

RADICAL FUTURE PASTS

Untimely
Political
Theory

Edited by

Romand Coles,
Mark Reinhardt,
and George Shulman

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PREFACE

This book is inspired by and dedicated to Peter Euben. An intervention into debates about the forms of political theory, the ways in which theorists draw upon or reconfigure the past, the prospects for radical democratic politics, and the relations among them, it is offered as something of an "antifestschrift." The essays collected here are not about Peter's work but are engagements with these problems—just as the "anti-introduction" that follows this preface and dedication provides a context for those essays but is not directly about them, either. Still, this is a book in Peter's honor, and we would like to begin with an account of why so many political theorists have felt it important to participate in such an enterprise.

Like Thucydides and his fellow Athenians, Peter Euben was "born into the world to take no rest and give none to others."¹ Among those to whom he has given no rest are his students, and Peter's life of extraordinary pedagogical performances has ensured that all the contributors to this volume of essays, as well as many others we would have liked to include, can count themselves "students of Peter" whether they actually attended his classes or not. It may be that Peter's greatest gift is indeed creating students. This does not mean acolytes, for what distinguishes his teaching is an uncanny capacity, in person and through his writing, to help so many people find their own way into (or voice for) theorizing politics. He has done so in person partly because he is an acute listener, but also because of a style of thinking—we might call it thinking out loud—that can best be described metaphorically.

Surely, Peter's thinking is a kind of traveling, as if his task is to carry a thought—his own or another's—to as many of its potential implications, say, destinations, as possible. At the same time, Peter's thinking surely involves unpacking all the layers and aspects of an idea, issue, or event. If the one metaphor evokes the original meaning of the Greek root *theôria*, not only its association with vision, but also with the envoys (*theôroi*) delegated to travel and report back as well as with the ships (*theôrides*) that carried them,

RACE AND THE DEMOCRATIC AESTHETIC

Jefferson, Whitman, and Holiday on the Hopeful and the Horrific

Melvin L. Rogers

They [citizens of Wisconsin and Missouri] had never heard of Billie Holiday, let alone "Strange Fruit." . . . They had never heard anything remotely like this. . . . I remember one girl just broke down and started sobbing. I was propagandizing, spreading the word. It made an impact on people. For the first time in their lives it made them think about the lynching victims as humans, as people.

—Labor organizer Warren Morse, quoted in David Margolick,
Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves
Blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze

—Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit," quoted in David Margolick,
Strange Fruit

America's history is marked by a striking image—"black bodies swinging in the southern breeze." Abel Meeropol—a Jewish American—first articulated this line in his 1937 published poem "Bitter Fruit" after viewing Lawrence Beitler's graphic and horrific photo depicting the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (figure 1). Although Meeropol eventually put the words



Figure 1. Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, lynched in Marion, Indiana, on August 7, 1930. Photograph by Lawrence H. Beitler, courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society, P0411.

to music, it was jazz singer Billie Holiday's haunting rendition of the song, now titled "Strange Fruit," first recorded in 1939 that made it a classic.¹ The shift from *bitter* to *strange* marks an important transition in understanding the meaning of lynching in America, for Meeropol's use of *bitter* captures the unsavory quality of the image—an image whose bitterness would otherwise make it an unfit subject for human consumption. To use *bitter* brings to mind a harsh, disagreeably acrid taste.² And yet the commonness of black bodies hanging from trees between the 1880s and 1960s explained, perhaps implicitly, the necessity of changing the title.³ How strange, we might say, that white Americans did not find the visual spectacle of black suffering bitter, a fact that pointed not only to asymmetrical power relations between the two races, but inequality regarding the ethical and political status of blacks.

Black lynching in America was not merely a direct violation of natural rights and human dignity. To speak in this language is to render the problem in purely legalistic terms that obscures the ethical framework in which

respect for rights and the dignity of persons first take hold. By "ethical framework," I mean the constellation of norms and practices that informs the development and assessment of persons, their standing in the community, and the institutions central to that community. Black lynching was conterminous with and troubled the meaning of a democratic ethos.⁴ How does one practically and conceptually engage the simultaneous existence of a professed commitment to equality and liberty alongside the fact that white Americans visually digested those with whom they otherwise shared the polity? After all, the swinging of black bodies from trees was emblematic of an aesthetically charged spectacle, much like the one we see in Beitler's photo, which underscored the insecurity of black life amid the moral depravity of white America. Participants were socially habituated to the permissibility of black suffering, and this habituation was of a piece in the theater of terror that reminded black folks of their position as a subordinate class. Could there be hope in a society that holds both a commitment to democracy and a commitment to domination?

In this essay, I take the juxtaposition of hopefulness and the horrific to provide uncommon insight into matters of race and an appropriate democratic ethos. I engage this vexing issue by reflecting on the normative possibilities latent in Holiday's performative rendition of Meeropol's song. The song aspires to capture America's imagination by deploying the very method that sustained and sanctioned black suffering—namely, the spectacle. As Amy Wood notes of antilynching activity, "Lynching opponents trusted the same assumptions about spectatorship that bolstered prolynching thought—that to see an event was to understand its truth."⁵ Just as the lynching of black Americans was an event in which a sense of community was formed, as white Americans joined together in a carnivalesque cultural experience to flout the very notion of black security, Holiday attempts to foreground the spectacle of pain through a rhythmic counterweight. The song collapses the distance between the visual and the auditory, recasting the normative response to lynching. As black Americans often made clear through song, literature, and visual art, words and images are not inert—having no inherent power of action; they are in an ethical and political register ways of living.

In reading the song this way, I interpret Meeropol and Holiday as attempting to reeducate the American public. Reeducation foregrounds both process (i.e., method or approach deployed) as well as a normative presupposition. On the side of process, three points should be observed. First, reeducating the audience is framed within an artistic and performative

context. This is reflected in the words of the song and Holiday's performance of it. Second, when the words are combined with Holiday's dramaturgical displays, the entire enactment restages the lynching of black folks as a form of suffering (the source of its bitterness) and seeks to use the fact of consumed suffering (what marks the strangeness of the fruit) as a means for transforming the sensibilities of the public. Third, the aim—that is, the content of reeducation—is to properly align the intellectual and emotional senses of the public with the demand of reality. On the side of normative presupposition, the process casts into relief the proper conceptual register on which the song functions; it is a form of democratic protest.

I should be clear. Who doubts that "Strange Fruit" is a form of democratic protest? After all, scholars such as Angela Davis, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and David Margolick all agree on just this point.⁶ But what does this mean? Or to ask the question differently: How does the adjective *democratic* qualify the term *protest*? Consider it this way: the term *protest* merely denotes a "declaration of disapproval or dissent" regarding some action or policy.⁷ The term itself does not yet imply anything about one's fellows or the polity to which one belongs. And yet the entire performance of "Strange Fruit" is not merely a process for articulating a complaint, but a way of appealing to the audience for redress. When democracy and protestation are taken together, Holiday's performance presupposes that the citizenry is capable of being responsive to and accepting responsibility for ethical and political horrors. Indeed, it is this presupposition that explains why Holiday performs the song in the first instance.

In order for my interpretation of the song to gain normative traction, I turn to two figures who stand in an uncertain relationship to black pain: Thomas Jefferson and Walt Whitman. My claim is not that they are concerned with the suffering of black folks or with their subordination. Instead I appeal to the ethos of democracy that they elucidate and in which they locate the possibility of America's ethical and political transformation. In Jefferson's diverse writings, we find a dynamic and open process for understanding democratic development. Development is an emergent property of viewing "the people" as an aspirational category, a site for symbolic action where new configurations of self, society, and the character of both might be reimagined.⁸ In Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, the content of aspirations become possibilities insofar as they capture the heart of the people to whom they are directed.⁹ I thus follow Jason Frank in believing that for Whitman to capture the heart entails not merely the stipulation of argumentation, but

a process of reasoning that is aesthetically tinged, painting a picture of self and society to which we become emotionally drawn.¹⁰ Crucially, I add that to become emotionally drawn is, in Whitman's thinking, simultaneously to express a judgment of value about the object or subject in question.

Drawing on the historical resources of David Margolick's *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song*, I return to Meeropol and Holiday and maintain that the hope of the song is best understood within the framework stipulated by Jefferson and Whitman. On the one hand, the song presupposes that the meaning of the people is not yet settled, which bespeaks the openness of democracy; on the other, the song and what Meeropol referred to as Holiday's "styling" of it aspire to engender aversion to black suffering by white Americans.¹¹ Holiday, I maintain, claims for herself, her black fellows, and America the essential framing elements that Jefferson and Whitman employed for thinking about democratic development, although she puts them to use for ends quite distinct from these earlier thinkers. Her voice and performance disclose anew the meaning of lynching. The economy of the song thus tries to strike a balance between the horrific that necessitated its construction and the sense of hope that points toward the possible transformation of its auditors.

Jefferson and the Condition of Social Possibilities

When we hear the phrase "the people" in Western political discourse, we typically think, at a descriptive level, of those individuals belonging to a society in which they are accorded certain rights and privileges. We usually have in mind a set of indispensable liberal freedoms that are institutionally affirmed. The idea of the people at this level is a designation of membership with a set of entitlements by virtue of one's position in society.

But we also mean something more robust. The phrase alerts us to a program of sorts, a vision for improving the social and political world and for bringing about a new world in which all persons enjoy security. It is a recognizably aspirational vision, for the political goals it champions, the ethical outlook it proffers, and the emotions it seeks to engender tend toward bringing into existence a new world. In its aspirational mode, the concept of the people inspires faith and provokes action.¹² But to describe the concept of the people in the aspirational mode is not to fix its content or to hold in view a determinate set of individuals. As Paulina Ochoa Espejo nicely explains, "When you consider time and change, you realize that a people

does not originate when individuals merge into a bigger thing. Instead, a people arises when many actions and movements combine into novel patterns of change. For a people is always in the making or unmaking."¹³ This is a fundamental feature of the American worldview (not without historical precedent, however) in which it often describes and re-describes, makes and un-makes, its political and cultural identity—what Daniel Howe aptly calls a preoccupation with “making the American self.”¹⁴

This dualistic account is not without its problems, and in Thomas Jefferson we find both its possibilities and its limitations. I shall come back to the limitations in a moment. For the greater part of this section, I argue that the idea of the people provides the background horizon for understanding America as a site of symbolic action and that Jefferson ties this idea to the very legitimacy of democracy. How we should think about the aspirational category is theorized in Walt Whitman’s meditation on the importance of aesthetics to democracy. When taken together, Jefferson and Whitman provide a useful entry point for understanding the power of Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit.”

In his classic 1789 letter to James Madison, formulations used on several other occasions, Jefferson articulates his vision of the unboundedness of the people. “I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self-evident,” he explains, “that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.”¹⁵ Although Jefferson advances this thought in the context of undercutting the idea of generational debt, his reflections are not limited to economic matters. His thinking is far more radical. He applies it to the relationship among citizens and their connection to political authority so as not to permanently bind later and even present generations to prior laws that are unresponsive to emerging grievances.¹⁶

In Jefferson, we find a close connection between democratic sovereignty and the idea of ethical and political development; it foregrounds the importance of understanding the people as an aspirational category. For him, the concept of the people serves as the legitimating core of democracy and does so precisely because it transcends America’s political present and includes its past and future. This view informs his thinking when in his 1816 letter to historian Samuel Kercheval he connects the meaning of law and the constitution to an unfolding vision of political life:

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched.

They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. . . . But I know, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.¹⁷

Jefferson’s sensitivity to the developmental character of the natural and social world is part of his political ontology. My use of the term *political ontology* has a specific meaning; it informs our most basic sense of being an actor in relation to our life chances and the life chances of the communities to which we belong. Ontology in this sense is always in danger of reifying the descriptions it offers of humans and their world.¹⁸ What is striking about Jefferson, emblematic of the passage, is that his political ontology avoids reification; both political actors and their world are open to criticism. Precisely because the environment is evolving, he reasons, it is a mistake to think solutions articulated in the past will necessarily be effectual in the future. Jefferson does not, as Judith Shklar mistakenly argues, affirm a “politics of perpetual newness,”¹⁹ but his work does defend a politics of evolutionary development. For him, as for the later pragmatists, the test of our beliefs is their ability to redeem their worth in the face of experience; they become verified and reverified to the extent they continue to produce satisfactory results in managing the world we inhabit. Jefferson understands the meaning and agency of the people through their ability to construct and reconstruct their social and political world, and he therefore counsels a pragmatically inflected and historically sensitive hope.

An important political implication follows from this line of reasoning: the people—understood at an intergenerational level—can never be represented in their entirety in any specific expression of the people’s will. This also means that the sovereign people can never wholly be identified with the legal and institutional apparatus (i.e., the constitution and its government) that claims to articulate its aspirations. The rejection of this identification opens an ongoing, iterative, and contestatory vision of political life (the

source of Jefferson's radicalism) that reflexively points to a space that can be claimed, tentatively occupied, and reclaimed.

Jefferson did not invent this idea; he, like most Americans, inherited it. After all, since its modern emergence, the idea of the people has functioned to dissolve the line of demarcation between rulers and ruled that previously defined monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical societies. It addresses, at least theoretically, an important danger at the heart of political rule—namely, that some of us might find ourselves at the tyrannical mercy of some others of us. The people thus serve as a periodic monitor, evaluating power holders and rendering them changeable. The changeable character of power holders thus rests on a descriptive designation of the people—it refers to those with rights and privileges of citizenship, enshrined in a constitutional structure and often on visible display during electoral cycles. As John Locke maintained in his *Second Treatise of Government* in the seventeenth century, political representatives hold power in “trust,” and the logic of this follows, as Thomas Paine aptly argued in *The Rights of Man* in the eighteenth century, from “ingrafting representation upon democracy.”²⁰

The representational paradigm implies a remainder that can never be completely absorbed. This remainder forms the morally appealing core of democracy precisely because it is a site of aspirations that have yet to be articulated. It is what we might call constitutive power—the power for acting, instituting, and establishing. Government derives its existence from that power; it forms the channel through which agential energy moves.

Constitutive power is never relinquished even within the representational paradigm. Historically, political reformers appealed to this power, and through it they redescribed the content and boundaries of the polity. This was the same power that legitimized the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the U.S. Constitution in 1787. From the people's “authority,” explained James Wilson in the 1790s, “the constitution originates: for their safety and felicity it is established: in their hands it is as clay in the hands of the potter: they have the right to mould, to preserve, to improve, to refine, and to finish it as they please.”²¹ In 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson described this same power as the inexhaustible site for remaking America, what he called “a new yet unapproachable America.”²² The same idea ultimately led W. E. B. Du Bois to conclude in 1920 that the “foundation of the argument for democracy” is that “the argument must be continually restated and emphasized.”²³ From the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the aspirational category consistently denoted (albeit controversially) the power

of the people to give direction to their lives, and even that new direction could never describe aspirations that had yet to be expressed. In this role, the people did not merely monitor but could breathe new life into the world.

The dualistic character of the people—its descriptive and aspirational dimensions—is central to Jefferson's political philosophy; indeed, he pushes it to its logical conclusion. “Cherish, therefore, the spirit of our people,” he recommends in a letter to Edward Carrington, “and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them.”²⁴ Jefferson's use of the term *spirit* is more than rhetorical flourish. As Samuel Johnson observes in his 1755 *Dictionary*—the most commonly used dictionary in the eighteenth century and one with which Jefferson was familiar, owned, and recommended—the word *spirit* denotes “temper” or “habitual disposition of mind.”²⁵ Applied to the citizenry, it refers to a characteristic orientation underwriting American democracy (“the mainspring,” as Jefferson calls it).²⁶ Appeal to the people's “good sense” when they are in error, Jefferson counsels, for it may yet, he believes, contain the source of their enlightenment.²⁷

Faith in the people underscores a fundamental issue at the heart of democratic rule as Jefferson conceives it. After all, the notion of a developing social world cast doubt on placing faith in a constitution. The legitimacy of democratic rule is therefore found not in the past or present, but in a community's responsiveness to the future—its sensitivity to time and change. Precisely because of the need to make the citizenry responsive, Jefferson and later generations emphasize the importance of character in theorizing the democratic self, and the language of “sense,” “sensible,” and “sensibility” achieves primacy in American political discourse because it accentuates the malleability of the cognitive and affective dimensions of the self.

The spirit of openness runs underneath the political ground upon which we find the descriptive view of the people. It is the latent rebelliousness of political life—what makes intelligible the hope of Whitman's poet and Holiday's performative appeal. Constitutionalism draws its authorizing power from this spirit and can never (theoretically) extinguish it without compromising the very legitimacy of the idea of democracy in the first instance. Jefferson applies the logic of holding power in trust otherwise associated with the relationship between political representatives and their extant constituency to the wider temporal framework of past, present, and future generations. What the Greeks called *demokratia*—literally, power of the people—is, in Jefferson's hands, temporalized. To his mind, we can now

speak of past, present, and future generations holding power in trust (or in usufruct, to use his language) for a people not yet in existence.

This reading of Jefferson should not be confused with unvarnished acceptance, especially given that I wish to harness it for reflecting on race and democracy. His nationalism and its connection to his defense of racial homogeneity must remain a source of concern. The openness of the people and the contestatory politics it invites (much in keeping with the aspirational view) are consistently tethered to a constraining particularism. This is largely because the idea of the people contains an ambiguity. Although Jefferson uses the aspirational core of "the people" to disrupt the binding of the present and future of America, the definite article *the* implies a unitary view of political society that is often harnessed for exclusionary ends.²⁸ Jefferson translates this unitary quality into a vision of national particularism—a vision of political but nonetheless racially homogenous oneness—that is the specific content of his own aspiration for America. We need only think of his emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the American polity in 1774 and his demeaning description of blacks in Query XIV of the 1787 English edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*.²⁹ Arguments like this fueled the very idea of white supremacy that ultimately justified the lynching of black Americans. This particularism haunted the American imaginary, threatening to permanently limit its reach and close the political and affective borders of the nation. Later thinkers sought to disconnect the people as an aspirational category from specific visions of homogeneity to which it was often tied.

The irony, of course, is that most of these thinkers challenged homogeneity by appealing to the aspirational view of the people Jefferson defended in the first instance. His hypocrisy may well have been damaging to his character, but it did not need to constrain the nation's future. Cherish the spirit of openness, to recall his idea. How far one could push openness on matters of race was a source of deep doubt, undoubtedly helped by his racism. As Jefferson reflected on the inclusion of African Americans, for instance, he concluded that "deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained" made difficult, if not impossible, the process of persuading each race that inclusion was a genuine possibility.³⁰ But the practice of persuasion provides an important clue for understanding how the battle for America's soul was so often waged—a battle in which Holiday's song was squarely located. "In a republican nation," Jefferson writes in an 1824 letter to David Harding,

"whose citizens are to be led by persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance."³¹

Persuasion requires speakers and writers to confront communities through speech with experiences. When Jefferson refers to persuasion, he has in mind not a form of rhetoric that leads people away from the truth, what we call manipulation, but one that directs and guides its auditors to intimations of the truth that if acted upon, he believes, will produce a better way of life. Persuasion, in this second form, appeals to the audience's capacity for judgment—that is, attempting to transform both their sense and their sensibility. Rhetoric is thus expressive of the world-making power of the self, whose projections in the world are dependent on those engaged. The aim, as I argue elsewhere, is to create a feeling of ownership by the one on the receiving end of persuasion; auditors, as we say, turn things over in their mind with the aim of rejecting, endorsing, or amending the beliefs with which they are presented.³² In being a coparticipant in the process, the auditors retain and employ their reflective agency.

The process Jefferson has in mind is not lost on Whitman. In *Democratic Vistas*, he underscores the dynamism of reflective agency: "the process of reading" (although reflective agency is not confined to that practice alone) "is not a half-sleep, but, in [the] highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed."³³ Rhetoric is the quintessential mode of engagement for one who believes (as Jefferson and Whitman do) that the people's mind is open. Through this method, the rhetorician and auditor become coparticipants in constructing a shared political and ethical life. For both Jefferson and Whitman, appealing to the audience's capacity for judgment is a means to bind the polity to new visions of itself—that is, to tap into the receptivity that judgment entails and to harness the power of the polity's potentiality.³⁴

Whitman and the Democratic Aesthetic

If Jefferson understands persuasion as essential to the aspirational view of the people, it is in Whitman that we find engagement with how to render the process of binding efficacious. This, for him, is fundamentally a matter of providing persuasion with an aesthetically charged content—a view not lost on Jefferson. "We are," explains Jefferson, "wisely framed to be as warmly interested for a fictitious as for real personage. The field of imagi-

nation is thus laid open to our use and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the heart every moral rule of life.³⁵ In Whitman, the notion of reasoning takes on a capacious character that weds the affective and reflective dimensions of the self in one process—a full embrace of the role Jefferson accords the imagination. Our affective states become judgments of value about the world. “Long enough,” writes Whitman, “have the People been listening to poems in which common Humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors. But America listens to no such poems. Erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming be the chant; and then America will listen with *pleased ears*.”³⁶

“Pleased ears” is the expression of a latent possibility made manifest; the American self, Whitman suggests, is capable of responding affirmatively to practices that reject domination and embrace freedom. “Pleased ears” is also denotative of an active process by the listener, what Whitman calls “supple and athletic minds” that meet the sound of the poet, vocalist, and orator.³⁷ As Whitman says in what might appropriately be considered the epilogue to *Leaves of Grass*, “The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine.”³⁸

The role he accords aesthetics runs throughout *Democratic Vistas*; it configures aesthetics as a cooperative project among selves in rearranging sense and sensibility and in turn remaking character.³⁹ The aim of aesthetics thus presupposes the vision of openness already stipulated in Jefferson—the people understood as an aspirational category—in which “the poems of the purports of life” might be articulated.⁴⁰ In this section of *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman not only ties the purports of life to the meaning of death but sees in the fact of death the possibility to affirm and locate life’s purpose. Death may vivify life and cast into relief the ends to which life should aim.

The purports of life contain an important clue to the significance of aesthetics for Whitman. If a powerful picture of self and society can potentially elicit a longing to be that self and to inhabit that society, might the same logic generate aversion? This is the hope of Holiday’s performance—a deployment of art to repel one’s fellows from embracing forms of life detrimental not only to themselves, but more significantly to others. But before we get there, three questions emerge: (1) Why is this understanding of art significant? (2) How does the developmental function of art work? (3) And from whence does art derive its guidance?

In his classic work of political theory *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey famously refers to Whitman as democracy’s “seer”: “Democracy will

come into its own for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.”⁴¹ Dewey’s own thinking and invocation of Whitman place them both in a tradition of thinking that emphasizes democracy’s openness, what Whitman calls the possibility for “trying continually new experiments.”⁴² In this moment, one is reminded both of his connection to that tradition and that which makes him democracy’s seer: “We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests, out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. *It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because, that history has yet to be enacted.*”⁴³ For Dewey, the term *seer* signifies a person in possession of profound moral or spiritual insight—the kind of perception that is distilled from one’s experiential engagement with the world. Elsewhere he uses a word often employed to describe the seer: *prophetic*. As he explains, “There is a prophetic aspect to all observation; we can perceive the meaning of what exists only as we forecast the consequences it entails.”⁴⁴ Hence, faith in the people, Whitman explains, depends not on “churches and creeds” if they are meant to turn our gaze away from the experience and demand of life, but on the development of the “identified soul.”⁴⁵

This notion of the prophetic (the workings of a bounded imagination) as well as the meaning of the soul (as that which is present but indeterminate) often lead Whitman to cast his democratic vistas as “speculations” or “suggestions”⁴⁶ about a future not yet realized. “Democracy too,” he explains, “is law, and of the strictest, amplest kind. . . . [T]he law over all, and law of laws, is the law of successions; that of the superior law, in time, gradually supplanting and overwhelming the inferior one.”⁴⁷ But because the law of succession always points to what has yet to be embodied or enacted, Whitman’s writings function in a hortatory mode. It is philosophy as poetic ministry aimed at what George Kateb calls the soul’s “potentiality.”⁴⁸

Crucially, Whitman is not merely describing his own poetry; he means to make a larger claim about artists as such. Writing of the artists, he contends: “They too, in all ages, all lands have been creators, fashioning, making types of men and women, as Adam and Eve are made in the divine fable.”⁴⁹ Here we return to the developmental idea of the self present in Jefferson—a point Holiday seems to share. We can understand Whitman’s reflections

in this mode: an attempt to perceive and, in his language, to “provoke” the realization of a future in light of what is latent in us as communally oriented creatures.⁵⁰

The questions that are prominent in Whitman’s writings and that prompt Dewey to dub him as democracy’s seer are thus the following: What language is required for America to understand that which democracy takes to be the case—its communal existence? What would bring democracy’s history into existence? What will create those citizens capable of performing the democratic? Whitman answers:

What I say in these Vistas has its main bearings on Imaginative Literature, especially Poetry, the stock of all. But in the region of imaginative spinal and essential attributes, something equivalent to creation is imperatively demanded. For not only is it not enough that the new blood, new frame of Democracy shall be vivified and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, etc., but it is clear to me that, unless it goes deeper, gets at least as firm and as warm a hold in men’s hearts, emotions and belief, as, in those days of Feudalism or Ecclesiasticism, and inaugurates its own perennial sources, welling from the center forever, its strength will be defective, its growth doubtful, and its charm wanting.⁵¹

This passage occurs in the introductory section of *Democratic Vistas* that sets the stage for the rest of the text.⁵² In this passage, Whitman (a) identifies democracy as extending beyond its legal and political apparatus, (b) identifies art as the basis for eliciting a way of being democratic, and (c) sees art as containing the possibility of informing our sensibilities—those associated with both our cognitive and affective faculties—and thus giving life to a new character. Let us attend to the meaning of this passage.

Why does Whitman understand art in this way? His answer relates directly to his understanding of democracy as a social practice. For him, like Jefferson, democracy is not to be understood exclusively in political terms. The legal and governmental apparatus of democracy is important, but its stability and refinement must always be located within a wider cultural horizon that provides normative sustenance. This is the sense in which Whitman speaks, as in the extended passage previously given, of a form of democracy that goes deeper and animates the hearts and minds of the citizenry. The question that prompts Whitman to understand democracy

in this way is the following: Can we affirm the principles of liberty and equality when the law is silent and when government intervention is stilled? For him, one is able to affirm these principles when they become the law of one’s life. This way of understanding democracy extends beyond political and legal institutions because it depends on the everyday and habitual. This is democracy understood at the level of ethos or character of a nation or what Whitman calls “culture.” Consistent with the principles of liberty and equality, he explains that a democratic culture is not for “a single class alone.” “I should,” he continues, “demand of this programme or theory a scope generous enough to include the widest human area.”⁵³

Contra Kateb, this conceptualization of democracy is not of “secondary importance at best” for Whitman.⁵⁴ In fact, focusing on a democratic ethos is essential because it is both the site of the world-making power of self and society (both understood as sources of constitutive power) as well as that place where self and society are most susceptible to development (how that constitutive power will be deployed). Constitutive power for Whitman, as Jason Frank observes, functions outwardly toward the world but reflexively on the self that authorizes such power.⁵⁵ Reflexive engagement with oneself is subject to being guided and developed, and this relationship requires, Whitman believes, models of living. Law is unsatisfactory if it comes in the form of external imposition, and rational appeal that does not simultaneously inspire the soul will suffer from a motivational deficit. For Whitman, we will lack the resources to understand why we are motivated to live one life rather than another. Hence, Whitman famously says in *Leaves of Grass*: “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence.”⁵⁶ That one persuades by mere presence, Whitman suggests, underscores the power of the image that stands out and from which one can read off a mode of conduct that captures and captivates and is generative of beliefs.

Whitman’s thinking entails a specific notion of art that aligns it with a democratic ethos. In that section of *Democratic Vistas* where he mentions “pleased ears,” he approvingly quotes the librarian of Congress: “The true question to ask respecting a book, is, Has it helped any human soul?” This, he explains, “is the hint, statement, not only of the Great Literatus, his book, but of every great Artist.”⁵⁷ Here, we confront Whitman’s understanding of art, but now with resources to revisit the reference to “pleased ears.” This term may easily imply that which one finds pleasurable quite independent of its deeper positive worth. Consider another human sense—the sense of

taste. We might well say that the alcoholic finds liquor pleasurable, but we would be hard pressed to claim that its effects are beneficial to the person's health. What we discern here is the internal corruption of the person that potentially leads to negative effects outwardly.

Whitman tends to think of the role of art along the lines of improving the interior self; in fact, he calls artistic interventions "mother of the true revolution, which are of the interior life."⁵⁸ Art, then, is part of the perfectionist goals he attributes to democracy, what Emerson calls "ascension, or the passage of the soul into higher forms."⁵⁹ Whitman does not deny that one may be interested in art for its own sake. As he explains, "It may be that all works of art are to be first tried by the art qualities, their image-forming talents, and their dramatic, pictorial, plot-constructing, euphonious and other talents."⁶⁰ But Whitman is clear that this is not where art's import lies in a democratic society. Instead, he anchors the role of art in the space made possible by the constitutive power of self and society; its role is to offer suggestions for ways of living.⁶¹

Ways of living are not themselves ethically unbounded. As Whitman explains, the moment artists claim their production to be "first-class"—and what artist would aspire to achieve anything else, as Whitman knows all too well—"they are to be strictly and sternly tried by their foundation in, and radiation, in the highest sense, and always indirectly, of the ethic principles, and eligibility to free, arouse, dilate."⁶² Elsewhere in *Democratic Vistas*, he refers to the ethical goal of art as cultivating "moral conscientiousness"—an attempt to assess one's life by "the names Right, Justice, and Truth."⁶³ Notice that art is tried indirectly by "the ethic principles" because adherence to those principles must be noncoercive and voluntary if they are to function at the level of habit.⁶⁴ In this context, Whitman highlights the importance of reflective agency in the way he configures the role of art; to voluntarily embrace what is on display is to say, with heart and mind, "I'm persuaded of its truth." "You shall learn to listen to all sides," he says in *Leaves of Grass*, "and filter them from yourself."⁶⁵ He repeats the claim later, but at that point emphasizing the perfectionist role played by attending to the voices of others: "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen, And accrue what I hear into myself . . . and let sounds contribute toward me."⁶⁶

What truths are we filtering from ourselves? What is the contribution being made to the self? Or, to ask the question differently, what is the content of the artistic presence whose mere existence is able to convince? The truth, Whitman adds, is that art can arouse (as in awaken) or dilate

(as in expand) the self, making it both aware of and sensitive to the demands of right, justice, and truth as expressed in the lives on display. Artistic intervention is configured as a device for cultivating ethical attentiveness (the idea of arousal) that makes sympathetic identification possible (the idea of dilation). What Stanley Cavell says of perfectionism applies equally to Whitman's outlook, guiding the meaning of artistic intervention: "If there is a perfectionism not only compatible with democracy but necessary to it, it lies not in excusing democracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching how to respond to those failures, and to one's compromise by them, otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal."⁶⁷

Properly considered, then, "pleased ears" does not mean subjective taste, as in "I find being an alcoholic pleasurable." The phrase signifies hearing appropriately, as when one is drawn, almost without reflection, to beautiful sounds. Or in its ethical register, it refers to hearing appropriately, almost without reflection, to the claims of right, justice, and truth. As when the sounds of freedom rather than domination register with pleased ears because they are the sounds of the democratic self. I say "almost without reflection" because for Whitman such sounds tap into an "intuitive sense" coterminous with democracy.⁶⁸ Artistic intervention does not provide what does not exist; rather, for him, it makes manifest what lies below the surface, helping to give it form and shape in the everyday world. Given that Whitman means to include not only what is heard, but what may be seen or felt, his ideas include the vast array of impressions that may stimulate the body.

This way of rendering bodily sense organs is tricky because it may very well be the case that artistic productions put us in touch with truths about self, society, and world that are far from pleasurable. After all, Meeropol and Holiday are continuous with a literary and dramatic form that often used lynching rituals in plays and novels to underscore the demeaning attitudes of whites toward blacks, to consolidate and direct the energy of black folks in the service of racial justice, and to shame the white community.⁶⁹ This account of art is not lost on Whitman; he acknowledges that in order to "fend off ruin and defection," the citizenry "needs new, larger, stronger . . . compellers."⁷⁰ Accepting truths with pleased sense organs may very well involve embracing the value of displeasure. "It may be," he explains, "[that] a single new thought, imagination, principle, even literary style . . . put in shape by some great Literatus . . . may duly cause changes, growths, removals,

greater than the longest and bloodiest war, or the most stupendous merely political, dynastic, or commercial overturn."⁷¹ Whitman does not mean to suggest that the transformation potentially produced by artistic intervention is equal to the pain of war, but that the form of death (or "removals," to use his phrase) that potentially occurs because of art's intervention is one of the spirit and that this death brings its own growing pains.

Let us now bring together the notion of pleased sense organs with Whitman's earlier idea that art is meant to "arouse" the self. Given that the term *pleased* is not ethically unbounded, the term *arousal* takes on a very powerful meaning for Whitman. *Arousal* refers to an intentional and a cognitive state: intentional because affect is directed toward an object and cognitive because a judgment has been implicitly made about the object. Sexual attraction is the most obvious example here, but such attraction is not a passive state, as in being overwhelmed by the traits the person possesses. In fact, sexual attraction produces arousal because it taps into and makes evident subterranean desires; we are drawn to another by becoming more clearly aware of our own desires and values through the eyes others. As Alan Trachtenberg points out, it is the "ecstasy of identifying with the physical point of view of another, seeing through the other's eyes into one's own, [that is] the psychological basis of a truly democratic culture."⁷² Recall that, for Whitman, one does not sit passively and allow artistic constructions to overtake one; rather, one is an active participant in coming to appropriately engage the constructions, and this process of engagement bespeaks value. This process involves, as Martha Nussbaum explains, at least three salient ideas: "The idea of a cognitive appraisal or evaluation; the idea of one's own flourishing[;] . . . and the idea of the salience of external objects as elements in one's own scheme of goals."⁷³ To say, as Whitman did earlier, that artistic constructions convince by presence in a democratic culture is to say (*a*) that the viewer or listener of artistic constructions evaluates the ethical standing of such productions, (*b*) that such productions centralize the process of becoming for the recipient (however painful), and (*c*) that such productions illuminate the system of values that otherwise lay dormant (those that must be removed and those that may well need to be embraced in the service of growth).⁷⁴ For Whitman, if artistic intervention makes manifest what is latent, then one's arousal about such interventions is an acknowledgment of its worth and its ability to alert us to the corruption of the soul or to what may yet ennoble it.

Toward the People's Reeducation: Holiday, Lynching, and the Performance of Pain

Whitman's understanding of art is preparatory work for what Holiday puts on display, attempting to awaken the self to the horror of lynching. As Whitman explains, "Literature, Songs, Esthetics, &c, of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of Personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways."⁷⁵ To say that they are effective is an overstatement by Whitman, given the orator, poet, visual artist, or vocalist's dependency on having the audience stand in the right relationship to what is being presented.

Enforcement strikes a more important note, for it does not bespeak a legalistic engagement, but an ethical one. As Whitman notes, and as Holiday seeks to do, song aims to bring about not only "growths," but "removals" as well. Holiday's version of Meeropol's song and her stylized performance of it seek to evoke in the listener a self-imposed mode of conduct toward black life that, if properly understood, will identify as "bitter" the "fruit" of human suffering hanging from trees. Whereas Jefferson's notion of democracy presupposes the people as an aspirational category, and Whitman renders the content of those aspirations efficacious through aesthetic appeals, it is in Holiday that we find these implicit theoretical frameworks, but the content she provides extends their reach to serve racial justice. "Strange Fruit" is a song of democratic protest consistent with the activists and novelists of the 1920s and 1930s—both a grievance about and an appeal to the polity. To this final theme we now turn. Let us begin with the historical framing.

Spectacle lynching achieved prominence in the wake of the Civil War to terrorize and humiliate African Americans. These events were not confined to a few random mobs but were sanctioned by local officials and often organized by "respectable" members of the community. Both the events and the publicity of them (distribution of lynching photographs and postcards) served as vehicles to circulate norms of white superiority over black subjects. The success of lynching depended not exclusively on the presence of the victims, but largely on white Americans serving as spectators. In these contexts, they were "socially" habituated to find the displays "aesthetically acceptable."⁷⁶ Lynching photographs similar to Lawrence Beitler's (see figure 1) as well as detailed descriptions of such events were crucial weapons in the arsenal of white supremacy.

Increasingly during the 1920s and 1930s, however, both lynching pho-

tographs and literary recounting of lynching events also found their way into the tactics of antilynching activists, especially members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), novelists, and essayists. This is an odd occurrence. Why circulate images and propagate descriptions of such horrific acts? Just as lynching events and photographs tied white participants together in a community organized around norms and practices that involved policing and brutalizing black Americans, antilynching activists increasingly came to see the photographs as a visible testimony to the moral depravity of white Americans that might galvanize the black community and bring about the transformation of America. As Amy Wood notes, "Lynching opponents also sought to challenge the original intention of these photographs by inverting the racist assumptions of black bestiality and propensities for violence that undergirded the defense of lynching. They instead represented white mobs as savage threats to American civilization, a representation that held particular force in light of the United States' international role as a beacon of democracy."⁷⁷

Let us reflect on this point with an example. In a 1935 NAACP antilynching pamphlet, one sees a lynched Rubin Stacy surrounded by seven white children who gaze at his now lifeless body, with the following caption: "Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated?"⁷⁸ The pairing of the Stacy lynching with a caption that overtly provides interpretative guidance stands in stark contrast to what we see in Beitler's photo of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (figure 1). In the NAACP photo, we see an attempt to reverse the moral lesson of such photographs. In Beitler's photo, the white man in the foreground stares intently into the camera and points to the lifeless bodies of Shipp and Smith that hang above, as if to say to viewers something like the following: "This is how it ought to be done—how treatment of Negroes is supposed to be exacted."⁷⁹ In the NAACP photo, the caption means to undercut the moral legitimacy of a similar treatment, relocating bestiality from the black subject to the white agent. The underlying question at work is the following: Is this behavior—both the violence on display and the subjection of youth to it—becoming of a civilized people?

How could this approach have any hope of succeeding? After all, given the prominence of racial prejudice, it is not a stretch to imagine the credibility of

antilynching activists being called into question. As Miranda Fricker rightly notes, "Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."⁸⁰ Here we confront the subtlety of the NAACP's approach. Lynching photographs were informed by an obvious representational realism: to see the image entailed accepting the truth of its occurrence, allowing viewers to bear witness to the event. But without weaving the photographs into the linguistic tapestry of horror, the image might well become merely a recording of who was killed, how, and by whom. Both lynching and antilynching activists stood within the same epistemological but contestatory domain, the latter attempting to redescribe the meaning of the photo and to deploy horror in order to transfigure the American public. The NAACP's caption is thus guided by a critical tripartite assumption, without which the appeal would scarcely make sense—namely, that a standard of being civilized is at work within the wider culture, that this standard cannot be theoretically squared with the treatment of African Americans accurately on display, and that the American demos can be awakened to this fact. The shared epistemological domain allows for a reframing of similar images in which the power of language (the NAACP's caption) aspires to release the photo's horrific reality. The NAACP's aspiration thus aligns itself with the theoretical presumption of democratic openness that is a precondition for reframing the photo.

Notice that the questions in the caption seem less interested in distilling a description of the participants and more concerned with confronting the viewers with their own thinking. It is a provocation that infuses the photo with new meaning. Lynching opponents sensationalized lynching events and photos in an effort to capture the entire spectacle and redirect the moral gaze, as evidenced by the caption. The aim was to properly align one's reactions to the cruel reality of the event. Lynching now figured as an act of moral barbarity unbecoming of a civilized society. Whereas the photos once served as artistic mementoes of white superiority, they now could potentially be used as artifacts of white cruelty in the context of a new "visual politics."⁸¹

It is precisely this redirection of the moral gaze that informs Meeropol's song and that frames Holiday's 1939 rendition of it. As David Margolick explains in his book about the song, Meeropol wrote the poem and ultimately put it to music in response to seeing the Shipp and Smith lynching photo—a photo that, Meeropol says, "haunted him for days."⁸² The poem originally appeared in the *New York Teacher* in 1937 and thereafter had been performed as a song, but Meeropol subsequently gave it to Holiday at Café Society in New York City, where she performed it regularly. Up until that

point, no single piece of music made lynching its primary subject matter, and the song achieved an amazing degree of success (given the subject and the singer) by becoming number 16 on the U.S. Billboard charts. For Meeropol's part, he explains: "I wrote 'Strange Fruit' because I hate lynching and I hate injustice and I hate the people who perpetuate it."⁸³ Framed as such, the intention behind the song seems confined merely to the expression of anger—a cathartic release that distances Meeropol from those in the photo who approvingly bear witness to the lynching.

Holiday's description of the song as her "personal protest,"⁸⁴ however, and her reported response to her mother that she believed that singing and performing the song might "make things better" seem to capture more accurately what she and Meeropol intended.⁸⁵ That is, a personal protest captures the identification between the artist and the message being conveyed. There is, I argue, an analogous relationship between the NAACP's photo and caption, on the one hand, and the song and Holiday's rendition of it, on the other. Both seek to convey a new ethical sensibility. This raises the question: What does the song mean to tell its listener? That it might make things better most certainly places Holiday in the space opened by the aspirational view of the people. Meeropol and Holiday believed the polity to be capable of responding appropriately to the claims of the song—a belief that who the people are (as displayed in the cruelty exacted on black bodies) need not determine who they may yet become. The song, then, is more accurately a democratic protest; it is an articulation of grievances directed to an audience that Meeropol and Holiday believed was capable of hearing appropriately. Consistent with the work of activists, the song laid claim to the image of lynching, recontextualized it, and gave it back to the demos, who might yet be reeducated by it. Meeropol and Holiday's orientation makes explicit the presumption that the people may not stand beyond reproach. And Holiday's specific performance models a form of life that seeks to transfigure the social and political world.

Consider the first and third stanzas of the song.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black Body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁸⁶

The words are simple in their display of the horrific, but the lynched victims are oddly described as "strange fruit" and then subsequently as "a strange and bitter crop." The words alert us not only to the spectatorial dimension of lynching, as evidenced in the photograph that stimulated the production of the song, but also to the subtle consumerism at work. The senses of sight and taste are collapsed into one mode of engagement. White Americans are visually consuming and digesting lynched black Americans. The deployment of the terms *strange* and *bitter* now recasts the meaning of *fruit* in its new light—it is unhealthy, a corruption of the soul. The words stage a realignment between the horror of lynching and its negative effects on the polity that are otherwise denied; in its ethical register, the song tells us that we can never distill value from the harm done to black Americans.

But if the words attempt to convey the consumption of the horrific on display, it is Holiday's performance that aspired to stimulate an accurate assessment of lynching in her listeners. Hers was an attempt to capture her audience and educate their moral sensibilities through her vocal and dramatic display akin to the NAACP caption. Consider two reflections on her performance of the song, one from Meeropol (more appropriately mirroring Holiday's thinking) and the other from artist Albert Hirschfeld: "She gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation," commented Meeropol, "which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywhere. This was exactly what I wanted the song to do and why I wrote it. Billie Holiday's styling of the song was incomparable and fulfilled the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have. The audience gave her a tremendous ovation." And Hirschfeld stated, "It was a beautifully rendered thing, like a great, dramatic moment in the theater. To see Billie Holiday alone was something else, but this particular song made one sit and listen and think."⁸⁷ What is at work in these descriptions but not easily susceptible to textual elucidation are the subtle inflections in Holiday's voice and the somatic indicators (literally, her bodily gestures) that give the song its "shocking quality" and make one "sit and listen and think." Consider one of her last performances of the song in 1958 on *Chelsea at Nine*—a weekly international cabaret show from a London theater that aired from 1957 to 1960.⁸⁸ Of course, we might well imagine some variation between 1958 and her earlier performances of the song in Café Society, but perhaps not much.

As the video of the performance shows, the entire song is accompanied by haunting music, the piano, played in B-flat minor. One need not be a musician to hear the somber and dark quality of the arrangement. In fact, B-flat minor functions as a sinister, "dark" key.⁸⁹ Before Holiday begins, the listener is being primed for anguish and for loss; the music itself attempts to fashion and generate an appropriate response to match its grim sound. It is no wonder that upon hearing Holiday perform the song in an apartment in 1938, Charles Gilmore remarked, "The apartment became a cathedral, the party a funeral."⁹⁰ In fact, Holiday's regular performance of the song at Café Society involved simple but deliberate staging—the suspension of service, a darkened room, and only a spotlight on Holiday's face—to set the mood and render the entire atmosphere of the café continuous with the claims of the performance. Similar to the proverbial moment of silence, the staging emplots the audience into a tragic horizon the fitting expression of which can only be mournful contemplation. Holiday's voice enters; it is an appropriately stern counterpart to the seriousness of the lyrics. The dominant feelings that saturate the song are both contempt and disappointment; it is, in other words, a lamentation directed at the nation of which the audience is a part.

The contempt and disappointment in her voice are coupled with somatic indicators in the *Chelsea at Nine* performance. Her body moves uncomfortably; a look of disgust flashes across her face as she sings the line "southern trees bear strange fruit." This is then followed by a grimace framing the words "blood at the root." But it is with the lines "bulging eyes and twisted mouth" that she contorts her own mouth as if to mimic the dead, both raising the volume of her voice and singing the line in a strained vocal that closes with a look of contempt. Holiday models for her audience what she deems as appropriate responses to lynching. By aiming her performance to the somatic level of democratic practice, she hopes to retell the story of bearing witness to lynching and the reactions it ought to stimulate. It is an attempt to make present what one would obviously think appropriate—a gasp, a cringe, a look of outrage. What Ralph Ellison said of the novel might well be said of Holiday's antilynching performance: it is "a way of possessing life, of slowing it down, and of giving it the writer's [and singer's] own sense of values in a delicately and subtly structured way. All this, of course, is not simply a matter of entertaining, but is a way of confronting reality, confronting the nature of the soul and the nature of society."⁹¹

Her performance is not ethically, cognitively, or emotionally neutral; it is informed by a cognitive-affective vision of a barbaric nation that she mir-

rors back to the public. The mode of delivery is not exclusively concerned to help us understand lynching, but to aid us in displaying the appropriate emotions to it through a mimetic display of the horrific. The meaning of the song contains a hidden somatic-affective roadmap that Holiday's gestures make explicit for consideration. In doing so, her words and performance reach out toward the listeners, asking them to think and feel the norm being conveyed—that such events should at all times be met with disgust. Or to put it differently, she performs the very thing she hopes to arouse in her listener. What Whitman says in *Leaves*, Holiday more effectively realizes and deepens in her performance: "Your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the riches and fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in the very motion and joint of your body."⁹² One can literally read off a mode of conduct from her performance and, as a result, place lynching, its victims, and its perpetrators within a new ethical economy. When I say "read off a mode of conduct," I mean that we can articulate norms against lynching and its perpetrators, on the one hand, and norms for the protection of would-be victims of such crimes, on the other.

Her performance and the conduct it projects reorder the ethical standing of blacks in the scheme of America's social and political framework. Holiday's engagement does not articulate a direct argument for the dignity of black life. Because she aspires to persuade by presence, her encounter is subtle, as is the emergence of the new ethical economy she proposes. But it is not mysterious for being subtle. The revelatory dimension of the words is evident in Holiday's gestures. Taken by themselves, the words appear descriptive of lynching, but when the entire performance is considered, her bodily articulation renders a judgment against what is being described. In confronting the audience with and moving them toward the horrific through her somatic engagement, she attempts at the same time to orient them differently and positively to the black subject. In other words, you cannot consistently be moved at the cognitive-affective level without being drawn to or aroused by the ethical claim being advanced. It is the ethical claim that reflexively endows the black body with worth otherwise flagrantly denied by the act of lynching.

One final word is in order. Placing Thomas Jefferson and Walt Whitman—one a middlebrow philosopher and the other a poet—in conversation with the jazz singer Billie Holiday may strike the reader as odd. This is especially

so given that this essay, if I have clearly stated and executed its aims, is about the meaning and possibility of ethical and therefore political transformation in the United States as it relates to racial justice. Of course, there are a number of thinkers for whom this approach would not be philosophical heresy. Cornel West, Bernard Williams, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell, and Peter Euben all find in the culture of the Western world resources for thinking through some of the most challenging philosophical and practical problems relating to agency, justice, love, solidarity, and responsibility. What is striking about all these thinkers is the explicit idea that placing poetry and philosophy or song and philosophy in conversation may well be generative of a new kind of life. To say that it may be generative connects the meaning of sincere transformation and the convincing character of democracy to a fundamental idea. Genuine self and collective transformation eschews coercive force as counterproductive in achieving change, as much as democracy rejects illegitimate impositions on the citizenry as ineffective in securing political and ethical agreement. Indeed, development of self and society as well as political and ethical agreement embrace reflective agency as essential to the process. To tether Holiday's song to Jeffersonian and Whitmanian frameworks is to believe, as Holiday's performance conveys, that political and ethical conversion depends on laying out a vision where one's fellows may refashion a good in which all may enjoy dignity and respect.

This, of course, is not to reduce Holiday's voice to Jefferson's and Whitman's; it is to locate her within the American intellectual pantheon to which she contributed. The substantive content of "Strange Fruit" brings into view the horror of black life that seems to escape philosophical attention, and Holiday absorbs the horrific meaning of lynching in voice and movement that attempts to model the appropriate response to such cruelty. Hers is an attempt to "make things better" through a vocal and dramaturgical display that if taken seriously performs democracy in the service of racial justice and refashions the people. But laying out that vision through song and display is only part of the democratic equation, for it depends on others actively making that vision their own.

This dependence of course confronts us with a proposition that haunts the entire essay and from which we can find no escape. Citizens constantly depend on those whom they do not control. That unsettling thought points us to yet another proposition. What fuels and sustains them is a form of faith—faith that the polity has not yet been settled, faith that the people are

not beyond reproach, and faith that the nation may yet secure redemption from its sins. Democracy's legitimacy is less about a well-ordered constitution or appropriate procedures (although they are important) and more about faith in the possibility of the polity's transformation despite its manifest failure in practice.

Notes

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For a recording of Holiday's "Strange Fruit," see Billie Holiday, Frank Newton, and the Café Society Band, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Commodore Records, 1939).

1. The evolution of the song is captured nicely in David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). I draw extensively from this work in the paper's third section. Of course, Holiday was not the first to sing the song, although it achieved its greatest popularity through her.

2. See "bitter," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <http://www.oed.com>.

3. See Daniel T. Williams, "The Lynching Records at Tuskegee Institute," in *Eight Negro Bibliographies*, comp. Daniel T. Williams (New York: KrausReprint, 1969), 1–15. For some classical reflections on lynching, see Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record*, in *On Lynchings* (1895; reprint, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), 55–151; *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919); Fitzhugh W. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

4. I have used the terms *ethical framework* and *ethos* to note closely related ideas. *Ethical framework* means to capture a system of norms and mores of a community—its habits. When taken together, the two articulate the *ethos* of the community—its character. (Hegel and Dewey are obviously in the background here.) To say black lynching ran alongside and troubled a democratic *ethos* is to point to an internal dynamic in which the identity of the community is at odds with itself. I do not mean to claim that black lynching was an aberration, but nor should I be read as describing it as a natural

outgrowth of democratic practice. There are, we might say, competing habits at the heart of the American character—habits that will disrupt the professed commitment to freedom and equality for all and habits that will be used to bring critique to bear on practices of domination and exclusion. Two things to note. First, I do not mean to say the latter are clearly articulated, merely that they are lying in wait. In some instances, they will be vague and inchoate, awaiting reflection to give them shape and articulation. Second, that I speak of “the” American character as a unified whole is not to deny internal differences; rather, it means that despite such real differences we are nonetheless capable of understanding the terms of our interlocutors as belonging to one and the same ethical framework.

5. Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5. See also Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, DC: CIVITAS/Counterpoint, 1998), chap. 2; Shawn Michelle Smith, “The Evidence of Lynching Photographs,” in Shawn Michelle Smith and Dora Apel, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 10–41; Dora Apel, “Lynching Photographs and the Politics of Public Shaming,” in *Lynching Photographs*, 42–78.

6. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 180, 194–97; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 77, 131; Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 3–4, 7, 107.

7. See “protest,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

8. Elsewhere I have argued for the normative importance of this view of the people for understanding W. E. B. Du Bois’s classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*. In that context, however, I was not interested in teasing out the Jeffersonian lineage of this idea. See Melvin Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2012): 188–203. Here, I argue more forcefully for the centrality of this idea to Jefferson’s understanding of democratic life. In a longer book project, I maintain that this Jeffersonian account was used by historically excluded groups in ways that Jefferson could not imagine and that his own commitment to the logic of democracy could not conceptually prevent.

9. The version of *Democratic Vistas* used here is Whitman’s 1876 version, the second printing of his 1871 edition that contains his additions: Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, ed. Ed Folsom (1876; reprint, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010). All other quotations of Whitman’s writings are drawn from Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996).

10. Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), chap. 6.

11. Meeropol quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 30.

12. In at least two other places I have tied the aspirational view of the people to faith. See Melvin Rogers, “The Fact of Sacrifice and the Necessity of Faith: Dewey and the

Ethics of Democracy,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 47, no. 3 (November 2011): 274–300, and Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect,” 201–2.

13. Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 2–3.

14. Daniel Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

15. Thomas Jefferson (hereafter TJ) to James Madison, September 6, 1789, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (hereafter *WTJ*), ed. Albert Ellery Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), 7:457, original emphasis. See also TJ to John Wayles Eppes, June 24, 1813, in *WTJ*, 13:269–79; TJ to Governor William Plumer, July 21, 1816, in *WTJ*, 15:46–47; TJ to Thomas Earle, September 8, 1823, in *WTJ*, 20:470–71.

16. Compare David N. Mayer, *The Constitutional Thought of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), and Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

17. TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *WTJ*, 15:70–73; compare TJ to John Adams, June 15, 1813, in *WTJ*, 13:252–56.

18. See Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmations: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6–7.

19. Judith Shklar, “Democracy and the Past: Jefferson and His Heirs,” in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffman and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 174.

20. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1690/2003), §§149, 155, 210, 221–22, 227–28, 230, 240; Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1792), in *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), pt. 2, 567. For the importance of trust to politics on which I rely, see John Dunn, “Trust and Political Agency,” chapter 3 in *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981–1989* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990).

21. James Wilson, *Lectures on Law* (1790–1791), in *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. Robert Green McCloskey, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1:304. For a contrasting but earlier view, see Alexander Contee Hanson’s remark that the notion of a sovereign people is “subversive to all government and all law” (Hanson [writing as Aristides] to the People (1787), in *Representative Government and the Revolution: The Maryland Constitutional Crisis of 1787*, ed. Melvin Yazawa [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975], 125).

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience” (1844), in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 485.

23. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920; reprint, New York: Dover, 1999), 82.

24. TJ to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, in *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1985), 880. Several portions of these lines are worth noting: the language of “our people” signals Jefferson’s particularism that is in tension with his incipient cosmopolitanism; his encouragement to “keep alive their attention” and to “reclaim them by enlightening them” highlights the faith he places in the transformative possibilities of the people or what might be described as the source of his perfectionism. This second dimension of his thinking is a piece of the larger emphasis he places on character and its central place in democratic transformation.

25. Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary* (1755), ed. Jack Lynch (New York: Leveger Press, 2002), 476. For Jefferson’s recommendation of the *Dictionary* as an aid to fixing in us “the principles and practices of virtue,” see TJ to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771, in *Writings*, 740–45.

26. TJ to Richard Price, February 1, 1785, in *Writings*, 798.

27. TJ to William Carmichael, 1786, in *WTJ*, 6:31. Three points should be noted here. First, this is not to deny Jefferson’s belief in the importance of a natural aristocracy. He too, like Adams, believes in the necessity of having “the real good and wise” at the helm (TJ to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in *Writings*, 1306). The disagreement, however, is about the precise relationship between the masses and wise men. On this point, Jefferson parts ways with Adams. He believes that one can appeal to the people’s capacity for judgment and rejects the wholesale claim that one finds in Adams that the people are “addicted to Corruption and Venality” (John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, 11 vols. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963], 2:28). Second, I deliberately employ the term *may* to denote the uncertainty of appealing to the people’s good sense. The capacity for good sense does not imply for Jefferson that the people will always employ it effectively. That one has the capacity for good sense generates faith in the people, but not certainty in the appropriate deployment of that capacity. After all, Jefferson is clear that the citizenry is always in danger of having their capacities corrupted by their fellows or their institutions. This second point undercuts the long-standing attribution of blind optimism to Jefferson. For a longer critique of the attribution of optimism, see Maurizio Valsania, *The Limits of Optimism: Thomas Jefferson’s Dualistic Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011). Third, precisely because the people’s capacities might be corrupted, Jefferson, like others in the tradition of American and African American political thought, places special emphasis on cultivating the moral and intellectual virtues of character. For a longer argument on the importance of character to Jefferson’s thinking, see Jean Yarbrough, *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

28. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 15–22; Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 72–77; Gregg D. Crane, *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20–29.

29. Thomas Jefferson, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” in *Writings*, 103–23; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia* (1787), in *WTJ*, 14:179–208.

30. Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 14:192.

31. TJ to David Harding, April 20, 1824, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 651; see also James L. Golden and Alan L. Golden, *Thomas Jefferson and the Rhetoric of Virtue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

32. Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect,” 188–203. See also Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

33. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 76. Although Whitman here references reading, in the previous paragraphs he refers to musicians and orators as well.

34. The themes of receptivity and potentiality in Whitman are most skillfully explored in George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), chap. 10.

35. TJ to Skipwith, August 3, 1771, 742.

36. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 59, emphasis added.

37. *Ibid.*, 76.

38. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 667.

39. This notion of aesthetics should be distinguished from its conventional definition as a study of the judgment of taste found classically in Immanuel Kant. Rather, Whitman means to make a claim about the centrality of the senses to cognition and its manifestation. But given that this claim is framed, as we will see, by democracy, aesthetics is taken not as a private affair, but as an activity of social beings seeking to direct and guide the senses, whose manifestation is found in character. That is, aesthetics, for Whitman, functions as a site to take up a “mode of comportment.” This latter view of aesthetics relating to comportment is also suggested by Kant. My thinking and clarification here are owed to Robert Gooding-Williams, “Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire,” in *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

40. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 68.

41. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers (College Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2012), 141. For a richer account that aligns Whitman with Deweyan pragmatism, see Stephen John Mack, *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

42. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 31.

43. *Ibid.*, 37, emphasis added.

44. John Dewey, *Individualism: Old and New*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, 17 vols., ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 5:76; compare “For the mind, which alone builds the permanent edifice,

haughtily builds it to itself. By it, with what follows it, are conveyed to mortal sense the culminations of the materialistic, the known, and a prophecy of the unknown" (Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 49).

45. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 42–43. We hear a similar claim in *Leaves*, where Whitman says of the democratic poet: "In the dispute on God and eternity he is silent, / He sees eternity less like a play with a prologue and a denouement, / He sees eternity in men and women, he does not see men and women as dreams or dots" (475).

46. Compare Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 15, 18, 44, 50.

47. *Ibid.*, 24.

48. Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 245.

49. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 36.

50. "A Nation like ours, in a sort of geological formation state, trying continually new experiments, choosing new delegations, is not served by the best men only, but sometimes more by those that provoke it—by the combats they arouse" (*ibid.*, 31).

51. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

52. I come to this conclusion largely because this passage appears in the first seventeen paragraphs (that is, in paragraph fourteen) of *Democratic Vistas*. It is only in the eighteenth paragraph that Whitman retrospectively marks off the earlier paragraphs as the introduction: "Out of such considerations, such truths, arises for treatment in these *Vistas* the important question of Character, of an American stock-personality, with Literatures and Arts for outlets and return-expression, and of course, to correspond, within outlines common to all" (10).

53. *Ibid.*, 40; compare Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 1.

54. Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 242.

55. Frank, *Constituent Moments*, chap. 6.

56. Whitman, *Leaves*, 303.

57. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 67.

58. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

59. Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in *Essays and Lectures*, 458.

60. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 67.

61. Although the point has already been suggested, it is worth repeating: this functional character to art is evocative in its approach rather than having the character of a direct appeal that we might find, say, in other approaches such as philosophy or history. I therefore avoid the reception fallacy, a sliding from what art aspires to do to a claim about what it does. The latter is more clearly about reception. For more on this point, see Simon Stow, *Republic of Readers? The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), chap. 2.

62. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 67.

63. *Ibid.*, 62.

64. I am reading into Whitman without much explanation regarding his commit-

ment to the notion of habit we find in Dewey's writings. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey writes of habit the following: "We need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity" (in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, 15 vols., ed. Jo Ann Boydston [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976], 14:31). I ask the reader to trust my attribution here without its appearing anachronistic.

65. Whitman, *Leaves*, 28.

66. *Ibid.*, 53.

67. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18; compare Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 28–29.

68. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 69.

69. Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

70. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 70.

71. *Ibid.*, 7–8, emphasis added.

72. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 68.

73. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4; see also chaps. 1 and 15.

74. I realize I have moved quickly here, perhaps too quickly. A full explication of the relationship between Whitman and Nussbaum will have to await a longer discussion in my current book project.

75. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 36.

76. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 75; Smith, "Evidence of Lynching Photographs," 10–41; Mark Reinhardt, "Painful Photographs: From the Ethics of Spectatorship to Visual Politics," in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 33–55. Of course, the most penetrating account of lynching events as a form of habituation that is part and parcel of the cultural logic of modernity is found in Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), especially the introduction and chap. 1.

77. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 184. See also Smith, "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs," 37–41; Apel, "Lynching Photographs," 42–78.

78. Quoted in Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 196.

79. It should be noted that the two men had already been savagely beaten and

killed before subsequently being staged for the lynching (see Madison, *Lynching in the Heartland*, 10–11).

80. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1 and chap. 1.

81. See Reinhardt, "Painful Photographs," 33–55.

82. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 21. The remaining paragraphs here are drawn liberally from Margolick's text, although my purposes are quite distinct from his own.

83. Quoted in *ibid.*, 10.

84. Billie Holiday (with William Dufty), *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1984), 84.

85. Quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 31.

86. Quoted in *ibid.*, 1.

87. Both quoted in *ibid.*, 40.

88. See the performance on Joel Katz, dir., *Strange Fruit* (DVD) (San Francisco: Association with the Independent Television Service, 2002).

89. Wilfred Mellers, "Round and about in Górecki's Symphony No. 3," *Tempo* 168, no. 3 (1989): 23.

90. Quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 30.

91. Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 310–11.

92. Whitman, *Leaves*, 11.

9

IN PRAISE OF DISORDER

The Untidy Terrain of Islamist Political Thought

Roxanne L. Euben

In January 2011, an uprising in Tunisia forced President Zine al-Abidine Ben 'Ali from office, inaugurating a wave of challenges to authoritarian rule from Morocco to Yemen. Deeply entrenched patterns of power and powerlessness were disrupted by a groundswell of demands for dignity, work, and participatory politics. Many of the established shibboleths of American foreign policy in the Middle East were outpaced by events, assumptions of a hardening cold war between Islam and the West temporarily suspended as images of Egyptians converging en masse on Tahrir (Arabic for *liberation*) Square carrying placards demanding "*hurriya!*" [freedom!] traveled the globe at lightning speed. In that moment, it appeared as if the demos would remake entirely the dynamics of a region held for decades in the iron grip of autocrats garbed in the trappings of presidents, generals, and kings. But politics, as Max Weber famously pointed out, "is a strong and slow boring of hard boards."¹ Egyptians quickly discovered that they had dispensed with the dictator but not the dictatorship, numerous Bahraini activists were rounded up and imprisoned on flimsy charges in appalling conditions, and spring in Syria devolved into a brutal and protracted winter in which tens of thousands have died.²

In a triumph of hope over experience, many observers expected that the Arab Spring would not only transform Middle Eastern politics but also render obsolete shopworn depictions of the "Islamic world" as a largely undifferentiated cauldron of illiberalism, violence, and anti-Westernism.³ Instead, the increasing power and visibility of Islamist parties, organizations,