



HOPE DRAPED IN BLACK

JOSEPH R. WINTERS

Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress

HOPE DRAPED IN BLACK

THE RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

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DEDICATED TO

Joseph Winters
(*my father*)

Angeletta Winters
(*my grandmother*)

AND

Lawrence Smith
(*my grandfather*)

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I have been thinking about the themes of melancholy, remembrance, and trauma for a while. Part of my investment can be traced back to personal experiences and losses; another source of this interest is my immersion in African American literature and culture and my passion for critical and literary theory. This book is motivated by a suspicion that many of our influential narratives, images, and cultural symbols minimize the intensity of loss and injury in our world. More specifically, this project is animated by the dangers and limitations of interpreting black freedom struggles and the legacy of racism within logics of progress and national exceptionalism. My sense is that a different kind of hope and set of possibilities emerge through melancholy, remembrance, and a heightened understanding of history's tragic features.

I completed the penultimate draft of this book a month before the Ferguson uprising and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. While time and space did not permit me to write about this insurgent set of practices, struggles, and aspirations, much of my analysis resonates with the concerns and overall energy of this movement. This book is also

very much concerned about the ways in which black death and suffering have become normalized and widely acceptable.

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Introduction

On the evening of November 4, 2008, the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, conceded victory to his opponent, Barack Obama. McCain's concession speech encompassed many of the familiar elements associated with this genre of political oratory, including successive attempts to urge his Republican-dominated audience to overlook partisan differences and redirect their energy and commitment to overcoming common problems. What made this situation historically unique, of course, was the fact that the Democratic opponent and victor was a black American. Understanding the significance and import of "the first black President," McCain began his speech by situating Obama's victory within a broader historical trajectory, by connecting the present moment to the nation's past:

This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight. I've always believed that America offers opportunities to all who have the industry and will to seize it. Senator Obama believes that

too. But we both recognize that, though we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained our nation's reputation and denied some Americans the blessings of American citizenship, the memory of them still had the power to wound. A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States. Let there be no reason now for any American to fail to cherish their citizenship in this, the greatest nation on Earth.¹

McCain makes several important rhetorical moves in the opening segment. He acknowledges that Obama's victory is especially significant for black Americans, a group that has endured various kinds of injustice since the seventeenth century. Even though he suggests that black people might value and interpret this event differently than other Americans, McCain underscores the relevance of this event for America as a whole (which resembles his insistence that common goals and ideals should trump partisan disagreements). For the Republican candidate, Obama's triumph confirms his belief that "America offers opportunities to all who have the industry to seize it," a belief that Obama apparently shares. After this election, according to McCain, there is no reason to doubt America's supremacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Similarly, there is no reason for citizens to feel ambivalent about their relationship to the nation-state, their identity as Americans. In other words, Obama's victory is meaningful and significant because it reinforces America's collective self-image as an exceptional nation, as a place unequivocally defined by opportunity, tolerance, and freedom. His ascendancy illustrates and confirms the nation's democratic ideals.

As McCain identifies Obama's impending victory as "evidence" of American supremacy, he also invokes America's racialized past in a specific manner. Think, for instance, of his reference to Booker T. Washington, the late-nineteenth-century black leader who urged black people to develop industrial skills, rather than strive for political enfranchisement, as a way to secure acceptance and respect.² McCain suggests that Washington, the first black to be formally invited to a White House dinner, anticipates and foreshadows the election of the first black president. By referring to

a black leader widely known for his tendency to cater to the interests of white elites, McCain directs the audience's memory to the more acceptable and palatable dimensions of black freedom struggles. Black activists like W. E. B. Du Bois or Ida B. Wells, contemporaries of Washington who rejected his conservatism, might not fit so easily into McCain's speech or into a triumphant vision of American history.

Even though McCain refers to the more palatable side of the nation's racial history, he knows that any reference to this history involves memories of injustice and suffering. Yet McCain seems to relegate this memory to a past that the nation has moved beyond and transcended. He claims, for instance, that "we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained the nation's reputation" and that "America today is a world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of that time." He also points out that the memory of racial injustice "had" the power to wound and unsettle people, suggesting that what Wendell Berry refers to as America's "hidden wound" has been mended. McCain is right to proclaim that there have been significant changes and shifts in America's racial arrangements in the past century, including the elimination of laws that prohibited blacks from entering and participating in designated public spaces. To deny these changes and improvements would be disingenuous. At the same time, it is important to remember that these changes are the result of long, tortuous struggles against white supremacist practices. Altering the state of things, as these struggles demonstrate, requires people to put their bodies on the line, to expose their bodies to danger, violence, injury, and State repression. The victorious tone of McCain's terse recapitulation of the past obscures this painful side of progress. In addition, McCain's rhetoric deflects attention from the ways that "old injustices" linger on in the present, even if these injustices target black bodies in new and subtler ways. The assumption that the nation has moved beyond the cruelty and bigotry of the past overlooks the ways in which these forces get redirected toward other racialized groups—Arabs, Latinos, Asians, and so forth. What is crucial here is the relationship between the significance/meaning ascribed to Obama's victory and memory of racial loss, violence, and cruelty. For McCain, the election of the first black president not only illustrates the nation's greatness but it also enables us to locate "old injustices" in a distant past, a past that is a "world away" from us. Because of the nation's recent triumph, we should no longer be disturbed by anguished memories of racial exclusion.

In response to Obama's victory, many publicly recognized figures echoed McCain's enthusiasm about racial progress. For instance, Rudolph Giuliani proclaimed, "We've achieved history tonight and we've moved beyond . . . the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness."³ For the former mayor of New York City, the election of the first black president signified the end of racial inequality; similarly, this momentous event proved that race was no longer a relevant factor or social category. America, according to Giuliani's assessment, is undeniably postracial; we have arrived. In line with the former mayor's optimism, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist George Will stated that the 2008 election should put an end to racial narratives defined by "strife and oppression," tired discourses that deny "fifty years of stunning progress."⁴ Perhaps more surprising, black American celebrities like Will Smith claimed that Obama's ascendancy prevented black people from making any more excuses regarding their inability to thrive and prosper in America.⁵ The irony here is that these public figures employed classic racial thinking—the notion that one individual's success represents the achievement of a racial group as a whole—to deny the ongoing significance of race.⁶

One might dismiss this postelection excitement as a fleeting moment. The rhetoric of a postracial nation might simply be the result of collective fervor around a historic event that many thought they would never experience in their lifetime. According to this explanation, as the enthusiasm generated by Obama's victory wanes and the postracial fantasy confronts sober realities and stubborn conditions (police surveillance and repression in communities of color, protests in places like Baltimore and Ferguson), the assumption that the nation has moved beyond race will lose validity. Although there may be some truth in this explanation, dismissing the optimism around racial progress as a fleeting response to Obama's ascendancy would neglect the ways postracial rhetoric exemplifies long-established ideologies, narratives, fantasies, and aspirations that heavily influence Americans in particular, and modern denizens more generally.⁷ It would neglect the pervasive commitment to the idea of progress in American culture, an idea that, when invoked, mitigates experiences and memories of racial trauma and loss.

Even individuals and figures who might reject the postracial fervor tend to cling to the proverbial idea of progress, invoking this trope to make sense of present and past struggles, achievements, and losses. Think, for instance,

of President Obama's poignant speech in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman and the collective frustration and anger over the death of Trayvon Martin.⁸ In July 2013, Obama began this speech by identifying with the deceased victim of Florida's stand-your-ground law. The deceased black subject, Obama tells the listener, could have been him thirty-five years ago, or even his son. This identification with Trayvon has generated criticisms in the past, accusations of Obama's playing the race card, being divisive, and so forth. After lauding the overall efficiency of the American legal process (he tells us that the system works), Obama reminds his audience of a history of racial disparities in the justice and legal systems. Black communities, he suggests, experience racial profiling, police brutality with police impunity, excessive surveillance, and unfair drug laws more frequently than other groups. But as a good politician, he quickly shifts from discussing the problems to delineating some concrete proposals to redress these lingering racial inequities and divisions. In addition to mentioning local and federal policies that might defuse mistrust and fear, he stresses the importance of starting a national conversation about race. He recommends that we begin these serious and difficult talks at the local level, in churches, families, and workplaces, in spaces that are supposedly less "stilted" than formal political realms. He ends the speech in an upbeat and buoyant manner. Talking about his daughters and their promising relationships with diverse groups of friends, he reassures the audience that the nation is progressing and getting better on the problem of race. He consoles us that the nation, despite recent events, is becoming a more perfect union, thereby connecting this speech to the famous Philadelphia address in 2008. (This conclusion also resonates with Obama's claim, made during a BET interview in response to protests in American cities against police violence and State repression, that we have to believe in progress because this belief gives us hope that we can make more progress in the future.⁹) Why is the President compelled to comfort citizens in the face of tragedy with the idea that each successive generation is advancing as a whole? What does this rhetorical move accomplish for us and why do we desire this consolation? How does a sweeping, unifying notion of progress serve as an imaginary buffer against instances of tragedy, violence, and loss? How does Obama's concluding optimism in the speech about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman thwart more unsettling ways of remembering, interpreting, and contemplating violence and suffering? How does this

attempt to sustain optimism around the subject of race foreclose a different kind of hope, a more melancholic kind of hope that Obama both gestures toward and immediately stifles for the sake of the order of things?¹⁰

Obama's speech, similar to McCain's, articulates a logic and grammar of progress that resonates with many. It has become quite commonplace to assume that Americans are situated on a progressive trajectory that continues to unfold through time.¹¹ In other words, with more progress, the nation will continue to approach a state of racial reconciliation (and perhaps even reach a juncture where race no longer matters). Even if people quibble about how to measure this progress, they typically leave unexamined the limitations and dangers internal to the rubric of progress as it applies to racial difference, black American strivings, struggle, loss, and forms of remembrance. In this book, I critically examine this trope, the effects it has had on the nation's imagination of its racial history, and the ways it has been used, invoked, and troubled by black writers and artists. Like many authors before me, I contend that the category of progress—even as it has been used in different contexts to galvanize struggles for a better, more just world—harbors a pernicious side. This all-too-familiar concept often functions in public discourse to downplay tensions, conflicts, and contradictions in the present for the sake of a more unified and harmonious image of the future. As McCain's concession speech demonstrates, progress is often aligned with triumphant accounts of history and the nation-state that too easily reconcile historical losses with current achievements. Similarly, the rhetoric of progress aligns itself with other reassuring tropes, ideals, and fantasies that seduce us into imagining a future that can protect us from loss, tragedy, and other conditions that are unavoidable for human subjects. As I argue throughout the book, the discursive reproduction of this concept results in the conflation of hope and optimism, a process that cultivates expectations of a better future by marginalizing or downplaying dissonant memories and attachments. These dissonant attachments—to traumatic events, unfinished struggles, neglected histories, and the recalcitrant dimensions of that past and present that resist closure and the eagerness to "move forward"—are necessary to challenge current configurations of power, especially since the effectiveness of power depends partly on its ability to produce forgetful subjects.

In this book, I draw attention to the black literary tradition as a discursive site that both troubles collective attachments to progress and that puts forth conceptions of hope and futurity that are mediated by melancholy,

loss, and a recalcitrant sense of tragedy. (Certainly other groups, communities, and traditions, some of which include black people, demonstrate how narratives of progress undermine themselves—Native Americans, immigrants, LGBT communities, and working-class subjects are examples. Yet in light of the ways black people’s diverse strivings, experiences, and struggles consistently get assimilated into ascendant national narratives and because black bodies become readily available signifiers of progress, optimism, and American supremacy, it is important to reconsider the fraught relationship between black strivings and progress.) The authors and artists that I examine in this book, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison, suggest that the possibility of a better world involves a heightened capacity to remember, register, and contemplate the damages, losses, and erasures of the past and present. While progress tends to function as a consoling and conciliatory narrative, this book contends that a better world, a more generous world, involves being more receptive to those dissonant, uncomfortable dimensions of life and history that threaten our sense of stability, coherence, and achievement.

THE AMBIVALENCE AND AGONY OF PROGRESS

The idea and promise of progress, an idea that is connected to values such as recognition, equality, and freedom, has always been a fraught object of discussion and interest for black writers, artists, and thinkers. This is especially the case for the philosopher, social critic, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. In “The Souls of White Folk,” a scathing essay written in the aftermath of World War I, Du Bois radically undercuts the pervasive faith that the world is moving steadily on a path toward increased freedom and equality. In this essay, he suggests that the rhetoric of civilization and progress denies a traumatic underside that consists of slavery, the colonization of people of color, war, and conquest. In an expression that resembles a prayer, Du Bois exclaims: “We have seen—Oh Merciful God! in these wild days and in the name of Civilization, Justice, and Motherhood—what have we not seen, right here in America, of orgy, cruelty, barbarism, and murder done to men and women of Negro descent.”¹² While Du Bois underscores the specific struggles of black Americans during the so-called nadir of American race relationships (a post-Reconstruction period marked by the establishment of Jim Crow segregation and the ritualized lynching of black bodies), he is also thinking broadly about the relationship between

civilization, progress, and race-inflected domination within modern life. Similar to Karl Marx, Du Bois contends that many of the material freedoms, advancements, and enjoyments that the modern world introduces rely on systems of exploitation and exclusion. As Du Bois puts it, “High wages in the United States and England might be the skillfully manipulated result of slavery in Africa and peonage in Asia.”¹³ What is important here is that Du Bois can be interpreted in this essay as saying that modern notions of progress and freedom are inherently flawed and problematic because they rely on and are intertwined with practices and conditions—capitalism, colonial expansion, racial hierarchies, endeavors, and incentives to usurp and possess the earth—that are harmful to non-Europeans, working-class bodies, women, and other groups. At the same time, he can be read as suggesting that these notions of freedom and progress are not necessarily flawed or attached to pernicious desires, endeavors, and projects; rather, these ideals have just not been embodied or practiced properly. If the latter position is taken, then progress and the practices and arrangements associated with this ideal should be embraced and simply expanded to include groups, communities, and collective bodies that are presently marginalized.¹⁴

This ambivalence haunts Du Bois’s writing and thought. (But, of course, he is not unique; he inherits, and bequeaths, this ambivalence.) As many commentators have noted, Du Bois occasionally identifies with and adopts rather simplistic notions of progress and civilization. Like other black intellectuals and black people more generally, Du Bois articulates a commitment to something like racial progress or uplift. While historical efforts to uplift the race seem necessary and laudatory, these efforts carry troubling implications and consequences, especially when uplifting black people is defined as civilizing the black masses. As Kevin Gaines points out, the proverbial uplift paradigm, adopted by many black intellectuals and activists since the nineteenth century, calls for an educated, elite class of black people to liberate the masses of black folk from imposed conditions of poverty, ignorance, and moral depravity.¹⁵ The demand and struggle for recognition has therefore involved the celebration of certain individuals or groups that “embody” and signify progress and advancement; these are figures that have adopted and learned the ideals, values, and practices of the civilized world (Europe and America), middle-class whiteness, enlightened Christianity, and so forth. Du Bois certainly has moments that betray a strong allegiance to progress, to the idea that recognition for black

people requires being inducted into the civilizing process. Here we might think about Du Bois's fascination with charismatic figures like Otto Von Bismarck, a model for black leadership, according to Du Bois, because he embodied a "forward marching spirit" in his endeavor to unite Germany. Or one could cite his enthusiasm during World War I about black soldiers (and black people's patriotism) being conduits for recognition, assimilation, and advancement. But to reduce the possibilities in Du Bois's thought to these moments is to foreclose more ambiguous, and more generative, trajectories and lines of flight as indicated in essays like "The Souls of White Folk." Throughout his corpus, there are fruitful tensions and conflicts around related notions of progress, recognition, and freedom; while he certainly has one foot in the civilizing processes of modernity, he also acknowledges that these processes are pernicious and terrifying for people of color, working-class bodies, and other kinds of subjects. Du Boisian ideas like the color line, the Veil, and double-consciousness, themes that I discuss in chapter 1, suggest that modern life is fractured and broken and that the flourishing of some groups and communities relies on the systemic marginalization, alienation, and death of others—in addition to tendencies to bury and conceal these persistent realities.

To better understand Du Bois's equivocal position, it is helpful to remember that he is responding to ideas, philosophies, and narratives that mark people of color as backward and uncivilized or that locate black bodies outside the movement of history. As Shamooin Zamir reminds us, Du Bois is in conversation with philosophers who adopted and articulated these kinds of narratives, most notably Hegel.¹⁶ Hegel is significant in part because of his attempt to fuse philosophy and history, to offer a coherent, systematic account of the development of Reason and Spirit within history.¹⁷ For Hegel, world Spirit develops in stages and through various conflicts and contradictions, becoming more coherent and mature in the process. Spirit moves from a lower form of consciousness to a higher form, originating in the East and culminating in the West. During this journey, according to Hegel, Spirit "skips over" Africa, meaning that Africa does not participate in the development of reason, truth, and freedom. Africa, in Hegel's vision, "is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European part of the world."¹⁸ Here my intention is not to simply bash Hegel for his individual blind spots, nor is my intention to neglect the more admirable aspects of his thought and

legacy. What is important here is that Hegel's thought demonstrates how the logic of progress operates to establish and justify racial hierarchies. Because some nations are imagined as more advanced than others (in politics, technology, culture, religion), these advanced nations are able to rationalize and vindicate the violent treatment of inferior nations as part of a civilizing process. Hegel claims, for instance, that civilized nations are entitled to "regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are."¹⁹ As Hegel indicates, the colonial system, a set of coercive arrangements and policies that heavily shaped current racial formations and hierarchies, was motivated and legitimated by narratives of progress that located Europeans at the forefront of history's movement and black and brown peoples behind, or forever outside, the vanguard of history.²⁰

Implicitly responding to this kind of historical imaginary, Du Bois contends that black people have unique gifts to contribute to civilization and humanity.²¹ Contra Hegel, he argues that black people's strivings are just as important and significant to the shape of modern and American life as other racialized groups and communities. Furthermore, black people's struggle for recognition has something to do with demonstrating and acknowledging their distinct cultural and political contributions to the modern world—their humility, songs, art, democratic traits, spiritual struggles for freedom, etc. As I argue in chapter 1, by inscribing black people's experiences, struggles, losses, and contributions into the movement of history, Du Bois interrupts, challenges, and "puts the brakes" on Hegel's march of freedom. In other words, while Du Bois initially accepts the terms and conditions for acceptance into an advanced state of humanity, he also introduces themes, motifs, narratives, and strivings that undermine triumphant notions of advancement, progress, and the expansion of freedom.

Other literary figures of the twentieth century, including Ralph Ellison, exposed the limitations, dangers, and erasures of forward-marching schemes. In his celebrated novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison offers a kind of parody of Hegelian and Marxist-inspired conceptions of time and history. The Brotherhood, an interracial, liberationist group that the protagonist joins and later clashes with in the novel, tends to view the past and present in a narrowly instrumental way. According to this organization, past events, struggles, and losses are only significant insofar as they contribute to and help fulfill the goal of human liberation. Those individuals, strivings, and memories that are not immediately relevant to this liberated future, or that

present an obstacle to a unified, harmonious future, are “plunged outside of history.” While Ellison insists that the Brotherhood does not represent Marxism *per se*, some of the qualities associated with the fictional organization remind us of the dangers of Marxism and Marxist interpretations of history and human experience. Recall that Marx, Hegel’s dissident disciple, is very aware of the ambivalences at the center of modern life. While Marx occasionally lauds capitalism for the new, valuable things and ideas that it brings into the world—novel forms of communication, travel, commerce, knowledge—he claims that advancements in these areas depend on the global exploitation of workers, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the objectification of human relationships.²² Although Marx is primarily concerned with class struggle, he is aware that class and race domination are intertwined. The wealth that European capitalists have been able to accumulate, on Marx’s reading, is made possible by the exploitation and enslavement of Africans, Asians, and Native Americans as well as the usurpation of indigenous lands.²³ The “rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production” contains a dark underside; progress is a turbulent movement.²⁴ Even though Marx acknowledges the ambivalence of progress, he remains committed to the idea that history moves, through struggle and conflict, toward a better and more humane future. Capitalism is a penultimate historical stage, a stage that anticipates and enables the workers’ revolution and the gradual creation of a classless society, the *telos* of history. Marx envisions a future society no longer beset by exploitation, inequality, and division. Although this seems on the surface to be a laudable vision, Marx’s forward-directed proposal contains notable problems and flaws. The belief that history moves toward one goal trivializes the presence of multiple and conflicting aims, desires, meanings, pasts, and comprehensive visions within our world. This denial of plurality has pernicious consequences. As the legacy of communist regimes demonstrates, the imposition of a universal *telos* (by the so-called vanguards of history) onto local contexts and communities is a violent process, a process that sacrifices—for the sake of a unified and liberated future—those bodies, cultures, and groups that “lag behind” and resist the movement of history.²⁵ Therefore Marx’s proposal runs into some of the same problems that Hegel’s account of history does. In addition, because Marx privileges class identity and the labor struggle, other kinds of struggles—around race and gender, for instance—are either rendered insignificant or seen as ancillary to class conflict. In chapter 3, I discuss how Ellison challenges Marxist conceptions of time and history by

offering a jazz-inspired notion of time and by demonstrating the playful, tension-filled relationship between the past and present.

While Ellison resists Marxism's triumphant account of history, he is much more ambivalent about optimistic versions of America, America's future, and national exceptionalism. Ellison's relationship, like Du Bois's, to the "idea" of America is motivated in part by an insistence that black Americans have always participated in shaping and building American culture. Contra those who would make a stark contrast between black and American identity, Ellison underscores the "intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to the larger society."²⁶ Even though blacks have been historically marginalized and excluded from the mainstreams of American life, they have also created cultures and traditions that both constitute, define, and challenge what we mean by the term *America*. As Ellison puts it, "Negro writers and those of other minorities have their own task of contributing to the total image of the American by depicting the experience of their own groups . . . A people must define itself, and minorities have the responsibility of having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still forming American people."²⁷ Similar to Du Bois, Ellison suggests that black people's struggle for recognition occurs through their various contributions to the evolving idea of America, humanity, and so forth. At the same time, Ellison's fidelity to the evolving idea of America occasionally devolves into a commitment to American exceptionalism and an uncritical celebration of the "frontier" as a site of boundless freedom and creativity, ideas and myths that have had disastrous consequences for America's internal and external others.²⁸

As I show especially in chapter 5, American exceptionalism, progress, and empire form a complicated and tortuous constellation, a constellation that has been both formative and destructive of black existence. American-style optimism in a future marked by greater opportunity and freedom for American citizens (and nations that endorse the nation's ideals and principles) is intertwined with the assumption that America is an exceptional nation, a "beacon" to the rest of the world. In his influential book *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch traces American exceptionalism back to the Puritan-inspired notion that America represents a New Israel, a nation and people that have been chosen by God to redeem the world.²⁹ The imagined covenant between God and America ensures that the nation's future is one of plenitude on the condition that America strives to fulfill its mission to the other nations, a mission that entails the expansion

of internal and external borders. One example of this missionary attitude is President McKinley's proposal to civilize and Christianize America's "little brown brothers" in the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century, a proposal that justified America's occupation of the Philippines. According to Bercovitch, as civic rituals and discourses perpetually reenact the idea of chosenness (in religious and secular garb), America increasingly becomes a symbol of progress, freedom, and opportunity.³⁰ He claims that prominent American writers and critics, including figures of the nineteenth century like Emerson and Whitman, often ascribe these ideals to America as if they are part of its essence, part of its fundamental makeup. America, in fact, has privileged access to these ideals; the world's success depends on America's capacity to embody and spread the spirit of democracy. On Bercovitch's reading, American progress constitutes a unifying and unidirectional trajectory; progress, as he points out, "denies divisiveness."³¹ While Ellison seems to have one foot in this all-too-familiar ideal of America and the grammar of progress and optimism that accompanies this ideal, he also pushes back against this framework. He contends that progressive and triumphant narratives rely on the denial of painful and uncomfortable details of the nation's history. As he puts it, "A great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at the cost of ignoring the [troublesome] processes through which we've arrived at any given moment in our national existence."³² Ellison acknowledges that there is something about our attachment to American-style progress that diminishes our capacity to remember and contemplate the tragic underside of this movement and story.

As Du Bois and Ellison indicate, progressive accounts of history have been complicit with the violence of modern life. These narratives work to rationalize the violence enacted against "less advanced" groups, people who need to be civilized, saved, or brought into the fold of universal history. Similarly, they encourage people to forget, deny, or downplay the violence that happens against people of color in the name of progress. As I show throughout this book, these concerns about the dangers and erasures of progress resonate with the reflections of Walter Benjamin, the literary critic of the twentieth century who is often associated with the Frankfurt School. In his well-known essay "On the Concept of History," Benjamin acknowledges that progress is a "storm," that this idea has justified and been complicit with numerous historical catastrophes.³³ But just as important for my argument, he suggests that progressive narratives vitiate our

ability to remember, contemplate, cite, and mourn these catastrophes. For Benjamin, progress renders history coherent and harmonious by resolving the traumatic dimensions of history, by incorporating history's traumas into affirmative accounts that underwrite the positions of those in power. As he puts it, memory is always in danger of "becoming a tool of the ruling classes," a situation that threatens to "murder the dead twice," to erase and eliminate the dissonant quality of past suffering, injustice, struggle, and loss.³⁴ Think, for instance, of the way Obama's presidency is often placed in a linear trajectory that begins with chattel slavery, travels through Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, traverses the civil rights movement, and culminates with Obama's election.³⁵ This kind of story places black American struggles into a transparent, forward-marching story that easily makes sense of and resolves past and present traumas and conflicts. In other words, we don't have to be disturbed by this ponderous racial past because it has been lifted away, or is being lifted away, by the achievements of the present. As McCain's speech shows us, Obama's victory might invoke the memory of racial suffering but this dissonant memory is quickly superseded by an optimistic interpretation of this historic moment that reassures us of American progress and supremacy. The "triumphs" of the present enable us to explain away and buffer ourselves from the unsettling quality of America's racial history. Similarly, overconfident claims about black American advancement and racial progress assume that these achievements have been distributed equally across class and gender lines. This overconfidence screens from view the ways racial fears and anxieties, traditionally directed toward black subjects, can get redirected and attached to other bodies and communities that seemingly pose a threat to the nation's well-being and collective images.

But, as Du Bois and Ellison also demonstrate, it is not easy to simply dismiss the idea of progress in light of the multiple and conflicting ways that this trope has been used, especially in the context of black freedom struggles. I acknowledge that a basic notion of progress has inspired many struggles, acts of resistance, and movements that many of us admire. It is a concept that has been deployed, resignified, and enacted by communities and individuals that have experienced the underside of this concept and process. I think, for instance, of Martin Luther King's faith in a universe that "bends toward justice." I also am reminded of Theodor Adorno's claim that progress provides a preliminary "answer to the doubt and the

hope that things will finally get better, that people will at least be able to breathe a sigh of relief.”³⁶ What would critique, resistance, or political struggle mean apart from a minimal notion of progress, a hope that the quality of life will improve, especially for those groups that have been systematically marginalized? I therefore acknowledge that progress, a trope that facilitates certain ways of interpreting, constructing, and relating to historical change and development, has had different meanings and connotations. (To claim, for instance, that humanity necessarily moves forward, improves, and approaches a state of fulfillment is not necessarily the same thing as claiming that progress is the result of contingent human efforts, interventions, and interactions.) I also take it that this idea is intertwined with other fraught ideas and ideals that many people cherish—freedom, equality, inclusion, recognition, reconciliation, agency, and so forth. Although I take seriously the complexities involved with this category, in what follows I am primarily concerned with progress as a triumphant category, as a tool that helps to reinforce, affirm, and justify the order of things (and conceal the nasty aspects of the existing state of affairs). In other words, this book specifically targets narratives, images, and strategies that rely on the denial or easy resolution of painful tensions and contradictions in the past and present, those facets of life that remind us that the status quo is harsh and cruel for many people under its sway. While attachments to progress are not always explicit, my sense is that it lurks behind and discloses itself in collective commitments to American exceptionalism, the American Dream, a postracial society, leaving the past behind, and spreading democracy and capitalism, even through war, to less “developed” nations. For many people, catastrophic events in the modern age, like the Holocaust, the slow extermination of Native Americans, The Middle Passage, genocide in Rwanda, and perpetual wars and ecological disasters, have shattered the notion that history necessarily moves toward a more complete and fulfilling state. At the same time, this idea of progress episodically flashes up. It operates in both subtle and explicit ways to mitigate and diminish the tragic qualities of history and human existence. The denial of ongoing racial disparity and violence is, in part, a result of our culture’s yearning for a future (and a present) that has been liberated from certain kinds of unsettling losses, memories, and conflicts. If progress is the condition of the possibility of hope in our culture, then this is a hope that has little to no room for melancholy.

BLACK LITERATURE AND THE LEGACY OF MELANCHOLY

Du Bois and Ellison make up an important part of what I call the black literary and aesthetic tradition, a tradition that often underscores themes like melancholy, remembrance, loss, and tragedy in ways that gesture toward a different kind of hope. This melancholic hope, in opposition to triumphant, overconfident narratives, tropes, and images, suggests that a better, less pernicious world depends partly on our heightened capacity to remember, contemplate, and be unsettled by race-inflected violence and suffering. When I use the phrase *black literary and aesthetic tradition*, I have in mind authors, artists, and texts that have responded to, articulated, and rendered audible and visible the painful contradictions associated with black subjectivity, modern processes of racialization, and so forth. I am thinking of a variety of texts and discourses that delineate and exemplify the ways black Americans have developed enduring, yet precarious, cultural practices, institutions, and resources, enabling blacks to survive within the tentacles of white supremacy.³⁷ By *tradition*, I mean something like what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “arguments extended in time,” discourses that travel across time and space, elaborating on recurring themes, topics, and conditions while acknowledging historical discontinuities and breaks.³⁸ In this book, the black literary and aesthetic tradition refers specifically to essays, novels, speeches, music, and films, different kinds of texts that reflect and give meaning, and meanings, to the diverse experiences of being formed as a black subject in America and the modern world more generally. By using the language of tradition, I acknowledge and accept the dangers involved in imposing unity and coherence onto experiences, phenomena, and expressions that are diverse, pluralistic, and scattered. I similarly acknowledge that the qualifier *black* or the phrase *black subjectivity* is unstable and takes on different, conflicting meanings across time. For instance, if Du Bois defined black Americanness or Negroneess as “riding in a Jim Crow car” (suggesting that this legal and social condition provided blacks with a common, unifying obstacle), then surely something about being and identifying as black has changed significantly since 1964 and the passing of the Civil Rights Act. Finally, I take it that traditions are imagined and constructed according to certain interests, desires, and aims. For this book, the black literary and aesthetic tradition is a construct that enables me to connect and juxtapose authors and artists that share concerns, ideas, and commitments germane to my investigation.

This “shared” dimension should not obscure the fact that every imagined tradition is defined just as much by disagreement and tension as it is by consensus and overlap.³⁹

In what follows, I consider how black thinkers, writers, and artists have articulated the pains, pleasures, and struggles associated with inhabiting a black body in the modern world, experiences that trouble progressive narratives and that invite us to think hope and melancholy together, to imagine vulnerability and heightened receptivity to loss as sites for a different kind of hope. In order to express and articulate this melancholic hope, these writers and artists often draw from black musical practices and styles, such as the spirituals, blues, jazz, and more recently, hip hop. Du Bois, for instance, treats the sorrow songs of slave communities as expressions of “death and disappointment” that simultaneously voice longings for a better, more just existence. As Du Bois pays tribute to the spirituals and sorrow songs in his well-known text *The Souls of Black Folk*, he does this in part by using sorrow as a trope throughout the text, a trope that works to invoke different kinds of emotions and affects in the reader. Writers like Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison use blues and jazz in their novels and essays to register the “painful details” of black life, the tragic and comic dimensions of human existence, and the breaks, cuts, and wounds that accompany migration, exile, and dislocation. Similarly, filmmakers like Spike Lee and Charles Burnett incorporate jazz and blues songs in their cinematic representations of black communities and cultures. By combining image and sound, these films enable and compel audiences to both see and hear the pleasures and pains, doings and sufferings, struggles and losses experienced by black bodies. For these authors and filmmakers, musical practices like jazz and the blues, especially when incorporated into literature and film, signify different modes of being in the world, different ways of relating to others, time, history, and loss.

Yet the use of the term *melancholy* or the phrase *melancholic hope* to describe these aesthetic expressions might understandably generate questions and concerns. For many people, melancholy invokes images of depression, pathology, and despair. In addition, melancholy usually refers to an exclusively individual state or condition; it therefore does not appear to have implications for ethics, politics, and how we imagine the relationship between self and other. Finally, it might not be clear how this category helps us think about and reimagine modern racial formations, racial difference, and black people’s strivings and experiences. While the language

of progress might be too optimistic, the invocation of melancholy goes too far in the opposite direction. In this study, I draw from an array of thinkers who have rekindled interest in the political and ethical implications of loss, trauma, and remembrance. Many of these authors trace the idea of melancholy back to Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), wherein Freud appears to make a stark distinction between these two mental states.⁴⁰ Mourning, according to Freud, "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."⁴¹ Notice that the object of mourning is not always concrete for Freud. Because people are attached to ideals (like freedom or equality), they can experience loss when these ideals are undermined or when these ideals are withheld from certain individuals or communities. It is also important to point out that Freud refers to mourning as a regular response to loss. The mournful subject acts normally when she is able to replace the lost object with a new one, even though this may be a slow and painful process. Melancholia, on the other hand, is a pathological response to the loss of an object. This condition is "not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this [lost] object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming-about various conditions seem to be necessary."⁴² Because the melancholic subject cannot replace the lost object with a new one, she must incorporate the lost object, a process that leads to a conflation between the self and the lost object. This internalization of loss works to unravel the grieving individual; this internalized loss becomes a recalcitrant wound that "empties" the self and undermines any notion of self-coherence. As Freud puts it, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."⁴³

Freud seems to be making a neat distinction between healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to loss, between those who are able to successfully move on from a traumatic experience and those who remain stuck in that moment.⁴⁴ But anyone who has experienced loss (death, separation, injury) knows that the process of moving on is always incomplete. Past losses have a habit of haunting the present in ways that we cannot control or anticipate. As Judith Butler points out in her reading of Freud's essay, Freud incorrectly assumes that objects are exchangeable, that the new object of attachment can fill in the emptiness caused by the loss of an object. She writes, "Freud's early hope that an attachment might be withdrawn and given anew implied a certain interchangeability of objects as a

sign of hopefulness. . . . I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place, as if full substitutability were something for which we might strive.”⁴⁵ Since objects are never completely exchangeable, Butler contends that the neat distinction between mourning and melancholy does not hold, a conclusion that Freud’s 1917 essay actually invites. Whereas Freud suggests that the completion of the work of mourning is a sign of hope, Butler maintains that a different kind of hope is opened up when we confront the intractability of loss or the ways various forms of unrecognized loss both shape and puncture our social worlds and relationships. For Butler, an alternative to violence and perpetual war involves developing forms of solidarity and community that affirm our shared vulnerability to injury, loss, and death, a shared quality that proponents of empire and war tend to disavow. Like Butler, David Eng and David Kazanjian also suggest that melancholy might be unhinged from its exclusively pessimistic connotations.⁴⁶ For these authors, melancholy does not simply register lost objects and ideals; it also signifies the remains and leftovers from past experiences of loss. Melancholy, on their reading, is “a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future.”⁴⁷ Whereas narratives of progress minimize or explain away the catastrophes of history, melancholy becomes an occasion to be unsettled and opened up by painful, fragmented accounts of war, genocide, and racial and gender violence. This melancholic attachment to the losses and remains of history makes possible a different kind of future than the one imagined by the proponents of progress. Similarly, these attachments reshape our relationship to the past (and the evanescent present).

Amid these recent attempts to draw out the ethical and political dimensions of melancholy, Anne Cheng has used this category to think specifically about racial formations in America. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng uses Freud’s category to draw attention to forms of grief experienced by black Americans (and other racialized groups, especially Asian-Americans) that cannot be quantified or “definitively spoken in the language of material grievance.”⁴⁸ Cheng does not deny the importance of redressing historical injustices in the political and legal realms. She is simply concerned about experiences, struggles, and losses that cannot be resolved or fixed through juridical institutions. Alluding to Ellison’s aforementioned novel, Cheng suggests that melancholy registers the experience of being rendered invisible, of

being both assimilated into and excluded from the social order. By setting up an analogy between the melancholic ego and the ideal of whiteness, Cheng claims that “racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others.”⁴⁹ (Racialized others, in this configuration, are akin to lost objects that are integrated into the ego but only because the distinction between the ego and the lost object has been elided.) In addition to describing racial formations in America, melancholy also refers to the ways blacks have responded to rejection and marginalization. As Cheng puts it, “racial melancholia as I am defining it has always existed for raced subjects both as a sign of rejection and as a psychic strategy in response to that rejection.”⁵⁰ By linking loss and strategy, or melancholy and practice, Cheng’s project resonates, to some extent, with Karla Holloway’s fascinating work on grieving practices within black American culture. In *Passed On*, Holloway discusses how black Americans have endured a history of untimely deaths. Because of this predicament, they have established practices, rituals, and institutions in response to death and loss that have been crucial to the formation of black American identity.⁵¹ Both Holloway and Cheng allude to the sorrow songs and spirituals as examples of this melancholic mode of being. Referring to Du Bois’s aforementioned interpretation of this genre, Cheng suggests that melancholy is a strategy that involves wrestling with death, suffering, and absurdity while also affirming moments of freedom, joy, and pleasure. In fact, the sorrow-song tradition, she suggests, juxtaposes and even fuses feelings, affects, and dispositions that we usually take as opposites—joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and melancholy and hope.⁵²

In what follows, I take this intimacy, and tension, between melancholy and hope seriously in an attempt to trouble overconfident accounts of history, human experience, collective identity, and racial progress. In this book, melancholy undercuts familiar affirmations of hope, or hopefulness, to gesture toward a different kind of hope, future, and set of possibilities. Melancholy, as the sorrow-song and blues traditions indicate, is one way to register death, tragedy, and loss, including the losses, exclusions, and alienating effects of social existence. It names one way of being unsettled, wounded, and affected by these all-too-human conditions. While these conditions are ineluctable for human beings, they are also mediated and informed by power, sociality, history, and so forth. Certain communities and subjects, in other words, are more susceptible to “untimely” death