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DISCURSIVE INCARCERATION: BLACK FRAGILITY IN A DIVIDED PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

The expression of fragility has always been a difficult and complex matter for African Americans, for the discourse of mainstream media is set up to both sustain and misrecognize their fragility. Even though the black public sphere split off from the dominant public sphere after the Civil War to enable distinctive forms of expression, the “practiced habits” of which Coates speaks continued working within the structures of the dominant discourse. My essay will analyze the structure of America’s indifference to fragility in six parts. In the first section, I will introduce a normative problematic that can track how the hegemonic public sphere uses the rhetoric of formal equality to subordinate and silence African Americans speech, while also opening a space for black speech to be heard rather than dismissed. Sections two and three examine the historical separation of the black public sphere from the dominant public sphere, tracing the silencing structures that haunt us today back to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954, for this “progressive” decision provided a template for what can be said and cannot be said. The fourth section analyzes how Ralph Ellison thematizes and revises the encounter between the black and dominant public spheres. Sections five and six discuss the ways in which Ta-Nehisi Coates exposes the contemporary forms of these discursive structures that undermine progress toward equality and the resistance to such exposure in the media.

Keywords: fragility; social imaginary; race; public sphere; normativity.

The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one’s eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands. (Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me)

The expression of fragility has always been a difficult and complex matter for African Americans, for the discourse of mainstream media is set up to maintain their fragility by obscuring it through misdescriptions that disqualify any protest.¹ Even though the black public sphere split off from the dominant public sphere after the Civil

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers of this essay and the guest editors, Chiara Patrizi and Pilar Martínez Benedí, for their comments, which have helped me improve my argument. In addition, I would like to thank Laura Lane Steele for her thorough reading of my essay and her insightful suggestions.

War to enable distinctive forms of expression, these alternative forms were unable to revise the “practiced habits” of which Coates speaks. The result is that, today, the black public sphere exists alongside the dominant discourse, breaking through momentarily, as we saw in the widespread outrage at George Floyd’s murder, only to be pushed away by backlash. Given this discursive landscape, how should we approach fragility? First, we need a normative problematic capable of tracking how the hegemonic public sphere uses the rhetoric of formal equality to subordinate and silence African American speech. Second, this problematic must also open a space for black speech to be heard rather than dismissed as “resurrecting the past,” as politically invalid identity politics, or as an attack on “white people,” phrases we often hear in response to Critical Race Theory and the 1619 Project, both of which attempt to introduce the relevance of longstanding, systemic racism into current discussions about public education.² In the first section of this essay, I introduce the problematic of social imaginaries in order to articulate the structures of “discursive incarceration” within the dominant collective imagination, whose historical shape is outlined in the second section. I then turn to the complex normative challenges to these structures articulated in the writings of Ralph Ellison, who thematizes the conflict between the mainstream and black public spheres, holding up for interrogation some of the structures on both sides of the divide. I then move to Coates’s structural critique of the “post-racial” optimism following the election of Barack Obama. Written in the form of a letter to his son, Coates’s *Between the World and Me* insists on the power of the mainstream racial imaginary to reinvent justifications that perpetuate the ongoing subordinating violence inflicted on black lives, violence that makes black lives extremely fragile, at the same time that it silences them.

² “Since January 2021, 41 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism, according to an *Education Week* analysis. Fifteen states have imposed these bans and restrictions either through legislation or other avenues.”

<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>.

THE LINGUISTIC POLITICS OF SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

When political philosophers and lay people conceive of democratic ideals, they often employ an idealized thought experiment that permits them to generate conceptual principles abstracted from the narratives and practices of any community. We can see these thought experiments in the work of John Rawls, the most influential American political philosopher of the twentieth century. Rawls (1971) developed a counterfactual ideal he calls the “original position” (17-22), in which the citizen is deprived of any knowledge of his/her intelligence, class, sex, etc., for the derivation of principles.³ For the American public sphere, this conception of principle is concretized in the most consequential model for normative reasoning: the Supreme Court opinion. Since Rawls himself endorsed this form as a model, I will pay particular attention to the structures of discourse shaping some influential cases, as well as to the power of these structures to shape the collective imagination (Ferguson 1990).⁴ By examining normativity through the problematic of the collective imagination, I can display the structures of legitimation of a particular society through time, structures that are occluded by an approach that sees normativity as the realization of principles and that animates this realization by a call to “live up to our principles.”

As a point of departure, I will use Charles Taylor’s hermeneutic formulation of the collective imagination as “social imaginaries” to inform my argument. “The social imaginary is not a set of ideas,” Taylor declares, but rather, the imaginary forms the background that makes sense of “the practices of a society ... Thus, the notion of a moral order goes beyond some proposed schedule of norms that ought to govern our mutual relations and/or political life The image of order carries not only a definition of what is right, but of the context in which it makes sense to strive for and hope to realize the

³ See Carla Bagnoli’s essay “Constructivism,” in which she brings together many of these diverse thinkers—John Rawls, Christine Korsgaard, Onora O’Neill—under a common definition: “the view that the moral principles we ought to accept or follow are the ones that agents would agree to or endorse were they to engage in a hypothetical or idealized process of rational deliberation” (Bagnoli 2021). This line of thinking begins with Kant and continues through Habermas.

⁴ Rawls (1993) says, “To check whether we are following the public reason we might ask: how would our argument strike us presented in the form of a Supreme Court opinion?” (254).

right” (Taylor 2004, 2, 8-9). The social imaginary concerns the ways “ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms but in images, stories, legends, etc. ... The social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices and widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor 2013, 308).⁵ These imaginaries—made from fictional and nonfictional sources—form the background out of which we think and act but “which we do not entirely understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for these is to want to leap out of the human condition” (Taylor 2007, 387). Taylor’s argument for imaginaries thus has a transcendental and historical dimension. On the one hand, the transcendental dimension maintains that imaginaries, not concepts or categories alone, are the inescapable condition of thought that cannot be ignored or blocked out in the interest of rationality or clarity.⁶ On the other hand, the historical dimension insists that the imaginaries are not timeless categories, but the outcome of historical conditions. Taylor uses the notion of the imaginary to show how the Western collective imagination made a transition from premodern religious and hierarchical macro structures to the ones that now shape Western modernity, such as the public sphere, the modern moral subject, secularity, and popular sovereignty. He does not develop how the imaginary is also the source of domination, resistance, and argument, though his problematic can be expanded to address these issues and bring literary discourse into political argument.⁷ However, the importance of the imaginary does not reside in its nuanced treatment of the background alone, but also in the way it makes the utterances we find in novels, essays, letters, and films relevant to normative debate. In my view, normative argument is not focused on the application of a principle to a particular situation or text, but on the way a particular utterance engages the relevant imaginary. In the next two sections, I will characterize the relevant imaginary

⁵ Imaginaries are the middle level of articulation, placed between the “explicit doctrines about society, the divine or the cosmos,” and “embodied understanding” or “habitus” (Taylor 1999, 167).

⁶ See Taylor’s exchange with Robert Brandom (Taylor 2010, Brandom 2010) over whether we can reason without imaginaries. Taylor believes we cannot; Brandom thinks we can.

⁷ I have developed the imaginary as a normative problematic that differs from Taylor’s and shows how argument through the imaginary is possible. See Steele 2017.

background in the works of Ellison and Coates. The point of the historical background is not to inform readers about well-known discrete historical events and texts, but rather to show them how these are indicators of a structural “discursive incarceration” that makes African Americans fragile and vulnerable at the same time that it silences them. In the last two sections, I show how this structure is passed down not just to Ellison and his generation, but to Coates’s (ours) as well.

DIVIDING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: WHITE DOMINATION AND BLACK CONTESTATION

From the time of the Civil War, the black public sphere has split from the mainstream public sphere. As David Blight (2001) observes: “In the half century after the war, as the sections reconciled, by and large, the races divided” (4). Civil War reunions ceremoniously reinforced what was going on in the discursive public sphere: white unity was celebrated, while the memory of slavery and African American voices was suppressed. We can see this in events such as the commemoration at Gettysburg in 1913, at which soldiers from the Union and Confederate armies appeared without a single black soldier nor any mention of black people in President Woodrow Wilson’s speech.⁸ Black newspapers, on the other hand, denounced the event.⁹ This attempt to canonize the memory of the Civil War as the story of how both sides fought gloriously and how a divided nation healed after 1865 was reinforced in the twentieth century by the enormously popular documentary by Ken Burns, *The Civil War*, which appeared in 1990 and was watched by 40 million viewers. As historian Leon Litwack (1997) says, “The most appalling and revealing shortcoming in Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* is the way it chose to deal with the war’s legacy ... with every anniversary, with every reunion of aging

⁸ See Michael Dawson’s discussion of how the forced exclusion of blacks led to the establishment of a set of parallel institutions outside of the main venues of American civil society (Dawson 2012). There are, of course, other public spheres organized around ethnicity or gender in the United States—e.g., Latinx.

⁹ The *Washington Bee*, a black Republican newspaper at the time, asked, “A Reunion of whom? Only those who fought for the preservation of the Union and extinction of human slavery” or those who “fought to destroy the Union and perpetuate slavery, and who are now employing every artifice and argument known to deceit and sophistry to propagate a national sentiment in favor of their nefarious contention that emancipation, reconstruction and enfranchisement are a dismal failure” (cited Blight 2001, 10).

veterans, the war came to be depoliticize. ... Memories on both sides turned toward a recounting of military exploits, towards patriotic sentimentalism. ..." (134-35).¹⁰

The history of the separation of black and mainstream public spheres is too long a story to tell here. For my purposes, its most important feature is the codification of the imaginary framework of "separate but equal." This imaginary emerged and exercised its power even before the Founding, as historian Nicholas Guyatt (2016) has shown in *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation*—that is, long before the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. What made the imaginary structure so important was that it created a way for the concept of equality to cohabit with subordinating practices and imaginaries shaping the lives of African Americans, while "protecting" whites from grasping black self-understandings.¹¹ Even Justice Harlan's famous dissent—"in the eye of the law, there is no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens"—includes the reassurance to whites of their superiority: "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is" (*Plessy* 1896, 559). The language of the dominant group created a normative reality that black people were forced to recognize and, to some extent, internalize. The dominant language not only rationalized the anguish of African Americans as justified, it also made them doubt the reality of their own experience, a kind of gaslighting that ignored or justified their pain and enhanced their fragility. Despite their subordinate status, African Americans came up with coping strategies, including linguistic ones. These linguistic differences were sufficiently profound and structurally coordinated to generate a distinctive language.¹²

¹⁰ W. E. B. Dubois pushed back against the dominant memory in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), a work that was largely ignored by the mainstream media.

¹¹ As historians confirm, the case captured the understanding of the principles of equality and fairness of most Americans at the time. Harlan was proposing, as Reva Siegel (1996) points out, that "the nation could repudiate a regime of racial caste in the eyes of the law while continuing a regime of racial caste as a social fact" (229). This is the perfect rationalization—elites could maintain their practices of subordination while telling themselves that they were fulfilling the country's ideals.

¹² Two short citations from Bakhtin (1981) will clarify what I mean: "At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present ... (291). Thus, "every speaker "live(s) in several language systems" (295).

BROWN AND THE IMAGINARY OF SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

The *Brown* Court inherited the imaginary framework of “separate but equal,” an American tradition since the Founding. This structure permitted the concept of equality to coexist with the subordinating practices and imaginaries shaping the lives of African Americans. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) captured the understanding of the principles of equality and fairness of most Americans at the time (Rosen 2006, 54). I emphasize this point to push back against the claim that there was a “contradiction” between the principle of equality and the practices of the time—e.g., in Gunnar Myrdal’s words (1995): “In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice the solution is not effectuated” (24). Myrdal falls into the trap of separating principle from the historical imaginary with which it is associated, as if a concept had a clear telos in the collective imaginary which we were “failing to realize.” Principles are always understood with and through social imaginaries as a condition of their intelligibility. The only reason white people could talk about the principle of equality as an ideal was that they had found a way to reconcile it with their belief in black people’s inferiority.¹³

The *Brown* Court understood well the limits imposed by the “separate but equal” imaginary of the time and hence how controversial their decision would be. Chief Justice Earl Warren gave explicit recommendations to the other Justices on the language of the decision: it “should be short, readable by the lay public, non-rhetorical, unemotional and, above all, nonaccusatory” (quoted in Kennedy 2011, 121).¹⁴ Warren’s directive can be seen as sound political advice; he did not want the Court to create more animosity from segregationists than necessary by demanding that they examine their past acts. But if we take a long view, we can read this instruction as a continuation of the “gag” order

¹³ The belief in black inferiority—fostered by the scientific studies of the time—was widespread among abolitionists and was woven into the imaginaries on both sides of the slavery debate. Frederick Douglass (2018) understood that abolition of slavery did not, by itself, address the fundamental issue—the recognition of the full humanity of people of African descent (117–18).

¹⁴ As Kennedy observes: “If all we knew about segregation was what is discernible from the face of that ruling, one could be forgiven for wondering what was so wrong about ‘separate but equal’” (121). For “gag rules” during debates over slavery, see Stephen Holmes 1988.

about the discussion of slavery in Congress prior to the Civil War.¹⁵ In other words, the political censorship on matters of race started long before *Brown* and continues to this day.

Although *Brown* overturned *Plessy* on the desegregation of schools—other forms of segregation remained in place—it used four rhetorical devices to create a new discursive landscape of subordination. One was the way social scientific evidence was gathered and used by the Court. *Brown*’s famous footnote 11 to Kenneth Clark’s research, showing that adolescent black girls preferred white dolls to black ones, and to Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, supported the “damage hypothesis.” This interpretation used the language of victimhood as the appropriate lenses for addressing race. While this language may have been effective in the short-run in breaking down legal segregation, it was also effective in reinforcing the languages of condescension and inequality (white people were not considered to be damaged by their own violence, of course). The white majority could treat blacks as an object of pity, an approach that did little to challenge their own self-understanding.¹⁶ This disempowering condescension can be seen in the structure of many “progressive” literary works, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), in which black characters are depicted only from the point of view of whites, only as objects of pity, rather than as agents whose thought and words matter.

The second feature—found in the *Brown* decision and in Myrdal’s famous study—was the oblivion of African American writings and institutions. Myrdal’s work (1995) established a pattern of not just disregarding African American voices but of seeing their culture as “a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture” (928-29). In this reading, black people were so deformed by the violence inflicted on them that they were incapable of creating a nourishing culture or recognizing their own best interests.

¹⁵ In May 1836, the House passed a resolution that automatically ‘tabled’ or postponed action on all petitions relating to slavery without hearing them. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1800-1850/The-House-of-Representatives-instituted-the-%E2%80%99Cgag-rule%E2%80%99D/>.

¹⁶ See Darryl Scott 1997, which looks at the damage imagery used by both racists and antiracists.

The third feature of the hegemonic American imagination was interest convergence, whereby blacks gained social justice primarily when their interests converged with the interests of the white majority.¹⁷ As is well-known, at the time of *Brown* the United States' racial practices were a source of embarrassment in the Cold War because they undermined America's image abroad.¹⁸ These forces joined the first two elements previously mentioned to push the court and other elites to support desegregation without recognizing African Americans' autonomy or their voices. Interest convergence was not just a sociological phenomenon of domination; it became part of a discursive form that systematically silenced other forms of writing and living.

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The fourth feature was the way the American legal system blocked, and still blocks, out historical and structural questions. Earl Warren's instruction to the justices in *Brown* to be non-accusatory was turned into an interpretive principle in *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education*. Justice Lewis Powell acknowledges the presence of longstanding systemic racism, only to dismiss it: "No one doubts that there has been serious discrimination in this country. As basis for imposing discriminatory legal remedies that work against innocent people, societal discrimination is insufficient and over-expansive. In absence of particularized findings [of discrimination], a court could uphold remedies that are ageless in their reach into the past and times in their ability to affect the future" (*Wygant* 1986, 276). Moreover, the Court recognizes only intentional acts by agents and their consequences.²⁰ Since this complex network of

¹⁷ The classic article is Derrick Bell 1980,

¹⁸ President Eisenhower said in a 1957 televised address that the Cold War struggle and international opinion compelled him to send federal troops to Little Rock: "At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world. Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations" (quoted in Osgood 2006, 134).

¹⁹ As Robert Dahl says: "The policy views dominant on the Court are never for long out of line with the policy views dominant among the lawmaking majorities of the United States" (quoted in Rosen 2006, 6).

²⁰ As Riva Siegel (1998) says, "As Fifth Circuit reads Supreme Court case law, affirmative action can be employed for the purpose of remedying the 'present effects of past discrimination' but not for the purpose of 'remedying the present effects of societal discrimination'" [i.e. systemic]. Moreover, "the state's use of remedial racial classification is limited to rectifying the harm caused by a specific state actor." (43-4). In *Washington v. Davis*, decided in 1976, the US

imaginaries assumed hegemonic status in the public mind, we can see why no simple argument invoking a principle of equality or justice would be capable of creating awareness of patterns of subordination; the preliminary to any hope for change.

In the following section I will examine how Ralph Ellison challenged the above imaginaries—which he did not with a discursive argument focusing on principles in the manner of the courts or by using social scientific research. Instead, he took aim at the structures of the background structures that informed these disciplines and the public sphere.

RALPH ELLISON’S MOBILIZATION OF IMAGINARIES

Ellison is particularly relevant to my argument because he addresses directly the division between the languages of the mainstream public sphere and the languages of the African American community. Ellison brings into relief the transsubjective structures of the social imaginary, structures that cannot be narrowed to the prejudices of a group. Rather, they are constitutive of the world in which most whites and blacks lived at the time. As legal philosopher Catharine MacKinnon (1996) says, “Dominant narratives are not called stories. They are called reality” (235). Whites remain largely oblivious of these structures, while blacks remain painfully aware of them, and, at the same time, try to carve out an alternative space of existence.²¹

Moreover, Ellison saw that narratives were not only constituting reality, but also serving as normative justifications for black subordination, such as the narrative of D.W. Griffith’s blockbuster film, *Birth of Nation*:

The anti-Negro images of Hollywood films were (and are) acceptable because of the existence throughout the United States of an audience obsessed with an inner psychological need to view Negroes as less than men. Thus, psychologically and

Supreme Court ruled that laws or government policies that disproportionately harm Black people do not violate the Constitution’s equal protection clause unless the plaintiff can show that a state actor *intended* to discriminate, and that this intention, in turn, caused a discriminatory result. Discriminatory intent is very difficult to prove.

²¹ See Linda Martin Alcoff 2007 and Charles Mills 2007, who explore the epistemology of racial ignorance.

ethically, these negative images constitute justifications for all these acts, legal, emotional, economic, and political, which we label Jim Crow.” (Ellison 1995, 305)

Ellison’s writings argue against the caricatures produced by Myrdal and other elites, who saw in black culture only a backward set of destructive practices that people should be glad to leave behind when they assimilate. In his review of Myrdal’s *America Dilemma*, Ellison (1995) acknowledges that “Negro” culture has some undesirable features, but insists “[t]here is much of great value and richness, which because it has been secreted by living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard” (340).

Ellison implicitly addressed the risk of reinforcing Myrdal’s “damage hypothesis” by focusing only on the misery of African American life. He cites this passage from Wright’s *Black Boy*: “Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I know that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it” (quoted in Ellison 1995, 166). He then comments that his “sense of Negro life was quite different,” regretting “that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means of discovering the forms of American Negro humanity” (Ellison 1995, 166, 167). Ellison wanted to foreground the creativity of African American culture in response to white oppression.

For even as his life toughens the Negro, even as it brutalizes him, sensitizes him...it conditions him to deal with life and himself... He is no mere product of his sociological predicament. He is a product of the interaction between his racial predicament, his individual will and the broader American cultural freedom in which he finds his ambiguous existence.” (Ellison, 1995, 160)²²

²² Ellison (1995) says: “In *Native Son* Wright began with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro’s reality is more important than what Negroes themselves knew it to be” (114). I don’t think it is fair to Wright’s achievement to reduce his texts to a Marxist hermeneutics of suspicion, but the comment shows how deeply he contested Wright’s presentation of African Americans’ sense of reality.

For Ellison, neither white nor black culture can be affirmed in an unqualified way, for they are both damaged and imbricated in ways that go unnoticed: “What is needed in our country is not an exchange of pathologies but a change in the basis of society. This is a job which both Negroes and whites must perform together. In Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole” (Ellison 1995, 340). Indeed, Ellison insists that white culture has internalized without acknowledgement its borrowings from African American culture: “Whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black” (583). Hence, American society needs neither mere integration of bodies into the same public spaces nor gathering statistics about inequality, but a transformation of the social imaginary into which whites and blacks are integrated. He takes on this project in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952).

In this text, Ellison has his young black protagonist inhabit different areas of the dominant imaginary so as to display the way it structures experience; however, he also needs a voice that can show how the protagonist becomes aware of these patterns and is able to revise them and “signify” on them, drawing on sources from African American folklore, T.S. Eliot, and others.²³ Ellison achieves this by having the protagonist himself tell the story retrospectively so that there will be two perspectives on which to draw: the perspective of the naïve self as it goes through the different parts of the imaginary, and the perspective of the narrating self, the self that has already been through the sequence of experiences. Thus, the novel can be read as a search for a site from which to tell the story.

In order to establish a distinctive separation between the two voices, Ellison (1981) begins with a long Prologue spoken by the mature experienced self before beginning his chronological account, in which the perspective of the younger self takes the lead. In the Prologue, the narrator tells a fable of recognition, in which he is attacked by someone who does not see him, but only the aggressor’s own projection. This

²³ Henry Louis Gates traces this tradition of “signifying” in *The Signifying Monkey*. See also Ellison’s essay (1995) on folklore “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (100-12).

initiates a drama of recognition, not just between Invisible Man and his different interlocutors, but between text and reader. In the first pages of the novel, we can read: “People refuse to see me . . . When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (3). The text deliberately disorients the reader, playing off the slave narrative, *Notes from Underground*, Richard Wright, and jazz traditions. The narrator’s perplexing, taunting style makes the reader aware that his/her habitual orientation to the world will not work here and serves as a warning that readers will simply repeat the action of the assailant and commit a hermeneutic mugging of the text if they are not prepared to give up the assumption of a shared linguistic world and the identity that comes with it. During the course of his journey, the narrator has had to give up his own self-understanding, and it takes him the entire novel to learn that he is invisible. Readers should expect a similar wrenching experience, for the novel is not just speaking to them; it is speaking for them: “Who knows,” says the narrator, “but that on lower frequencies I speak for you” (568).

In the first chapter, Ellison puts his character in a scene that brings out the brutality of the structure of recognition for the “good black boy.” Invisible Man, valedictorian of his high school class, goes to get his diploma and a college scholarship from the white elite, but first he must fight blindfolded against other black men. While the narrator and the reader understand the degrading relationship between Invisible Man and his audience, the young self does not. “The harder we fought, the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability?” (24). The free indirect discourse here captures the voice of the naïve young man as he seeks recognition from the powerful white men surrounding the boxing ring. The speech that the young man gives after the fight is taken verbatim from Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition” Speech (1895), a speech that was a paradigm for black success, urging young men to accept the political and social status quo and do their best with what was given to them. At this point, Invisible Man sees no other path forward, and will continue to seek recognition from different authority figures, black and white.

Ellison (1981) describes the way he brings the reader into the imaginative structures that link the text and the world, and then excavates them: “I could not violate the reader’s sense of reality, his sense of the way things were done, at least on the surface. My task would be to give him the surface and then try to take him into the internalities, take him below the level of racial structuring” (532). To do this, Ellison did not seek to represent historical events or people, but to draw out the structures of the imaginary that enable us to understand those particulars: “I didn’t want to describe an existing Socialist or Communist or Marxist political group, primarily because it would have allowed the reader to escape confronting certain political patterns, patterns which still exist” (Ellison 1995, 538). Ellison claims that “[the writer’s] task then is always to challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of the few—and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth” (154). Ellison understood his novel as an argument, not just against Griffith and Myrdal, but also against black writers, such as Washington and Wright. As he says during his debate with Wright: “All novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms of each other” (Ellison 1995, 165).²⁴ Despite his critique of American racism, Ellison remained optimistic about the possibilities for African Americans and American politics, and the election of Barack Obama in 2008 can be seen as a justification for such optimism. However, if we look at Obama’s writings on race, we will see the structures of *Brown* holding him back, structures that Coates brings into stark relief.

²⁴ For his critique of Wright, see “The World and the Jug,” (Ellison 1995, 155-88). He dramatizes this critique in the writing of his novel *Invisible Man*, whose title plays off Wright’s *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. The standard reading of Ellison sees him as affirming American ideals and thus missing his understanding of normativity as structured into the world. For instance, Richard King (2004) says that Ellison “sounded much like Myrdal’s American creed the ‘moral imperative ... implicit in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights’ that stood at the center of the ‘consciousness and conscience’ in classic American writers” (294).

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE RACIAL IMAGINARY IN POST RACIAL AMERICA

After the election of Barack Obama, many people started to speak of a postracial America, of an America that had somehow put its racial struggles behind. However, if we look at the way Obama responded to criticism of his minister's rhetoric during the 2008 presidential campaign in his "A More Perfect Union" speech, we find a brilliant rhetorical performance that did not stray far from the limits of acceptability laid down by *Brown*. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* has been looked on as a direct reply to Obama's discussions of race, and it lays to rest any fantasy that America has become post racial²⁵ (of course, Coates is not seeking election to a powerful political position and therefore does not have the same strictures on his speech as would a prominent official). Coates makes this challenge not by a competing argument organized around principles of justice or equality; nor does he follow Ellison's model, for he does not believe, as Ellison does, in the power of language to transform American imaginaries. His goal is to demolish the idea that the United States has overcome its past and now treats the lives of African Americans equally. We can see this false triumphalism when people respond to the cry of "black lives matter" with "all lives matter," for they are simply repeating the legacy of *Brown* by offering an abstract normative principle while refusing to acknowledge the forceful normative structuring of American life.

Drawing on the model of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Coates's text is in the form of a letter to his son; a testimonial, in which he warns the young man about what to expect from society.²⁶ The dominant narrative for understanding the structure of American normative reality at any given moment of history is to think of it as part of a progressive narrative, in which "the basic ideals of America and American people are

²⁵ See John Paul Rollert (2015), "Between the World and Me: Empathy is a Privilege." *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2015. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/10/reading-coates-thinking-obama/>; and Jeremy Mayer, "Reading Coates, Thinking Obama," *The American Interest* 11, no. 2 (October 10, 2015) <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/10/reading-coates-thinking-obama/>, for the connection between Coates and Obama, who is never mentioned by name in *Between the World and Me*.

²⁶ Coates's clear connection to Baldwin has raised the question of whether Coates has yet attained a stature that merits such a comparison. See Michael Eric Dyson's essay for a discussion of the Baldwin-Coates connection. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/james-baldwin-tanehisi-coates/399413/>

good, even if Americans sometimes act unjustly” (Balkin 2001, 5). Such a view reduces American history to a series of acts that aspire to high ideals without quite achieving them. This account ignores the way American history can be read as the continuous reworking of the social imaginary, an imaginary that is both ontological and normative, an imaginary that *is* the realization of American ideals as understood by those controlling the dominant account. Coates (2015) tells his son: “The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are” (99).

To Coates, these structures are the tissues of rationalization encasing the subjectivity of a privileged group that he calls “the Dreamers,” alluding to the subtitle of Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope: Reclaiming the American Dream*, as well as to other versions of this dream. The dreamers are a self-contained community that does not think of itself as a community, but whose inhabitants live in a distinctive normative universe. Because their privilege, empowerment, and normative insularity are invisible to them, this universe is the site for pronouncements about “justice” and “equality” for society as a whole.

To capture the self-understanding of the Dreamers, Coates (2015) cites Solzhenitsyn’s well-known remark that “to do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he’s doing is good, or else that it’s a well-considered act in conformity with natural law” (98). Coates then comments: “This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works” (ibid.). He concludes this section with the quotation I used as an epigraph, in which he links the possession of the dream to the long-practiced indifference to the dispossession of black lives.

Constitutional principles cannot root out inequality, for it is woven into the language of the Dreamers’ world. No thought experiment can lift a Dreamer out of this world, or bring an outsider in. A Dreamer cannot empathize with the kind of life Coates is describing because the Dreamer needs a new framework for understanding normativity so that the “facts” of a nondreamer’s life can appear. Coates is not appealing to a politics of identity, but thematizing the ontological force of the reigning normative

order. Thus, when he speaks of police violence and of talk on sensitivity training, he is dismissive because such localizations of the problem miss the point. It is not individual police officers who commit the crimes, but the American people locked in the Dreamer imaginary:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies—the sprawling carceral state, the random detentions of black people, the torture of suspects—are the product of democratic will. (79)

His language is at once descriptive and normative. Coates is being “realistic,” but he is not presenting sociological facts and then arguing for why these facts indicate injustice. Rather, he is striking at the ontology that generates facts and norms and therefore opening a space for new historical and sociological questions that can follow up on his insights. He wants to make clear that the dominant collective imagination of most whites and many blacks provides a framework in which criminality is understood, a framework that is not shared by minorities. He calls this framework the product of “will,” in order to insist on the collective intentionality at work here. Coates shows how the invocation of principles enables the Dreamers to assume that they have access to all the normatively relevant aspects of the world and to rationalizing their contented inaction.²⁷ That is why we need a normative problematic that does not simply assess facts currently available through the dominant imaginary, but one that can bring new normatively relevant facts into view. Instead of “realizing” or “correctly applying” a principle, we need to transition from one package of normative imaginaries to another.²⁸

²⁷ I have deliberately avoided the phrase “white supremacy” because it is ambiguous and provides more heat than light. I’ve addressed features of hegemonic discourse instead.

²⁸ This kind of argument was introduced by Hegel, but we can find a clear illustration of transitional arguments from one framework to another in Stanley Fish’s Introduction to *Is There a Text in This Class* (1982). In this piece, he recounts his journey from New Critic (meaning in the object) to Reader Response Critic (meaning in the subject) to Interpretive Community critic (or Spirit, in Hegel’s terminology).

TRANSITIONAL ARGUMENT AND TRANSSUBJECTIVE STRUCTURING

One of the key stumbling blocks to the understanding of the transitional argument on race has been the idea of transsubjective structures, for this notion does not fit easily into traditional ideas of normativity and agency. We can see three such reactions in response to the structural claims in Coates's book and in other research. In his review of Coates, Chatterton Williams (2015) notes: "It's not just black kids in tough neighborhoods who are hapless automatons" (16). Williams is missing the point. Of course, people have agency, but what everyone has been overlooking are the structural properties of their world that shape that agency. Coates' text can reveal this truth not by fidelity to particularities, but by bringing into relief what is surreptitiously shaping our world.

A second common objection to Coates's argument is that his reading of history ignores the "good acts and actors" in American history. *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2015) says, "I think you distort American history. This country, like each person in it, is a mixture of glory and shame. There's a Lincoln for every Jefferson Davis and a Harlem Children's Zone for every K.K.K.—and usually vastly more than one. Violence is embedded in America, but it is not close to the totality of America" (Brooks). This is precisely the kind of reading that ignores structural domination through the imaginary by seeking to pull out isolated and idealized actions for a moral scorecard, as if these examples somehow refuted claims about the collective structures of meaning operant at the time.²⁹

A third objection, what could be called the "Obama objection," minimizes the structural divisions among linguistic communities and proposes an empathetic leap between individuals. Defining it succinctly as a successful attempt to "stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes," Obama (2006) regards empathy not as an exceptional gesture, but as an organizing principle for ethical behavior, and even a preferred way of being altogether (66). By cultivating our capacity for empathy, he

²⁹ Bret Stephens makes the same kind of argument against the 1619 Project.

says, we are forced beyond “our limited vision,” making it possible to overcome what divides us, allowing us to “find common ground” even in the face of our sharpest disagreements. Obama makes empathy “the heart of my moral code” and “a guidepost for my politics” in *The Audacity of Hope* and in “A More Perfect Union” (66, 67). The model of empathy fits well with thinking of normativity as the application of constitutional principles since it is organized around equal respect and concern for atomistic individuals, an account that is unhinged from the language in which individuals are embedded. But individuals cannot leap out of these collective structures by simply exercising their imaginations. They must find a way to articulate some critical distance, an articulation that demands that they change who they are. Ellison’s work provides a model for some of this critical work, since he shows how to argue through social imaginaries rather than through principles alone. However, an isolated literary work, like any individual utterance, may change some individual minds but will have difficulty changing social imaginaries, which are held in place by institutional inertia and the power and money that goes with it. It’s hard to imagine that in our current political climate the American Congress would ever authorize a national interrogation of history, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.³⁰ For some Americans, no such questioning is necessary because the racism of the past has already been “fixed” and hence has no relevance in the present. To say otherwise, in their view, is to play identity politics and demand special treatment. Nonetheless, the division of the American public sphere is no longer accepted as unchangeable, and people are confronting it from different disciplines. Writers, legal theorists, historians, philosophers, and sociologists are all taking on the complicity between formal equality and a dominating imaginary. Breaking down the protean forms of this relationship will not be easy but conceiving of normativity through the imaginary as well as principles gives us new ways to display, rather than occlude, the processes through which the meanings of the world are produced and justified.

³⁰ Andrew Valls 2003 and Martha Minow 1999.

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