had become a heavily rural organization of only 50,000 to 75,000 workers.\footnote{Sanders, 50-52. Other reasons for Knights’ decline include Powderly’s failure to support the Haymarket bombers and organized counteroffensives by employers.}

Urban workers of vastly different backgrounds and traditions, who came into daily contact on assembly lines and even picket lines, thus had few opportunities to debate the meanings and implications of their collective conditions and actions. The manifold inflections through which workers appropriated words like hunger, freedom, or Populism were largely channeled through the various mechanisms of ethnic factionalism. When workers did come together to strike across lines of race and ethnicity, there was often very little elasticity around the edges of their social-group differences and hierarchies. Their senses were not attuned to hear the disparate overtones of resistance or to see the spectral intensities of vision gathered together in the same space, and many of the faintest notes and glimmers were assimilated or dropped. It was quite possible, for example, for Slovak and Anglo-American workers to fight side-by-side against the Carnegie Steel Corporation and its Pinkerton Agency guards during the Homestead Strike of 1892, but to walk away with radically divergent interpretations of the epic struggle. Slovak workers shouted the slogan, \textit{za chlebom}, which literally meant they were “going for bread,” but they would likely have contested those strikers who claimed a capital on the values of community and political freedom. “We are bound to Homestead by all the ties that men hold dearest and most sacred,” one Anglo-American worker told a mass crowd, adding that they would have to decide “if we are going to live like white men in
the future.”114 Gathering multi-ethnic coalitions together in mass action was subversive vis-à-vis capital, which counted on new immigrants as strike breakers. But it was not sufficient in and of itself to desediment the layers of paternalism and fear that acted as fortresses around white supremacy. Thus, after years at the helm of the most diverse union in the nation, Knights of Labor leader Terrance Powderly, an Irish Catholic, could still complain about the “unfortunate” new immigrants whom good Americans “must educate year after year to prevent from using bombs instead of ballots.”115 And the platform of the “People’s Party” could carry a resolution against opening the nation’s ports to “the pauper and criminal classes of the world [who] crowd out our wage earners,” thereby standing out as an early voice in the wave of anti-immigration legislation that would sweep through Congress in the early twentieth century.116

The irony of Powderly’s statement is that he failed to recognize the ways in which the language of Populism could be used as a kind of rhetorical bomb, whose impact silenced many of the contrapuntal overtones struggling to shape the movement. Populism depended on these overtones, that is, on the contest of centralizing and decentralizing forces that played out in a variety of rural and urban settings, in relation to different bodies and communities of striving and vision, on local, regional, and national scales, all intertwining with the friction and elasticity that hold social movements together. The centralizing forces of Populist rhetoric were crucial: how could new ideas of freedom,

114 This example is taken directly from Kazin, 35. For a description of za cheblom in the Homestead Strike, see Paul Krause, The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 220-21.
115 Quoted in Kazin, 37.
116 The Omaha Platform, reprinted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 95.
democracy, and commonwealth be born into the world with the force of structural change, if the movement could not gather enough bodies and voices behind it? This consolidation would paradoxically require opening Populism to contestation among the disparate social groups that sought to find a place in the movement and to shape its meanings and directions. How these centralizing and decentralizing forces played out in the various sites and relationships that constituted Populism, and how well the movement was able to gather disparate visions, depended on how it traversed, disrupted, and reinscribed established cultural differentials of power and powerlessness. In particular, if concentrated capital and organized white supremacy feared the specter of a unified black-white-immigrant-socialist-feminist Populism, these differences were often concealed in Populist rhetoric that was packed with nativism, racism, and patriarchy. The fragile efforts to weave translocal narratives across the chasms separating blacks and whites created some of the movement’s most radically democratic imaginings, and some of its most profound violences.

Efforts in the South to build a biracial coalition of farmers and laborers took place within a dense field and through durable dispositions of racial domination and submission. Analyses of the successes and failures of these coalitions, however complex their account, usually polish the rough edges with one of several glosses. The most prominent sheen among those sympathetic with the movement, especially Goodwyn, portrays white Populists as victims of their age: their attempts at organizing across race were laced with calculations of utility and presumptions of paternalism, but they created significant openings for radically subversive speech and action and by and large stood in
contrast to the rampant white supremacy of the Democratic Party. In the hands of those more critical of the movement, white Populists turn into active white supremacists, at best calculating and paternalistic, and at worst agents of institutional segregation, electoral intimidation, and Jim Crow. Others make the compelling argument that black Populism was a self-organized movement: rather than widely deferring to white Populism, African Americans mobilized around a distinct set of needs and visions, and they chose to build coalitions with whites when it was in their strategic interest to do so.\footnote{The first view is also held by Sanders, and to a lesser extent Kazin. Hoffstadter is most commonly associated with the second view, and Postel most recently emphasizes the centralizing and exclusionary modes of the Farmer’s Alliance in particular. The third view is articulated most strongly by Patrick Dickson, \textit{Out of the Lion’s Mouth: The Colored Farmers’ Alliance in the New South, 1886-1892} (M.P.S. thesis, Cornell University, 2000). Gerald Gaither outlines three related schools of interpreting black Populism: historians in the 1920s and 1930s saw African Americans as manipulable by southern whites; by the 1950s, many, including Goodwyn and Pollack, detected the threads of interracial harmony in the movement; and many recent scholars are challenging the “myth” that such an coalition could have existed during the period. Gaither argues that black Populism in the South was a “many-faceted crystal” that doesn’t fit easily into any category. See Gerald Gaither, \textit{Blacks and the Populist Movement: Ballots and Bigotry in the New South}, revised edition (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), x.} Each of these versions contains an important part of the story of biracial Populism, and yet the partiality of each conveys its strong investments in a certain kind of story: about the political freedom engendered by social movements, about the exclusions inherent in popular rule, about the self-generated capacities of oppressed groups. What none of them does, however, is wrestle with the stops and starts, the openings and closures, the uneven and discontinuous results of grassroots democratic social movements, which are always already shaped by the relations of power and powerlessness they struggle to change.
White supremacy saturated Populism. While organizations like the Grange, Wheel, and Knights of Labor began accepting black members during the 1880s, the Farmers’ Alliance maintained an official whites-only policy. Old forms of white supremacy were rewired through Charles Macune’s social Darwinist belief that progress for whites required strict segregation from blacks. In Macune’s view, the Alliance was a business organization, and it would need to maintain a white face to uphold its professional credentials. The Alliance’s segregation policy was enforced not only in relation to black farmers and cooperatives, but also in its coalitions with other predominantly white organizations. After the southwestern railroad strikes of 1886, in which blacks played a role on the picket lines and in related political conventions, the Alliance adopted a rule to prohibit dual membership with the Knights. When the Alliance merged with the Wheel and other allied groups in 1887, its segregation stance prevailed over their more inclusive racial policies. The Alliance’s relationship with the Colored Farmers Alliance, whose membership was in the hundreds of thousands, was marked by calculation and anxiety.\(^\text{118}\) Blacks and whites worked together in some cooperative ventures, but the Alliance refused to back the CFA cotton pickers’ strike of 1891, branding it an attempt by blacks to “better their condition at the expense of their white

\(^{118}\) The Colored Alliance formed December 12, 1886, and like the Alliance, it developed in the footsteps of a long history of black organizing around Greenback, Grange, and labor issues, not to mention abolitionism. Estimated membership in the CFA is disputed, with numbers cited at 250,000; 825,000; and 1 million at its height in 1890. The recoverable evidence about black Alliances and the interracial life of Populism is slim. Humphrey as lead organizer, but suballiances largely have black leadership and a black lecture circuit. See Omar Ali, \textit{Black Populism: From the Colored Farmers' Alliance through the People's Party, 1886-1896}, (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003), excerpt at \url{http://ipoaa.com/black_populism_3.htm} (accessed March 25, 2009); Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 276-306; and Sanders, 121, 441, fn. 64.
brethren.”¹¹⁹ In the electoral arena, the Alliance played an active role in stripping the economic, social, and political rights of African Americans across the South. For example, the National Alliance lobbied against federal supervision of elections in 1890; County Alliances in North Carolina protested public funds for black schools and sought legal restrictions to protect white landlords against black tenants; beginning in 1890, County Alliances throughout the South worked through the Democratic Party to support railroad segregation measures. Organized under the People’s Party from 1892-1896, white farmers in some southern counties used intimidation, violence, and other tactics to recruit or disenfranchise black voters. One black Republican newspaper editor wondered out loud, “Is it not plain to every colored man that this Alliance intends to plot the oppression of colored farmers?”¹²⁰ Numerous examples went against this grain, and I will discuss several of them below. But the more fundamental concern remains: if some decentralizing forces defied and disrupted the Alliance’s official policy of strict segregation, it was just as likely that other decentralizing forces could move it in the direction of even more aggressive forms of racism and white supremacy.

As the Alliance moved into politics in the 1890s, it saw the need to build strategic coalitions with black farmers, and it often did so with great rhetorical and spectacular effect. In the political heyday of Populism, blacks and whites stumped at the same podium in front of mass crowds of both black and white farmers. Georgia Populist Tom

¹¹⁹ This statement is from an editorial in The Progressive Farmer, the reform paper of Southern Alliance President Leonidas Polk, quoted in Dickson, “Out of the Lion’s Mouth.” ¹²⁰ Quoted in Adam and Gaither, 14. For the information in this paragraph, see Postel, 36-42, 175-181, 196-196; Sanders, 121; Goodwyn, 147; and Adam and Gaither, 59, 77, 150.
Watson repeatedly took the stage to declare that the People’s Party would “wipe out the color line,” contending that “the accident of color can make no possible difference in the interest of farmers, croppers, and laborers.” But Watson also cautioned crowds that “it is best that [blacks and whites] should preserve the race integrity by staying apart,” especially since he believed that his own Anglo-Saxon heritage was “stronger, in the glorious strength of conception and achievement, than any race of created men.” Indeed, after one biracial rally in Georgia, Watson’s newspaper made it quite clear where blacks stood in the movement, reporting that whites “ate until we could eat no more,” at which point “the darkeys and dogs ate all they could.” Perhaps the most gripping spectacles performed at Populist rallies were staging ceremonies to bury the “bloody shirt.” Two white Civil War veterans would greet each other and claps hands at the front of the stage, often with a black party member standing in the background. The presence of a black soldier represented the image of a color-blind Populism. Behind the sectional embrace in the foreground of the spectacle, however, was an assurance to white southern voters that, under the People’s Party, the North would no longer meddle in their business—or their acts of racial domination. In the very same performance, repeated on stages across the country, the movement ritually opened competing habitus to new relationships between northern and southern whites, while it ritually forgot its implications in a still-living history of slavery.

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121 Pollack, 380; Postel, 196.  
122 Quoted in Postel, 196.  
123 Postel, 181-82.
Anglo-Saxon unity trumped biracial cooperation in the rhetorical sparks and spectacular flashes of Populism, just as it did in its more sustained negotiations: debated language on integration and federal voting protections were ultimately left off the platform of the People’s Party. Nonetheless, it would be in these dissonant resonances of Populist speech and action, and in the tiny openings of its internal debates, that radical racial imaginings would emerge. They did emerge, and not only against the backdrop of extreme odds. What these examples show is that they would have to engage in an ongoing struggle for space and inflection amidst modes of racial domination and paternalism that were always seeking to close and reconsolidate.

The consolidations of white supremacy within Populism could drop with the force of a bomb for blacks in the South—the lynching of fifteen strike leaders who sought to forge better livelihoods for cotton pickers, the massacre of boycott demonstrators who dared to break open space in a racially dominated public sphere, the regular intimidation and violence toward voters who hoped to carve out basic rights and protections. In these instances, Populism’s claims of color blindness carried a degree of validity: most white members, at best, utterly failed to grasp the conditions facing the black farmers and laborers from whom they withheld solidarity or protection. What African Americans had to overcome during the late nineteenth century were precisely the modes of domination and submission that operated everywhere to reinforce long-held dispositions of deference—and so to reinforce the oppressive closures of white supremacy. In every county in the South, blacks sought to address immediate life-and-death issues of security,
fighting for their right to be seated on juries and working to elect friendly police forces.\textsuperscript{124} With regard to debt and poverty, what whites portrayed as mutual class interest was, for blacks, as much a struggle for economic independence from whites as it was from capital. If the CFA owed its origins, in part, to the Alliance, it had as many debts to the broad philosophy and practice of black self-help that was emerging in both rural and urban settings, through the work of churches, beneficial and insurance societies, and cooperative enterprises.\textsuperscript{125} Many in the CFA even welcomed the separate-but-equal relationship with the Alliance, because it enabled a degree of autonomy from white supervision. As a member of the Georgia Colored Alliance explained, “All the Negro wants is protection. You white people attend to your business and let us alone.”\textsuperscript{126} Indeed, when they \textit{were} left alone during the period between Reconstruction and Jim Crow, black southerners devoted their attention to developing and sustaining an array of economic, educational, and political institutions at the local level.\textsuperscript{127} They understood that protecting themselves from the closures of racial domination would require consolidating their own strengths: by developing the dispositions and capacities to insert themselves into discourses and spaces that were profoundly centralized around white supremacy, and by gaining access to the instruments through which they could structurally decenter them.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Postel, 174.
\item Adam and Gaither, 27-28, 34-35. Black self-help, however, led some black landowners and professionals to distance themselves from black tenant farmers and wage laborers.
\item Postel, 42.
\item In their efforts to rid themselves and their communities of economic dependence on whites, black southerners were among the most ardent advocates of improving public school infrastructure.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The footsteps between the economic and political spaces and of black and white Populism were tiny—a white lecturer organizing in a black farm district but never the other way around, several black and white activists meeting to discuss the interracial politics of the Texas People’s Party, one black member serving on each of the Party’s committees. In the political heyday of Populism, small black caucuses turned out at party conventions and, as we’ve seen, blacks and whites shared stump podiums in more visible movements of integration.\textsuperscript{128} At a meeting of the General Assembly in Richmond, the Knights of Labor flaunted segregation codes by having a black member introduce Terrance Powderly at the microphone.\textsuperscript{129} The documented evidence of Populist electoral cooperation exceeds that of overt white supremacy. Though little is known about the degree and quality of coalitional practice and biracial negotiation at local and state levels, it is not difficult to imagine heated debates at party conventions and in the mainstream and reform press. With eleven black delegates in attendance at its 1892 state convention, the Arkansas Populist Party resolved to support “the downtrodden regardless of race,” including “honest pay to equal labor.” In response to state policies granting white commissioners control over black public school funds, the Texas Populist platform of 1894 advocated for black power in the area of public education.\textsuperscript{130} Beginning with County Alliances as early as 1888 and continuing with the People’s Party, Populism supported or nominated black candidates for office in a number of states, including

\textsuperscript{128} Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 294-306.
\textsuperscript{129} Sanders, 40.
\textsuperscript{130} Sanders, 129; Goodwyn, 295-299.
Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Numerous black candidates backed by a Populist-
Republican fusion in North Carolina were elected to local office in 1896.\footnote{See Adam and Gaither, 24, 49, 58; Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams,” 1435-1456.}

Practices of traveling, cooperating, negotiating, and staging across lines of race
did often introduce subversive inflections into dominant racial structures and discourses,
even as these inflections were often in danger of scattering or being lost amidst
paternalistic interpretations. As evidenced by the coalitional spaces within Populism,
anything more would require whites who were capable of straining to see, hear, and touch
the most imperceptible stories of reality and hope that might texture the course of the
movement. And it would require black actors willing to insert their stories in public
spaces, and to reassert themselves when they were willfully ignored. In a small interracial
meeting in Texas, Melvin Wade, a black trade unionist, had this to say to a white
participant’s lofty rhetoric of equality: “When it comes down to the practice such is not
the fact. If we are equal, why does not the sheriff summon Negros on juries? And why
hang up the sign, ‘Negro,’ in passenger cars? I want to tell my people what the People’s
Party is going to do. I want to tell them if it is going to work a black horse and a white
horse in the same field.”\footnote{Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 288.} The gathering discussed Wade’s vivid testimony and his
solidaristic hope. Then it proceeded to appoint all whites to the committees that would
decide such platform issues. It took another heated struggle—in which strategic
arguments, normative claims, and utopic visions all surfaced—for the Party to agree to
one black representative on each executive and local committee. Such spaces of struggle,
previously unthinkable, saw at least momentary shifts in sensibilities long patterned by racial hierarchy, and they produced tangible, if often symbolic, results. At times, this decentered Populism’s utopic imaginings rather than allowing them to remain whitewashed. An Alabama newspaper offered this imagination of the spaces in which blacks and whites might cooperate in local self-rule: “The white and colored Alliance are united in . . . the promotion of the doctrine that farmers should establish cooperative stores, and manufactures, and publish their own newspapers, conduct their own schools, and have a hand in everything else that concerns them as citizens . . . personally or collectively.”

These were the micro-level spaces in which imaginings of racial solidarity—including those produced by Populism’s own lofty rhetoric and grand spectacles—were tweaked open, contested, stretched, and often lost. It would be too easy to fetishize these miraculous moments within the movement, even as their own natality draws attention to the layers of habitus, opacity, and strategy that complicate Arendt’s celebration of publicity and action. The movements between black and white spaces were simply too limited and engaged by too few to create more than the most fragile, fleeting, wild ruptures in dominant racial patterns, discourses, and embodiments. The limits of these movements suggest the ways in which translocalism, narrowly conceived in geographic terms, can build myopic forms of power. To do more than tell a lie about racially solidaristic democracy, Populism would have needed to generate more of these motions

133 Ibid. 283.
at the limits of black and white spaces, and to care for their qualitative dimensions. But this, in turn, would have required commitment to building interracial dialogue into two key practices through which the movement cultivated its dynamic of centralizing and decentralizing power and authority. First, it would have entailed deepening its translocal practices to enable encounters not only with other people and ideas, but with radically different others, in unfamiliar settings, through strange words and unsettling performances, in ways that stretch dispositions and habits of listening, seeing, touching, and tasting. Second, it would have required the movement to devise and advocate institutional protections for these kinds of spaces and practices between blacks and whites, protections it largely failed to support in its struggles for institutional and structural change. But Populism did experiment with forms of aesthetic and ethical practice and forms of institutional protection and dynamism that contain important radical democratic insights—ones whose potential extension to race the movement itself neither saw nor sanctioned. I take each up, in turn, in the next two sections.

Cultivating Democratic Aesthetics

New imaginings within Populism were cultivated as bodies and words traveled between micro-level spaces and practices, but what was the interplay between these and the more spectacular dimensions of Populist speech and action. How did the performativity of habitus constrain, enable, and inflect the performativity of speech, and vice versa? Populism’s movements—not only its public stagings in strikes and mass encampments, but even the alternative rhythms of cooperative spaces, the weekly
gatherings in suballiances and lodges, and the negotiation of coalitional limits and platforms—often took on a spectacular quality, and they were surrounded by incessant discourse. In this section I take up the claim, made by Goodwyn and Boyte, that “the people need to ‘see themselves’ experimenting in democratic forms.” In what spaces and through what practices did hundreds of thousands of men and women “see” themselves becoming a movement? How did these spaces differ from the brighter, more ephemeral public spaces often associated with Arendtian aesthetics? How could the movement see-itself-becoming-in-practice at all, if Bourdieu is correct that so much of practice operates beneath and profoundly shapes the registers of consciousness and imagination. How did this kind of seeing-in-practice generate new aesthetic ideas about collective identity and democracy? With profound limits, Populism cultivated a democratic aesthetics, one that enabled “the people” to see, hear, touch, and taste the myriad bodily and spectral intensities that constituted and contested the commonwealth they struggled to bring into being. I elaborate the best insights that can be generated from the aesthetic spaces and practices of Populism, and I do so by turning at several points to its more promising work at the edges of gendered spheres of economic, social, and political life.

134 This is an un-cited epigraph at the beginning of Goodwyn, Populist Moment, xxvix. I need to find the passage, but am almost positive he takes it from Harry Boyte, who in turn borrows heavily from Goodwyn’s rendering of Populism. I discuss Boyte’s take on this quote below, in relation to his concept of “public work.”
In Goodwyn’s account, the cooperative movement was the animus and lifeblood of Populism. Contra Arendt’s separation between economics and politics, the questions and strategies of cooperative political economics were the common objects that generated countless spaces of collective action and dialogue—in churches and schoolhouses where men and women debated political economy and democracy; in mass encampments where thousands gathered to hear stump speeches and coordinate events; in extensive media publics that were facilitated by a thriving reform press. And in cooperative economic spaces themselves. Farmers’ experiences of debt, poverty, hunger, and necessity were laced with their memories of a broken promise of democratic equality, their anger over arbitrary modes of power and powerlessness, and their hopes for better forms of freedom. Their cooperative efforts were crucially about meeting basic needs, but cooperation was also fundamentally about generating spaces, practices, and relationships through which “the plain people” could produce new ways of being in the world. It was in their experiences of building and sustaining cooperative economies that many farmers began to imagine and to enact their visions of a cooperative commonwealth. In cooperative spaces, and the spaces that emerged around them, the work of farm labor became, to inflect Arendt, public work. Boyte uses the term “public work” to describe sustained, collective efforts, in which solving problems or creating material goods takes on broader cultural and political significance. That significance develops as people come to see

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135 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 111.
themselves, discontinuously and over time, as actors engaged in the struggle to build and care for a common world.\footnote{Boyte, \textit{Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 5.}

Cooperative marketing opened up spaces in which farmers would gather en masse to sell their products in bulk. Alliance warehouses often contained 500, 1000, or even 1500 bales of cotton at a time, and farmers invited cotton brokers from outside their immediate trade area to buy at higher prices. Cooperative spaces reconfigured the isolated, power-laden, ritual movements of “settlin’-up” time. Farmers no longer drove their wagons home with an “overproduction” of cotton and an empty-handedness of despair. Instead, as one newspaper reported after a mass sale in Texas: “Empty wagons returned homeward bearing blue flags and other signs of rejoicing.”\footnote{Goodwyn, \textit{Populist Moment}, 30.} One of the most successful cooperative purchasing ventures was a southwestern boycott of jute manufacturers, who had combined in a price-rigging scheme to inflate the costs of the material used to bag cotton. Farmers boycotted the colluding jute manufacturers, and instead arranged a cooperative exchange of jute bags for farm produce with European manufacturers. The larger political implications of the boycott were made visible by the rhetoric and stagings surrounding it. Tom Watson highlighted its revolutionary implications for politicizing the economy from below: “It is useless to ask Congress to help us, just as it was folly for our forefathers to ask for relief from the tea tax; and they revolted … so should we.”\footnote{Quoted in Goodwyn, \textit{Democratic Promise}, 144.} Some 360 farmers in Georgia heeded his call for direct

action. They enacted a public staging of the boycott at a mass convention, wearing uniforms made of jute bags and earning the title of “cotton bagging brigade.”¹³⁹ When a double wedding attended by 20,000 farmers featured both couples “attired in cotton bagging costumes,” the symbolic meaning of the boycott connected work to the fundamentals of community life.¹⁴⁰ It was in these cooperative spaces of economic self-help that farmers generated and staked their hopes for—and saw themselves in the acts of authoring and building—their collective futures. Cooperative economic spaces and practices thus created spectacles in which old processes of labor took on new meanings, in which inevitable logics of survival and necessity were replaced by more open-ended senses of capaciousness and possibility.

Alliance planning conventions, parades, and encampments gathered men and women together in mass stagings, which carried on the tradition of messianic tent meetings and were designed to impress farmers with a sense of their own authority and power. According to Goodwyn, county-level meetings “grew into vast spectacles”:

Long trains of wagons, emblazoned with suballiance banners, stretching literally for miles, trekking to enormous encampments where five, ten, and twenty thousand men and women listened intently to the plans of their Alliance and talked among themselves about those plans. . . . When a farm family’s wagon crested a hill en route to a Fourth of July “Alliance Day” encampment and the occupants looked back to see thousands of other families trailed out behind them in wagon trains, the thought that “the Alliance is the people and the people are together” took on transformative possibilities.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Leonidas Polk is quoted in Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 145.
¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The quote is from a journalist who was present.
¹⁴¹ Goodwyn, Populist Moment, 34.
In these spectacles, new spatial and temporal imaginings were born. Wagons trains had once marked the lengthening caravans of poor migrants locked in an inevitable story of debt and poverty. These were the lines of dislocation wrought by a credit system that had revolutionized patterns of land ownership and corporations that were rapidly vying to consolidate state territory.¹⁴² Now wagon trains of farm families converged time and again in lines of hope—across Texas, or Mississippi, or Kansas—that the power-debt structure might just be interrupted. In these spectacular lines of hope, and in the spaces they generated, men and women came to see their collective power as story makers; they witnessed themselves in the act of creating a new world.

But what was to say that the story Populism authored and enacted would not be an American Nightmare? As we’ve seen, most white farmers actively constituted economic and political power by “bulking” their resources and capacities against capital, but also by hoarding it from and over African Americans through modes of segregation and paternalism. Black farmers had to organize in quieter and more clandestine registers, removing themselves somewhat from the violent and disciplinary forces of a racialized public sphere. For the most part, then, a lingering and resurgent white supremacy would attend both the internal spaces and practices and the public performances of Populism, always ready to coalesce around fugitive insurrections of speech and action. What I want to claim is more modest: that Populism offers insights into how the spectacle of a

¹⁴² This concentration of farmland had its parallel in the mining towns that Populism later traversed. For example, American Association Ltd., a mining company that incorporated in an Appalachian valley in 1887, owned 75% of the land in that valley by 1980. See John Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Society (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), v.
movement storying itself might be inflected and refracted by the contrapuntal practices through which it does so, and by their multiple edges. These edges are at times prismatic, adding many more points of inflection and refraction to collective imagining. But they can also be blunt, as in bulking and hoarding, serving crucially to reinforce a collective sense of power and purpose, and/or to reinscribe myopic forms of power and vision. Cultivating these practices and edges constitutes a democratic aesthetics, in which spaces of imagination are born spectacularly and discursively, yes, but also in different combinations bodily, receptively, emotionally, and purposefully.

At mass encampments and parades, at thousands of local suballiance meetings, in cooperative spaces, and at political conventions, men and women engaged in practices of different rhythms, temporalities, and touches. The purposeful work of strategizing cooperative ventures or negotiating resolutions and planks was set amidst pauses at twilight suppers or convention breaks, during which stories were swapped, radical economic and political critiques contested, and utopic yearnings cultivated. It was also set amidst the currents and counter-currents generated in weekly lecture discussions and in the editorial pages of the reform press, where men and women engaged in intense and ongoing dialogue about larger meanings and immediate challenges. In relation to this broader field of storytelling, yearning, listening, and imagining, strategic debate and action narrowed the lens of Populist vision in institutional policies and party platforms. But it was also the site of deep contestation about broader visions among those centralizing forces that established the movement’s official discourses and the de-centering forces that clamored and mobilized at its edges. As was the case with the
Populist-Socialist coalition, such contestation not only inflected official positions with radical or conservative overtones, it created aesthetic and practical openings through which different sets of actors could organize around offshoot imaginings of Populism.

Briefly considering the relationship between gender and aesthetics offers insights into the generative edges of Populist discourse and practice; it also recasts the qualitative dimensions of translocal imagining by looking at deep differences engaged in the most proximate spaces of the movement. Women participated in Populism in ways that contested and stretched the edges of gendered spheres of life and significantly inflected the discursive and spectacular practices of the movement. Alliance women spoke and voted in meetings, held office in local and even county chapters, and sometimes worked as traveling lecturers. They edited and wrote for movement circulars and kept up active discussions in the editorial pages of the reform press, where rank-and-file women regularly took up some of the more radical feminist ideas of the day. In these ways, women engaged men in debating the gamut of pressing economic, social, and political issues, including economic and political equality for women. Women also used the organizing energy generated by the movement to renew and extend their political networks. Many engaged simultaneously in or built relationships across the Alliance, myriad evangelical societies, the temperance and suffrage movements, the International and National Councils of Women, and so on. In 1891, women from twenty-six states

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formed the National Women’s Alliance (NWA), identifying themselves as “the industrial women of America” and promoting a vision of trans-class sisterhood. Their “Declaration of Purposes” became the basis for public and persistent lobbying in the reform press and at Populist conventions to advance broad improvements in gender equality.144

Through the day-to-day spaces protected by the movement and through many more forged among women, a radical idea and practice of identity emerged within Populism: women organized were a force for social change.145 In particular, suballiances and the reform press acted as “schoolhouses in mixed-gender political culture” and as training grounds for women’s collective action.146 These were spaces in which rank-and-file women developed skills for speaking and writing in public, gained assertiveness in their radical beliefs about domestic and political equality, and cultivated fierce dispositions for contesting and claiming rights and power.147 Through their multiform networks and especially through the NWA, women increasingly inserted themselves and the specter of their vitality as a social group into the movement. If Populism generated messianic expectations for social change, these carried insurgent overtones in the mouths of women. “Rule the women out and the reform movement is a dead letter,” stated an epigram in the official journal of the NWA. “Put a thousand women lecturers in the field

144 Buhle, 88-89.
145 Buhle makes a similar claim, 89.
146 Goldberg, 141. Jeffrey makes a similar claim.
147 Discussions of equal access to education and economic self-sufficiency were more common in these spaces, and were more actively sanctioned by men. Many women also saw economic advancement as primary to suffrage, as an organizing strategy. Suffrage and especially domestic equality faced steeper hurdles. See Jeffrey; Postel, 71-72, 85, 96.
and the revolution is here.”[^148] The “maternal commonwealth” envisioned in the NWA Declaration of Purposes specified not only full political equality, but also “cooperation in every department of life to its fullest extent,” critical analyses of “all questions relating to the structure of human society,” and an insurgent “unity of action among the Sisterhood, in all sections of our country.”[^149] As these ideas were circulated, debated, and inflected through exchanges in the reform press, calls for radical change in domestic and social structures began to echo in daily life: including, equalizing marriage and divorce laws, striking the word ‘obey’ from marriage vows, winning rights pertaining to family finances, sharing the burden of parenting and housework, and freeing women of the social strictures of household propriety and drudgery.[^150] Populism was thus a movement whose struggle for “manly” freedom from the tyranny of capital also generated and harbored a swirl of centrifugal forces, which would piecemeal chip away at public and everyday forms of patriarchy.

As with white supremacy, the centralizing forces of patriarchy sought to coalesce around every insurgent word and deed. For every lecturer or editorialist who claimed that “the ability of girls has been found equal to that of boys,” another would naturalize sex difference and gender inequality. “Do not spend your time in longing for opportunities that will never come, but be contented in the sphere the Lord hath placed you in,” one lecturer chastised his female audience. “If the Lord had intended you for a preacher or a

[^148]: Buhle, 89.
[^149]: Buhle, 88. The sisterhood was most often imagined to be white, and at times explicitly imagined against the drudgery associated with the work of African Americans.
[^150]: Postel, 72, 85. Buhle, 87.
lawyer He would have given you a pair of pantaloons.”

At the 1892 St. Louis Industrial Conference, which ushered in the People’s Party, a recommendation passed without dissent to encourage suffrage referenda at the statewide level, but it was not included as an official plank. Months later in Omaha, suffrage was dropped altogether from the party platform. And yet, far more than they did on matters of race, the primary institutions of Populism sanctioned and protected spaces for women to take on uncustomary roles, and women responded by further transgressing and incessantly pushing the limits of gender boundaries. We can thus establish a better sense of the decentering forces that inflected aesthetic ideas of gender and commonwealth in Populism. These forces were performed in particular acts and small struggles in countless spaces, reiterated in incessant talk about women’s equality and independence, circulated through women’s networks at the interstices of the movement, embodied in the new dispositions forming in thousands of women and many men, tasted in the words of power and freedom passed on from generations of activists and suffragettes. Far from remaining beyond the reach of inquiry, in the Bourdieuan sense, radical imaginings of gender surfaced and were contested in the flesh of Populist practice and speech. Cultivating these dynamic and discordant timbres in its body, contra Arendt, the movement situated even its strategic actions and performances on unruly and disruptive grounds.

The work of building coalitions, devising strategies, contesting visions, and cultivating habitus was also punctuated with emotional oratory and orgiastic enthusiasm.

151 Quotes are from Jeffrey.
that roused ensembles to more messianic pitches. A Kansas reporter describes the Alliance Day picnics that were turned into mass nominating conventions during the 1890s. They turned into “a religious revival, a crusade, a Pentecost of politics in which a tongue of flame set upon every man [and woman], and each spoke as the spirit gave him utterance.”

Populism and evangelical revivalism literally shared spaces and traditions during the period, and even in secular spaces, Populist rhetoric struck the chords of belief and the structures of feeling that millions of Americans had inherited from the messianic tradition. Speakers used Biblical references and emotional modulations to evoke Populism as a moral crusade, but also to inspirit a kind of Pentecostal aesthetic experience. In one register, participants were exhorted to put their bodies on the line in a battle of good versus evil whose urgency was cataclysmic. The preamble to the Omaha Platform of the People’s Party opened with the warning: “we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin.” That ruin was being accelerated by the Democrats and Republicans, who “proposed to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the alter of mammon; to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the millionaires.” The preamble closed by pledging that “the forces of reform this day organized will never cease to move forward until every wrong is remedied.”

The piercing rhetoric of good versus evil produced one of the blunter edges of Populist imagining. It was intended to awaken and mobilize the collective power and

152 Quoted in Goldberg, 147. The reporter adds, “Women with skins tanned to parchment by the hot winds, with bony hands of toil and clad in faded calico, could talk in meeting, and could talk straight to the point.”

153 Quoted in Pollack, Populist Mind, 60-61, 63.
purpose of a righteous commonwealth, but its shriller tones could become moralizing, reactionary, and exclusive.

But messianic oratory could also produce prismatic edges, which dispersed utterances and regenerated the multitude vis-à-vis capitalist regulation of bodies and speech. The “Pentecost of politics” that took place at mass gatherings describes an aesthetic experience of enthusiasm and glossolalia. One of the most spectacular of these moments, to those who saw it from the outside, occurred at the 1892 Industrial Conference in St. Louis, immediately after Ignatius Donnelly read out loud the preamble to what would later become the Omaha Platform. A veteran orator, Donnelly held the rapt attention of his audience, and his closing words pulled them taught to the battle lines of good versus evil: “If any will not work neither shall eat. The interests of rural and urban labor are the same; their enemies are identical.” 154 Then the chairman of the platform committee read out the list of demands. At which point, according to a sympathetic journalist:

Hats, papers, handkerchiefs, etc. were thrown into the air; wraps, umbrellas and parasols waved; cheer after cheer thundered and reverberated through the vast hall, reaching outside of the building where thousands had been waiting [sic] the outcome, joined in the applause till for blocks in every direction the exulation [sic] made the din indescribable. 155

In the words of a less sympathetic observer, who saw the specter of socialism in the crowd, the sounds of the convention “rose like a tornado” and participants “embraced and kissed their neighbors, locked arms, marched back and forth, and leaped about tables and

154 Quoted in Kazin, 29.
155 Ibid.
The enthusiasm and glossolalia of the gathering ushered forth in a profusion of words and gestures, whose inflections were multiplicitous. Their embraces, their reverberations, their leaping and marching: these movements and interlockings transgressed the lines dividing North, South, Plains, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, socialist, rural, urban, men, women, suffragettes, self, other, body, world. If not the specter of socialism, these experiences were nonetheless subversive. For as Alliance President Leonidas Polk put it, the powers of the day “know that if we get together and shake hands and look each other in the face and feel the touch of kinship, their doom is sealed.”

It would be sealed with an elasticity whose fibers stretched and propelled in centrifugal and centripetal directions. As subjects slipped into the folds of other bodies and habitus, they generated a multitude of senses, rhythms, interstices, and inflections that opened new nodes of feeling and imagining. The public enthusiasm of orgiastic bodies proliferated what Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant call “unsystematized lines of acquaintance.” These lines temporarily suspend the economic dialectic between body and world that naturalizes and reproduces social hierarchies. Bodies loaded with the dead weight of “obligatory routes and impassable barriers,” in the Bourdieuan sense, experience a weight that is more buoyant and manifold—a weight that stretches elastically through the unsystematized lines between them and incites spontaneous and...

unpredictable modes of feeling and pleasure. The potential force of this elasticity between bodies and subjects acts as a wedge to the transformation of those social norms and structures—such as, capital, patriarchy, and sexual difference—that require the deadness of the body for their own existence.\textsuperscript{159} It was through these wedges that aesthetic lines of beginning could emerge, in which people of different backgrounds and perspectives felt and saw that their collective action could rupture the inevitability of time. As one reporter wrote about the St. Louis convention, “Every man who sat in the exposition hall as a delegate … believed in his soul that he sat there as a history-maker.”

Generating elasticity is thus a vital source of natality, but it also provides a crucial context of support to buoy ongoing collective action and imagining among disparate groups of people. Polk knew that Populism’s strange and unexpected “touches of kinship” were subversive, because social divides are produced and “stirred up” by those who “try to work upon our passions.”\textsuperscript{160} He understood that enthusiastic transgression, in combination with the more mundane work of sense making and care in churches, schoolhouses, and union lodges, would be the condition of the risky economic and political promises people made to each other.\textsuperscript{161} The connections that were enabled in these spaces and practices, across old lines of isolation and anxiety, drew new lines of mutual support and relational power. These were the elastic interstices that sustained the

\textsuperscript{159} See Berlant and Warner. I’m adapting a point they make in the context of an argument about queer sexuality, public intimacy, and heteronormative cultures of secular liberalism and its public/private distinctions. This unquoted sentence draws queerly from one of their more provocative lines, in the sense that I’ve tweaked it without properly acknowledging the borders around their intellectual property.

\textsuperscript{160} Quoted in Goodwyn, \textit{Populist Moment}, 133-34.

\textsuperscript{161} See, for example, the discussion of the Alliance “joint-note” plan below.
more purposeful commitments actors made to each other and the movement over time—to care for the possibility of future acting and imagining.

The democratic aesthetics of Populism thus generated a dynamic of dispersal and gathering at the core of the movement. Through practices that engendered diverse rhythms, temporalities, and touches, actors could release some of the sediments of old patterns and hard tales, and gather to cultivate of new senses, dispositions, narratives, and visions. They did this on repeated occasions in different combinations with different potentialities for discovery, transformation, and institution, and always with the possibility hovering around every word and deed that old relations of power and powerlessness would live on or coalesce. Their public discourses and performances were thus constituted in the struggle of centralizing and decentering forces, which gathered relational power and authority vis-à-vis capitalist totalities but did so in part by dispersing power and authority through the multiple nodes of sense, practice, and coalition that imagined Populism. At its best, the movement cultivated narrative practices that opened what Bakhtin calls internally persuasive discourses, which proliferated the sites and actors of future authoring. As actors came to see themselves in the practice of experimenting with democratic forms, came to see themselves as story makers, they gained confidence in their capacities to interrupt the same hard tales of inevitability that had structured their lives—and to do so repeatedly. Their crusading narrative insurgency, driven in one register by their moral idealism, was thus diffracted through countless other spaces and practices that opened them to strange touches and unpredictable pleasures, to new possibilities for imagining. These multitudinous sites of imagining were, in
profoundly limited ways, what Populism sought to rescue from the proverbial altar of mammon and to preserve for future generations. These would be the “unexhausted virtue” and the “ever-refreshed strength” of the body of the commonwealth.

Building Dynamic Institutions

If Populism was born as a cooperative economic movement, it is widely remembered as a massive third-party campaign. This is because farmers, laborers, socialists, greenbackers, revivalists, prohibitionists—and perhaps most acutely, African Americans and suffragettes—finally agreed in large numbers that they would need to “move into politics” to win protections against monopolies of currency, credit, markets, government, and culture. For many radical democrats, this move would represent the just reverse: in Arendtian terms, it would be a move away from the public spaces of political freedom and into the realm of state administration. They would be partly correct. The People’s Party marks a transition between the grassroots democratic culture of Populism and the administrative centralization of the Progressive Era. But after over decades of struggle, millions of insurgent actors who sought to decenter power and protect spaces of freedom looked upon the state as their best hope. What kinds of protections did they seek? What institutional consolidations of power and authority promised to foster political freedom, especially for Americans long schooled in principles of limited government, local autonomy, and self-reliance? It is possible to elaborate answers to these questions based on Populism’s own institutional organizations and from its vision of the state: the dynamic of centralizing and decentering played out in both. This dynamic
is promising for a democratic politics in which the borders of economic, social, and political relations are drawn, unsettled, and redrawn, at the same time recasting efficacy and legitimacy of borders as such. But this is also, as Wolin has shown, the dynamic deployed by capital to de-democratize natality. Populist institutions, at their best, suggest a kind of dynamic institutionalism that affords protection to and democratizes the emergence of newness.

As an institution working at local, state, and national levels, the Alliance experimented with a form of organization that kept the dynamic between macro-power and micro-power in generative flux. The organizational power of the Alliance in relation to dominant capital forms expanded at the county, state, and national levels. Farmers bulked their goods to sell en masse at county and state levels, and they centralized their cooperative procurement efforts through Alliance purchasing agents. As local and less coordinated efforts met stiffer and stiffer opposition from merchants and bankers, the Texas Farmers’ Alliance Exchange set the wheels in motion behind Charles Macune’s plan for statewide marketing of the cash crops of every suballiance. When an observant lawyer remarked that the Alliance was “forming one of the grandest monopolies that the world ever saw,” a supporter of the cooperative movement insisted on making a distinction: “It may become a great monopoly, but we predict that it will use its power wisely.”\(^{162}\) Perhaps she would have been correct. But had the Alliance won governmental protections and survived the century, it is not difficult to imagine it taking a bureaucratic

\(^{162}\) Quoted in Postel, 118. For information in this paragraph, see also Postel, 115-25; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 48-49, 110-139.
turn, or becoming a farm trust that excluded black farmers and kept down wages for
farmhands. There were seeds of such a vision already at work in the cooperative
movement. In its efforts at state-wide marketing, business managers and agents directed
the practical workings of cooperation at a greater remove from rank-and-file members.
And as statewide marketing began to falter in practice, one exasperated proponent of the
plan demanded, “Don’t you know that one hundred cooperative stores working on an
independent basis … would ruin the Exchange? … Don’t you know that a body with out
a head is dead?” 163

And yet, that bureaucratic vision was not a reality, nor even a dominant
centralizing force, during the movement. State Alliances could provide support at the
county and local level, but they had nothing like administrative control. Instead, local
suballiances often breathed life through their coordination on a broader scale. This was
no more evident than in the statewide marketing venture of the Texas Alliance. The plan
was to adopt a system of joint bank notes, through which landowners and tenants would
place their entire individual assets, from ownership papers to loose pennies, at the
disposal of the group as collateral for statewide cooperative purchasing. It was a fight
against the credit system that would sink or swim with the whole group, and in which
better-off farmers risked their land for the poorest even when cash-only cooperatives
were in their narrower interests. These ambitious commitments brought the Texas
Alliance closer than any to debt relief for its members. When the joint-note plan was on

163 Quoted in Postel, 124-25.
the verge of collapse, due to insufficient collateral for bank loans, tens of thousands of farmers met at county courthouses throughout Texas on June, 9th, 1888 to dig deeper into their pockets. The plan did eventually collapse, but it was “a day men remembered for the rest of their lives.” The Alliance was thus able to afford a genuine degree of protection against the potential psychic and material costs of political action through its commonwealth commitments and the innumerable micro-practices of care that sustained them. Its promise as a state and national institution came through its deep roots in local spaces.

Of course, Hamilton or Hobbes could have said as much, at least in their most prescient insights on the need for capillary power to habituate and centralize imaginations toward the national state. But it was a radical democratic concept, in the case of the Alliance, to operate as a national institution by proliferating spaces of local self-help. As a centralizing institution that left administration largely decentered, and that frequently opened national and state proposals to vote by rank-and-file members, the Alliance created myriad internal spaces for contesting official decisions and experimenting with alternatives. These were spaces of innovation, in which “seemingly endless variants of cooperative arrangements” circulated without inevitably seeking standardized form. They were also the translocal spaces in which farmers cultivated habits of listening, critique, story making, and non-deference—even toward centralizing authorities within the Alliance. They were buoyant spaces, whose elasticity released bodies and

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164 Goodwyn, Populist Moment, 74-80.
165 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 39.
imaginations from the permanent debt structure that had locked them into a futurity of the same. Instead, the exchange of knowledges, innovations, and yearnings, via traveling lecturers and movement circulars, generated translocal spaces as spaces for anticipating alternative inflections and imaginings of commonwealth. The success of the movement depended on these alternatives, on the very possibility of alternatives. It is little surprise, then, that its fundamental spaces cultivated in farmers dispositions toward both gathering and dispersal. The Alliance prospered as a national economic and political institution because it was an organization that couldn’t contain its own ends.

The same can be said in significant ways for the People’s Party, which would remain, in Kazin’s words, an “amalgam of social groups and political organizations with clashing priorities.”166 Within a month of the 1892 St. Louis Industrial Conference, grassroots Populist organizations began to emerge across the country. Their roots and routes were often the vast network of suballiances and the traveling lecturer circuit that connected them. In other places, they were born in the living remnants of two decades of frenzied but relatively uncoordinated third-party activity, whether Greenback, Anti-Monopoly, Union Labor, Socialist Labor, Prohibition, or any of the hundreds of local and state Independent parties.167 The People’s Party revived democratic imaginings of electoral politics as the western world, even its revolutionaries, increasingly adopted tightly organized and centralized party structures. The People’s Party was born of a mass social movement and constituted by seasoned insurgents who looked not to surrender

166 Kazin, 30.
167 Sanders, 128-131; Kazin, 27.
their power to the party, but to wield power through it. Goodwyn describes the vision of one of the original architects of the Alliance: “The Alliance needed to stand in relation to the People’s Party as the Jacobin Clubs of revolutionary France had stood in relation to the new democratic parliamentary government. The self-organized people of the Alliance would serve as ‘a mighty base of support’ for Populist candidates when they legislated democratically and a strong admonishing force when they did not.” And indeed, the People’s Party took shape regionally and locally in a diverse array of forms: some with stronger farmer-labor coalitions, some with more racially solidaristic visions, some with planks on suffrage or prohibition, but all reflecting the differential makeup of grassroots insurgency in particular contexts.

But the grassroots and coalitional bases of Populism were often fragile, requiring cultivation and tending in micro-level spaces and support from macro-level institutions. Many of the coalitional imaginations born in micro-contexts never broke their way into national party platforms, as evidenced by the failure to include planks in favor of either suffrage or federal intervention to protect the voting rights of African Americans. But the failures of the People’s Party to attend to democracy’s multiplicitous nodes of imagination had its roots in micro-contexts as well. For it was here that farmers barely tiptoed across segregated spaces, here that agrarian organizers couldn’t find a language to reach urban immigrants, here that power permeated household gender relations. And it was here that the base of the People’s Party collapsed before the party did. If the Alliance

grassroots network was to be a base of support and accountability for Populist candidates, rather than a mobilizing engine for a centralized party, the latter is what it eventually became. As the cooperative movement ran out of options for standing up to banks, merchants, and manufacturers, cooperatives began to decline from 1890-1893. Without public work to gather farmers together, membership in suballiances fell. At the same time, as the Alliance moved into politics, the traveling lecturer system was replaced by a more traditional lecture circuit, which lacked the dialogue, give and take, and radical listening of translocal spaces. Just as Populism was gaining power as a national third-party movement, it was losing the democratic power of imagination at its base. And in 1896, when Populism fused with the Democratic Party to nominate William Jennings Bryan for president, the more radical voices in the movement were the ones who lost out.

Redrawing the lines of good and evil, Donnelly declared, “The Democracy raped our convention while our own leaders held the struggling victim.” In an editorial inflecting Donnelly’s gendered rhetoric, one woman mocked men for “waving Alliance principles and swallowing the whole Democratic Party.”

But what state protections from capitalist domination did Populism imagine? What kind of state could promise “democracy” without being forced to swallow a lie? With what irony did a movement that struggled to decentralize capital and democratize state power help usher in the more administrative reformism of the Progressive Era?

Populism faced not the monolithic state bureaucracy we picture today, but a

169 Kazin, 44.
170 Quoted in Jeffrey.
disaggregated complex of rules, organizations, and institutions. Neither displaying the
conservative anti-statism of many contemporary populist groups nor calling for sweeping
state powers, the movement worked on a host of scales and issues both to reform and to
use state power to protect and enhance democratic capacities. Making a compelling case
for the crucial role of Populism as a “principle instigator” of progressive reform,
Elizabeth Sanders argues that farmers sought to steer the regulatory and infrastructure-
building capacity of the state toward a variety of ends: to deconcentrate economic power,
especially with regard to money and credit, labor and land policy, and transportation and
communication; to squeeze open more space to develop local and regional economic
power and innovation, including cooperative economies; and ultimately, to effect more
egalitarian relations of wealth and power. What Populists did not assume, separating
them from later reformers, was that the state would hold bureaucratic discretion in policy
making. Their plank for government ownership of railroads, for example, carried explicit
language and suggested regulations “to prevent the increase of the power of the national
administration” in its new role.¹¹

More generally, in Sanders’ analysis, Populism envisioned a state that governed
through strong legislatures, a democratized electoral system, organized social
movements, and specific statutory mandates—which, whenever possible, would be
carried out through “local, decentralized, ad hoc arrangements in which movement

¹¹ Pollack, Populist Mind, 63.
This would be a state, like Leonard Cohen’s vision of “Commonwealth,” that would fundamentally reorient the centralizing and decentralizing powers that imagine democracy. Its consolidations would pluralize the spaces and practices that harbor emergent imaginings of democracy. Its organized imaginings would have access to and wedge open more direct lines—referenda, direct election of senators, and executive term limits were among those demanded by the Omaha Platform—to inflect and reconstitute the state.

“Democracy is Not a Lie”: Promising in the Flesh

What does it mean for radical democracy to cultivate Populism as a source of authority for acting and imagining? What we inherit is an exemplary movement that struggled to emerge amidst the always constrained and contested cultural field of orthodox, hubristic, and radical democratic imagining in America. Its exemplarity perhaps lies in the fact that it did democratize culture and politics in some of its spaces and practices, while it failed to do so in others, and did both at the same time. The borders intersecting Populism were simultaneously elastic and rigid, the movements at their edges both pulsating and profoundly stuck. When the movement managed to wedge open spaces for new imagining in fields of resurgent orthodoxy and centralizing hubris, it always reinforced or produced closures at the same time: for example, when stagings to “bury the bloody shirt” ritually forgot slavery and denied ongoing racial domination; or

\[172\] Sanders, 388. This paragraph is largely drawn from Sanders analysis, especially 8, 132, 187-88, 410-17.
when advances along gender lines proliferated racist assumptions about the moral superiority of white women vis-à-vis blacks; or when farmer-labor coalitions joined to codify anti-immigrant resolutions in the People’s Party platform. Populism’s legacy is this tradition of radical democratic struggle and reactionary backlash, and its legacy can be traced to various left and right populisms today. There are crucial distinctions to make in that tracing. But making those distinctions alone would be too easy. For Populism also shares with contemporary radical democratic struggle an American inheritance in which even the most incisive new beginnings carry over orthodox edges and emerge in dangerous proximity to radically centralizing modes of power.

Populism’s struggle in fields of American orthodoxy and hubris nonetheless casts a more translucent light on the limits of radical democratic imagining. Amidst radically dynamic forces that sought to centralize power by dislocating everyday capacities, and orthodox forces that stabilized themselves by holding certain cultural authorities beyond the reach of inquiry and contest, the movement experimented with alternative dynamics of consolidating and decentering power and authority. It gathered bodies, discourses, and imaginings across lines of difference to protect and enhance democratic capacities for receptivity, critique, and provocation. At the same time, its dynamics of decentering and dispersal were often crucial to generating elastic modes of belonging, practices of cooperation and promising, and broad-based energy and support, all of which enabled the movement to remain resilient through decades of fallback by capital. In these ways, Populism understood that new imaginings must be born and cultivated in competing habitus—which are developed, nurtured, forgotten, and recovered over time, as uneven
bodies come together in unfamiliar spatial arrangements, called by surprising discursive ideas and practices, via unsettling modes of power and powerlessness, in untold relationships to their shared and contested histories. Those new imaginings that did move boundaries within Populism—cooperative public work across class, deliberation across gender, and solidarity between farmers and laborers—came when unlike actors could gather time and again, perform joint actions on a repeated basis, deliberate and reiterate the terms of their cooperation, and often, meet through more decentering touches. These were the spaces in which the movement contested not only its ideological meanings and rhetorical performances, but elementally, the quality of its interstitial spaces. None of these spaces lacked for rigid and myopic borders of their own. But each reiterated that the body of the commonwealth would be democratized in the flesh.
CONCLUSION

Loving Anxiety:

Harboring the Stranger in Democratic Imagining

Obama is the candidate of the new—a “new generation,” a “new leadership,” a “new kind of politics,” to borrow phrases he has used. But, in emphasizing newness, Obama is actually voicing a very old theme. When he speaks of change, hope, and choosing the future over the past, when he pledges to end racial divisions or attacks special interests, Obama is striking chords that resonate deeply in the American psyche. He is making a promise to voters that is as old as the country itself: to wipe clean the slate of history and begin again from scratch.

—John Judis

The Obamnesty will be stopped only if ordinary Americans stage the kind of extraordinary grass-roots revolts that stopped amnesty, twice, during the Bush Administration.

—Peter Brimelow

But I’m stubborn as those garbage bags
that Time cannot decay.
I’m junk but I’m still holding up
this little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

—Leonard Cohen

The promise of democracy in America has taken on different overtones since Chevrolet’s “Anthem” began airing on national television in 2006. As I write this conclusion, the United States stands at the epicenter of the worst global recession since

the Great Depression. In the U.S. alone, the financial meltdown has forced millions to confront unprecedented rates of home foreclosure, chronic unemployment forecasts, collapsed retirement funds, severed health insurance, and new gluts in homelessness, poverty, and hunger.  

Once able to conceal its hand in creating the surplus of insecurity in America, General Motors stands on the verge of Chapter 11 bankruptcy and is set to undergo a massive, accelerated, and highly visible restructuring plan that will likely cut half its brands, close two-thirds of its dealerships, and wipe out tens of thousands of jobs. Chevrolet will probably emerge little worse for the wear. But the question has been wedged open, at least, whether Americans will remain passive viewers of “Our Country,” as its scenes cut disjunctively between undeniable stories of suffering and loss and irrefutable evidence of corporate greed and criminal mismanagement that make a mockery of public trust.

If political imagination still seems oxymoronic to many who inhabit Chevy’s America, millions of others have rediscovered the audacity of political hope. Whatever else it was, the election of Barack Obama was steeped in America’s rhetorical tradition of new beginnings, buoyed by the authoritative vision of Thomas Paine. In Obama’s words: “Hope is the bedrock of this nation: the belief that our destiny will not be written for us, but by us; by all those men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is,

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who have the courage to remake the world as it should be.”

Refusing to consign the future of America to the dull repetition of its past, Obama’s sharp rallying cry—Not this time!—opened imaginative spaces in which a motley cast could see themselves in the act of authoring a new world. The endless array of Obamonikers perhaps exemplifies the limits of their creativity: Obamacons, Obámanos, Obama Mamas, Progressives for Obama, Confederates for Obama, Obamatrons, ObamACORN, Obamastan, B.O. Reeks, Keep the Change, Nope. I want to reflect briefly on the constraints and possibilities of natality in Obama’s America, both to reiterate my central concerns and arguments and to hold open the questions and challenges facing radical democratic imagining today.

Many radical democrats saw in Obama the best chance in decades to elect a president who could be agitated and compelled to democratize the state. His reliance on community organizing discourses and tactics suggested, or at least opened the way for many people to imagine, something distantly akin to the protective, decentered state envisioned by nineteenth century Populists. Activists and intellectuals repeatedly appropriated his rhetoric to articulate such a vision: America, as it should be, would proliferate and protect opportunities for grassroots movements—across a range of intersecting needs, coalitions, and scales—to contest and steer the decision-making and infrastructure-building capacities of the state. Most recognized, at some level, the ideological and material obstacles that stood, almost implacably, in the way of this vision.


But they believed nonetheless that radical democracy, however discontinuous its emergences, could become something more than a miracle. Theirs was the audacity to hope for a state that would harbor and enable future potentials for radical democratic acting and imagining.

The audacity of hope, that unruly “belief in things not seen,” did hold promise as an ethos for democratizing the state.\(^8\) As Plato knew, straining to see beyond the limits of a given order can develop into deeper habits of double-seeing: in this case, seeing that America’s seeing is incomplete. That incompleteness was experienced in several fundamental aspects of national life. Obama supporters sought not only to escape “four more years of John McCain’s George Bush policies.”\(^9\) Many were trying to come to grips with a national psyche whose logics of violence and control had been paraded, for the whole globe to see, in a spectacle of waterboarding, wiretapping, administrative arrogance, and citizen duplicity. Those logics, of course, had deep roots in the scars of slavery. Spurred by the audacity of a candidate whose presidential bid was the legacy of assassinated civil rights leaders, many citizens could no longer suppress their intense, palpable hunger for a more racially solidaristic vision and practice of power in America. And when Obama spoke of a “new kind of politics,” steered by an organized citizenry that would hold the state accountable to its democratic promise, his words conjured not


only partisan gridlock in Washington; for many, they aggravated a gnawing unease that democracy in America had indeed become a lie. In these ways, Obama’s rhetoric was repeatedly inflected and decentered with overtones that had long been unthinkable and unsayable in public spaces: This is our country, “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” “There was not then, nor is there now, a single American institution that is not a racist institution.” “America is not a true democracy.”

The audacity of political hope was thus marked by an insurgence of American anxiety. Throughout this project, I’ve elucidated the spatial, temporal, and discursive practices through which people collectively imagine the unimaginable. But I’ve also tried to foreground anxiety as a constitutive limit on political imagining, which in every instance is co-authored by differences it variously cultivates, conceals, or disavows. This insight is the legacy of Plato and Hobbes, who wrestle with the paradox of political imagination. Platonic double-seeing tends contradiction and incompleteness as conditions of natality in a world that has gone dark, but Plato’s romantic desire to rationalize imagination recommends pacifying the unruly imaginings of those who cannot see the light of reason. Hobbes, at his most cynical, innovates the arts of pacification: he anticipates a kind of normalized agitation that would habituate citizens to adapt instinctually to radically dynamic and totalizing modes of power. In my discussions of American hubris and orthodoxy, and then of Arendt and Bourdieu, I elaborate

romanticism and cynicism as prominent affective responses to the anxiety of political imagining. It is possible to trace both to profound yearnings and critiques generated at the limits of a given order. But each responds by concealing or disavowing key constraints and possibilities at its own limits. Thus Arendt insufficiently separates her concept of natality, as “founding anew and building up,” from its implications in more cynical logics of creative destruction. Conversely, Bourdieu’s cynicism not only masks the innumerable buoyant potentialities of habitus; it also conceals its roots in his own utopian aspirations, which too often warp into a kind of all-or-nothing romanticism about the conditions and possibilities of freedom. Romanticism and cynicism thus tend to bleed into each other in ways that disdain the world as it is, rather than caring for this broken world as the condition of imagining the world as it should be.

More often than not, the anxiety of incompleteness has pulled imaginings of Obama’s America between poles of romanticism and cynicism. Obama’s victory was heralded with headlines of redemption and rebirth: “Dream Realized.” “A Dream Fulfilled.” “The Dream Comes True.” “Race Is History.” “A Changed Nation.” “Welcome Back, Democracy!”11 The summation of two years of radical critique, not to mention a bitter history of struggle, these headlines signal that wrestling with America’s constitutive logics of racial and economic domination may generate anxiety of a kind that cannot be sustained for very long. The desire to have moved beyond racial divisions or to

have restored democracy has its roots in the powerful urge to imagine forms of freedom that could somehow be unbound from logics of force and violence. As Obama understood, some romanticism is crucial for opening spaces of collective imagining, especially in a world where those who fight for change are cynically derided for “peddling false hopes.”¹² But a romanticism that disavows its constitutive differences comes into dangerous proximity with the more hubristic romanticism of Chevy’s America or Donald Rumsfeld’s America. Their claims to remake the world are the more cynical acts of creative destruction that reproduce modes of power and powerlessness.

The America of Chevy and Rumsfeld survives, in part, by reproducing its own cynicism. For many radical democrats, Obama was at best an “enormous relief” from eight years of George W. Bush, and at worst a mouthpiece for a more hubristic America. Judith Butler worries about the “uncritical exuberance” surrounding Obama’s victory, warning that his “intensely imaginary” evocation of unity functions ideologically to mask the anxieties of America’s internal contradictions.¹³ Wrestling with the question of what kind of state, if any, could support radical democracy, Wendy Brown suggests that Obama is just another brand of democracy: “Like Barack Obama, [democracy] is an empty signifier to which any and all can attach their hopes and dreams.”¹⁴ Enter

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¹⁴ Brown, “We Are All Democrats Now.”
Chevrolet: “I’d like to order the Obama Special, please, with a Change Lite and some Freedom Fries. Make that to go.”

Butler and Brown seem to harbor utopian hopes for a state that could protect and enable practices of freedom that work on the limits of a given order. But it is easy to understand why they guard these hopes in the midst of what Brown candidly calls “democracies we do not want.” Radical democrats do not, for example, want Peter Brimelow’s democracy, in which grassroots social movements are the driving force against amnesty for illegalized immigrants. But many find it hard to shake their anxieties about a disaffected and apocalyptic right wing, whose calls to “take back our country” sound an awful lot like those of an organized citizenry looking to wield power over a democratic state. And many wary of the state all together when they remember that Obama’s America is also Chevy’s America and Rumsfeld’s America, in which a corporate megastate still vies to exert totalizing force over every act of political imagining. In America’s latest attempt to begin the world anew, radical democrats are perhaps as anxious as Brimelow about Obamnesty. Except they worry about a corporate bailout whose risky game of chance reinforces the same old logic of “heads-capitalism-wins, tails-the-public-loses.” More directly, they worry about amnesty for Donald Rumsfeld and other U.S. officials who legitimated, designed, and carried out acts of torture in the name of national security. They see both cynicism and romanticism in Obama’s pretense to “resist the forces that divide us” and “move forward with

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15 Ibid.

But how could radical democracy move forward in this broken world, as it is? How might we care for the crossgrained and buoyant traditions of radical democratic imagining, without yielding to the more disdainful stances of romanticism and cynicism? I’ve tried in this project to develop an ethos and practices of a more loving anxiety, which strains to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the differences at its edges. This suggests, most basically, the need to love anxiety as a condition of natality in a world that is profoundly regulated by totalizing and reproductive modes of imagining. Indeed, a love of anxiety has animated the most promising gestures to democratize imagining in these pages: Plato’s double-seeing; Cohen’s Commonwealth, which loves the bitter questioning at its heart; Bourdieu’s efforts to cultivate the unsettling gaps in the dialectic between expectations and objective chances; Arendt’s harboring world, which shelters, anticipates, and inaugurates strange emergences; Bakhtin’s ethical injunction to imagine and act at the interstitial borders of bodies, languages, and cultures; Populism’s uneasy experiments in belonging—with what it could not yet imagine, both in its translocal and coalitional practices and in the uncertainty of its strategies for provoking anxiety at the heart of America.

In each of these instances, the impetus to love anxiety as a condition of natality also suggests spaces and practices that could cultivate more loving forms of anxiety at the
edges of collective imagining. Indeed, radical democracy needs modes of imagining whose constitutive anxieties can desire fiercely, rather than guarding themselves in cynicism. Thus Populism sought to animate the subdued desires of a passive and fearful citizenry in an age of daunting hubris and dangerous orthodoxy. But such audacity gains buoyancy and weight only in its humility. And so radical democracy also needs to cultivate anxieties whose worries are not so many impulses to moralize or romanticize, but rather are signals that call us to anticipate and strain to encounter the strangers within every act of imagining. As Populism understood, at its best, this is an ethical and political humility, capable of building and caring for protective and resilient modes of imagining in the midst of totalizing and reactionary forces.

Loving anxiety suggests practices and challenges for radical democratic theory and practice, and I want to close by reflecting on several of these and their implications in and for Obama’s America. I’ve tried to experiment with practices of reading texts by loving and cultivating their anxieties. I treat these desires and worries as the almost corporeal habitus of a text, whose performativity variously constrains, conceals, animates, and co-authors its theoretical imagination. Rendering the habitus of a text more translucent not only complicates its theoretical imagining; it also cultivates that text as a strange authority for new imaginings, which are less cynically mired in or romantically wooed by its more obvious limits. Moreover, it has hopefully enabled me to appropriate each of the texts with which I deal at length, without quite as easily concealing or disavowing my own debts to them as they are and as they could be.
My sense is that these reading practices require both the kinds of theoretical juxtapositions I’ve used, as well as juxtapositions of theory and practice. It would be possible, for example, to cultivate the textual habitus of Bourdieu and Arendt within the world each imagines. But it is through an iterative, dialogical engagement with Bakhtin that strange buoyancies and unsettling centripetal and centrifugal forces are agitated within their theoretical bodies and in the interstices between them. In other words, while Bakhtin offers neither a theory of habitus nor of natality, it would be difficult to imagine a radical democratic habitus of natality without his interjection. The same can be said of Populism, which was neither a reactionary populist illusion, nor a miracle unbound from the forces of the world as it is. If Bourdieu and Arendt provide theoretical lenses for evaluating Populism, it is exemplary of their theories only in the sense that it loved and cultivated many of their anxieties. Populism affirms the possibilities of caring for the buoyant and crossgrained traditions of dialogically contested natality, but it emerged in a broken world of centripetal and centrifugal forces that inflected its most promising imaginings with totalizing and reactionary impulses from the start. Many of these impulses are intensified in Obama’s America, where rhetorical imaginings of freedom and democracy can cut incisively on the downbeat, only to be vacuated on the upbeat by romantic and cynical drives to avoid the anxieties they provoke. Engaging these anxieties, through deep contextual analyses, seems crucial to our theoretical clarity about the constraints and possibilities of democratic imagining, in relation to our ill-explored anxieties about “democracies we do not want.”
Substantively, I suspect that gaining such clarity will entail cultivating bodily habitus as the stranger within democratic imagining. Bourdieu compels us to consider how social orders and groups regulate habitus to estrange those imaginings that are most threatening to them. But it is also the unruly performativity of habitus that provokes anxieties at the limits of every act of imagining. As my analysis of Populism suggests, radical democratic habitus can develop modes of elastic belonging and familiarity with strangeness. But this requires experimenting repeatedly with a repertoire of practices, which gather and disperse bodies in different spatial relationships, across deep lines of difference, and through variegated rhythms, temporalities, and touches. At the level of rhetorical imagination, at least, Obama’s America does open possibilities for affirming and struggling to build a state that could harbor a more buoyant and crossgrained habitus. But that struggle suggests the need for democratic theory and practice to find better responses to several crucial challenges, toward which I gesture in closing.

Amidst resurgent mobilizations of a right-wing base that wants to “take back our country,” how can radical democracy distinguish its repertoires of cultivating habitus from those of right-wing populisms? If these populisms had prevailed in the 2008 election, America’s rhetorical imagination would be animated not by the audacity of hope, but by Sarah Palin’s triple credo: Wink, wink. Don’t blink! And be wired to the mission of “Our Country.” These modes of imagining require habitus that enable

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unambiguous familiarity, closeted secrecy, unreasoning decisionism, and radical adjustment to the state. But if we do indeed live in Palin’s America, how is radical democratic imagining also implicated in its modes of habitus and imagining? How should it be, in its efforts to cultivate modes of elastic belonging that could weaken reactionary backlash and facilitate strange coalitions against the centripetal forces of a corporate megastate? How too should radical democracy engage more moderate populisms, whose edges are both sharper and duller than left populisms—sharper in their willingness to engage and negotiate with state institutions, rather than hanging back cynically or oscillating between the romantic impulses of force and irrelevance; duller in their willingness to steer past differences at the edges of the state they would affirm and reconstitute?

Finally, and foremost, how could radical democratic theory and practice care for America not only as this broken world, but also as those stubborn “garbage bags/ that time cannot decay?” The stench of those garbage bags might inflect one of Obama’s best insights about our brutal, bitter, and beautiful racial past: “These people are part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.” What would it mean to cultivate the temporal performativity of habitus by “leaning in/ breathing deeper that brutal burning smell/ that surrounds the smoldering wreckage/ that [we’ve] come to love so


The impossibility of Obamnesty in this wreckage, even for immigrants, lies in acknowledging that America was always foreign to itself. I’ve tried thus far to imagine America in its constitutive difference-with-itself—in the garbage-bag revolutionary imaginings layered over in the centripetal pull of time, in the unruly populist imaginings that repeatedly exceed and decenter totalizing modes of cultural reproduction. But what would it mean to conceive of revolutionary and populist imaginings as immigrant imaginings vis-à-vis the totalizing corporate and cultural state that relentlessly tries to police, destabilize, or assimilate them? More concretely, how could we imagine and cultivate the material and cultural contexts of a world, of this broken world, in which collective identity is constituted through movement as much as place, and through processes of bordering and debordering that establish multiple relationships, networks, and scales of belonging? How could the cultural authorities, traditions, and practices of immigrant America democratize imagining: of democracy, imagination, and America? And would that no longer be “Our Country”?

Bibliography


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BIOGRAPHY

Laura Kathleen Grattan was born on May 10, 1978 in Fairfax, Virginia to William F. Grattan and Marcia Grattan. She graduated summa cum laude from the College of William & Mary in 2000, with a B.A. in English and Honors in Interdisciplinary Studies. After college, Laura worked as a Research Assistant at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. She has remained an associate of the Kettering Foundation, co-coordinating a seminar on Deliberative Democracy in Higher Education, and editing a book with John Dedrick and Harris Dientsfrey, Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, Campus, and Community (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2008). In 2002, Laura began a doctoral program in Political Science at Duke University. At Duke, she taught courses on contemporary ideologies, the politics of imagination, body politics, and an engaged-learning course on the ethics and politics of immigration. She received a Kenan Instructorship in Ethics and an H.B. Earhart Fellowship, and she participated in the Kenan Graduate Colloquium in Ethics and the Franklin Humanities Institute Mellon Dissertation Working Group. She is also a member of the American Political Science Association and the Association for Political Theory. During her years in Durham, NC, Laura was an active member of Durham CAN (Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods) and Duke Organizing. She is grateful to have been part of an inspiring group of community and campus activists of all stripes, who organized successful living wage campaigns with Durham City, County, and Public Schools and at Duke University.