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One More River to Cross: The Therapeutic Rhetoric of Race in the Post-Civil Rights Era

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One More River to Cross: The Therapeutic Rhetoric of Race
in the Post-Civil Rights Era

by

Nigel I. Malcolm

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my father, Lorenzo Malcolm, for being someone I can admire.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation grows out of many years of study under the tutelage of the finest teachers and scholars I've had the privilege to know. My advisor, Dr. Carol Jablonski, encouraged me to embark on this project and always stood as a lighthouse guiding me to a distant shore. She gave willingly and abundantly of her time, even while away pursuing her own studies. My appreciation and admiration for her know no bounds. My committee members, Dr. David Payne, Dr. Navita James, and Dr. Dan Bagley are a dream team among academics. Dr. David Payne gave me his insights into therapeutic rhetoric, insights that provided a strong foundation on which to build this study. I hope that this study opens the door to an even greater appreciation of the possibilities inherent in his work. Dr. Navita James taught me more about race, class, and gender than I ever knew before. I hope one day to have as great an understanding of these issues as she possesses, and I thank her for sharing her understanding with me. Dr. Dan Bagley brought a synergistic influence to the group that both sparked creativity and expanded my imagination. I hope that each day I will continue to see possibilities rather than limitations as a result of his teaching.

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ABSTRACT

The rhetoric of W.E.B. Du Bois contributed both to a sense of group failure among blacks and a sense of individual failure. Du Bois also created a need to explain the reasons for the failure of the group, as well as that of individuals within the group, specifically those within a segment of the black population deemed the talented tenth. Today the talented tenth is more generally spoken of as those occupying positions within the black middle class. Explanations for failure among blacks as a group are generally of two kinds. The first posits that the failure blacks experience as a group is due to the failure of the talented tenth to provide adequate leadership of the race. The second posits that the failure blacks experience as a group is due to the failure of American society to commit itself to establishing not only legal equality but also social, political, and economic equality for all Americans.

Members of the talented tenth, not understanding that the root of the problem lies with the impossible situation Du Bois placed them in as saviors of the race begin to attribute perceived failures among blacks to American society. Instead of questioning Du Bois's goal and the possibility for complete 'racial uplift,' members of the talented tenth begin to question American society's commitment to realize the goals of the civil rights

movement. Rather than optimism, one finds pessimism among blacks in the post-civil rights era.

I examine Shelby Steele, Derrick Bell, and Randall Robinson's texts as rhetorical discourses that respond to the notion of a debt owed to the race, and evidence a sense of group failure among blacks. I illustrate how David Payne's topoi of therapeutic rhetoric provide a context for understanding not only the arguments these authors make about the nature of failure among blacks, but also the possible solutions these authors pose as avenues for consolation and/or compensation.

Chapter One

Introduction

W.E. B. Du Bois's 1903 essay entitled "The Talented Tenth" provides a foundation for a sense of group failure among blacks. Du Bois argued for an intellectual aristocracy that would elevate the position of blacks in America. Du Bois looked not to the masses for social uplift but to the elite for stable stewardship of a race aspiring to take its place in the Western world. He believed that a tenth of individuals within the black community had the ability to lift the race from its position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Du Bois emphasized the role black men would play in the elevation of the race. He argued, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men" (*Writings* 842). It was his belief that "the talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground" (847). The talented tenth's role was not only to provide leadership but also to separate the wheat from the chaff within the black community. They were obligated to reverse the effects of slavery and in so doing justify their own place at the top of the social hierarchy among blacks.

Du Bois held contempt for the idea that leadership arose from the bottom of the social hierarchy. He refuted arguments to the contrary in stating, "Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never, it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters" (847). The talented tenth's place at the helm was unquestionable for Du Bois. All others had failed to steer a proper course. He noted that history supported his views because for "two hundred and fifty

years that black serf toiled at the plow and yet that toiling was in vain” (846). Instead of finding hope in the many, Du Bois found it in those like himself, college educated men. Yet Du Bois observed, “It is safe to say that the Negro has not one-tenth his quota in college studies” (858). For Du Bois, white society served as an example of what blacks were denied because of slavery. The failure of blacks to educate themselves and establish a cadre of leaders who would make blacks as a group the equal of other races was evident for Du Bois.

Du Bois’s “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” in 1948 not only revisited his advocacy of the talented tenth but also contributed to a sense of individual failure among blacks. In this speech, Du Bois spoke of his own naiveté regarding individuals within the talented tenth. He admitted, “I assumed that with knowledge, sacrifice would automatically follow. In my youth and idealism, I did not realize that selfishness is even more natural than sacrifice” (In *The Future of the Race* 161). He went on to speak of the ways in which the talented tenth might use the plight of the Negro people to their own advantage. Individuals would use the Negro masses as leverage to pursue their main objective of uplifting themselves. He stated, “My Talented Tenth, I could see, might result in a sort of interracial free-for-all, with the devil taking the hindmost and the foremost taking anything they could lay hands on” (162). Individuals within the talented tenth had failed to live up to Du Bois’s expectations; therefore he sought to re-write the script he authored in his youth.

Du Bois reconceived his notion of the talented tenth focusing particularly on what he termed the guiding hundredth. He observed, “This would be an actual numerical one hundredth of our race: a body large enough really to represent all. Yet small enough to

insure exceptional quality; if screened for intelligent and disinterested planning" (174). Du Bois's distrust of the masses initially led him to place his faith in ten percent of the Negro population. Now the failure of his chosen few led him to seek solace in ten percent of the talented tenth, or one percent of all Negroes.

Du Bois also created a need to explain the reasons for the failure of the group as well as that of individuals within the group, specifically those within a segment of the black population deemed the talented tenth. Today this group is more generally spoken of as those occupying positions within the black middle class. Middle class blacks, trapped within Du Bois's rhetorical legacy, find it necessary to offer up explanations for group failure. Explanations for failure among blacks as a group are generally of two kinds. The first posits that the failure blacks experience as a group is due to the failure of the talented tenth to provide adequate leadership of the race. The second posits that the failure blacks experience as a group is due to the failure of American society to commit itself to establishing not only legal equality but also social, political, and economic equality for all Americans. The first of these two positions is demonstrated in the work of Carter G. Woodson.

Carter G. Woodson in *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) put forth his own response to the race problem and the ability of the talented tenth to solve it. Woodson agreed with Du Bois that slavery had done great harm to the Negro people, halting their advancement and keeping them in a state of physical and mental bondage. He argued that the shackles of slavery were not taken off following the Civil War as the amendments to the Constitution suggest. Rather oppression took on new forms as both state and federal laws ensured continued discrimination against blacks. According to

Woodson, slavery evolved into segregation “which is the most far-reaching development in the history of the Negro since the enslavement of the race. In fact, it is a sequel to slavery” (102).

Woodson emphasized mental slavery in his work, arguing that an inability to think for themselves crippled blacks more than anything else. Blacks were educated to imitate whites and their ideals to the extent that the talented tenth of which Du Bois wrote was of little value to the masses of black people. One did not find in Woodson the faith that Du Bois initially placed in whites. To the contrary, Woodson displayed a profound skepticism about the motives of whites in ‘educating’ blacks. He argued, “The Negro’s mind has been all but perfectly enslaved in that he has been trained to think what is desired of him” (24). Furthermore, “It is an injustice to the Negro, however, to mis-educate him and suffer his manners to be corrupted from infancy unto old age and then blame him for making mistakes which such guidance necessitates” (125). Woodson believed that for blacks to be truly free they must come to understand their own history and in doing so they would come to understand themselves. He wrote that, “Instead of cramming the Negro’s mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable” (151).

Woodson saw the talented tenth and their leadership of blacks as counter-productive. They led blacks astray and engaged in politics as usual for their own benefit. He argued, “The Negro should be a figure in politics, not a tool for politicians” (182) and called for a level of political sophistication that went beyond party politics. In his view, “Any people who will vote the same ways for three generations without thereby

obtaining results ought to be ignored and disenfranchised” (183). “The Negro should use his vote rather than give it away to reward the dead for some favors done in the distant past” (183). Yet this is precisely what the black leadership in this country did, and in many ways still does.

In *Race Matters* (1993) contemporary writer Cornel West also offered a critique of the talented tenth. West observed, “Most present-day black political leaders appear too hungry for status to be angry, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in advancement to be defiant” (38). He lamented that as a group, “The present-day black middle class is not simply different than its predecessors—it is more deficient and to put it strongly, more decadent” (36). The talented tenth and the guiding one hundredth fail to provide solutions to the problems of most blacks. Instead, they’ve grown more adept at looking after their own interests.

Du Bois’s rhetoric leads members of the talented tenth to become pessimistic with regard to the ability of blacks as a group to live the American dream. It engenders a questioning of American society’s commitment to equality for all. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West wrote of the contemporary state of black America and in particular the status of the talented tenth in their book, *The Future of the Race* (1996). Gates borrowed a line from Dickens in noting, “If it is the best of times for the black middle class—the heirs of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth”—it is the worst of times for an equally large segment of our community” (xii). He continued, “We, the members of Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, must accept our historical responsibility and live King’s credo that none of us is free until each of us is free” (xvii). Yet despite his appeals to both Du Bois and King, Gates was unable to reconcile the Darwinian state of affairs implicit in the creation

of a talented tenth; that some blacks would succeed while others would fail. West, however, came closer to this observation in stating:

Du Bois's heralded Talented Tenth will by and large procure a stronger foothold in the well-paid professional managerial sectors of the global economy and more and more will become intoxicated with the felicities of a parvenu bourgeois existence. . . . The significant secondary efforts of the black Talented Tenth alone in the twenty-first century will be woefully inadequate and thoroughly frustrating As this Talented Tenth comes to be viewed more and more with disdain and disgust by the black working poor and very poor, not only class envy but class hatred in black America will escalate--in the midst of a more isolated and insulated black America. This will deepen the identity crisis of the black Talented Tenth--a crisis of survivor's guilt and cultural rootlessness We will see anguish and hedonism intensify among much of the Talented Tenth. (110)

He concluded, "In the end, Du Bois's Enlightenment worldview, Victorian strategies, and American optimism failed him" (111). A similar statement could be made about West, who offers little more than a jeremiad for those who care to listen.

Du Bois's rhetoric eventually led members of the talented tenth to reassess slavery and segregation's hold over the prospects for advancement among blacks. If the efforts of the talented tenth are not enough to overcome the obstacles of slavery, and even segregation, then some are led to believe that failure among blacks is predetermined. The locus of the problem according to Du Bois was slavery, and many contemporary scholars echo his viewpoint. Yet the failure of the talented tenth to uplift the race has caused some to argue in favor of reparations as a solution to the problem of the color line. Boris

Bittker in *The Case for Black Reparations* (1973) examined the issue of reparations for African Americans from a legal standpoint. What makes Bittker's work interesting is his narrow focus on reparations for Jim Crow segregation rather than the usual emphasis on slavery. He observed, "This preoccupation with slavery, in my opinion, has stultified the discussion of black reparations by implying that the only issue is the correction of an ancient injustice, thus inviting the reply that the wrongs were committed by persons long since dead . . ." (9). Bittker did not resolve the reparations issue in his work, but instead hoped to stimulate a dialogue on the subject. Yet as Randall Robinson noted in *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000) nearly thirty years later, Bittker was unsuccessful in his attempt to stimulate debate among his contemporaries (203).

The call for a discussion of reparations took on new life in the early 1990s as it moved from marginal to mainstream among blacks. Randall Robinson brought the discussion into the twenty-first century with the publication of *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. Robinson took as his subject America's black holocaust and its ramifications in contemporary America. Some might balk at the use of the term holocaust, but Robinson did not. He wrote that "Anywhere from ten to twenty-five million Africans died in slave ships en route from Africa to the Americas" (33). Many more died as a result of slavery, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow segregation. For those who survived, their lives were often stripped of meaning, or devoid of the potential for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The historical and present victimization of blacks was a primary focus of Robinson's work. He referred to blacks as victims noting that "No race, no ethnic or religious group, has suffered so much or so long a span as blacks have and still do . . ."

(8). According to Robinson, black achievement on both the African and the North American continent is denied. For that reason, he sought to address the absence of African and African-American history in America, and the ramifications of this void on the black psyche. “To set afoot a new and whole black woman and man, we must first tell the victims what happened to them—before and after America was new” (7).

Robinson argued that it is necessary for blacks to realize their status as victims if they are to be made whole again. Still, this realization is only a starting point in the discussion of reparations. Blacks must also make whites acknowledge that they benefit from the racial injustice of both the past and the present. Robinson aimed to give both blacks and whites an understanding of the victimization that blacks endured in the past, and many still endure in the present. His emphasis on victimization harkens back to Du Bois’s belief that the poor status of blacks as a group is directly related to the institution of slavery and its effects on black life.

The institution of slavery ended at the close of the civil war, yet the practice of racism continued during segregation. In the post-civil rights era some scholars question whether racism’s hold over American life can ever be broken. Derrick Bell argued in his work *And We Are Not Saved* (1987) that racism in American society is permanent. Bell argued throughout his work that racism was fundamental to both the establishment and the maintenance of American society. He saw racism as a permanent feature that could not be overcome. The struggles of the civil rights movement brought some advancement for blacks but did not bring substantial equality with whites. Civil rights legislation brought legal equality to blacks but did little to bridge the economic divide that separates them from whites. Yet the failure of the civil rights movement to create economic parity

is often seen as proof that blacks lack initiative rather than the entrenched nature of inequality in American society. This leads some scholars to question whether Americans are truly committed to establishing equality or simply wish to eliminate only the grossest vestiges of discrimination.

The true aims of Americans are placed under the microscope in Joe Feagin's *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations* (2000). Feagin sought to make a case for reparations through an exhaustive account of America's racist practices. It is the historical grounding of his work that sets it apart from other texts. Bittker's work examined the constitutionality of reparations, searching for legal precedent that might provide a foundation for a case. Robinson utilized a narrative approach, centering his argument primarily in the existential effects of racism on black life. Feagin's work, in contrast, examined history in painstaking detail from the early colonial days to the present. Much emphasis is also given to the founding father's creation of what Feagin believed to be a racist constitution. According to Feagin:

It appears that few whites have ever envisaged for the United States the possibility of a truly just and egalitarian democracy grounded solely in respect for human rights. Certainly the founders did not conceive of such a possibility even in the long run. (266)

Feagin concluded that "the base of the U.S. system must be replaced if systemic racism is to be removed, just as the sinking foundation of a dilapidated building must be replaced" (258). Yet this conclusion is subject to debate, as well as its premise that systemic racism is still a fundamental part of the U.S. society.

While others have explored the determinative effects of racism on black advancement, I shall concern myself with an influential segment of the black population. I contend that members of the talented tenth, not understanding that the root of the problem lies with the impossible situation Du Bois placed them in as saviors of the race, attribute the perceived failures of members of their race to American society. Instead of questioning Du Bois's goal and the possibility for complete 'racial uplift,' members of the talented tenth prefer to question American society's commitment to the goals of the civil rights movement. Rather than optimism, one finds pessimism among blacks in the post-civil rights era.

Du Bois's rhetorical legacy, his initial advocacy of a talented tenth, has led to a degenerative communication spiral of both accusation and denial that threatens the possibility for dialogue between blacks and whites regarding the issue of race. In order to better understand relations between blacks and whites, and what in the words of Randall Robinson "America owes to blacks," we must first examine the relationships blacks have with each other. What do blacks, as Du Bois and Robinson suggest "owe each other," and in what ways does this notion of debt contribute to a conversation among blacks centered on failure?

The notion that some blacks owe other blacks a debt underlies Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth. Members of the talented tenth are both leaders of the race, and debtors to the race. Yet the possibility that this debt can go unpaid means that both blacks as a group and individual members of the talented tenth can harbor a sense of failure. The failure of the many can be attributed to the failure of the few to uplift them. Yet why should members of the talented tenth have a sense of failure when if judging from

objective factors such as their level of education, income, and social status many appear successful?

I contend that the answer rests in the notion of debt which is fundamental to Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth. If as leaders of the race, members of the talented tenth are debtors to the race and responsible for its uplift, then the failure of the talented tenth to achieve the goal of racial uplift can generate a sense of failure for individuals within the group. This failure can be experienced as a personal one. Communication scholar David Payne's work on the therapeutic rhetoric of failure provides us with a way to better understand what is happening among blacks in this instance. Payne's framework for understanding failure posits the existence of two different types of individual failure: idealistic failures and materialistic failures. In the next section I will discuss this aspect of Payne's theory in relation to W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth.

The Rhetorical Study of Failure

Payne suggests that there are at least two types of failures that we deal with as individuals: idealistic failure and materialistic failure. Idealistic failure occurs "where the failure results from comparing oneself with unattained ideals" ("Communicating in the Context of Failure" 23) even when an individual may possess all the trappings of success in the eyes of others. The second type of failure, materialistic failure, occurs when "social judgments are made by comparing conditions against what they are supposed to be, what is 'normal,' not against an ideal, or even necessarily what conditions ought to be" (23). Individuals may place this judgment of failure on themselves or it may come from others. Payne believes that we can see ourselves as idealistic failures and also as

materialistic failures (24). Taking Payne's observations one step further, I suggest that individuals can see themselves as idealistic failures because of the materialistic failures of others. That is, people may see themselves as idealistic failures if they believe that they are responsible for other persons in our society who are deemed materialistic failures.

Payne notes the connection between idealistic and materialistic failure within an individual, yet I believe that a connection can also exist between the idealistic sense of failure within one individual and the materialistic failure of another. The idea of a talented tenth suggests and in some ways mandates that the talented tenth have a sense of idealistic failure so long as members of the 'underclass' are materialistic failures. Parents may see themselves as idealistic failures due to the materialistic failures of their children. Yet Du Bois's rhetorical magic was to make members of the talented tenth have a sense of idealistic failure for individuals they may have never even met.

The ability of Du Bois's rhetoric to reverberate over time in the hearts and minds of the talented tenth points to the persuasive power of his 'theory' of social uplift. According to Payne, "Given the function of theory to reflect and perpetuate certain values of individuals and/or the social order, the persuasive effects of theory should not be overlooked" (37). The idea of the talented tenth is a theory of how progress occurs within social groups in society. Yet this theory is accepted as doctrine among many individuals and therefore is seldom questioned. We understand that theories are meant to help us explain the world, and even to predict events, yet we sometimes forget that theories can be proved wrong. The power of Du Bois's theory is that many members of the talented tenth treat it as if it were a law of social uplift with as much explanatory power as any law found in physics or chemistry.

We need theories to help us make sense of the world and our place in it especially when things are not going as we believe they should be. According to Payne,

‘Problems’ of individual identity which are represented as a bifurcation of subjective and social realities are likely to be experienced as failures in the lives of individuals. When this happens, there are persuasive techniques which maintain or repair the failed identities and ‘psychological theory’ legitimates these procedures by relinking identity and world. (40)

Linking Payne’s observation with an understanding of Du Bois leads me to see a connection between personal identity and group identity in society. How I see myself as an individual may differ from how society views me as a member of a group. The ‘theory’ of the talented tenth calls for me to take my inner reality and through the force of action make objective reality correlate with it by changing the status of my group in society.

Du Bois’s theory of the talented tenth provides a sense of purpose in the world for not only Du Bois but for others as well. Payne writes, “when looked at as a remedy for failure in individual identity and failure in social identity (a condition described in both cases as a need for ‘integration’), images of collectivity which may appear to dissolve the individual are really a form of ‘super-individualism’ ” (44). The members of the talented tenth can in fact be seen as super-individuals. Du Bois pushes to create others like himself in the talented tenth. If as Payne suggests, “Personal disunity accompanies a lack of social support, and in this case the individual employed persuasion as a means of gaining social support so as to achieve personal unity” (46), then Du Bois’s confession in

The Souls of Black that his sense of self is divided may be a catalyst for the creation of the talented tenth. According to Du Bois:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (45)

Du Bois creates the idea of a talented tenth as a solution to the problem of the color line, which is experienced as a problem for blacks as individuals within a social group. The group initially provides a justification for Du Bois's own place in the world as much as he provides its members with the same sense of place.

What we are dealing with here is a problem of identity. Payne observes that "transforming one's identity is extremely difficult even when one is motivated by inner wishes and goals, and one cannot expect for it to be any easier to accomplish this miracle through purely verbal means without a life-context that makes such changes a matter of survival" (47). Surely for Du Bois and others the problem of the color line provides this context. If as Payne suggests, "when looking for the therapeutic function of rhetoric, one must consider the uses of persuasion which serve the self in a situation where an individual must adapt to conditions beyond his or her immediate control" (48), then for Du Bois segregation is the situation that calls forth a need for therapeutic rhetoric.

Rhetoric by itself, however, is not enough to create effective persuasion. According to Payne, "the enactment of persuasion itself is crucial to the event of

persuasion” (49). There is a need for the talented tenth to do something to make Du Bois’s persuasion effective. In “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” Du Bois notes in part the failure of his rhetoric due to a lack of action by members of the talented tenth. His repeated calls for a talented tenth, and subsequently a guiding one-hundredth (ten percent of the tenth), to do something are attempts to make the rhetoric believable. Other rhetors have reiterated Du Bois’s initial call over time in an attempt to make the rhetoric believable not only for others but for themselves as well. Faith in this case comes through works. Yet over time Du Bois lost faith in the idea of the talented tenth, and the group that embodied it, because he did not see enough works in others. Failure existed within the group despite Du Bois’s own best efforts to show himself to be both an example and an agent of change.

This has important implications for our understanding of how rhetoric actually works. Payne writes, “It is the technique of persuasion which is legitimated in actual experience, not the truth of the specific appeal, and this prepares the audience for future persuasion long after the specific issues have changed” (53). In relation to the rhetoric of the talented tenth, Payne’s point leads me to an interesting observation. Du Bois abandoned this ‘technique’ over time. Nevertheless, subsequent generations of the talented tenth, as members of the rhetorically constituted group, attempt to re-legitimate the ‘technique’ for themselves and others. Evidence of this is displayed in Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West’s book *The Future of the Race*. According to Gates and West:

A central part of our mission as teachers is to analyze, and reinterpret for our generation, the great writings of the black past, showing how they continue to speak to us today . . . We two 'grandchildren' of the group of intellectuals Du Bois

dubbed 'the Talented Tenth,' have sought to think through--and critique--Du Bois's challenge of commitment to service that, we deeply believe, the formally educated owe to those who have not benefited from the expanded opportunities afforded by the gains in civil rights and its concomitant, the programmatic attempt to fulfill America's commitment to equal opportunity, popularly known as 'affirmative action.' " (viii)

The power of Du Bois's rhetorical magic is evidenced in its reiterations through subsequent generations even after he abandoned the idea. Yet in order for the magic to work effectively on those who repeat the incantations a sign of some sort is necessary. Repeatedly, members of the talented tenth call on those within the group to do the necessary work of social uplift and in so doing give them a sign that the rhetoric is effective. Yet at the same time, repeated calls are themselves signs that a sense of failure exists both for blacks as a group, and for individuals within the talented tenth.

Relationship to Other Studies

The failure of blacks' rhetorical efforts has great importance not only for our understanding of race relations but also for our understanding of the possible limitations of rhetoric. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "all rhetorical theories make the ontological assumption that man is, by nature, subject to and capable of persuasion" (97). Nevertheless, some theorists such as Mark McPhail are beginning to question this assumption as well as doubt the possibility that humans are willing to overcome divisions of race that have economic and social implications.

Blacks have utilized many strategies in their attempt to create identification between Americans of different hues. Kirt Wilson notes the failure of blacks' attempts to use imitation as a means to gain equality following emancipation. While for whites the strategic use of imitation as a means to personal growth and societal advancement was an accepted and encouraged practice in society, the use of imitation among blacks met with less favorable results. While black rhetors such as Frederick Douglass encouraged blacks to imitate whites, whites began treating black imitation as a sign of inferiority noting that "blacks were skilled imitators, but their imitation did not alter their individual or collective subjectivity" (96). According to Wilson, "With slavery's abolition, the claim that blacks would evolve through imitation largely disappeared from public dialogues about race" (96). Whites saw "Black imitation as an instinctive, primitive habit that hindered rather than advanced the race's evolution" (97). In the end, whites' opinions about black imitation supported a belief that "Blacks should not receive equal civil rights, because they could not be assimilated into the dominant culture without destroying the very culture that absorbed them" (98). "To protect against this invasion, the nineteenth century's white majority chose to interpret black imitation as a sign of difference rather than similarity" (99) thus solidifying division rather than supporting blacks' attempts to create greater identification between the two groups.

Division rather than identification permeated American society for some time as whites resisted blacks' rhetorical efforts to gain equality. Waldo Braden critiques the rhetoric of civil rights opponents in Mississippi from 1954-1964 and notes that the state represented a "closed society" in which outside influences were resisted and moderation on the civil rights issue within Mississippi was suppressed. He notes that while the White

Citizens Council “spread fear and intimidation at the grassroots . . . in public statements . . . their leaders repeatedly avowed their abhorrence to lawlessness” (338). State officials maintained “a positive and unyielding stance” (344) that was also in line with the White Citizens Council’s resistance to civil rights (351). The “net result was to increase conformity, and of course, sacrifice for the system” (350).

While supporting states’ rights many rhetors have worked against the interest of the nation. Wayne Flynt critiques the discourse of various civil rights opponents noting the ways in which their rhetoric not only supported segregation but also undermined the democratic process. Like Aristotle, Flynt finds fault with persuaders who appeal to the audience’s emotions in an attempt to “short circuit the auditor’s normal critical facilities” (40). Flynt attributes the violence of the Birmingham crisis in 1963 to this rhetoric, observing that even when respected rhetors stated that they did not support direct violent action their critiques of integration and support of continued resistance to equality for blacks left audience members with little choice other than violence once other measures failed (53).

White resistance to black equality has been both overt and covert. The latter having just as much impact on blacks’ efforts to create identification as the former. Lisbeth Lipari critiques the ways in which studio executives at Columbia Pictures negated Lorraine Hansberry’s attempts to address the problem of the color line in the screenplay adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Lipari notes that Hansberry’s attempts to address issues of race in the screenplay in ways that went beyond those seen in the original play were covertly resisted as a means to sustain the “cultural production of whiteness” (81). Hansberry’s attempts to use film as a medium to speak truths through

pictures in ways her play could not were subverted. Although studio executives allowed the author to pen her screenplay, they carefully controlled which elements of her text would be filmed and the context under which an imagined white audience would interpret various scenes.

Even in instances in which blacks had the appearance of free speech one finds that in actuality not all black rhetors were given the opportunity to be heard. Garth Pauley notes differences of opinion within first, the civil rights movement, and within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), regarding appropriate responses to the rhetorical situation represented in the March on Washington specifically and also to racism generally. Pauley explains the context for John Lewis's address and how substantial changes in his speech were made prior to its delivery at the March on Washington.

The ability of SCLC and other civil rights organizations to alter the meaning and goals of Lewis's original text points to their ability to not only control the civil rights agenda but also weaken organizations such as SNCC by subverting the group's consensus decision-making model. The success of SCLC and other civil rights organization's efforts to thwart SNCC's attempt to publicly break with the established civil rights agenda illustrates the success of the talented tenth in re-asserting their dominance over those who support the masses as a source of leadership. Pauley's critique notes differences in ideals and goals. Pauley observes:

During its own time and in American memory, the March has stood as a shining symbol of unity and hope. For many it symbolizes what was right with the

American civil rights movement . . . To others, however, the March symbolized what was wrong with the civil rights movement. (337)

Pauley's critique illuminates divisions within the movement, the ways in which division was suppressed at the March on Washington, and alludes to the consequences that stemmed from this action.

Divisions suppressed at the March on Washington became evident in the rhetoric of young SNCC activists. Charles Stewart examines the ways in which Stokely Carmichael used rhetoric to push for change within the civil rights movement. Tired of the slow pace at which change was taking place, Carmichael brought new meaning to blacks' demands for 'Freedom Now' by imbuing younger blacks with a desire for 'Black Power'. According to Stewart:

The unrealistic dreams of perfect social orders that permeate social movement rhetoric heighten expectations and demands that remain only dreams after years of struggle and suffering. Frustration builds within new generations of activists who become increasingly disaffected with the social movement establishments which preach messages of patience and gradualism, the rhetorical staple of the institutional opposition. (430)

In short, what Stewart points out is that unrealistic dreams lead to interpretations of actions and situations as failures. It is this sense of failure that Carmichael articulated within the civil rights movement.

Stewart observes that a crucial sign of the fissure within the civil rights movement came in June 1966 when a small contingent of activists, including King and Carmichael, picked up James Meredith's march for freedom. Carmichael chose this moment to

announce SNCC's break with the SCLC and many other civil rights organizations. In introducing the civil rights movement and the world to the phrase "Black Power," Carmichael made plain the division civil rights leaders suppressed at the March on Washington. Celeste Condit and John Lucaites write that "the leaders of the civil rights movement quickly rejected both the sounds and principle of 'black power'. By the middle 1970s, however, the notion of 'black power' had been adopted by most activists, although it came to mean different things to different people" (194). Yet according to Robert Scott, Black Power rhetoric is itself a sign of the failure to achieve integration. Scott critiques Black Power rhetoric and argues that it is violent, justificatory of self-defense measures on the part of blacks, and points to the need for whites to accept its "fundamental justification as real" (97-98).

After over a century of rhetoric stretching from the pre-civil war era to the post-civil rights era, race still divides black and white Americans. Both presidents and protestors attempt to lay claim to the past as a means to sway audiences in the present. John Murphy explores the ways in which former President Clinton utilized the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a means to address a largely black audience on November 13, 1993. What is interesting to note is that Murphy points out the ways in which Clinton not only utilized King's rhetoric but also spoke in his voice as a means to rebuke blacks for "the moral anarchy that has engulfed the poorest [black] neighborhoods since King's death" (71). The perceived failure of blacks is addressed from other quarters as well. John Pauley II notes that at the Million Man March, Louis Farrakhan sought to call Americans, both black and white, to atone for their sins. Farrakhan told blacks that they are spiritually dead but that he has been sent to give them new life ("Reshaping Public

Persona” 525) if they will “purify” themselves and “accept the responsibility” to “call America and the world to repentance” (527).

The need for therapeutic cleansing, and resistance to it, are bound up in the debate over the issue of reparations. Jacqueline Bacon examines the ways in which advocates of reparations and opponents of reparations construct very different histories and favor contrasting methods of remembering the nation’s history, particularly when it involves oppression guilt and responsibility. Bacon utilizes Mark McPhail’s concepts of implicature and innocence to discuss the ways in which many blacks and whites diverge in their understanding of America’s past and its influence on the present.

One of the interesting points in Bacon’s article for the purposes of this research is when she notes the divisions that exist between blacks on the issue of reparations. She points out that Randall Robinson engages in a politics of implicature, while Shelby Steele assists whites in engaging in a politics of innocence. Robinson would agree with the idea that “if structural institutions take their power from and depend upon the society that creates them the responsibility for the harm they inflict is communal” (182). Steele, in contrast, would fall into the camp of “opponents of reparation [who] do not deny the sins in the nation’s past, but they suggest that they should be left behind” (182). Rhetorical scholars often focus on discussions and controversies that take place between blacks and whites as blacks protest for freedom and justice. What is not examined as frequently are the discussions blacks have with other blacks whether in person or via literature as to how blacks should pursue freedom and justice in America. Bacon contrasts Robinson’s rhetoric with that of opponents like David Horowitz. Yet would not a close reading of

Robinson's arguments in relation to Steele's arguments about black progress in American be equally fruitful to our understanding of race?

The field of rhetorical studies is often slow to recognize the potential benefits of studying blacks' rhetorical efforts. Enrique Rigsby notes the failure of rhetorical studies as a field, and rhetorical critics as practitioners to address African American discourse as a topic worthy of study on a continual basis. He observes the paucity of research until the late sixties and states, "It seems ironic that communication scholars seem to have discovered the rhetoric of African Americans only when angry black men and women took to the streets" (193). In the seventies to mid-eighties criticism of African American rhetoric "virtually disappeared from print, with only a few exceptions" (193). Rigsby calls for critics to make African American rhetoric "a recognized part of scholarship in our field, not merely an occasional outburst" (194). For Rigsby, "our disciplines lack of rhetorical studies emphasizing African American rhetoric is a curious footnote that raises interesting questions" (198). That Rigsby could note such failures in 1993 shows the lack of interest rhetorical critics have shown to what Du Bois deemed the twentieth-century's main issue: the problem of the color line. The extent to which critics in the twenty-first century will address this problem remains to be seen.

According to some critics the efforts of blacks to address the problem within the field of communication are unsuccessful to date. Ronald Jackson II notes not only the failure of African American theories of communication to be utilized in mainstream texts but also the failure of African Americans to become a more central part of the field. According to Jackson, "African American theory-building exists, but it is often treated as though it is invisible or insignificant" (50). Furthermore, "African American scholars

also have been rendered invisible” (53) in “the absence of any written mainstream valuation of African American theories and historical relevancies . . .” (51). For Jackson, it is very important to have “paradigms and approaches produced by, for, or about African Americans” (51) though the first two weigh heavily in his critique. He believes that members of a given ethnicity or gender are best suited to render “the most accurate accounts” (54) of their own condition. He concludes that “the major project confronting the African American intellectual is liberating the masses of ignorance and negative self-evolvement” (60).

One scholar who has attempted to liberate not only the masses but also the intelligentsia is Mark McPhail. Mark McPhail now questions the desire of rhetors to move away from a rhetoric of complicity towards a rhetoric of coherence. He writes:

Today, I am less sure than I was ten years ago that any form of rhetoric can remedy what W.E.B. Du Bois believed was the greatest misunderstanding of the twentieth century, the problem of the color line. Indeed, I am beginning to wonder if race can be adequately addressed as a rhetorical problem at all. If the solution to the problem of the color line is, as Golden and Rieke suggest, psychiatric instead of persuasive, then we must seriously reconsider if racism is a problem that can be remedied by rational discourse, or if it is a social pathology which expresses itself in a politics of innocence and an ideology of denial. (*The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited* 199)

In the end, race calls into question fundamental assumptions about the nature of rhetoric and those who both employ and are subject to it.

Preview of the Analysis

This study examines the ways in which Shelby Steele, Derrick Bell, and Randall Robinson use rhetoric to cope with actual or perceived failure in the post-civil rights era.

Two books from each author are analyzed:

Shelby Steele. (1991). *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*.

Shelby Steele. (1998). *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*.

Derrick Bell (1987). *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*.

Derrick Bell (1992). *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism in America*.

Randall Robinson. (2000). *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*.

Randall Robinson. (2003). *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other*.

Shelby Steele is a black conservative who believes that many blacks have failed to live up to their end of the social contract with whites. If Martin Luther King's Jr.'s dream has been deferred, then it is because African-Americans have sought to renegotiate the meaning of that dream in a way that runs contrary to the ideal of a colorblind society. Derrick Bell has given up on the dream. As a founder of critical race theory, he offers trenchant critiques of white American resistance to equality for African-Americans. Randall Robinson urges white Americans to live up to the dream by granting reparations for slavery and segregation to African-Americans. These authors represent an important range of thought on the African-American political spectrum.

Shelby Steele combines his degrees in political science, sociology, and English, to offer insight into various aspects of race relations in American society. He is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, and a contributor to many widely read publications. Along with his success as a writer, Steele also won an Emmy award in 1991 for his documentary, *Seven Days in Bensonhurst*.

Steele's *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, published in 1991, was a *New York Times* bestseller, and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, it is "One of the best books on race in America to appear in the past 25 years". In 2003 it was number 35,813 on Amazon.com's sales rank list, and number 41,120 on Barnes and Noble's online sales list, twelve years after publication. In April, 2005 it was number 62,508 on Amazon's list, and number 139,008 on Barnes and Noble's list. *A Dream Deferred, The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*, published in 1998, was a *New York Times* Notable Book. In 2003 it was number 51,734 on Amazon.com's sales rank list, and 100,307 on Barnes and Noble's online sales rank list five years after publication. In April, 2005 it was number 291,728 on Amazon's list, and number 392,691 on Barnes and Noble's list.

Derrick Bell is a law professor and a founder of critical race theory. He's served as Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, as well as Deputy Director of the Office of Civil Rights. He was the first tenured black professor at Harvard Law School, and Dean at the Oregon School of Law. Bell left both positions in response to faculty hiring decisions. He is currently a visiting professor at the New York School of Law, and a well-known writer on the subjects of race and class in American society.

In this study I examine Bell's *And We Are Not Saved*, published in 1987, and his national bestseller, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, published in 1992. *And We are Not Saved*, was number 140,355 on Amazon.com's sales list in 2003, and was 127,433 on Barnes and Noble's online sales list. This is a notable achievement considering that these numbers represent the work's popularity sixteen years after its initial publication. In April, 2005 it was number 142,007 on Amazon's list, and number 120,442 on Barnes and Noble's list. Bell's national bestseller, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, was number 51,532 on Amazon.com's sales rank list in 2003, and number 49,359 on Barnes and Noble's online sales list eleven years after its publication. In April, 2005 it was number 135,967 on Amazon's list, and number 65,986 on Barnes and Noble's list.

Randall Robinson has worked on both the international and domestic front in the fight for social justice. He played an instrumental role in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. He is the founder of TransAfrica, an organization that seeks to influence U.S. foreign policy. He also plays a key role in the movement for reparations to African-Americans in the United States. I include *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, as a text for analysis in this study, along with Robinson's follow-up book, *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other*, published in 2003. *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, published in 2000, is a seminal text for those seeking to understand the resurgence of this movement in the 1990s. *The Debt* is a national bestseller. The online retailer, Amazon.com, ranked the book at 24,642 on its sales rank list in 2003. Barnes and Noble's online component, ranked the book at 14,880 on its sales rank list in 2003. In April, 2005 the book was number 277,413 on Amazon's list, and number 76,512 on

Barnes and Noble's list. The book also topped *Essence* magazine's non-fiction bestseller list for 2001, and was number seven on their list in 2003. It was also represented as a listener's pick for National Public Radio's summer reading list, along with the Ralph Ellison's, *Invisible Man*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, among other notable selections. *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other*, was number 87,046 on Amazon.com's sales rank list in 2003, and number 78,119 on Barnes and Noble's online sales list. Considering the large volume of books each of these retailers provides these numbers represents considerable sales. In April 2005 the book was number 42,310 on Amazon's list, and number 186,879 on Barnes and Noble's list.

I believe that the popularity and critical acclaim of the six texts I selected, in conjunction with a rhetorical critique utilizing Payne's themes of consolation and compensation and their corresponding topoi, sheds light on African-American men's responses to failure in the post-civil rights era. African-American men have fared less well than African-American women since the civil rights era. There is value in understanding how African-American men, especially those characterized as members of the talented tenth, respond to the issue of group failure given this turn of events. In some ways this study provides a counterpart to Greeson's, *The Recovery of Race in America* (1995) in which he focused heavily on the responses of African-American women to crisis after the civil rights era. Focusing on a single gender may have its benefits, as men and women may have different responses to failure.

Conclusion

Understanding Du Bois's rhetorical legacy and its impact on the shape of blacks' rhetorical efforts is imperative if we are to understand the ways in which blacks seek to cope with failure in the post-civil rights era. A perception of failure exists for both blacks as a group and members of the black middle class charged with leading the group forward. Opening the paper today I saw a syndicated column from William Raspberry of the *Washington Post*. The title of the column read, "Will black middle class show others the way up?" Raspberry proceeded to discuss the various indications for failure among blacks as a group and stated that "we blacks who have achieved some success can, and I'm convinced we must (help other blacks succeed)". He continued, "Those of us who have found our way out of poverty and despair need to remember those who abetted our escape—and do what we can to lead others to economic, social, and political safety." Yes, Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth is alive and well. Perhaps it is a testament to the power of rhetoric that although Du Bois's faith in the idea waned he could not take back the hold his words had over others in his time. Today, over one hundred years later, his words have a powerful grip over the shape black rhetoric takes in our time. In the next chapter, I will explore in more detail the rhetorical dimensions of failure and their import for understanding race discourse.

Chapter Two

Rhetoric and Failure in the Analysis of Race

To say that rhetoric is therapeutic is to acknowledge the ways in which it orients both groups of people and individuals to situations. It provides us with a way of being that can do so many things. It enables us to come to terms with our past, or simply to cope with our present. It enables us to dream of a better future that makes present difficulties seem small in comparison. Without some form of therapeutic rhetoric life would be unbearable.

We do not always succeed in our endeavors and we require a means to understand our failures. We respond to failure with therapeutic rhetoric. It provides us with what Kenneth Burke called “equipment for living”. Equipment is a fitting word as without it we are naked, disarmed, left defenseless against the travails of life. When we experience the droughts, the floods, the frosts of life, rhetoric is always there to keep us alive. Therapeutic rhetoric is the breath of life for without it we die. It preserves our spirit and enables us to live each day whether cloudy or gray.

When failure occurs individuals often respond with some form of therapeutic rhetoric. In this chapter I discuss various themes of therapeutic rhetoric that are germane to my study. First, I discuss rhetoric’s influence on the audience (others). Second, I discuss rhetoric’s influence on the rhetor (self). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive but they do provide two main distinctions. Third, I discuss Kenneth Burke’s contribution to our understanding of therapeutic rhetoric, specifically his notion of

rhetoric as “equipment for living”. Last, I discuss the ways in which therapeutic rhetoric can inform a discussion of race in American society noting the work of Aaron David Greenson, Dana Cloud, and David Payne. In this study I utilize Payne’s topoi of failure as a means to understand the ways in which Randall Robinson, Derrick Bell, and Shelby Steele express discontent with the pace or absence of ‘racial progress’ in the post-civil rights era.

Rhetoric and the Audience

In discussing rhetoric’s influence on the audience Stephen Depoe critiques the therapeutic uses of nostalgic appeals in Edward Kennedy’s 1980 address to the Democratic National Convention. Although Depoe notes the failure of Kennedy’s attempt to garner “support for specific policies which would recreate past conditions in the present and future” (186) Kennedy nonetheless succeeded in inviting “his audience to share in the nostalgic remembrance of liberal policies and personalities of the past” (183). Depoe’s essay points out the ways in which “nostalgic rhetorical appeals perform a therapeutic function when the speaker attempts to stimulate nostalgic reminiscing in an audience in order to reduce anxiety and to strengthen group identity and cohesion” (185). He concludes, that “the relationship which a community forms towards its past directly influences its decisions in the present” (187).

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we rarely let go of the past or the individuals who fill it. Steven Goldzwig and Patricia Sullivan examine the ways in which print media help the American public cope with the assassinations of both politicians, and social movement leaders. They argue that print media perform a

therapeutic communication function in which “the newspaper editorial eulogy is an enduring mass-mediated rhetorical vehicle that continues to help us cope with the loss of national public figures” (126). Print media engage in both epideictic and deliberative rhetoric in order to heal breaches “in the moral order” and “in the political order” following assassinations (141). Furthermore, “the news editorials seem to mount efforts to assuage both the sense of communal guilt and the lingering fears over the future of the republic” (141). Goldzwig and Sullivan see the newspaper editorial eulogy “as a significant form of therapy in an age dominated by electronic communication” (142).

An electronic medium such as television can also serve a therapeutic function according to Leah Vande Berg. Vande Berg examines televised commemorations of the J.F.K. assassination as pilgrimages social members take via media. According to Vande Berg these pilgrimages are therapeutic in nature. They allow the public to both remember the slain president as well as the better times he represented. “Journalism’s living room pilgrimages recreate or perhaps just perpetuate a self-serving ongoing national need for redressive, therapeutic mechanisms through which the *communitas* and Camelot can be restored” (62). Vande Berg’s study shows the ways in which media can perform a therapeutic communication function by allowing the public a means of “redress through memory” (48).

Film also serves as a medium for therapeutic communication. It can help individuals cope with the past as well as the present as David Payne illustrates. Payne critiques the therapeutic rhetoric of *The Wizard of Oz*. He notes the ways in which its rhetoric “formulates situations and problems for characters and audiences, and shows how characters succeed or fail in the solutions they adopt” (“The Wizard of Oz” 28).

According to Payne, “texts can influence the way an audience member sees the world or sees his or her individual position in and problems with the world” (29). The film’s rhetoric provides audiences with an understanding of how young girls become women, of how cowardly lions become men, so that viewers can cope with failure and survive and the ups and downs of their own lives. Payne writes of *The Wizard of Oz*:

The entire film can be viewed as a therapeutic episode wherein a typical adolescent feeling of alienation from adults becomes the prelude to an experience and treatment of adult transformation. The narrative experience vents the adolescent desire for adventure and adult power. Yet does so safely with the assurance of success. (32)

In short, it makes us feel good about ourselves and more optimistic about our lives, thus providing “a much desired curative for the individuals of our culture” (38).

Rhetoric and the Rhetor

It is possible that as much could be said about the ego function of protest rhetoric. This aspect of protest rhetoric remained ignored until Richard Gregg brought it to the attention of rhetorical scholars. In his essay Gregg notes the failure of rhetorical scholars to examine the “ego function of rhetoric” (71). Scholars concerns with the pragmatic functions of discourse as a means for speakers to gain the adherence of listeners to their requests/demands, may cause scholars to ignore the possibility “that the primary appeal of the rhetoric of protest is to the protestors themselves, who feel the need for psychological refurbishing and affirmation” (74). Gregg contends that rhetorical scholars’ assumptions that protest rhetoric needs to be rational is false (89). In focusing

on the ego-function of rhetoric, Gregg states that it “seems to thwart the idealized kind of problem discussion we like to see on the public stage” (85). Instead, protestors often engage in ego-building rhetoric that affirms the identity of not only an individual rhetor but also those to whom he or she may act as a surrogate thus accomplishing “the ego identification of a number of selves” (75). Although Gregg’s focus on the ego-building function of rhetoric sheds light on the therapeutic functions of rhetoric, Aaron Greeson challenges his assumption that protest rhetoric is irrational.

Aaron Greeson illustrates the failure of rhetorical critics to fully account for the significance of protest rhetoric. Many critics dismissed protest rhetoric as irrational when it deviated from accepted conventions. Richard Gregg later argued that protest rhetoric could perform an ‘ego-function’ even if it was irrational. Greeson finds fault in both these positions noting that protest rhetoric often has a logic of its own, one that is meant to disrupt conventional standards of knowledge and rationality. Protest rhetoric often aims to achieve group formation for the subordinated (othered) individuals, to give them a different epistemology from that of the oppressor group, and potentially achieve a dialogue with the oppressor group/system once subordinated individuals have created their own group/system. Rhetorical critics have generally been unable to see this logic because their “own ethnocentric vision impedes recognition of the rhetor’s ‘inner logic’ ” (“Minority Epistemology” 254). Greeson attempts to give critics a means for “asking questions which acknowledge the possibility of a micro-systemic logic” (254) that differs from the “macro-systemic perspective on the acceptable form of protest” (254) most critics share.

Therapeutic Rhetoric and Kenneth Burke

Some critics however have recognized the rhetor's 'inner logic' and what rhetoric could do not only for addressed others but also for the addressed self. Kenneth Burke observed that rhetoric could have an influence on the rhetor and in so doing serve as "equipment for living" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 293). Burke's work, *Counterstatement* contains a series of essays that are fruitful in understanding "literature as equipment for living". In his essay "Three Adepts of Pure Literature" Burke's purpose is to make an argument about the prospects for pure literature through a discussion of the Flaubert, Pater, and De Gourmont. Yet a single sentence stands out for me as a marker of Burke's developing ideas about therapeutic rhetoric. In his discussion of De Gourmont, Burke writes "An author who lives most of his life in his head must perform his transgressions on paper" (24). Burke will elaborate on this idea in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, but here in one sentence we find the seed of a great idea. Burke implies that there is a difference between De Gourmont's life, and the lives he lived on paper through his fiction. Nevertheless, De Gourmont's fiction provided him with "equipment for living". Burke points up the idea that it is possible for one to live through art, especially art of one's own making. We can be different people for better or for worse. We can lead different lives that may be quite different than those we experience in the 'real' world. Literature can function as a 'virtual' reality that may in fact be just as dear to some as the one inhabited by creatures of flesh and blood.

In Burke's essay "Psychology and Form" he notes that "form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (31). Burke is providing his idea of what a work of art should do, but in doing so he is also

telling us what a rhetor should do. If rhetoric can inform, persuade, or please, then in this case there is a focus on the latter. Pleasure, which is therapeutic, is connected to the use of the right form in art. Yet even in the course of persuading an audience we would still use a similar form as Monroe's Motivated Sequence suggests. In either case what is most notable is that rhetoric works on individuals on some level whether it gets us to feel something, or to do something. Deriving either pleasure, or a means to act in the world, both constitute equipment for living whether we are bohemians or activists. Furthermore, Burke notes "The method most natural to the psychology of form is eloquence" (37), and eloquence is a sign of good rhetoric whether pleasing or persuasive.

Burke goes further than this in stating that because form and eloquence are synonymous, "eloquence thereby becomes the essence of art . . . in short all of the emotions we experience in life proper as non-artists, are simply the material on which eloquence may feed" (40-41). "Art, at least in the great periods when it has flowered, was the conversion or transcendence, of emotion into eloquence, and was thus a factor added to life" (41). Burke shows us that there is not only a linkage between art and life, but also that art adds something to life.

Rhetoric, then, is therapeutic; it adds something of value to life. It allows us to confront life, and in good times to enjoy life. Literature can provide us with "equipment for living" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 293) as it enables us to "size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (304). In short, "Everything is 'medicine' " (293) and rhetoric is the medicine we symbol-using animals devise to help us get through life. "A man can be his own audience, insofar as he, even in

his secret thoughts, cultivates ideas or images for the effects he hopes they may have upon him . . .” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 38).

Therapeutic Rhetoric and Race

The potential relationship between therapeutic rhetoric and race remains for the most part unexplored. Though individuals such as Richard Gregg note the ego-function of protest rhetoric, Aaron Greeson is a pioneer in exploring the therapeutic aspects of rhetoric for members of a racial minority group. In his work *The Dialectics of Betrayal* Aaron Greeson examines the ways in which socially oppressed groups articulate rhetorics of betrayal. He defines betrayal as a “unilateral breaking of faith, oneness, affinity or trust with one another” (viii). The broken bonds he writes about in his case studies deal with gender and class solidarity among blacks. These case studies illustrate “the problems of sacrifice and violation of sacrifice (spoiled sacrifice) among the socially oppressed” (viii).

According to Greeson, breaks in a shared firstness code and a shared societal/secondness code lead members of socially oppressed groups to articulate rhetorics of betrayal. The shared firstness code asks that minorities as individuals make sacrifices for the socially oppressed group. Individual advancement should be concomitant with group advancement and should not take precedence over it. The shared societal/secondness code “pertains to the expectation (in more or less democratic/egalitarian societies) that justice and fairness will reign in an admittedly unequal situation” (14). The problem is that neither the shared firstness code nor the shared societal/secondness code is ever adhered to by all members of the minority or

majority group. This results in a paradox of liberation for members of minority groups as “the individual is expected/and frequently desires) to attain his personal liberation and that of the oppressed collectivity but finds that intracollectivity and external forces combine to render this goal conflictive if not virtually impossible” (18).

The tension between these expectations results in assertions of betrayal when the individual is believed to have placed his or her own advancement ahead of the group’s advancement. Other individuals come to believe that their attempt at sacrifice is therefore spoiled. Spoiled sacrifice engenders negative reactions toward an individual or group. The two examples Greeson notes are black men’s apparent betrayal of black women, and black academics who place the importance of class before race in discussions of black advancement in U.S. society.

Greeson’s study of sacrifice and spoiled sacrifice is useful in understanding how socially oppressed groups both conceptualize and articulate failure. Rhetorics of betrayal in regard to gender and class both have roots in failures stemming from the civil rights movement. The paradox of liberation, when applied to both gender and class, helps to illuminate current discussions of failure in the post-civil rights era.

Since the civil rights movement both blacks and whites have engaged in recovery rhetorics. In his work *The Recovery of Race in America* Greeson subsumes “rhetorics of betrayal, consolation, failure, and self-healing” under the umbrella term recovery rhetorics. He defines recovery rhetorics as those that illustrate:

- (1) A motive to recover something perceived as lost through violation, failure or betrayal.

- (2) The use of narrative to describe a discovery with inferred relevance for both one's own and the other's ability to deal better with duplicity and uncertainty, and an implicit invitation to identify with and accept the liberative powers of that discovery. (5)

The specific losses and narratives he explores are “white Americans’ loss of moral hegemony and Black Americans’ loss of the myth of racial homogeneity” (ix). I will focus on the second narrative, “Black Americans’ loss of the myth of racial homogeneity” as it is germane to my study.

Greeson argues that the racial bond between black men and women was weakened following the civil rights movement. The primary culprits for this occurrence were “black male sexism and racial contradictions” (45). Greeson asserts that black male abandonment of black women was made possible via a rhetoric of “personal choice”. This rhetoric dramatized “contradictions in interracial intimacy” and “undermined the ideology of Black liberation and its ‘Black is beautiful’ rhetoric” (45). Greeson faults black men for not remaining loyal to black women. Much of his work focuses on the responses of black women to this weakened sense of solidarity.

The problem I have with Greeson’s book is that in the name of the collective he rejects individualism. According to Greeson, “Black use of personal-choice rhetoric led to a violation of essentialist ideologies promoting racial identity and collusion” (45). Furthermore, “the pursuit of self-interest encourages a neglect of historically real collective oppression in the racial, economic, and political spheres” (46). Greeson faults individuals for violating essentialist ideologies that in many ways supported the “collective bond” he seeks to repair. He posits historical oppression as more important

than present opportunity. The reason for this is that he believes “it is more difficult to move from the racial group to the dominant group on equal terms if the groups have yet to reach collective parity” (96). Therefore, from Greeson’s perspective, individual attempts at advancement will most likely result in failure, and/or betrayal of the racial group.

Greeson’s focus on black recovery rhetoric amounts to a series of laments on the part of black women over black male failures. Black men are castigated and exist only as subjects to explain black women’s choices to seek interracial relationships as well. These black women no longer choose to remain loyal to a racial bond that is already broken. What is interesting is that Greeson finds fault with black women’s narratives as much as he does with black men’s rhetoric of personal choice. The only thing that would satisfy Greeson is a reconstruction of the racial bond that he believes once existed. According to him, “The old stories have lost their power to unify and transcend the differences of tribe and temperament. The journey is not quite over. In fact, we may need a new middle passage; a new basis for kinship and mutual care” (33). Greeson’s study of recovery rhetoric is itself a form of recovery rhetoric.

Greeson’s study led him to understand recovery rhetoric in terms of topoi. His use of topoi confirms the logic of commonplace themes to which individuals will turn to as they create narratives in response to a rhetorical situation. Greeson conceptualized his book as “a rhetorical study of loss and recovery” (ix). This loss is indicative of failure and the topoi allow individuals to engage in a recovery project. Recovery projects provide people with “ways of being related and connected to something and someone

larger than ‘I’ or ‘me’ ” (3). The topoi of recovery rhetoric: myth, messianism, magic, and mysticism, accomplish this goal.

In *Coping with Failure*, David Payne argued for a therapeutic rhetoric in which themes of consolation and compensation, along with various topoi, accounted for potential responses to failure. The topoi of recovery rhetoric Greeson posited are different from those Payne conceptualized, but display elements of Payne’s self-society, past-future, and spiritual-material topoi. The difference between Greeson’s topoi and Payne’s is that the latter display dialectical relationships whereas Greeson’s topoi: myth, messianism, magic, and mysticism, stand alone. Yet within each of these single topoi the dialectical relationship of Payne’s topoi is apparent. According to Greeson:

Myth “focuses on past collective collusion as the basis for persuasive images.

Racial myths focus on stories and characters that somehow ‘keep the dream alive’”.

Messianism focuses on “a shared legacy of obligation to continue caring for the Other(s) is the basis for this topos. Heroic delivery from the enemy is the central theme”.

Magic “focuses on fantasized, shared (mythological) formulas as the keys to controlling the Other. Magic occurs during and around the archetypal journey back to the past and the use of routinized practices to achieve wholeness”.

Mysticism “focuses on a privatized non-shared vision of the (possible) future as a rationale for action. Here the privatized vision reigns, and one’s persuasiveness inheres in quickening that force within each of us that understands that ‘life’ and ‘I’ could, may, and shall be Other. From this view, mysticism is a kind of

privatized magic: ‘You may not know my way of flying, but you can conjure up your own experience of flying’ ” (195)

Myth, messianism, and magic operate as strategies of consolation, emphasizing the past, the Other (society), and the spiritual. Mysticism operates as a strategy of compensation with its focus on the self and the future. The topoi of recovery rhetoric draw upon elements of the topoi of failure. The loss from which one seeks to recover is proof of failure. Nevertheless, disagreement exists regarding how we can best understand failure and therapeutic rhetoric.

In her book *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics* Dana Cloud offers a critique of Payne’s work on the therapeutic uses of rhetoric. She notes that Payne’s work argued that individuals employ themes of compensation and consolation, in order to deal with perceived failures that threaten their identities. Furthermore, she notes his argument that “the strategic deployment” of these themes allowed “the renegotiation of the person’s relationship with society” (3). Her critique begins with the observation that Payne’s work, “provides neither a critique of this process nor a discussion of the ways in which therapy can function as a rhetoric that exhorts conformity with the prevailing social order” (3). Yet these are the goals of Cloud’s study rather than those Payne set out to achieve.

Payne’s work set out to illustrate the therapeutic uses of rhetoric in instances in which individuals sought to cope with failure. He laid out a framework for examining discourse based on his observations that individuals resort to rhetorical strategies of compensation and consolation, along with various topoi that are dialectical in nature: self-society, past-future, spiritual-material. His goal was to provide us with a theory of

rhetoric that would explain how individuals dealt with rhetorical situations they experience as failure. Cloud's work shows the possibilities inherent in Payne's work when combined with a study of therapeutic rhetoric's function in a class system.

My own study illustrates two possibilities inherent in using Payne's ideas of compensation and consolation along with his three pairs of topoi: self-society, past-future, and spiritual material, as a means to rhetorically critique discourse on race.

According to Payne,

When communication is aimed at performing some sort of remedy or therapy for failure, the primary purpose of that communication is rhetorical and can have one or both of two basic functions: to console and/or to open the way for compensation (*Therapeutic Uses of Rhetoric* 42).

Shelby Steele, Derrick Bell, and Randall Robinson's responses to failure in the post-civil rights era fit this description, as these themes are inherent in their persuasive coping strategies. Payne noted in the conclusion of his book that when coping with failure, "the methods of such persuasion are finite and systematic, not infinitely various nor idiosyncratic" (155). I use Payne's conclusion as a starting point for my own analysis, employing his themes of consolation and compensation, along with his topoi: self-society, past-future, and spiritual-material, to uncover the rhetorical strategies that Steele, Bell, and Robinson use in their texts. These texts help both authors and readers to cope with the failure. I contend that Payne's topoi will provide a new understanding of how the rhetoric of race operates in the post-civil rights era.

I rely on Payne's descriptions of consolation and compensation, as well as the topoi, to structure my own reading and critiques. Payne wrote in regard to consolation that:

Rhetoric can console someone for a loss of hardship for which there is no real remedy. Consolation occurs when some sort of comfort is accepted in the form of a substitute for what has been lost . . . To console is to persuade to a different order of valuations wherein a new perspective on the loss is possible. In consolation, loss is neither denied nor erased. Consolation minimizes and diverts attention from loss and painful consequences (42).

Using Payne's description the following facets of consolation emerge.

1. There is a "loss or hardship" that is without remedy.
2. Comfort comes from substituting "for what has been lost".
3. Individuals are encouraged to see their loss in a new light through a "different order of valuations".
4. In keeping with attempts at substitution, and transcendence, attempts are made to minimize or divert "attention for loss and painful consequences" (42).

According to Payne, compensation works in a different way.

By contrast, when one compensates, one tries to balance things, to 'get even,' to find another way to achieve the original goal or something like them or perhaps to set and gain even better goals. Compensation also can involve substitution, but the substitute is assumed to be equal to or greater than the thing originally sought (42).

Using Payne's description the following facets of compensation emerge:

1. Individuals do not give up on success. They either attempt to reach their original goal via a different path, or they set a new goal of equal or higher value.
2. Substitution can take place, but the substitute should be of equal or greater value "than the thing originally sought" (42).

It is possible then, to draw distinctions between consolation and compensation in response to failure. Still it is noteworthy that Payne observed, "The same basic failure can call forth both compensation and consolation and require different interpretations of the same data" (45). These two rhetorical strategies are the primary means in which individuals attempt to cope with failure, and these strategies are evident in each text I examine.

Yet it is possible for a text to illustrate both consolation and compensation strategies. According to Payne the distinction between the two approaches to failure "is clear, but it is impossible to find any pure examples of either process" (43). The reason for this is that:

Consolation and compensation are concomitant functions in most episodes of managing failure. They are dialectically related as the logic of failure dictates. Rhetorically they are two different postures toward an interpretation of failure. The two postures may, of course, be taken at different times and in different situations addressing the same failure (43).

Though it is possible to draw distinctions between the two approaches, they are not always entirely separate. In some instances, consolation provides a means to compensation “in order to provide a complete framework for dealing with failure” (152).

Payne also found that a dialectical relationship existed between the topoi: self-society, past-future, and spiritual-material that enabled individuals to cope with failure. To make use of the topoi as a means to understanding consolation and compensation Payne wrote,

In its purest form, consolation involves making discourse that emphasizes social value over personal loss, conditions and causes of the past over present failing, and spiritual meanings or orientations over material losses. In its purest form, compensatory discourse stresses self-directed involvements or motives, future consequences or opportunities, and material values and orientations. (45)

Using these distinctions, I examine several works looking at the ways in which various topoi allow rhetors to construct therapeutic rhetorics of consolation and/or compensation in response to failure. I engage in multiple readings of each text in order to understand the rhetorical strategies employed on both macro and micro levels. Macro in this instance refers to the rhetorical structure or trajectory of an entire work. Micro refers to the shape of a specific chapter or passage. I follow Payne’s example, by using quotes from the text in conjunction with my own critique to illustrate and bolster my arguments about the persuasive strategies employed in each text.

In Chapter Three I critique the rhetoric of Shelby Steele in his works *The Content of Our Character* and *A Dream Deferred*. I note the ways in which Steele constructs a rhetoric of compensation that urges blacks to change themselves in the interests of

American society. The compensation for giving up their identification as blacks is the attainment of an identity as Americans. Steele suggests that when blacks lessen their racial identification it will be easier to achieve a national identification that they will share with whites. For Steele, this change constitutes both a progressive and necessary move that was not taken after the civil rights movement.

In Chapter Four I critique the rhetoric of Derrick Bell in his works *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. I note the ways in which Bell constructs a rhetoric of consolation as a means to console blacks for past, present, and future failures. Bell depicts racism as a permanent feature of American society, and the theme of repeated injustice runs throughout his works. Bell's belief that the past is determinative of both the present and the future makes change impossible. Unable to see avenues for compensation, Bell consoles both himself and black readers with an understanding that failure is inevitable.

In Chapter Five I critique the rhetoric of Randall Robinson in his works *The Debt* and *The Reckoning*. I note the ways in which Robinson constructs a rhetoric of both consolation and compensation for blacks. Robinson aims to achieve consolation for blacks via inclusion of blacks' role in the shaping of American history and culture within the nation's memorials. Inclusion within national memorials would provide consolation for the African heritage and traditions lost due to slavery. Robinson also attempts to achieve compensation for blacks as an advocate of monetary reparations for slavery. Yet even without monetary reparations, consolation for 'spiritual poverty' will according to Robinson, have material consequences. Robinson suggests that the spiritual benefit of recognition in the nation's monuments will enable blacks to achieve economic, social,

and political parity with whites, thus achieving a measure of compensation for what was lost due to slavery and segregation.

In the concluding chapter I provide the reader with an overall summary of what I have found from my examination of each author's work. This summary brings together my discussion of the authors and their works in a way that shows how consolation and compensation, along with the topoi, are represented on a macro level. The concluding chapter contains my findings and thoughts on how these rhetors have attempted to cope with actual or perceived failure in the post-civil rights era, the contributions this study makes to our understanding of the how the motif of failure operates in contemporary discourse on race, and the utility of Payne's topoi in the critique of this discourse. It also points to the need for future studies of the connection between therapeutic rhetoric and race discourse, along with the connection of therapeutic rhetoric to other types of discourse regarding gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

Chapter Three

The Self-Society Topos in Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* and *A Dream Deferred*

As David Payne notes in his examination of various texts that utilize the self-society topos, rhetors often “treat the broadly defined failure as one that requires personal adaptation” (*Coping with Failure* 68). In this chapter I will show how Steele’s work supports this observation in that black selves are asked to change in the interests of restoring harmony to society. According to Payne “social problems are solved by individuals’ acts of purification, without challenging the fact that society holds priority over the self” (68). Yet I argue that in Steele’s rhetoric this holds true for blacks more than it does for whites.

Steele’s rhetoric implies distinctions between different selves. He posits a normal or ideal relationship that exists between self and society that I suggest applies to whites in relation to society. Whites are not asked to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society. The story as I will illustrate, however, is different with blacks. Blacks are asked to sacrifice their identity as blacks for the sake of society. This stems from the fact that Steele sees the idea of race as un-American because “a healthy democracy is always at war with race” (*A Dream Deferred* 106). His solution to the problem he believes race represents is to ask blacks to transcend race in a way that whites are not asked to do. In Steele’s rhetoric, class becomes more meaningful to individual blacks than racial identity,

and it is this shift in perspective that he urges blacks to make. Steele advocates a personal adaptation that he sees as necessary for creating harmony in society.

My second point is that whereas Payne notes that authors such as Toffler and Skinner “follow typical apocalyptic strategies: [that] forecast doom as a way of motivating changes in the present” (75), I argue that Steele takes a different approach. Steele implies that for Americans the apocalypse has already happened because they failed to preserve the essence of democracy, which he sees as equality under the law for individuals rather than for groups. David Payne observes that for B.F. Skinner “all human failures are traced to the overarching cause of individualism” (75). In contrast, I illustrate how in Steele’s discourse a lack of individualism is the problem among blacks, and that Steele views society as partly to blame because of its focus on the need for group rights in recent decades. ‘Equality’ between individuals is pitted against the notion of ‘equality’ among groups. For Steele, this occurrence is a sign not that the apocalypse will happen, but rather that it already has happened.

A Rhetoric of Personal Adaptation

Steele feels a tension between himself and society that he must attempt to resolve. As a black man in America in the post-civil rights era he is trapped within the confines of a “balance of power between the races that settled things down a bit after the turbulent sixties” (*The Content of Our Character*, x). That balance of power depends on a sacrifice of self, of the individual, for the sake of society. As an American Steele must acquiesce to “public discussions of the race issue that [have] become virtually choreographed” (ix). As a black person he is “expected to speak in terms of racial entitlement . . .” (ix). What

Steele seeks to reclaim is a sense of himself rather than suffer the “public/private racial split” (x) of his divided self. Steele’s attempt to reconcile self and society requires, from his perspective, that he “both remember and forget” his blackness in order “to search out the human universals that explain the racial specifics” (xi).

Steele argues that both blacks and whites are trapped in a power game in which “innocence is power” (5). The uneasy subject of race looms over us with such force that the very mention of it “sinks us into one of those shaming silences where eye contact terrorizes” (2). The reason for this, according to Steele, is that “races are not just races but competing power groups” (4). In their battle for power “both races instinctively understand that to lose innocence is to lose power (in relation to each other)” (6). Steele views this zero-sum game as detrimental to our society because between groups “power defines their relations, and power requires innocence, which in turn, requires racism and racial division” (6). What Steele seeks is a new way of being that will transform both the individual and society. In a sense, Steele seeks to reassert the individual in society in opposition to the groupthink dynamics that he believes have corrupted it. When we relinquish our need to see for innocence or “use others as a means to our own goodness and superiority” (8) we will become better people and society will be better as a result.

Steele’s work is admittedly a revolt against the black power movement of the late sixties and the seventies. His revolt is against a collective black identity that “told [him] virtually nothing about who [he] was as an individual or how [he] might live in the world as [himself]” (167). This collective black identity is a subject of Steele’s work because it is still prevalent today. Steele asserts that both individual blacks and society as a whole are impoverished by a continuing focus on discrimination against blacks rather than

opportunity for blacks (169). The collective identity of blacks is one that sees them as victims “at war within society” (169). It “fogs up the sacred line between the individual and the collective” (171). He argues that in order “to retrieve our individuality and find opportunity, blacks today must consciously or unconsciously—disregard the prevailing victim-focused black identity” (172). Success for blacks will come only through “individual effort within the mainstream—as our means of advancement” (173). Steele urges blacks to create a “new identity [through] a meeting of black individual initiative and American possibility” (174).

The compensation for blacks in losing their African identity is an American one. Rather than live as divided selves, as hyphenated Americans, Steele urges blacks to simply become Americans. He sees the problem not as one of mainstream white society accepting blacks, but as one of blacks willingness to accept and become a part of mainstream white society. Becoming a part of the system, Steele suggests, would alleviate the need to challenge the system and more importantly, lessen the possibility of being victimized by the system. There is in Steele’s mind, a system at work, one that cannot be overcome; it can only be joined. From his perspective, games of racial politics, point and counterpoint, attack and feint, will only lead to more hardship for blacks. It is interesting to note that Steele’s “new vision of race in America” relies heavily on blacks’ willingness to de-emphasize the impact of race in their lives. Almost magically, Steele implies, this would lead other Americans to de-emphasize the importance of race in their relations with blacks. What is being discussed here is a problem of identification as Kenneth Burke describes it in a *Rhetoric of Motives*. For whites to identify with blacks, blacks must lessen their identification as blacks. Furthermore, blacks must lessen their

collective identification with other blacks and allow for the possibility that individually they may have more in common with whites.

Steele suggests that the only way for blacks to identify more with whites is to change themselves and their outlook on society. Contrary to conventional notions of the race problem, or the problem of the color line to use Du Bois's phrasing in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Steele situates the root of the problem within blacks rather than whites. Du Bois, among others, argued that changes in society would occur when whites relinquished the racist within. Steele in contrast, argues that in the post-civil rights era it is blacks who must relinquish their conception of the white racist without. Blacks' belief in the external presence and power of white racism leads them to take on postures of continual accusation toward whites.

Steele uses numerous examples to make this point and to reiterate the need for changes within black selves as a means to societal change. In one example, Steele recalls a gathering of successful middle class people at a dinner party. The host of the party is white as are many of the guests. Two of the guests, Steele and a man described only as "a black engineer," are the sole minorities to "integrate the group" (1). Steele uses the setting to illustrate that the presence of two black men (in a non-serving capacity) among a host of whites is a sign of societal change, or at least the attitudes of some whites. Nevertheless, Steele also uses the occasion to point out the lack of change among blacks in the post-civil rights era. The black engineer is a representative figure, a stand-in for the new black middle class, among whom individuals like Steele are perceived to be a minority. Were it not for the perceived minority status of individuals like himself within a black minority, Steele would have little cause for his book. His book, however, is an

attempt to confront individuals, such as the black engineer, who represent to him the militant postures of the late sixties and the seventies. Steele notes the abrupt entrance of race into the dinner conversation “out of nowhere” when the engineer confides to the group, “with a coloring accusation in his voice,” that “[he] didn’t realize [his] ambition would pull [him] into a world where [his] daughter would lose touch with her blackness” (1). Steele said nothing in response to the statement, and the only response came from the party’s hostess who replied, “Oh, I’m sure she’ll be just fine” (2).

Steele’s silence, his adherence to the code of racial solidarity, bothered him so much that he eventually felt compelled to write a book. In it he would respond to not only the black engineer but also the presumed majority of blacks who shared the engineer’s viewpoints. Steele as an individual would confront blacks as a group, and argue for the primacy of the individual in social relations. In *The Content of Our Character*, Steele seeks not only to redeem himself for his silence, but also to justify his own position in society. If the black engineer is correct in his assertion that integration led to a loss of blackness, then Steele is somehow less black and the whites he associates with are less accepting of difference than he believes them to be. Rather than accept this conclusion about the broader society, Steele focuses on the black minority and its own unwillingness to accept differences within the group.

A second example illustrates the extent to which groupthink among blacks begins in childhood, coloring their relations with whites and the ability of blacks to see differences between them. In the example, Steele recalls his need to see racism in the acts of a childhood friend’s uncle. The young boy told Steele that his uncle “was a racist” and from that moment on Steele saw racism in each of the uncle’s actions, even

those that displayed civility. According to Steele, even kindness could be dismissed because “evil could be sly as well, could smile when it wanted to trick you” (7). As a twelve-year-old boy, Steele had already learned to focus on the externalization of racism and racist actions. As an adult, he indicts this early version of himself, and many blacks, for failing to judge people (especially whites) by the content of their character. Instead Steele believes that many blacks approach whites with an expectation of racism that is itself a form of the social disease he seeks to cure.

Steele believes that an overemphasis on race is detrimental for blacks. On the one hand, blacks are likely to see blackness as a badge of superiority. Blacks are said to be more “humane, soulful, earthy, and spiritual than whites” (65). On the other hand, blacks may also use blackness as a badge of inferiority. In a society that prides itself on the ideal of equality, the unequal treatment of blacks in relation to whites is an historical fact. Nevertheless, Steele argues that in the post-civil rights era blacks “claim more racial victimization than we have actually endured” to deal with present day feelings of black vulnerability (67). Both claims of superiority and inferiority as a result of victimization are compensatory strategies. Steele notes that soulfulness is viewed as “a far more important area of superiority than those of other races” (63) despite the fact that it has “very little to do with success in the American mainstream” (64). Victimization is used as the basis for demanding “concessions from government, industry, and society at large while demanding very little from blacks themselves” (68). Black interactions with mainstream society become dramas acted out between them and us. As a result, Steele believes that conformity among blacks becomes normative, and that those blacks who resist the collective identity in favor of individuality are excommunicated from the group.

The need for individuality is paramount in Steele's work. According to Steele, "The most dangerous threat to black identity is not the racism of white society (this [for Steele] actually confirms the black identity), but the black who insists on his or her own individuality" (72). What Steele's rhetoric implies is that the balance between self and society can only be restored when blacks are able to claim their selfhood in society. Rather than exist as a group in opposition to society, blacks must become individuals within society. This can only occur when blacks are excommunicated from the group. Excommunication from the group will only come when individual blacks have relinquished the groupthink that lies within them. Racism, once again, is posited as less a problem of whites in society, and more a problem of blacks who have yet to become a part of society. Steele suggests that "oppression conditions people away from all the values and attitudes one needs in freedom—individual initiative, self-interested hardwork, individual responsibility, delayed gratification, and so on" (68-69).

The problem from Steele's perspective is not societal, but at its core, individual. In order to change societal attitudes towards blacks, blacks must change their own attitudes regarding themselves as individuals. For some time, groups of blacks have had the power to excommunicate individuals from the race. Now Steele asserts that freedom for blacks lies in the willingness of individual blacks to excommunicate the notion of blacks as a race, and the groupthink that sustains it. In order to find themselves, individual blacks must willingly walk into the desert and away from the captivity of cohesion. Blacks must remember that molecules are still composed of atoms.

It is difficult for blacks to remember that they are individuals when society as a whole, and in particular, white society, has a tendency to treat blacks as an homogenous

group. Steele notes that the civil rights movement forced whites to acknowledge their complicity in a system of exploitation in which blacks as a group were treated unfairly. Yet rather than undergo the hardwork of re-structuring society so that blacks as individuals could advance in society, Steele argues that whites created group-based programs that “have tended to give blacks special entitlements that are of no use because we lack the development that would put us in a position to take advantage of them” (80). This has allowed whites to ease their own racial guilt while achieving “the look of redemption” (85). Unfortunately for blacks, “bounty from another man’s guilt only weakens” (80). Rather than being empowered, blacks become passive recipients of white largesse with “an unspoken doubt about our ability to compete that is covered over by a preoccupation with racial discrimination” (90).

Steele sees himself and other middle class blacks as trapped within the confines of a race/class dialectic. To identify as blacks they must deny their middle class status, and vice versa. Steele blames the black militancy of the sixties for creating this duality of identity in the post-civil rights era. He writes, “The inner compatibility of class and race I had known in 1960 was gone” (100). Steele admits that as a child, the black middle class values he was taught were in fact “the values of middle class whites” (101). The black middle class was defined in favor of middle class whites, and in contrast to lower class blacks. Yet the 1960s created a society of victims and victimizers, in which “poor blacks became the ‘real’ black [he] was expected to identify with” (100). This is the situation that Steele seeks to reverse in the post-civil rights era. Steele seeks to assert the primacy of class over race, and the primacy of the individual over the collective in contrast to authors such as bell hooks in *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, and Jennifer

Hochschild in *Facing Up to the America Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*, both of whom seek a middle ground. For Steele, to identify with poor blacks is to reject the value system of “hard work, education, individual initiative, stable family life, [and] property ownership instilled in him since childhood” (108). It is to side against the “laws of advancement in American society” (108).

Steele sides so heavily in favor of class that he rejects Du Bois’s notion of the talented tenth. He sees himself, not as a debtor to the race, but rather as someone who has paid the price of middle class status. Steele regards the mandate to “reach back” as more akin to “reaching back from a moving train to lift on board those who have no tickets” (108). He expresses resentment toward individuals like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, who in *The Future of the Race* echo Du Bois’s idea of the talented tenth in the post-civil rights era. According to Steele, they act “as though middle-class status was an unearned and essentially passive condition in which one needed a large measure of noblesse oblige to occupy one’s time” (108).

Rather than greater identification with the black lower class, Steele seeks less identification. He implies that if anything, the black lower class ought to identify more with the black middle class, just as middle class blacks historically identified with the white middle class (108-109). Forced downward identification among the black middle class (109) is a trap that may explain the failure of the talented tenth to make the most of its position. In a sense, Steele argues that you cannot help anyone else if you have not helped yourself first.

The altruistic ideals Du Bois sought to inculcate in middle class blacks are part of the problem. Steele argues that downward identification is detrimental to middle class

blacks and that their salvation lies within their class status rather than their racial identification (109). This is a rebuttal to both Du Bois's notion of the talented tenth, and those such as West, who continue to preach the sermon today. According to Steele, individuals at the top cannot save those at the bottom by joining them. Du Bois and West note the black middle classes refusal to do so. Du Bois eventually gave up on the idea and began preaching to the proletariat masses, seeing them as the race's salvation. West, as a member of the talented tenth, clings to the idea of salvation from above, yet in his book *Race Matters* he has little to offer other than jeremiads and laments about black middle class hedonism, and lower class nihilism. Steele sees salvation as originating neither from above nor from below but from where one is standing. Individual initiative, hard work, and education in Steele's words are "laws of advancement [that] apply absolutely to black Americans also" (108).

A Rhetoric of the Apocalypse

Steele puts the issue of affirmative action on the table because it engenders a discussion of individual initiative, hard work, and education. Here the laws of advancement in America are put to the test and found wanting. Society in the name of creating diversity and addressing injustices of the past has created a quagmire in the present. Steele argues that white guilt and black power conspired to create a situation in which individuals are judged on the basis of skin color rather than character. According to Steele, this amounts to a wholesale retreat from the values that inspired civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Rather than aid the advancement of individual

blacks in society, our society aggregates individuals into one group, blacks, and treats them according to a prescribed formula.

The problem with this formula from Steele's perspective is that it hinders blacks more than it helps them. Individual initiative, hard work, and education are deemed less important than membership in a given group. As blacks, individuals are subjected to a "Faustian bargain" (111) in which the assertion of racial inferiority leads to preference in the form of affirmative action. Standards are lowered, and the "laws of advancement" (108) in American society become null and void in the name of creating diversity as an end through improper means. In this case the problem for individual blacks begins with society. White guilt and black power commingle in the mainstream to create an atmosphere oppressive to individual initiative. According to Steele, "blacks now stand to lose more from it [affirmative action] than they gain" (113).

The price of the ticket, in contrast to James Baldwin's work by the same name, is self-doubt and continued racial discrimination. Steele notes that "racial representation is not the same thing as racial development" (116) and as a result advancement among blacks has not achieved parity with whites. Campus populations appear diverse, but graduation rates for blacks remain lower (116). Those blacks who do graduate meet with a glass ceiling in the workplace as affirmative action "implicitly marks whites with an exaggerated superiority . . ." just as it marks "blacks with an exaggerated inferiority" (120).

Throughout his work Steele argues that changes among blacks will result in changes within white society. In his discussion of affirmative action, Steele maintains his thesis yet shifts his emphasis to the societal factors preventing blacks from developing as

individual selves. A preoccupation with group rights, among blacks, and group guilt among whites, stifles black initiative. Steele believes that affirmative action operates as a barrier to the advancement of black selves in society. Since affirmative action yields a perceived advantage for blacks, many blacks support it despite apparent disadvantages stemming from the policy. To some extent, Steele calls on blacks to reclaim their individual initiative, but primarily Steele argues that white society should do away with a preference that truly disadvantages blacks and forestalls long-term societal changes (124-125). Society, in this case, must stop oppressing the individual even if the oppressed do not recognize that victim status and the preferences stemming from it yield “no real power” (125).

Steele uses the university as a microcosm of society and an example of the ways in which white guilt and black anxiety create an atmosphere antithetical to black advancement. Policies such as affirmative action, which are meant to help blacks as a group, hinder them as individuals. Steele argues that affirmative action treats blacks as an homogenous group, ignoring class and other differences. It encourages a “politics of difference” (152) and ultimately “reinforces the myth of inferiority by implying that blacks are not good enough to make it into college on their own” (134).

According to Steele, self-doubt combined with racial anxiety is a dangerous elixir. Doubts about one’s ability are magnified exponentially in conjunction with a myth of black inferiority. Rather than face doubts about oneself, individuals are encouraged to see challenges they encounter as evidence of racism. In this case, an internal problem, self-doubt, leads to the perception of an external (social) problem, white racism. In his discussion of campus life, Steele provides a psychological examination of black students.

This is in keeping with the direction of his book, which discusses guilt, shame, anxiety, and denial. Steele's work talks about whites and blacks, but focuses mainly on blacks as the locus of the problem. For this reason, it makes sense that in using the university as a microcosm in which to explore American race relations, Steele should focus on black students and the changes he feels it is necessary for them to make.

One change Steele feels is necessary deals with the focus of black students. He notes that in his college days, black students focused on opportunity whereas black students today focus on obstacles to advancement. Steele argues that the black power movement of the late sixties and seventies was a catalyst for this shift. Individuals aspiring to leadership positions within the group (of blacks) have defined it in relation to society in a way that denies the autonomy of individual selves. This group in relation to society paradigm has replaced, among blacks, the self in relation to society paradigm that is more characteristic of American society. Moreover, being black subjects one to an "imbalance between the collective and the individual" (160) at a time when "opportunities for development can finally be exploited only by individuals" (161). Ultimately, Steele argues that "we must free ourselves from the tyranny of wartime collectivism . . . and reclaim ourselves from the exaggerations of our own memory . . ." (165). A focus on oppression and "the memory of the enemy" leads blacks to see themselves as helpless victims (163). Yet the real enemy according to Steele is not whites but other blacks who in the service of the group suppress the rights of individuals such as himself.

Steele's second book, *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*, picks up where the first leaves off. Defined as a black conservative Steele

finds himself alone, excommunicated from the group. He notes that during lectures at various universities angry blacks accuse him of violating the solidarity of the group. Yet Steele argues that “the problem for the black conservative is more his separation from the authority of his racial group than from the actual group” (*A Dream Deferred* 6). Steele seeks to defend himself both as a black and a conservative, as well as his right to create his own place in society as an individual. Still, the group’s ability to invoke “shame provides the muscle to keep individuals in line with group authority” (7). Designation as an Uncle Tom signifies “someone whose failure to love his own people makes him an accessory to their oppression” (7). Since black conservative and Uncle Tom are synonymous for many blacks, Steele must defend himself in the court of public opinion. Having sought only to live up to the values and beliefs his father instilled in him, and to whom his first book is dedicated, Steele “lives the life of a dissenter” (8) to the black power imperative and the groupthink ideology that sustains it.

Steele argues that black leaders constitute a grievance elite that demands preferential treatment for blacks in the form of various social programs. The problem with this is that these social programs strip agency away from blacks, and in some cases deny it altogether. All problems become structural in nature and are to be rectified through a liberal interventionism based on the notion that blacks are helpless victims. Blacks are treated as a group in need of outside assistance rather than as individuals who must be initiated into American society. With freedom comes responsibility, yet Steele argues that in the name of justice white liberals and black leaders have created programs that do not hold blacks accountable for their actions. Steele states that white liberals are less concerned with the development of individual blacks than with the redemption that

even ineffectual social programs give whites as a group (158). American society in this case works against the advancement of blacks as individuals by trading away individual rights in favor of group preferences.

Affirmative action programs, according to Steele, are one example of this tradeoff. This corrupt bargain makes race into a form of power that “perpetuates a kind of ‘reformed’ white supremacy, a white domination that is benevolent rather than malevolent” (50). Steele sees this as highly unjust and believes that American society has betrayed its best principles in an attempt to achieve absolution for its past sins. Steele believes that not only has American society betrayed itself, but also the civil rights movement. He notes that “racial oppression imposes nonindividuality on its victims, tells them that they will achieve no self, no singularity, that will ever supersede the mark of their own race” (58). Affirmative action programs, among others, do the same from Steele’s perspective. The imposition of a group identity onto individual blacks betrays a civil rights struggle that was “for the black individual and against his or her race as a political determinism” (58). In the post civil rights era, liberalism has resulted in a change “from the dehumanization of oppression to the deindividualization of the remedies for it” (59).

The struggle for black Americans is to become individual selves within society like other Americans. Unfortunately, according to Steele, both white liberals and black leaders have allied to work against this transformation. White liberals do so through support for social programs that alleviate white guilt while instilling no sense of agency in blacks. Black leaders do so through a demand for “black Americans to be a sociological people . . . [in which] it is our race, our group identity, that is paramount”

(60). Black leaders use race as a form of power that opens up a “zone of opportunism between the races” (61). Yet the programs and jobs this power creates are based on the idea that blacks are helpless victims.

Ultimately, Steele calls for both an end to society’s repression of black selves, and the assertion of selfhood among those who have been forced into a collective group identity in the post civil rights era. Steele argues that “a multiracial democracy simply cannot have an obligation to meet the racial needs of its citizens; its only obligation can be to address their human needs without regard to race” (105). Furthermore, “a healthy democracy is always at war with race” (106) because “in American life race will always be an opportunity for evil” (114). As such, blacks must become individuals within American society rather than members of a racial group. The solution to the race problem for Steele is to get rid of the idea of race altogether. Race is the problem, “and should be avoided even in the analysis of problems because it will only make the problem responsible to history” (107).

Conclusion

David Payne observes that in his analysis “the authors identify the causes of failure with the individual and his or her values. Consolation for this failure is found in the enormity and inevitability of the forces at work and in the possibility of identification with these grand forces” (*Coping with Failure* 76). Yet I note that for Steele, failure lies as much in society as it does in the individual. Society in many ways is to blame for individual failure because it stands in the way of reform. For this reason the grand forces that would in many cases be surrendered to must be resisted. The grand forces sweeping

society, such as the black power imperative and liberalism, must be fought for the sake of the individual.

Yet what we are given in this rhetoric is a choice between two bad choices. The first is the self in relation to self, a relationship that destroys society. The second is society in relation to society, a relationship in which there are no selves. In the first choice, society is so undermined that it ceases to exist as a functioning entity. All we are left with is individuals. In the second choice, society trumps the individual to the extent that the individual ceases to exist as an autonomous entity. As much as Steele argues in favor of individualism, his ultimate solution is for blacks to mortify themselves in favor of society because society never included them as individuals.

Steele's abhorrence to group rights leads him to ask blacks to transcend race. Steele suggests that everyone in society do this but I believe this has greater consequences for blacks than for whites. If the American social contract was established for the benefit of whites, and the face of society is still primarily white, then to ask blacks to transcend race is really another way of asking them to assimilate. Only blacks are asked to give something up in order to transcend race and be included in society. Whites give up nothing because whiteness is normative. To some degree whites can afford to ignore the idea that they are a racial group because the interests of whites as a group are written into the social contract that holds society together. For this reason, Joe Feagin in *Racist America* argues that "the base of the U.S. system must be replaced if systemic racism is to be removed" (258).

In Payne's study of therapeutic rhetoric, authors used the self-society topos as a means for coping with failure. Yet when authors perceived failure "responsibility for

immediate actions was placed squarely on the individual, even when it was society that needed to be redeemed” (82). The same finding holds true in my analysis of Steele’s rhetoric. Within the ideal relationship of self and society, Steele’s approach implies that his preference for individualism causes him to favor using the individual as a means to societal change. For Steele to use society would seem too restrictive of individual rights. Whereas in Payne’s study various authors’ rhetoric “could be read as a spiritual or moral protest against individualism” (82) Steele’s rhetoric is a moral protest in favor of individualism. Throughout his work Steele argues that society’s preemption of individual rights in the 1960s is the locus of the problem we face today. The restitution of an ideal balance between self and society is a chief aim of Steele’s work and a reason why his writings can be understood in light of the self-society topos.

In this chapter I have shown how Steele’s rhetoric requires personal adaptation among blacks in response to perceived failure. Blacks are asked to change as individuals for the sake of society. Personal adaptation is necessary in a society that Steele believes has undergone an apocalypse. American society from his perspective has undermined its traditional value system. It is through the personal adaptation of individuals, specifically black citizens, that societal change can occur and America’s traditional value system be restored.

In the next chapter I will show how Derrick Bell’s rhetoric militates against personal adaptation among blacks. Blacks are told that failure is inevitable. Fate rather than individual agency is omnipotent. American society, from Bell’s perspective, has and always will fail to live up to its espoused values because underneath it all lays a foundation built on racism. Blacks are asked to accept that they will always remain

outsiders in a society in which racism is fundamental. The efforts of the talented tenth are deemed inadequate in the face of systemic injustice, and the notion that the talented tenth can lead blacks to the promised land appears misguided. Bell's rhetoric serves to disabuse blacks of this notion, and replace faith in American democracy with disbelief.

Chapter Four

The Past-Future Topos in Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*

David Payne in *Coping with Failure* makes a number of observations about the past-future topos that are relevant to a discussion of Derrick Bell's works. According to Payne, "There is a time-line of contextual events, including patterns of experience and expectations, that manifests the evidences and consequences of failure" (85). In this chapter I will first illustrate how Bell's books construct this timeline for us as the past, present, and possible future are explored as a means to understand both the beginning and the end of failure. If as Payne notes even with "a trivial incident . . . fault will be assigned and . . . character attributions made," (85) then in the context of American race relations we can agree that the incidents are significant and fault is often placed on the shoulders of blacks who've failed to become the equals of whites despite liberal social policies and an expanded welfare state.

In the opening to *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* Bell asks "How have we failed and why? . . . Where, do we go from here? . . ." (3). Failure is the problem and the solution to this problem, like the fault for its existence, must lie in someone's hands. As a member of Du Bois's talented tenth, Bell is forced to deal with the race problem because of its connections to his own identity.

Bell, like Randall Robinson, sees his own identity as tied to that of the group. Neither man can be saved until blacks as a group are saved. As a result, Bell seeks

answers that explain not only where we are going, but also how we got into this predicament. As Payne observes, “Ideas about the past need to be shaped and reshaped in order to understand and treat failures as they occur in the present” (87). Bell’s attempt to understand both the group’s and his own identity crisis in the present, forces him to re-order and re-member the past in search of answers.

Bell’s work emphasizes the past as a means to explain present circumstances. Payne terms this a because-of framework, and in Bell’s work it explains present-day crisis and consoles blacks for failures deemed inevitable. This absolves blacks of fault because one cannot be blamed for fate. Payne’s observation that “the past must be reconstructed to show how it held the potential and the cause of failure” (87) holds true in Bell’s texts. Yet unlike in Payne’s theory we find no new future, no new remedy or revelation of the future. Bell stops short of transformation because he cannot construct an in-order-to context that “turns towards the future with either reformed goals or reformed means to achieve the original goals” (*Coping with Failure* 96). Despite Bell’s talk about a “desire to provoke discussion that will provide new insights and prompt effective strategies” (*And We Are Not Saved* 3) he provides us with none. Rather Bell reaches into the past to prophesy that it is useless to try because we are doomed by fate. Bell then waits to see if anyone will say or prove different. The most Bell does is to depict a history of failure and emphasize fate as a means to transcendence.

According to Payne, “When failure is perceived, time frames can be seen as loci of the failure and perhaps its cause, or they can be seen as loci of opportunities for repair” (91). As I will show, given that Bell believes that many present inequities stem from past injustice, he focuses on the Constitutional Convention as the locus of democracy’s

undoing. Bell sends his heroine Geneva Crenshaw into the past to prove that the founders knew what they were doing when they inscribed white privilege into the Constitution. The Constitutional Convention is the locus of failure but in Bell's texts rather than becoming a site of potential repair it is instead the grounds for a second injustice as the founders go ahead with their plans despite Geneva Crenshaw's pleas.

This brings me to my second point, which is that repeated injustice in the past, present, and future is a common thread throughout Bell's work. The assumed inevitability of injustice and subsequent failure of all those who attempt to change fate, points to the need for a because-of interpretation of events. As Payne observes, "Because of motives are only possible when one looks back at the past" (93) and this situation aptly describes Bell's work. Bell cannot show us a better future because his is overly focused on the past. His approach is analogous to driving down the road while looking only in the rearview mirror. One should not be surprised that an accident inevitably occurs, but this may have more to do with human error than environmental hazards. One cannot predict the future with certainty by looking at the past, yet in many ways this is what Bell attempts to do. Given the difficulties of the past it is not surprising that he can only see darkness rather than light at the end of human history's tunnel.

This leads me to my third point, demonstrated in my critique of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. I contend that Bell's perspective on human history is apocalyptic because he makes no distinctions between past, present, and future circumstances. His obsession with the past makes failure in the future the only outcome he can imagine. Payne states, "If failure is pictured as blotting out an entire future goal or, as in the case of apocalyptic authors, an entire future, then avenues to

either consolation or compensation are limited” (95). Bell’s rhetoric aims at consolation because he can give readers no compensation. Compensation would require a different perspective than one gets from looking only in the rearview mirror. Compensation would require optimism that Bell does not possess.

In his pessimistic rhetoric, Bell aims only to console readers for future injustice. As I will show, Bell’s final tale of the space traders serves as a form of inoculation that prevents blacks from being optimistic about the future. It protects them from betrayal at the hands of whites, yet at the same time strips them of human agency’s catalyst, hope. In Bell’s rhetoric there is no “in-order-to sequence . . . that turns toward the future with either reformed goals or reformed means to achieve the original goals” (*Coping with Failure* 96). In Bell’s works the original goals and the means to achieve them are all found wanting. Furthermore, the only transformation of selves possible is for blacks to become martyrs. Bell transforms blacks into a race of martyrs as a means of transcending past failure and providing them with consolation in both the present and the future. Consolation, however, is empty when it provides no means to compensation.

Constructing the Time-Line of Failure

Derrick Bell explicitly states the purpose of his work in the introduction to *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*. His work is an attempt to deal with a perceived failure in the post-civil rights era. It is an attempt to answer questions about the seeming permanence of the color line. Bell writes:

With the realization that the salvation of racial equality has eluded us again, questions arise from the ashes of our expectations: How have we failed—and

why? What does this failure mean—for black people and for whites? Where do we go from here? Should we redirect the quest for racial justice? (3)

Bell hopes “mainly to provoke discussion that will provide new insights and prompt more effective strategies” (3) for dealing with the aftermath of white backlash against civil rights initiatives.

In this work Bell is decidedly more optimistic about the prospects for change than he will be in his subsequent work. For now, he observes that “logical explanation fails before the patterns of contemporary discrimination . . .” making it necessary to use “the tools not only of reason but of unreason of fantasy” (5) to search for an answer to a problem he still believes can be solved. Because he believes that “barriers to racial equality . . . are neither novel nor new” (7) Bell seeks his answers in America’s past. He takes “the liberty of tampering with time and history to examine the original contradiction in the Constitution of the United States—a contradiction that is at the heart of the blacks’ present-day difficulty of gaining legal redress” (7). Bell takes other liberties as well in an effort to explain the shortcomings of the present and the prospects for the future.

The first of Bell’s tales examines what he calls the Constitutional contradiction, or the incorporation of slavery into a constitution that secured the blessings of liberty for many. Yet liberty and justice were not for all, and Bell sends his heroine Geneva Crenshaw into the past in an attempt to change the future. Geneva, a black civil rights attorney, journeys back to 1787 to speak to the founding fathers at the Constitutional Convention. She hopes that her knowledge of America’s future and the nation’s difficulty in dealing with the problem of the color line will convince the founders to re-

think their position on slavery. Yet her entreaties fail to convince the delegates to change the course of history.

What Bell explains to the reader via Crenshaw is that the founders were well aware of the contradictions they wrote into the Constitution. These were men who chose to live with a paradox because southern delegates “demanded the slavery compromises as their absolute precondition to forming a new government” (*And We Are Not Saved* 30). Furthermore, the founders understood “that the economic benefits of slavery do not accrue only to the south . . .” and therefore sought to protect their “property interests at the cost of [their] principles” (303). As one delegate in Bell’s version of the convention observed, “Slavery has provided the wealth that made independence possible” (34). For this reason the founders viewed slavery as a solution to a problem rather than as a contradiction (41).

Bell at times also seeks solutions to the problem of the color line by embracing a contradiction. In his second tale, Bell imagines the possibility of a conservative crusader who as a member of the Supreme Court would “wage a ceaseless campaign against the liberal orientation of its decisions” (54). The aim would be to “incite radical reform by the only means possible: hardening the hearts of the upper classes against those whom they exploit” (54). Bell believes that by hardening the heart of pharaoh he can incite rebellion among the populace. Poor whites would then recognize that they have more in common with poor blacks than rich whites. Bell would increase class division and the suffering of those at the bottom as a means to trump the race card which has been used against both poor blacks and whites since the nation’s founding. He believes it is necessary to abandon civil rights litigation and social programs that “manage only to

stave off starvation while keeping the masses too weak to recognize their true status” (54).

Bell’s desire to let conservatism run its course in order to bring about radical revolt is ingenious. Yet his fundamental aim of bringing about a coalition between poor whites and blacks is not new. W.E.B. Du Bois recognized the economic similarities between poor white and poor black sharecroppers even if they did not. He too recognized that poor whites refused to see this because they were constantly gazing into a mirror that reflected only their race and not their social class. Whereas Du Bois sought to bring about class-consciousness through reasoned discourse, Bell abandons this approach. His understanding of the irrationality of racism leads him to embrace the seemingly irrational strategy of working for the cause of racial justice by working against it. Rather than making whites aware of how racism works, he imagines a time of dire economic circumstances in which their understanding of class exploitation will allow them to overcome racism in the interest of self-preservation.

The problem with Bell’s plan is that the Great Depression did not lead to the utopia Bell imagines and it is doubtful whether this approach would do much more than increase the misery of society’s less fortunate. As the heroine Geneva Crenshaw admonishes Bell, “Your suffering, while real, is on a very different and less harsh level than that endured by the black masses whose numbers are increasing rapidly. I doubt that many of them would subscribe to your stoicism” (74). Here Bell is reminded that class-consciousness is not only a problem for whites but also for blacks as well. Class-consciousness should be a factor in both the analysis of social problems and the solutions posed for them. Nevertheless, at various times Bell fails to take class into account.

When Bell discusses the possibility of an ultimate voting rights act he fails to make any class distinctions among blacks. Yet Jennifer Hochschild in *Facing Up to the American Dream* notes various differences. One difference is that blacks in the middle class tend to vote at the same levels as whites, whereas poor blacks generally have lower levels of participation. Still Bell ignores differences such as these and instead wonders whether a voting system based on proportional representation would be of benefit to all blacks.

Bell makes the past come alive in the character of a state senator whose opposition to the interests of blacks is legendary. The senator is on his way to address the legislature on a bill that “would make it virtually impossible for blacks to gain election to the state legislature or any statewide office” (*And We Are Not Saved* 75). Yet on the way to the state capital the senator has an accident and his car careens off a bridge and into the water. Geneva Crenshaw, the black heroine of Bell’s tales, saves the senator from drowning. Although the senator recovers from his injuries he finds himself tormented by a voice telling him, “This is your chance! This is your chance!” (76). Eventually, the senator realizes what he must do to make things right. Rather than advocating reapportionment schemes to disenfranchise blacks, the senator begins a campaign to ensure greater participation of blacks through a new proportional representation plan. This plan would allow minorities “to elect representatives of their choice in numbers equal to their proportion of the population eligible to vote” (87). The senator’s fictional proposal is reminiscent of Lani Guinier’s proposal in her book *Tyranny of the Majority* and shows yet again the ways in which Bell draws upon the past as a means of speaking about the future.

In Bell's fictional tale the senator's colleagues are left in disbelief in regard to his political conversion. Bell sees merit in the senator's plan, yet Geneva Crenshaw argues that a proportional voting system could ultimately weaken the voting power of blacks as all black districts are created. Blacks would gain individual black representatives yet lose influence with white representatives who might otherwise need their votes.

Bell's discussion of the past leads him from a discussion of political equality to the quest for educational parity. In "The Chronicle of the Black School Children" Bell examines the influence of desegregation on the nation's school systems. As part of his thought experiment he imagines that every black child across the country disappears on the way to school. It is an event of biblical proportions as the children vanish without a trace, as if engulfed in the rapture depicted in Revelation. In Bell's tale, whites around the nation show sympathy for the victims but after a short while conclude that "perhaps it was all for the best" (103). For some time black children were seen as a burden on the nation's schools, and now that burden was alleviated. Whites no longer had to fear increasing minority enrollment and the corresponding decline of academic standards, discipline, and safety they believed would occur when blacks became a majority within a school (103).

Over time however, the impact of blacks on the nation's schools became evident in other ways. Bell discusses the financial gains of desegregation for white teachers, bus drivers, builders, and school boards. Black enrollment generated increased demand for services as well as bringing in federal and state funds. Now that the nation's black children had disappeared fewer teachers, bus drivers, and builders were needed. School boards began to see declines in federal and state appropriations while still needing to

meet the needs of white students bused in from surrounding areas. According to Bell, “Armed with this information a large sum was appropriated to conduct a search for the missing black children” (107). Nevertheless, the children could not be found.

Bell’s tale serves as a reminder that whites have benefited from racial oppression and its corresponding remedies. These remedies have often failed to cure blacks of social stigma and alleviate disparities. They have however, contributed to economic growth and job creation around the nation. Bell believes that whites pretend not to notice these benefits except during circumstances when their well being is affected.

The subject of reparations directly addresses the extent to which some whites benefited from the nation’s mistreatment of blacks. In “The Chronicle of the Black Reparations Foundation” Bell speaks of the unacknowledged gains that have accrued to whites as a result of slavery and segregation. He notes that whites deny not only the benefits of unequal treatment under the law that have worked in their favor but also the detriments of unequal treatment for the nation’s black citizens. Bell asserts that whites will never repay the debt that Randall Robinson and others argue is owed to blacks. For this reason he imagines the possibility of one white man, a Jewish immigrant named Ben Goldrich, acting as a savior of the white race and redeeming its sins through his own generosity.

Goldrich seeks to atone for the nation’s sins and alleviate the gross disparities between whites and blacks. He attempts to do so through the creation of a reparations foundation that will distribute his vast wealth among the nation’s black population. Initially, blacks are overjoyed at the plan but whites react differently. White opposition to the plan mounts swiftly as lawyers charge that Goldrich’s plan to help blacks is

discriminatory towards whites. Ultimately white opposition prevails as the Supreme Court renders a decision stating that Goldrich's plan violates the Fourteenth Amendment. This amendment was initially part of the nation's attempt to atone for slavery. Now it is used as a means to prevent redress for slavery's economic consequences.

Bell concludes his tale with the understanding that white resistance to black equality runs deep. As Geneva Crenshaw suggests:

There might be opposition other than racial. In a competitive society, all are threatened by any aid to those deemed lower on the economic scale that exceeds bare minimum subsistence—as in the resentment to the food-stamp program when a recipient is seen purchasing a steak or other luxury food. (135)

Bell believes that whites defend both the status quo and their place in the social hierarchy. Blacks were brought here as slaves and in Bell's eyes whites are threatened by the idea of them being anything other than slaves to white economic interests.

Bell uses the debate over affirmative action as a means to prove his point. In "The Chronicle of the Devine Gift" Bell argues that affirmative action, while seemingly meant to help blacks, is ultimately meant to protect the interests of whites. In Bell's tale, Devine Taylor, one of the nation's most successful black businessmen, offers to help recruit lawyers to teach at a preeminent law school. Bell is a member of the school's faculty and laments the dearth of fellow minorities at his school. In general, white faculty members attribute this to the difficulty of finding qualified minority applicants. Devine Taylor's gift to Bell and to the law school is his ability to locate minority applicants with impressive credentials that meet the school's standards of merit.

Initially, the influx of black, hispanic, and asian recruits is accepted among the white faculty and the administration. Over time, however, the growing numbers of minorities on the law school faculty become a cause for concern. The concern is that the law school will lose prestige when its faculty no longer has a white majority. Despite the excellent qualifications of the new hires, the law school puts a freeze on hiring any more minorities. This causes Bell to speculate about the true nature of affirmative action.

Each of the new hires had qualifications that equaled or exceeded those of white applicants. Yet over time the faculty said “Enough.” to the influx of qualified minorities in order to protect the interests of whites. A few minorities could be tolerated, but a substantial number of them created problems for an institution that equated white faces with prestige and believed that the public did as well. In the end, Bell concludes that “merit” is not the overriding concern in faculty hires but rather the maintenance of white privilege. White privilege is maintained and even aided with the addition of a few minority faces for the sake of appearing to endorse diversity. Yet too many minorities, even highly qualified ones, constitute a threat to the racial status quo.

Bell’s examination of the racial status quo implies that reform is more rhetoric than reality. Yet it is through rhetoric that we create our realities, and Bell uses it to envision alternative realities that speak volumes on the commonly accepted one. In “The Chronicle of the Amber Cloud” Bell envisions a dark cloud falling over the households of “white adolescents of wealthy parents” (162) across the country. The cloud operates like a biblical plague, causing adolescents to die not a literal but a social death. The amber cloud causes young white children’s skin to darken, and their behavior to resemble that of black inner city children. Young white children affected by the amber cloud become

“lethargic, suspicious, withdrawn and hopelessly insecure” much like children in the inner city. Soon gang warfare becomes a part of the suburban landscape as “upper-income enclaves, which had long excluded blacks and the poor, now were devastated from within” (163).

Bell creates the tale of the amber cloud to examine whether or not a common tragedy linking whites to blacks could lead to measures of racial reform. In the end he concludes that this is not the case as government aid for the amber cloud victims does not extend to poor blacks in his imagined scenario. Bell believes that the racial status quo in the United States would allow the government to obtain a cure for the amber cloud syndrome at great cost, yet deny its administration to poor blacks suffering from identical symptoms. In Bell’s world, white racism leads to a distinction between the deserving and undeserving victims. This line is drawn between whites and blacks in much the same way as during the Great Depression when whites were offered relief denied to blacks. Once again Bell argues that the times have not changed, and that the passage of the equal protection clause does little to ensure equality or protect blacks from white racism.

The ways in which Bell attempts to view the present in light of the past is also evident in his discussion of black families. In “The Chronicle of the Twenty-Seventh-Year Syndrome” Bell imagines a scenario in which black women who have “neither ever been married or entertained a bona fide offer of marriage to a black male” begin to suffer from a strange disease (199). The disease causes them to fall asleep and awaken after four to six weeks with “a special form of amnesia” in which they’ve “lost their professional skills” (198-199). It is as if they are being punished for being more successful at work than at home.

The problem with Bell's tale is that it lays a heavy burden on black women to create black families or face dire consequences. Yet black men, many of who are deemed ineligible for marriage because they lack both good educations and good jobs are not punished. Rather black men are given the power to be saviors for black women who until the twenty-seventh year syndrome's outbreak did not need saving. What Bell attempts to do in this tale is to re-inscribe a relationship of male dominance within not only the family but also the race. Bell notes "the deeply damaged sense of black male wholeness" (209) that came about as a consequence of slavery's damaging affects on black family structure and relationships between genders. Yet rather than envision a situation in which black men become whole as a means to empowerment, he instead chooses to take something away from black women so that men can feel more powerful.

Bell also seeks to limit the choice of sexual partners for black women as none other than the black male will suffice. Black women in interracial marriages or homosexual relationships are both subject to the twenty-seventh year syndrome. Black men on the other hand, are left free to pursue any relationship they would like to have. The burden for creating black families is placed squarely on the shoulders of black women.

In this tale Bell's admiration for the idealized stability of the pre-civil rights black family is evident. This idealization for the past leads him to imagine the negation of black women's present success outside the home if they fail to maintain the home for black men. Bell's longing for the past is in many ways a longing for patriarchy and the power it yielded for black men within the family unity. Since black women complain that black men are not educated enough or gainfully employed, Bell devises a solution to

the problem. Yet his solution is not to educate black men or find them better jobs in his imagined scenario but rather to strip black women of their education and jobs. Perhaps Bell imagines that then black women will have little cause for complaint as they will have nothing to hold over black men.

Repeatedly Bell discusses the hold he believes slavery has over black life for better or for worse. In “The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls” Bell discovers a text that has therapeutic value for blacks. The scrolls describe in great detail “a history gory, brutal, filled with more murder, mutilation, rape, and brutality than most of us can imagine or easily comprehend” (217). The scrolls describe slavery in all its facets but most importantly the ways in which slaves dealt with the horrors of everyday life. According to Bell, knowledge of past injustices and the ways in which blacks coped with them in the past is beneficial for blacks today.

Bell envisions that the lessons of the slave scrolls transform the lives of blacks in America today. He implies that history has the power to change the present and the future. Bell imagines that a knowledge of the slave scrolls changes black social life as negative outcomes are replaced with positive ones in areas such as family, education, employment, and politics. Bell notes that the shift is so profound that “Blacks began outachieveing whites in every area save sports and entertainment—activities that black people no longer believed could compare with the challenge of getting ahead through business and industry” (219). The healing power of the slave scrolls began to reverse the positions of both slaves and masters in society.

The power of the slave scrolls to affect black life did not go unnoticed. Rather than cheer the disappearance of social ills among blacks, whites responded acrimoniously

to black advancement in the social hierarchy. Bell writes, “It was, some whites felt, neither right nor fair—even un-American—for a minority group to gain so much advantage over the majority in a majoritarian society” (219). As a result, white backlash led to Racial Toleration Laws that forbid the teaching of the slave scrolls because whites saw the lessons as anti-white. Bell concludes that ultimately “even a monumental effort to pull ourselves up, sufficient to make even Booker T. Washington proud, will not move us out of our traditional place in this society” (233). Bell asserts that too much progress among blacks will be seen as un-American because it works against the inequities written into the Constitution to ensure white privilege.

Inequities written into the Constitution manifest themselves in both our political and social life. In the legal system, political and social lives conjoin often to the detriment of black defendants. Disparities in drug laws condemn black defendants while often letting whites off the hook with lesser sentences. Bell’s solution is to imagine a day when blacks no longer commit crimes. Yet even in this idyllic scenario problems persist between blacks and whites. In “The Chronicle of the Black Crime Cure” Bell imagines that a drug dealer hiding his stash in a cave discovers magic stones that when ingested cure black criminals of their urge to break the law. Not only are black criminals cured of their urge to break the law but they become overpowered by a “desire to fight black crime wherever it exist[s]” (246). As farfetched as this tale may sound, Bell uses it to illustrate a point. His point is that no matter what blacks do or do not do, whites will resist their efforts to change the social hierarchy. As black crime dissipates and violence in schools declines, white expectations of black failure continue to determine the outcomes for blacks. This is similar to the argument that Randall Robinson makes for the conditioned

expectations society has for blacks, the only difference is that Bell argues that these low expectations will never change.

Bell argues that as in the pre-civil war era when fear of slave revolts and “economic interests” united whites the same applies today. White collar crime is less stigmatized than no collar crime among blacks, and whites’ fear of blacks continues to defy rational explanation even when blacks are no threat to whites (247). Black success however, is seen as a threat to white economic interests. Bell contends that it is these interests that whites seek to defend. In Bell’s tale white apathy toward improving black life eventually leads many blacks to turn away from their efforts to advance in society. This is because they discover the truth Bell seeks to preach to the masses of blacks:

The central motivating theme of black struggle is faith, the common thread in all civil rights struggle is eventual failure. Like the drowning person who grasps for straws, you contend for your positions here with fervor or desperation. Have you learned nothing from experience? (248-249)

According to Bell, “civil rights programs are worthless opiates offering no more than delusions of hope to a people whose color has foredoomed them to lives of tokenism, subservience, and exclusion” (249). For Bell, integration into American society as it is does not constitute a viable plan. The only option short of separation is for blacks to continue pressing for social change in search of a third way. Out of the struggle for reform “may come the insight and imagination necessary to recast the nation’s guiding principles closer to the ideal—for all Americans” (255).

Yet Bell’s own faith in the possibility of black success in this endeavor eventually waned. Part of this may stem from the fact that in Bell’s final tale he saw it as necessary

to use supernatural entities called the Curia Sisters to create accord among black leaders fighting among themselves. The perceived failure of blacks as a group also stems from the failure of the talented tenth. Nevertheless, if Bell's pessimism about American society is warranted, then the failure of the talented tenth is predetermined. In his subsequent work, Bell follows this line of thought to its conclusion.

Embracing the Apocalypse

Derrick Bell's book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* argues that for African Americans the past and the future are the same. The allegorical stories he presents in his work are offered as proof that "racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" (xiii). As such, the best that blacks can do is to turn their resistance to a racist system into a form of triumph. They can live to "harass white folks," (xvi) and in some ways this is what Bell seeks to do in his book.

Bell harasses white folks and stirs the angst of blacks by reminding both of the impact of slavery on blacks. He notes that for blacks "slave heritage was more a symbol of shame than a source of pride" (1). In the period before World War II it was something blacks sought to forget. Yet following the War "and particularly in the 1960s . . ." slavery became "a sure means of evoking racial rage as a prelude to righteously repeated demands for 'Freedom Now' " (2). The past, in this case, was used for present purposes. Noting the effectiveness of this strategy, Bell utilizes it for his own purposes.

Bell argues that there is a connection between "the racism that made slavery feasible" (3) and the current status of blacks in the U.S. He cites statistical evidence as proof that since the 1960s progress is notable for some blacks but not for all. Bell's

collectivist orientation causes him to see this as a problem for all blacks. Bell is his brother's keeper and therefore argues that "even the most successful of us are haunted by the plight of our less fortunate brethren" (3). He critiques the idea of "racial progress" and in doing so provides his reading of present trends as a means to judge both the progress of the past, and the potential of the future.

Bell asserts that problems for blacks stem from the failure of whites "to identify with blacks as a group" (4). Bell believes that white's fear "that blacks will unfairly get ahead of them" (4) sustains an attitude among whites that makes past civil rights victories irrelevant. He believes that whites today have the same attitudes towards blacks as a group as whites did during segregation. For this reason the past determines the present and even future possibilities for blacks.

Bell seeks to reject past approaches in order "to 'get real' about race and the persistence of racism in America" (5). He argues that blacks must "plan for the future by reviewing the experiences of the past. The reality check Bell seeks to give blacks requires that he re-write the past in order to create a new future. Rather than progress, Bell speaks of stagnation. Instead of optimism, Bell dispenses pessimism as an antidote for unmet expectations. He states that instead of meeting "unexpected setbacks" blacks should come to understand "a current message with implications for the future which history has already taught us about the past" (5). In essence, Bell argues that no matter what blacks do they cannot win.

Bell draws a straight line from the Civil War to segregation and into the present in order to show that white attitudes are determinative of black progress. His timeline is important to his argument because it demonstrates the continuation of a single problem;

the lack of change in the attitudes of whites and this society in regard to blacks.

According to Bell,

The code words differ. The message is the same. Whites are rallied on the basis of racial pride and patriotism to accept their often lowly lot in life, and encouraged to vent their frustration by opposing any serious black advancement.

(9)

Bell argues that whites as a group oppose blacks as a group. He notes that “liberal democratic theory” which speaks of individuals, is silent on the question of group conflict. Past assumptions and beliefs about black progress based on liberalism fail to overcome the fact that racism is a fundamental and permanent part of American society (10). If as Bell asserts “color determines the social and economic status of all African Americans” (10) then the group is more important than the individual. A civil rights movement for individual rights in keeping with liberal democratic principles therefore failed to create meaningful change for blacks as a group. Blacks, Bell states, “remain what we were in the beginning: a dark and foreign presence, always designated ‘other’ ” (10).

The essential sameness of both blacks and whites in the present in relation to their predecessors is crucial to Bell’s argument. He states “We are now as were our forebears when they were brought to the New World, objects for barter for those who, while profiting from our existence, deny our humanity” (11). Bell sees whites living today as no different than those of the past, possessing the same mindset as those who enslaved blacks and nearly annihilated Native Americans.

For Bell the past acts as a sacred text, it is an oracle of the future that blacks must heed if they are to fully understand their place in America. Bell uses his reading of American history to argue that:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (12)

For Bell defiance is an act of dignity that has therapeutic value. Defiance provides blacks with a means of transcendence and provides them with a reason to live. Bell argues that “beyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly both a reason and the means for further struggle” (12).

Bell’s text is also therapeutic in nature in that it is meant to cure what he calls “the racial equality syndrome” (13). Faith in the American dream, faith that the goal of racial justice in America will be realized is misplaced and detrimental for blacks because according to Bell, blacks must face the “deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status” (12). Faith from this perspective is a disease consuming blacks. Instead of faith, blacks must embrace disbelief and skepticism. Bell urges blacks to “reassess the worth of the racial assumptions on which, without careful thought, we have presumed too much and relied on too long” (14). Bell’s cure for the miseducated Negro is a history lesson, a re-education that turns believers into heretics.

From Bell's viewpoint, the power of disbelief is one of the few assertions of agency blacks have left in the face of white supremacy. For Bell, coming to terms with America's shameful past and present injustices will allow blacks to embrace the future with an understanding that it will be the same as the past. It is almost as if Bell sees blacks as schizophrenics. On one hand, they are living in a world of injustice. On the other hand, they believe that the injustices they experience are somehow unrepresentative of reality, of the way things should be. Blacks in this case live in two different worlds, one filled with a history of pain and suffering, the other world, filled with hopes and dreams for the future. The cure Bell proposes is the abandonment of this second 'dream' world for the hard reality of the first. The cure for sustained disappointment is the abandonment of one's hopes and dreams. Although this may seem a ludicrous position to defend, Bell argues that it is the only sensible one. It is sensible because failure seems inevitable in a world in which black is the necessary foil to white.

Apocalyptic Tales

Bell argues that the historical relationship between whites and blacks is one of exploitation. Rather than a symbiotic relationship in which both sides benefit, he describes the relations between whites and blacks as parasitic. Using a fictional character he calls Jesse B. Semple, Bell provides the premise of his work. Bell uses Semple to speak his own mind, and what he has to say is this:

I don't ever see white people getting smart about race . . . Unless there is a crisis, they learn nothing! And if they can get out of a bad situation by messing with our

rights, that is what they do, have been doing for two hundred years, and likely will continue to do. (28)

For this reason, Bell holds no hope that the parasitic and exploitative relationship extending from slavery to segregation, and he believes into the present and the future, will ever change. The present, despite apparent advances, is in Bell's eyes no different than the past. The future, he argues, will be no different than the present. Bell believes that the foundation of American society is built on racism and that this will never change because it serves the interests of whites.

Bell sees the historical relationship between whites and blacks as one in which white interests are served to the detriment of blacks. He argues that both material changes in American society such as desegregation in the educational system, as well as symbolic changes such as the creation of a holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are of no more value than “the glass trinkets and combs they used in Africa a few centuries ago” (18). Desegregation in the nation's public schools is from Bell's perspective more symbolic than material even though it was supposed to be the latter. Bell argues that instead of complying with desegregation orders, school officials created “separate educational programs for black children within schools that were integrated in name only” (18). In essence, white society writes checks and hands them to blacks as a form of payment. Yet “before you can cash them in . . . the man has called the bank and stopped payment or otherwise made them useless—except, of course, as symbols” (19).

The symbolic nature of progress for blacks in America angers Bell. During one exchange with the fictional character Jesse B. Semple, Bells asks, “How do you keep all that anger aimed at whites when so many black men turn it on their families, each other

and themselves?” Semple replies, “I ain’t no saint man. My rage is big enough to hurt family, friends, and myself—and still have plenty left over. Only thing is I still remember the root course of my anger” (29). Through his fictional characters Bell speaks his own mind and at times expresses his own anger and frustration.

Bell, like his characters, is sometimes angry and frustrated because he sees the apparent futility of trying to rid America of racism. Ultimately, Bell argues that all blacks can do is accept that no matter what they do it will avail them nothing. Bell notes that as some blacks succeed in mainstream America it leads whites to:

conclude right off that discrimination is over and that if the rest of us got up off our dead asses, dropped the welfare tit, stopped having illegitimate babies, and found jobs, we would all be just like you [successful blacks]. (26)

Blacks in this case are damned if they do succeed, as their success will be used to point out failures in other blacks. They are also damned if they don’t succeed, as their failure generally confirms existing stereotypes and prejudices. Ultimately this leads some blacks to seek escape from America.

Bell’s character Jesse B. Semple states that he and his wife visit the Caribbean because “it makes us feel good” (30). Bell extends this urge to feel good beyond Semple to blacks as a group, and it is for this reason that “a homeland for blacks . . . [is] the biggest symbol of all” (30). Bell uses the back to Africa idea in a new way. Knowing that the reality of present day Africa is a far cry from the mythic ideal it symbolizes for some blacks, Bell conjures “the lost continent of Atlantis” (32) from the depths of the ocean in his tale of the Afrolantic Awakening.

Afrolantica, as Atlantis is called in Bell's story, is hospitable only to African Americans. It is their promised land and no one else's. Bell makes parallels between the ancient Hebrews desire to leave Egypt, and blacks quickening desire to leave America for a promised land filled with "substantial deposits of precious minerals including gold and silver" (33) rather than milk and honey. Just as the ancient Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea, whites attempting to enter Afrolantica are drowned in the thickness of the air. Whites find it difficult to breath, "like trying to breath under the burdens of all the world" (34) while blacks feel "exhilarated and euphoric" (35) much like the ancient Hebrews upon leaving Egypt.

As in ancient Egypt when pharaoh would not let the Hebrews go, so white Americans in Bell's tale resist letting blacks go. Bell uses a host of characters from black history such as Marcus Garvey, and Frederick Douglass, among others, to argue the pros and cons of emigration. While blacks moved in favor of emigration, whites opposed it because in the words of one white character, "It's more than this God-fearing, America—loving white man can take" (42-43). Many whites believed that blacks were being given too much, and the potential emigration of blacks amounted to "a dire plot to undermine world stability, economic security, and the American way of life" (43). In short, the slaves should not be allowed to leave the plantation. Nevertheless, many blacks, like the Hebrews of old, set out on a journey to freedom.

Freedom, however, didn't require a promised land after all. Bell notes that as blacks set out on ships for Afrolantica it sank back into the ocean. Yet rather than despair, blacks onboard the ships "felt deep satisfaction . . . in having gotten this far in their enterprise, in having accomplished it together" (45). What Bell argues here is that

the symbolic idea of a homeland can have material consequences even if blacks never make it there. The confidence blacks gained from attempting to reach Afrolantica convinced them that “they need no longer act as victims of centuries of oppression” (46).

Despite envisioning a future in which blacks could work together toward fighting oppression, Bell also envisioned a future in which whites worked together to recreate oppressive aspects of the past. In his story “The Racial Preference Licensing Act” Bell imagined a future in which whites could legally discriminate against blacks if they paid the appropriate license to discriminate in a public place. Money from these license fees would go toward the creation of an “equality fund” that would support black businesses, homebuyers, and “students seeking college and vocational education” (48-49). In this way blacks could profit from discrimination.

In Bell’s tale, both the President and eventually the Supreme Court come to support the Act for its “hard-headed realism” (49) in lieu of attempting to “police morality” and regulate “appropriate ‘moral’ behavior” as other government initiatives had done (51). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions were now passé. According to the President, this was “a radical new approach to the nation’s continuing tensions over racial status” (52). In the words of Bell’s heroine Geneva Crenshaw, “History and—one would hope—common sense tells us that [the] dream is never coming true” (61).

Along with a history of failed legislation and legal decree Bell also speaks of failed leadership among blacks. In his tale “The Last Black Hero” Bell creates a fictional character named Jason Warfield. Warfield is the leader of a “militant community based organization” and “a true hero for his people” (65). According to Warfield, successful

blacks eventually learn that “In this society they, as persons, are still ‘niggers’ ” (66). In this story Bell reminds readers once again that in his eyes the times have not changed.

One thing that has not changed in Bell’s mind is the tendency of black male leaders to choose white women over black women. Bell plays on this idea by having Warfield fall in love with his white female doctor, rather than a black female co-worker in his organization. The theme of Bell’s tale is black female abandonment and their betrayal by black men who fail to “encourage the forming and maintenance of strong black families as essential for survival in a hostile racist society” (80). In the end Warfield serves as a “reminder that human heroes have feet of clay” (84). As Neva, the black female protagonist of this tale explains, “Jason is not the first black leader who has failed to live up to the people’s expectations and hopes. I doubt he’ll be the last” (84). In this case, abandonment of black women is seen as tantamount to abandonment of the race.

What is interesting about this story is not just Bell’s themes of abandonment and betrayal but rather the lack of freedom he extends to black male leaders and black men in general. Engaged in what Bell sees as a racial war, black men who fall in love with someone who is “not a member of their group” (69) become suspect. It is as if they are traitors who have gone over to the other side.

The color line, Bell suggests, still exists, boldly separating the lives of blacks and whites in America. For Bell, the past, present and future are all the same. In his eyes the fundamental relationship between blacks and whites is no different today than yesterday or yesteryear. For this reason, Bell asserts that understanding the past is the best way to gain a foothold on one’s present position.

In his tale “Divining a Racial Realism Theory” Bell expounds his beliefs about the position of blacks in America through a fictional character named Erika Wechsler. Erika is not a white liberal but rather a racial realist. She is an individual who accepts that “American racial history has demonstrated both steady subordination of blacks in one way or another and, if examined closely, a pattern of cyclical progress and cyclical regression” (98). Racism from this perspective is here to stay, part and parcel of the American landscape.

Bell agrees with much of this perspective yet finds it hard to agree with the conclusions that Erika draws from it. Erika and a group called White Citizens for Black Survival or WCBS, have taken up arms and taken to the woods to await the coming of “a black holocaust or some other all-out attack on America’s historic scapegoats” (93).

On one hand, Bell listens to Erika in disbelief, yet on the other he is made to see that there is truth in much of what she says. In this tale Bell is walking in a national park in Oregon and barely escapes being struck by a bullet fired from Erika’s rifle. She had not meant to kill him but Bell quickly learns that other militia active in the same woods have different agendas. On one occasion Erika even saves Bell from a militiaman attempting to take them both prisoner. Bell learns that the pen is not mightier than the sword. He also learns from Erika “that if the need is great enough, the rewards large enough . . . blacks can be sacrificed at will”. In short, Ericka argues that “For over three centuries this country has promised democracy and delivered discrimination and delusions” (99). Bell ultimately embraces not only Ericka’s logic but also the dire consequences that may result from carrying out her premises to their conclusion.

In “The Rules of Racial Standing” Bell positions himself as Moses on the mountaintop. He hears a voice which is almost godlike that commands him to “speak up, Ike, an ‘spress yo’se’f!” (110). Like Moses, Bell comes down from the mountaintop with something for the people. He brings with him five rules of racial standing. In the Bible, Moses was given the Ten Commandments, and in Bell’s own book he is given the five rules during a dream. Now awake, Bell expounds upon the five rules and what they tell us about American society.

According to Bell’s heroine, Geneva Crenshaw, “These rules seem more like revelations of distilled woe than gifts” (114). In this she is correct, as Bell’s rules are not rules per say but rather pronouncements about how little voice blacks have in American society. Bell notes, “It is no accident that white writers have dominated the recording of race relations in this country” (113). In the end, Bell concludes that even those blacks who attain wisdom and the “gift of prophecy about racism” must lie with the sorrow of knowing “that no amount of public prophecy, no matter its accuracy, can either repeal the Rules of Racial Standing or prevent their operation” (125). Bell’s rules are in essence a description of the futility of black agency in the face of what he deems racial oppression. Yet Bell’s wisdom brings him only the sorrow noted in Ecclesiastes, and through his heroine he does little more than preach a jeremiad to the nation.

Jeremiads generally precede destruction and in a story entitled “A Law Professor’s Protest” Bell envisions Harvard’s black faculty and administrators, along with Harvard’s president, perishing in a “huge nuclearlike fireball” (127). In a touch of irony, Black faculty and administrators were meeting with Harvard’s president to discuss the paucity of black faculty and administrators at Harvard. Yet all within the president’s

residence “disappeared in a flash of fire that reduced even the stone and steel to a fine volcanic ash” (128). Suspicion surrounded the disasters as both blacks and whites across the nation alleged wrongdoing on the part of others, and “rumors ignited riots in the inner cities” (128).

The reason for the meeting was to discuss a plan to reverse Harvard’s history of resistance to changing traditional hiring practices that many believed discriminated against minorities. As a posthumous act, Harvard implemented a “Talented Tenth Program” that doubled “the percentage of black and Hispanic faculty and staff” at the institution (134). Bell mixes reality with fiction as he discusses the reaction of Harvard’s white faculty and administrators to this tale. He recounts his twenty year struggle at Harvard “to be the first, but not the last, black hired” and his disappointment that “after more than twenty years of clearing the trail . . . [it is] all grown over” (138). In the end, Bell concludes that “standards of qualification now subtly play the role once performed overtly by policies of racial exclusion” (139).

The problem however, is that whites may have difficulty seeing life from a perspective not their own. To counter this possibility, in “Racism’s Secret Bonding” Bell imagines that a series of racial data storms composed of “hitherto-unknown energy rays” flooded white American’s minds with not only “the statistics” but also “the horrified feelings of the subjects of those statistics” (148). In essence, white Americans were privy to the black experience from slavery to the present. Over time “the storms and their accompanying background lectures” led to “massive, day-long sitdown strikes” among whites (149). White officials soon passed legislative reforms regarding discrimination and white citizens eagerly complied with the new laws (150).

Bell creates this tale to question whether whites would act differently if they knew the effect of racism on blacks. Bell surmises that this knowledge could change whites and in turn American society. Yet through his fictional character, Geneva Crenshaw, Bell plays devil's advocate. According to Crenshaw:

We fool ourselves when we argue that whites do not know what racial subordination does to its victims. Oh, they may not know the details of the harm or its scope, but they *know*. Knowing is the key to racism's greatest value to individual whites and to their interest in maintaining the racial status quo. (151)

Furthermore, Crenshaw argues:

Americans achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom—an aspect of social functioning that more than any other has retained its viability and its value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day. (152)

Ultimately this leads Bell to wonder whether blacks are America's scapegoats (153) "always at risk of some ultimate betrayal by those who will treat such treachery as right" (155). Whites, he concludes, are both knowledgeable of racism and complicit in its wrongs. He sees blacks as "a race of Jeremiahs, prophets calling for the nation to repent" with little hope of success (157).

Bell's lack of belief in the nation's desire to repent is summed up in his tale "The Space Traders". Here Bell argues that in the not too distant future, aliens offer Americans monetary and technological assistance to cure the nation's financial and environmental woes in return for its black citizens. No one is quite sure what to make of the offer, and no one knows what will happen to blacks if they are sent away. What Bell

points out is that in his eyes few white Americans would really care. As the President of the United States tells his cabinet, “They [the aliens] are offering not only a solution to our nation’s present problems but also one—surely an ultimate one—to what might be called the great American racial experiment” (164). This ultimate solution is eventually embraced as blacks are deemed expendable.

Bell uses a character named Gleason Golightly to argue the black conservative position against forced emigration. He is a modern day Booker T. Washington, and the only black to have any influence on the conservative administration. Yet Professor Golightly’s words are of no avail and his family is sent away with all the other black families as whites pass a Twenty-Seventh Amendment that effectively authorizes the space trade.

Bell uses aspects of history such as the slave trade, the Civil War, World War II, and McCarthyism, to paint a picture of oppression. He intertwines aspects of the past with his imagined future in order to teach us a lesson in the present. The lesson is that blacks in this country are no more than chattel. Laws to the contrary can be ignored or re-written whenever it is convenient to do so. Bell’s tale ends with blacks being herded onto alien ships in the same manner that they arrived on slave ships. Told to “strip off all but a single undergarment . . . [and] linked by slender chains, black people left the New World as their forebears had arrived” (194).

Bell’s epilogue, “Beyond Despair” reiterates much of what he sought to accomplish through various stories. He notes the connections he sees between present-day blacks and their forebears, arguing that:

In these perilous times, we must do no less than they did: fashion a philosophy that both matches the unique dangers we face, and enables us to recognize in those dangers opportunities for committed living and human service. (195)

In short, he argues that “we are closer than we may realize to those in slavery . . .” (195).

For Bell, the past, present, and future are not as separate as they may appear. In fact, Bell’s approach is so deterministic that the past is both omnipresent and omnipotent.

History plays a crucial role in the human drama Bell creates because he believes that “we are imprisoned by the history of racial subordination in America . . .” (197). He observes that “racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting . . .” so that no matter where you are, there it is (198). Racism’s role in the shaping of American history is so large that Bell believes that it casts a shadow over both present and future prospects for blacks. In his eyes it is so determinative of black life that blacks are stripped of both agency and responsibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown first, how Derrick Bell utilizes the past, present, and possible future as a means to explore both the beginning and end of failure for blacks in America. Second, I have shown how repeated injustice is a common thread in Bell’s texts. Third, I have shown how Bell provides readers with an apocalyptic perspective on human history stemming from the fact that he makes no distinctions between the past, present, and future. Bell’s obsession with the past makes failure in the future the only possible outcome he can imagine.

Bell's work evidences the sense of both group failure and individual failure stemming from the rhetoric of W.E.B. Du Bois. Yet unlike Du Bois, Bell places no faith in the ability of the talented tenth, the guiding one-hundredth, or even the masses to resolve the problem of the color line. Rather than rally blacks towards new efforts to combat racism, Bell urges blacks to accept racism as a fundamental part of the American landscape. It is for this reason that the most Bell can do is attempt to console blacks for past, present, and future failure. Although Bell's encouragement of blacks to harass whites might in some ways be seen as compensatory, harassment can in no way fully compensate blacks for the losses Bell believes blacks have suffered. The trajectory of Bell's works aims towards consolation though what it provides must taste bitter in the mouths of those who force themselves to imbibe his rhetoric.

In the next chapter I will show how Randall Robinson seeks both consolation and compensation for blacks in America. Although repeated injustices are noted in Robinson's texts, unlike Bell, Robinson seeks for blacks a connection both spiritually and materially to America. Robinson believes that inclusion of African American contributions to our nation's history in its monuments will provide spiritual consolation for blacks. He also believes that material compensation in the form of reparations will help both blacks and the nation as a whole move beyond past injustice. Robinson sees "renaissance blacks," a group I see as analogous to Du Bois's talented tenth, as catalysts for change and calls on this group to pay its debt to the race. A sense of failure exists for both blacks as a group and individuals within the talented tenth who have failed to achieve the goal of complete 'racial uplift'. Robinson's texts provide blacks with a general explanation and a possible remedy for this sense of failure.

Chapter Five

The Spiritual-Material Topos in Randall Robinson's *The Debt* and *The Reckoning*

Payne asserts that considered rhetorically, “spiritual-material themes serve to complete the healing process by giving persons explanations and treatments that become guides for living and sources of consolation and compensation for any and all failures in the future” (*Coping with Failure* 121). In this chapter I will illustrate how Randall Robinson's desire to let blacks know what happened to them is a search for a general explanation for failure. The failure in this case is one for which he believes blacks should be consoled spiritually and compensated materially. First I will show that the spiritual and the material coalesce in that Robinson's emphasis on slavery memorials and texts is based on the belief that there is a spiritual benefit to the creation and maintenance of these cultural artifacts. The absence of such artifacts and thus the inability of blacks to worship their ancestors through them is a major grievance for Robinson. Moreover, Robinson connects spiritual poverty to economic poverty among blacks resulting in a sense of failure. Second, I will show that Robinson's claims for failure are based more on group failure than that of individuals. As I suggested earlier in the literature review, the materialistic failure of poor blacks engenders a sense of idealistic failure among middle class blacks. Robinson's works, as I illustrate, being one response to this sense of group failure.

In *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* Randall Robinson begins his story and the story he will tell about both blacks and whites with a somber tone. His story is

one that will challenge history and the ways in which we remember it. Robinson seeks to re-member the various material elements of our national past and present. The ways in which blacks are disembodied within it are painful to his spirit, and from his vantage point, destructive to the spirit of the nation's black citizens.

Robinson begins his journey, and the one that we will take with him, in the capitol building in Washington, D.C. "I looked straight up and immediately saw the callous irony, wondering if the slaves who had helped to erect the structure may have bristled at it as quickly as I" (*The Debt* 1). Inside the rotunda he cannot help but notice that the material embodiments of our national spirit fail to recognize the contributions of blacks to the same extent that those of whites are memorialized. He notes the absence of faces of color with the exception of a depiction that shows Native Americans engaged in violence against each other, and a small bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. with eyes that "look into the floor, as if the figure understands but cannot quite bear what is going on around it in the Rotunda" (2). What is going on is an erasure of the contributions of minorities to the creation and maintenance of American society. Only whites such as Thomas Jefferson are depicted with a countenance that "is proprietary, of the Rotunda if not of the country" (2). As Robinson observes, "The frescoes, the friezes, the oil paintings, the composite art of the Rotunda—this was to be America's iconographic idea of itself" (3). Yet the material symbols of America's spirit deny both the existence and the contributions of large segments of the population.

Robinson points out that although slaves' bodies and spirits were used to construct both the Capitol building and the city itself their contributions are unacknowledged. Other people were paid for their labor, and though Robinson visualizes

“the glistening backs of blacks with ropes and pulleys heaving the ponderous stones of the dome into place . . .” of the two books in the “gift kiosk run by the Capitol Historical Society . . . Neither book mentioned anything about the use of slave labor” (3). Here we have the bodies of one group, their material essence, used to construct material representations that both laud and feed the spirits of another. This is part of Robinson’s indictment against America. It is not only that slavery existed, but also that it is denied in our national symbols and monuments. Bodies dead and buried for centuries still have no recognition of their spirits. As important, Robinson believes that this lack of a material testament to the spirits of blacks’ ancestors is damaging to both the spirits of blacks living today and their possibilities for material achievement.

Robinson argues that the relationship between blacks and American culture is omitted from historical texts and artifacts extolling America’s past. Initially, he focuses on the civil war period in order to point out that blacks were once viewed as chattel, and even when freed became “spoils of war” and “contraband slaves” used to construct the Capitol (4). Blacks not only “fired and stacked the bricks” but also contributed the material essence of their bodies to constructing monuments of a freedom they did not enjoy (4). Robinson also notes that slave owners benefited materially from the work of unpaid blacks who labored. Robinson is not a Marxist seeking to turn the means of production over to the workers, but rather an advocate who requests back pay for past labor. The connection Robinson points out between blacks and American culture emphasizes the control of bodies and the wealth they produced of both a material and a spiritual nature. As he states of the Capitol, “This was the house of Liberty, and it had been built by slaves . . . paid only in the coin of pain” (6).

What Robinson seeks for blacks is a sense of connection both spiritually and materially to America in the same manner as white Americans. He asks that we “begin again as co-owners of a national democracy” (7). For this reason, Robinson’s arguments for reparations are two-fold, of both a spiritual and a material nature. Robinson’s work aims at not only material compensation but spiritual consolation as well.

Robinson speaks of a division within himself that results in “a war within, and . . . a great wanting of the spirit” (13). He is divided between his new self and an ancient self, a damaged self of the present and an “immortal self –the son of the shining but distant African ages” (13). He seeks to recall the life and memories of this ancient self because his inability to remember makes him less than whole in the present. Robinson extends his predicament to blacks as a group, arguing that the various aspects of culture that move “across the millennia like life giving rivers . . . [and] are essential to the health of any people’s spirit” are absent for blacks (15). In a sense, Robinson argues that the various elements that transcend individual identities and create a collective identity are themselves essential for individuals as well.

Robinson utilizes the second chapter of his work to give an example of the affect on black youth and black people in the present of a lack of knowledge about their past. After meeting a young boy named Billy who knew nothing of Randall Robinson, Trans Africa, or Nelson Mandela, Robinson begins to wonder what else the young boy might not know. He visualizes Billy in the Washington Mall with a mentor who is attempting to teach him about America through its memorials and monuments. Yet Billy does not see himself reflected in the memorials and monuments and wonders, “Where am I. Who am I? Why am I here?” (32). Robinson points out that the Washington Mall does little to

help the Billy answer these questions. Billy finds a memorial to the holocaust in Europe, but no memorial to the holocausts in America involving either black slaves or Native Americans. In the nation's commemorative malls the existence of blacks and other minorities is often denied.

Robinson sees this as a failure in American society. Blacks often lack knowledge of their history and by extension knowledge of themselves. "One can scour the commemorative architecture of the nation's capital and find little evidence that America's racial holocaust ever occurred" (33). For Robinson both the group and the individual, the past and the present are connected. The failure in American society is that the two are divorced from each other. Robinson suggests that blacks who lack knowledge of group progress often fail to progress as individuals. Yet rather than locate failure within the individual, Robinson argues that this failure is a societal one. "The crypto-Machiavellians who serve as the perennial stewards of American public affairs understood that people on the whole are as malleable as their history can be made to be" (33). His words evidence bitterness at not being taught his 'own' history, meaning that of black people. In the end, Robinson concludes that the Washington Mall is not meant to reflect blacks and other minorities but rather the achievements of whites. "The landscape is rife with examples, from historically overarching lies and half-truths to popular culture deceits" (33). He finds this situation intolerable.

Robinson asserts that the lack of acknowledgement in the nation's monuments and memorials is detrimental to blacks. He argues that it denies blacks answers to the question, "Who-am-I? . . . Answers as essential to the human psyche as food and water are to the body. Answers without which no social progress is possible" (46). Yet not

only are answers missing but according to Robinson, “Truths. Half-truths. Unsupportable myths. Outrageous lies. [Are] polished together into history” (46). Robinson sees this as a national sin worsened by the fact that “They [whites] have taken my tax dollars and bought only what they need” (54). The material assets of blacks and other minorities are used to fill the spiritual needs of whites. Robinson asserts that through memorials and monuments whites engage in ancestor worship yet deny blacks and others the same opportunities to worship individuals like themselves (55). He sees this as psychologically damaging for blacks because we “need to remember who we are, not remember with others who they are”. Furthermore, “The human’s innate need to remember one’s self before one’s own time. Distantly before. And reassuringly,” is denied to blacks (56). Robinson sees a connection between the material and the spiritual and vice versa. In many ways he argues that this connection was severed for blacks and attempts to force the nation into repairing the breach.

Robinson argues that various social problems are “each a cause and/or a consequence of disabling poverty—of means and spirit—that has shackled all too many entire black family trees since the Emancipation Proclamation” (62). Beyond this point the material status of blacks contributes to a conditioned expectation in society that “lifts the high-expectation meritless and, more often than not, locks down in a permanent class hell the natively talented but low-expectation black” (63). Material conditions contribute to a poverty of spirit that makes life itself a form of punishment analogous to hell. Blacks suffer from “high infant mortality. Low income. High unemployment. Substandard education. Capital incapacity. Insurmountable credit barriers. High morbidity. Below-average life span. Overrepresentation in prison – and on death row” (62).

For example, Robinson describes the economic and spiritual hell that a black woman named Anna lives everyday. She worries for herself and her children who lack the privileges of middle class life. Robinson empathizes with Anna and attempts to transfer this empathy to the reader and eventually to the nation. In relating Anna's story to the reader, Robinson emphasizes how a lack of material possessions eats away at the spirit of both Anna and her family. A lack of material possessions makes life hard, and in this way the material influences the spiritual. The poor may be blessed in some ways, but they are cursed with a lack of money in a society that prides itself on the accumulation of wealth. Ultimately this understanding leads to "Anna's periodic bouts of panic . . . now almost generalized despondency that deepened with certain sounds and sight associations" (67) all of which remind her of the middle class life she has yet to live, but which so many other Americans take for granted. Anna was poor and despite attending "her Pentecostal church with her children every Sunday without fail . . . None of it did any good" (72) no matter how hard she worked.

Robinson situates Anna's poverty not only in the present but also historically in the institution of slavery. He sees "generations of her family . . . like beads on a taut string, one end anchored in slavery the other in oblivion" (73). Furthermore, he sees this as the general case for many blacks. He believes that without a change in the economic status of blacks, "lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch" (74). Blacks and whites will otherwise remain separate and unequal because "slavery ultimately guaranteed that, even after emancipation, blacks would be concentrated at the bottom of American society indefinitely . . ." (76). Yet just as slavery may explain much about the

present conditions for many blacks, Robinson believes that a knowledge of black history before slavery is also needed.

Robinson asserts that blacks' lack of knowledge about both African kings, and African-American slaves leads them down a path toward self-hatred. He states, "We don't know what happened to us and no one will tell us. Thus we have concluded that the fault must be ours. We blame and disparage ourselves but seldom those responsible for our dilemma" (83). Robinson plays both the blame game and the race card to explain the position of blacks at the bottom of America's social and economic hierarchy. He lays blame upon America's white citizens. America's white society, a society that he argues denigrates people of color indiscriminately. Blacks have internalized the opinions of whites and are left with "a crushing loss of confidence" (85).

Robinson observes that whites on the other hand, confidently degrade other cultures and people via the logos of sports teams that are racially offensive. It is interesting to note that this is done for material gain while at the same time undermining the spirits of those depicted as dangerous Indians, and Redskins. Jackson Miller in his own work illustrates the difficulties Native Americans encounter as they struggle to end the dominant culture's appropriation of their identity and culture ("Indians, Braves, and Redskins"). While Robinson believes society today would be less likely to tolerate similar depictions of blacks as team mascots, he notes that black athletes say nothing about the logos they wear each time they perform.

Robinson sees change as unlikely because it would take "the undiluted force of the whole society" (90). It would also take economic resources, material means, to cure this problem of the spirit. The most Robinson can do is empathize with Native

Americans in a manner similar to the way in which he empathizes with Anna. He says of Native Americans, “I as they do, fully expect to be ignored by the larger society . . .” (91). Robinson is therefore left with nothing but a sense of despair he believes they must also feel. He feels the same despair for blacks because slavery is “an accursed contraption that steals the soul and violates the spirit” (92). Since Robinson’s aim is to draw a continuous timeline from slavery to the present, he sees the affects of slavery as ongoing today.

One way in which Robinson believes the affects of slavery are evident in blacks is their esteem for European culture over their ‘own’. Robinson tells the story of how a black female college graduate was “iffing herself European” (96) during a farewell address at an historically black college. Robinson asserts that had a white speaker done the opposite in front of a white audience that this would have been absurd. Why, he asks, is it not absurd for the black speaker or the black audience? Robinson concludes that the answer lies in self-hatred, a degradation of the spirit.

Robinson believes that making a public case for reparations “would begin a healing of our psyches”. This is necessary because slaves and their ancestors “were never made whole. And never compensated” (208). For this reason Robinson views blacks as “246-year-old spirit-dead victims with post-hypnotic hopefulness” (217). Repeatedly, Robinson refers to “psychic pain” and an “unequal economic relationship of blacks to whites” (226) arguing that spiritual pain can be compensated for materially. If nothing else, Robinson’s fight for reparations is itself as a form of consolation that may lead to changes in the way we both understand and memorialize aspects of our national history. These texts and monuments themselves would be a form of consolation in place

of material monetary compensation. If “social rights, wrongs, obligations, and responsibilities flow eternal” then the wrongs must be “adequately compensated and righted” (230). Yet although the wrongs might in theory be compensated, in reality there is no way in which they could ever be righted. The most one could accomplish is to offer consolation to the living descendants of slaves and sharecroppers, descendants who Robinson claims are linked both spiritually and materially to the poverty of their ancestors.

Robinson aims to turn the movement for reparations into a “connecting mantra” a “secular religion” uniting blacks within “common tenets” and “knowledge of ourselves” (239). He seeks to reclaim for blacks something “that has far more than material value” (240). Not only does Robinson seek from America the compound interest of a material debt he believes blacks are owed, he also seeks a form of spiritual compound interest as well. He divides the nation into victims and victimizers, and tells the victims, “You are owed. You were caused to endure terrible things. The fault is not yours. There is nothing wrong with you. They did this to you” (242). Yet if blacks are collectively victimized, then whites are depicted collectively as victimizers. Whites are asked to “feel some moral obligation for slavery and what followed it” (296). Blacks are asked to undertake a spiritual pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. that for them becomes synonymous with Mecca. Blacks are asked to lay their burdens and the sins Robinson states are not theirs on the altar of the nation’s capitol. Blacks engagement in lamentations and wailings will potentially yield a spiritual and perhaps a material harvest. This harvest is both the spiritual consolation and material compensation that Robinson argues America owes its black citizens.

Yet one of the greatest difficulties in solving the race problem, according to Robinson, is getting people to see that there is a problem. He states, “All of us look. Few of us see. Or want to see . . .” (163). He believes that as Americans most of us suffer from an “inability to see racial disease vectors” (164). Robinson implies that American society is constructed in such a way that it nourishes the spirits and bodies of white Americans while often failing to do the same for blacks. He recalls walking through the rotunda of Capitol Hill and noticing how “traitors to the United States and defenders of slavery” are often celebrated in the nation’s monuments and art. Yet few people take notice of this irony. Robinson admits that he “deflected its insult . . . and kept no conscious tabulation of its message. [Yet] I died some but could not know it” (164). The celebration of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson among others in Statuary Hall offends Robinson. In many ways he sees it as damaging to his very being and the death he speaks of is a spiritual death, a diminishing of his soul. Yet he also recalls that America’s failure to protect and cherish black lives equally with those of whites is made evident in the slaying of Amadou Diallo, and the torture of Abner Louima. In these ways the material nature of racism is manifest on the bodies of black victims.

Robinson sees America as fundamentally flawed because of racism. He asserts, “Monstrous systems do turn people into monsters. Every day. All the time. With unerring efficiency” (168). People of all colors are affected by an American culture of violence often reflected in its cinema. As a result, some individuals in society reap material gain through the destruction of the nation’s spirit. Diseased spirits then create material destruction throughout society in the nation’s streets and even its schools.

Robinson is “convinced that the real threat to the well-being of American society is internal, not external” (169).

The material destruction of America’s spirit is due to an overemphasis on materialism. Robinson states, “Money has become our real god, our overarching value. It is our ethic, our totem, or consuming ambition, our foremost measure of success” (170). The race problem, like many others, stems from a failure to pursue spiritual treasures rather than material ones. Robinson sees this as damaging not only to the nation as a whole but also to blacks in particular. Freed from the confines of physical slavery they remain trapped nevertheless. He notes, “Blacks walk around with their cages inside them” (175). Furthermore,

We blacks are in the hundreds of millions the world over, caged by post-slavers in stunted, half-told, unfavorable pictures of what we were and are and can be. Too many of us too broken, scarred, soul-weary to engage in the full truth and glories of ourselves in the Africa way-back as well as in our American experience. (177)

The connection between the material and the spiritual is perhaps made clear in Robinson’s observation that in American society blacks are subject to “power with art as its handservant” (167).

What Robinson wishes for American society is seen in his descriptions of Cuba. His praise for Castro is somewhat worshipful and one wonders whether Robinson would like to see himself as a liberator of blacks through peaceful means. Castro is cast as a hero, the United States as a villain. Robinson depicts Castro as a modern day Robin Hood, and the U.S. as an overpowering hegemon content to punish the poor people of

Cuba in the name of democracy. Castro is a symbol of opposition and the picture Robinson paints of Cuba is that of an isla bonita.

Robinson sees Cuba as an example of what America could be in a spiritual rather than a material sense. According to Robinson, “Cubans seem qualitatively less racist than Americans” (127), and he notes that “we could do the requisite ancestor worship in Cuba that we, ourselves, could not do on the Mall in Washington” (128). In contrast, Robinson writes that in America, “We are emotional defectors from a society whose white majority long ago smothered to death any notion of cultural ownership” (134). This differs from “white Cubans [who] . . . talk with unremarkable emphasis about their African ancestry” (129). Cuba is cast as a spiritual oasis despite the poor material circumstances its people endure because of a U.S. embargo over twenty-five years old. Robinson even goes so far as to write, “Those early Christians, now they were communists . . . They were communalists,” (146) as if to imply that the U.S. may be a capitalist nation but not a Christian one.

Robinson makes evident the extent to which the U.S. and many other western nations are more capitalist than Christian in his discussion of Africa and the Caribbean. He observes, “Africa pays out upwards of 20 percent of its export earnings in debt service to Western creditors, making economic development a sheer impossibility” (183). Furthermore, “The basics of the relationship between Africa and the West from 1700 to 1800 to 1900 to 2000 appear to have changed less than one might expect” (185). In essence, Robinson asserts that colonialism and its aftermath amount to little more than slavery revisited. Western nations via the IMF or their own governments can exert proprietary control over seemingly ex-colonial nations. Robinson sees the relationship

between western and African nations as all about money, with the “wealthy once again dictating to the weak the terms of surrender” (186).

The relationship between the spiritual and the material is also made plain in Robinson’s rhetoric. In one statement he asserts,

America is the sun whose limitless wealth draws impoverished humankind obeisantly into its orbit for warmth and validity. There they are, much of the black and brown world, bowing to an amoral money god that has deemed them irrelevant. (187)

In ancient Egypt the pharaoh was also looked upon as Ra incarnate, the sun god. In Robinson’s rhetoric the U.S. occupies the position of the sun and rules the world through its immense wealth and power. Yet Robinson sees the worship of this “amoral money god” as detrimental to the world’s poorer nations. It makes them “casualties of inattention and low self-esteem,” disemboweled and victimized (187). The poorer nations are stripped of not only their material wealth but also their spiritual endowments.

Robinson makes similar arguments about the material and spiritual poverty of blacks in America. He compares the material suffering of Jews during Nazi Germany with the suffering of blacks during the slave trade. He states that for blacks, “after 380 years of unrelenting psychological abuse, the biggest part of our problem is inside us” (205). For Robinson, the fight for reparations is not only about material compensation but also spiritual consolation.

As much as Robinson points to failure within American society, and of white Americans in particular, he also addresses failure among blacks. In the next section I show how the materialistic failure of poor blacks engenders a sense of idealistic failure

among middle class blacks. This sense of failure is evident in Robinson's works and may be a catalyst for them.

Materialistic and Idealistic Failure

Robinson's claims for failure are based on group failure more than that of individuals. Yet Payne notes "We are identified with the world around us in such ways that problems in the world can appear failures for us as individuals" (130). This is the heart of Du Bois's initial call for a talented tenth among blacks, and Robinson's recent call for a group of renaissance blacks to save the race. Robinson is one of those indicated in both groups, which are in many ways one and the same. He's succeeded materially while others have not, and because of either the rhetorical mandate of Du Bois or the notion of extended families Robinson draws from Africa he feels spiritual disconsolation. The fate of the many is placed squarely on the shoulders of individuals. In particular, the most successful blacks must always be deemed failures if blacks as a group do not succeed in achieving parity with other groups in society.

Robinson asserts that slavery damaged "the very soul of us" and that this makes it difficult for blacks to advance collectively (16). He states, "To be made large and formidable again—to be whole again—blacks need to know the land of their forebears when its civilizations were verifiably equal to any in the world". Blacks and whites must learn of a time when "the idea of black inferiority did not exist" (17). Here we find Robinson's desire for a material power, of the body's ability to assert itself in the secular world, tied to the ability to be whole again in a spiritual sense. Yet this spiritual

wholeness can only be achieved by remembering a time when blacks had material power in ancient civilizations of the past.

The material power of yesteryear must be remembered to attain spiritual power in the present in order to create material power in the future. For Robinson the absence of “a seeming eternal identity, a people’s whole memory” must be undone. The reason it must be undone is because “No people can live successfully, fruitfully without strong memory of their past, without reading the future within the context of some reassuring past, without implanting reminders of the past in the present” (27). Once again, the spiritual and the material are connected, as well as the past, present, and future. As Robinson states, “African Americans must spiritually survive from the meager basket a few mean yesteryears. No chance for significant group progress there. None” (28).

In a chapter entitled, “Demanding Respect,” Robinson states that blacks as a group have failed to gain both respect and material power in the political arena. He notes Bill Clinton gained the affections and votes of blacks without offering them much in return. Robinson points out how Clinton’s leadership was harmful to blacks in regard to education, rates of incarceration among blacks, and a growing income gap between whites and blacks. Robinson criticizes both Clinton and white society for a lack of will “to close all socioeconomic gaps between the races” (106). Whites failure to enact “a virtual Marshall Plan . . . for the common good” is evident (107). Moreover, Robinson reiterates his call for white society to “set afoot new values . . . purify memory . . . [and] recast its lying face” (108). He calls on a cadre of blacks to force white society to tell the truth about American history and make amends for past wrongs. He asks these “renaissance blacks” to “propagate an intellectual storm of self-discovery among blacks

tantamount to a secular religion” (108). According to Robinson, “Even to muster the energy for a particularized broad new demand—to restore, to put back, to recompense—we will have to heal our spirits, for the most part, by ourselves” (120). Renaissance blacks are therefore challenged to seek both material and spiritual gains for blacks, both compensation and consolation.

In his subsequent book *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other*, Robinson argues that “to understand the full damage that America has done to the black world over the last 346 years we must extrapolate the general from the specific, not the other way around” (1). The specific case he examines as a synecdoche of black life is that of Peewee Kirkland. Peewee was born “into the rigged game of dysfunctional families, variably crippling poverty, poor education, and all but nonexistent opportunity for long-term success” (2). Robinson uses Peewee’s life to discuss “the new de facto slavery” (3) of life in America’s prison system and the ways in which “from birth, black inner city males are strapped onto a hard-life treadmill leading all too often toward early death or jail” (2). He notes that black men are incarcerated at alarming rates in prisons that constitute a new “growth industry” (2).

Robinson sees the fight against this new growth industry as having both material and spiritual consequences. Black men are once again seen as “human chattel” (3) laboring in prisons for the profit of white investors, and workers who gain employment from the industry. Robinson’s fight is against the corruption of the money god he spoke of in *The Debt*, and the ways in which the pursuit of material gain strips away the soul of both the victims and the victimizers. He calls on successful blacks to “salvage a living

generation of African-American men and women” (3) caught in the mill of post-industrial America.

Robinson views himself as caught in this mill too but in a different way. He writes, “I am a commodity in democracy’s mouthy comic charade. Praise be to mammon, the powerless are allowed to talk. Indeed, are encouraged to yammer futilely at the tops of our voices” (8). As Erving Goffman observes, “A stigmatized person may find that the ‘movement’ has absorbed his whole day, and that he has become a professional” (*Stigma* 26). In the Bible, God compares himself to mammon, or riches, stating that it is impossible for a person to serve both. In contemporary America, Robinson asserts that mammon is king, and lord of lords. Robinson can speak against mammon and the earthly princes who rule the people, but can do little to change the situation of the people. He sees himself as a pawn in a game he does not control, moving one step at a time but never out of sight of those who oversee the board and its pieces. In one example, he discusses the situation of blacks in Miami and the ways in which their interactions with Cubans show that blacks are on the losing end of ethnic strife for material gains as minorities compete for crumbs from the master’s table. Robinson has attained a few scraps of bread for himself and “accomplished a measure of prestige and material comfort”. Yet he must admit that he has “no power. Perhaps not even influence” (10). He does not control the coming and going of currency in “a society in which the actor is more important than the real-life hero the actor portrays” (10). Robinson sees himself as a prophet, in our age a highly paid one, but nevertheless finding it difficult to change the spirit of a nation that lets his jeremiad go in one ear and out of the other.

Robinson even finds it hard to influence other blacks. For the first time he admits division between blacks as a group which he avoided doing in *The Debt*. He acknowledges class differences as well as age differences between himself and the young black men he is asked to address at a Black Male Empowerment Summit. Not only does he feel a sense of alienation from young black men but also an older black man of comparable age to himself. It is not just age but poverty that separates Robinson from Peewee Kirkland. Jennifer Hochschild observes that “African Americans are becoming more disparate politically and demographically as well as economically and socially” (*Facing Up to the American Dream* 50). As Robinson states, “I am no longer poor . . . I feel I may have lost the heart’s knowledge of the social slice from whence I sprang, although I am conscious of none of this” (16). The class based separation between Robinson and Kirkland is made more evident in Robinson’s description of Mark Lawrence, the organizer of the summit. He describes Lawrence as “a polished and well-educated (Wharton Business School, Cornell) man, and he makes the tasteful, well-prepared introduction one would expect of him” (17). Lawrence exemplifies the younger element of the talented tenth, and when Robinson looks at him he sees aspects of himself that he cannot see in Peewee Kirkland or the young men Kirkland attempts to save from the streets. At one point Robinson admits, “It occurs to me that I, a victim of prejudice, am not without a set of my own” (18). Nevertheless, Robinson attempts to bridge the gap through his recitation that “We are all victims” a theme he uses when discussing American society and the call for reparations (20).

Robinson sees himself as a material medium for spiritual knowledge when discussing reparations. He observes, “Only the voice—a medium, no more—had been

mine. All the rest—the thoughts, the sentiments, the visceral knowings—moved around and through us all like the plaintive ghosts of forebears awaiting remembrance and redress” (22). Yet the identification he attempts to claim with Africa and its people is absent in his discussion of America and its majority. He writes, “I ask myself who I am. I wear another’s clothes. I speak another’s language. I worship another’s god . . .” (25). Rather than identification, Robinson feels estrangement despite the superficial markers of assimilation he bears. He notes, “I sit here on the dais having landed in a new world, a world foreign to me . . .” (26). Although Robinson is no immigrant he sees himself as a foreigner in his native country. Denied the fruits of his material labor to the extent that he believes whites benefit from discrimination against minorities, he seeks solace in spiritual consolation. Robinson takes pride in knowledge of African history and the fact that his “information is thousands of years old” unlike young black men of today whose spiritual lives are much shorter (27).

At one point Robinson even rails against the idea of white America’s spirituality. He asks, “Do not the disciples of privilege invoke the same God . . . Do they not publish their trust in him on the coin of the realm? Do they not thank him? For grandfather’s bequest . . .” (35). The only God that Robinson can see reflected in American society is mammon. In his eyes the pursuit of wealth has not only stripped white Americans of the spirituality Robinson seeks, but also black Americans of their heritage and even their own gods. Robinson can only hold out hope for a time “when America is formed of a new and darker majority. When the unseen are at last centered on the masthead. When little is as it was before” (48). In essence he waits for a time when the poor will inherit the earth, the last shall be first, and the wicked will be judged if they fail to repent. The

spiritual and the material combine in ways that make the darker, poorer people of America into a chosen people who will one day gain possession of a promised land that was not shared with them from the foundation of America. Robinson even asks at one point whether historians will “write that America was never an authentic democracy or, worse still, never really tried to be” (49).

Robinson uses Peewee Kirkland’s life as one example of how American democracy has failed to provide equal opportunity to everyone. During a speech Kirkland gave at the Black Male Empowerment Summit, Peewee expresses his own anger and that of Robinson who seeks to identify with Kirkland and others like him. Kirkland tells the audience,

I was angry, angry at the conditions I was living under, angry at the fact that you had to shake the cereal box in the morning so that roaches would go to the bottom, angry at you knew how other people was living, and other people had cars, and other people had things, and angry at the fact that you couldn’t see ahead, you couldn’t see a future, you couldn’t talk about a future. You couldn’t see anything. (55)

Kirkland then admits that the way in which he responded to those conditions was both antithetical to some American values while at the same time in keeping with other American values. He states, “So when I was twelve, I began a life of crime. I did it to try to figure out a way to secure a future for my family” (55). Robinson wants the audience to lament the material conditions of Kirkland’s childhood and the ways in which dire poverty undermined Kirkland’s spirit. Kirkland could not see a brighter tomorrow and therefore find no source of compensation. Crime became a consolation for

other lost opportunities that were of greater value yet could not be had. Crime brought material gain to Kirkland at the cost of his spirit.

Robinson includes a brief interlude into his text regarding the establishment of chattel slavery in Virginia in the mid-1600s. It is meant to show a connection between the conditions of blacks then and now, along with the ways in which whites continue to profit from black servitude. In discussing the present, Robinson observes that New York's drug laws exemplify how prison and the incarceration of minorities amounts to a new growth industry. "Peewee Kirkland practiced in New York the only entrepreneurship allowed to him" (63) while the state of New York created "new well-paying jobs" (62) for those who would find profit in another's crime. Yet Robinson asserts that the true crime is that Kirkland "could not have known how high against him the deck had been stacked" (63).

Robinson tells readers the story of Peewee Kirkland's life as a synecdochic representation of black life in general. Robinson conflates the individual and the group, the past and the present, in order to assert his point. For Robinson "yesterday is today. In the year 2001, at home and abroad, blacks, disproportionately, are seen by the masters of the American economy as little more than human compost for America's continued global dominance" (81). Although Robinson presents readers with a biographical account of Peewee Kirkland's rise and fall as a small time criminal turned black market entrepreneur, and eventually drug kingpin, the main goal for Robinson is to comment on American society and the ways in which failure is evident in its past, present, and future.

In one chapter, Robinson imagines life in the year 2076 as a time of great crisis for America. The country is now a prison-industrial complex in which crime pays

dividends for those who own stock in prisons. The few rich are separated via gated communities from the many poor, and the talented tenth among blacks forget any connection to the masses of poor blacks. Moreover, blacks no longer identify as a group but rather as ethnicities to the extent that they no longer have a common present, and can remember no common past. The commonalities between past and present, according to Robinson, revolve around slavery and what is referred to as “the American Neo-Slavery Movement” (179). People of color are largely behind bars working again in ways similar to their slave ancestors. Yet just as blacks and Hispanics are reduced to the status of chattel, things have become “the sole measures of value” (88). Robinson states,

Everyone worshipped things. Things were like the drugs that tricked their affections and feigned appeasement to their befuddled spirits. Things were the idols, the gods that pretended nourishment to their moribund souls . . . God was dead. God was things. (188)

In this statement Robinson succinctly notes the extent to which the spiritual and material in American society are out of balance in the not-too-distant future.

Robinson speaks of the past, present, and future as integrally connected and as contexts in which to discuss the material and spiritual implications of slavery and segregation. Robinson seeks both compensation and consolation for the descendants of American slaves. He believes that today’s blacks suffer from “the social pathologies born peculiarly of generalized abuse and grinding poverty” (191) that stem from slavery and its aftermath. Robinson notes, “The victims have never been compensated. They have yet to be apologized to” (191). As a result of slavery and racial oppression they constitute “a contemporary generation of spiritually and economically impoverished

African-Americans” (193). Yet since Robinson believes that white Americans are in denial about the spiritual and economic costs of slavery to blacks and the benefits that accrued to whites, ultimately he places a heavy burden on successful blacks to help those less fortunate. He argues that the dire situation of the black poor “places a special responsibility upon more fortunate African-Americans (like myself) who were not required from the very beginning of their life to be tough before they could be strong” (193).

Robinson implies that successful blacks had it easier and therefore owe a debt to those who had more difficult beginnings. In essence, he reiterates Du Bois’s idea of the talented tenth without acknowledging Du Bois or his program for social uplift. What differs between Robinson and Du Bois is the attitude toward the talented tenth. Robinson appears resentful of this group even while he calls on them to help the masses. He fails to acknowledge that the privileged position they enjoy could stem from the hard work of their ancestors or themselves. He writes that they were simply “fortunate,” fortunate that their ancestor’s spirits were not broken during slavery, fortunate enough to be born into better circumstances than others. Their fortune, from his perspective, stems from chance and therefore they are obligated to share the wealth they did not earn. Sharing individual gains with the collective is a virtue to Robinson and he states, “To Americans, this should be a compelling (if foreign) notion to observe” (197). Yet for African-Americans, Robinson sees this as an obligation stemming from historical roots in Africa where people “are social products of external families (as opposed) to our nuclear families” (197).

The subject of family, in particular extended family, permeates Robinson's work. He suggests that as Americans we should treat each other as members of the same extended family. Although this has proven difficult for many people to do judging by our country's history of racial discrimination, Robinson argues that it is necessary in the present and important for the nation's future. Moreover, Robinson states that blacks owe a debt to each other and are obligated to take care of each other as members of an extended family with roots in Africa. His discussions of Peewee Kirkland's hard knock life, as well as that of young men like New Child and Aubrey Lynch, are meant to draw us into their world, put us in touch with their spirits, and convince us to care about them.

Rather than look at the urban poor as statistics and objectify them in a material sense we are asked to see their humanity and acknowledge their spirits, damaged as they may be from the hardships of life at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Robinson writes, "They are post-Christian America's state trained gladiators who slaughter each other before empty seats, the winners filling the state-built iron plantations that ballast the new economy of increasingly skewed privilege" (268). Robinson searches for a way to create identification between him and the poor blacks he encounters, yet finds it difficult to achieve. He observes, "They talk to Peewee and to New Child and to each other. They listen only to the authentic voices, trustworthy voices, voices found on their streets, found in their art, the starkly honest literature of rap music" (268). Although the roots of the extended family tree Robinson imagines stem from Africa, its branches in America are separate and far apart. In some cases it is as if half of the tree bathed in sunlight while the other half languished in darkness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West observe, "If it is the best of times for the black middle class—the heirs of Du Bois's 'Talented

Tenth’—it is the worst of times for an equally large segment of our community” (*The Future of the Race* xii). What Robinson argues is that ultimately the entire tree will die unless the situation is corrected.

Ultimately Robinson’s plea is for the black middle class, Du Bois’s modern day talented tenth, to live up to its rhetorical mandate as stewards of the race. Yet as Cornel West observes, “The present-day black middle class is not simply different than its predecessors—it is more deficient and, to put it strongly, more decadent” (*Race Matters* 36). Robinson laments, the relative silence of black leadership” in regard to “the warehousing of poor blacks in prisons” (273). While acknowledging class divisions that make focusing on such problems difficult, he nevertheless asserts that race is a more powerful variable among blacks than class. Still, he cannot deny that class matters and for this reason asks that “blacks receive for our pains a measure of material recompense” for slavery and its aftermath (272).

While money brings compensation in a material sense it cannot bring consolation for a spiritual problem. Robinson admits, “The healing of our spirits we must do for ourselves” (272). Yet group cohesion is hard to maintain because “integration provided tickets to some of us doctors, teachers, lawyers, et al., to leave the rest of us” (275). In some ways he sees an unintended benefit to segregation in that “the very best talent our community had to offer served our community alone, in part because segregation offered them little choice” (275). Bell hooks notes that “by the late 1960s class-based racial integration disrupted the racial solidarity that often held blacks together despite class difference” (*Class Matters* 91). Robinson implies that although blacks gained materially as individuals, they suffered spiritually as a collective because of integration. He views

integration as problematic because “white society has never seriously concerned itself with the eradication of white poverty. Hence, it is logical to assume that white society would be even less concerned about the consequences of black poverty” (275). The consequences of black poverty are not only material deprivation but also spiritual privation.

In Robinson’s rhetoric there is a connection between the material and the spiritual. The material poverty of black Americans leads to spiritual poverty as well. Robinson argues, “What is at stake here is our very future as a people in America” (276). The apocalypse of slavery is both then and now. The prison-industrial complex is but a variation on an old theme that has both material and spiritual chords, few of which are sweet.

Conclusion

Robinson seeks both consolation and compensation for blacks. Slavery memorials and texts that emphasize the contributions of blacks to the shaping of American history are integral to these aims. Inclusion within the nation’s memorials will provide blacks with consolation for the African heritage and traditions lost due to slavery. It would also console blacks for years of struggle to be recognized as one with many other Americans, a part of the American tapestry. Memorials and texts are a form of compensation as well, yet their overall effect is to provide consolation. Robinson believes this form of consolation for ‘spiritual poverty’ will have material consequences. Even without monetary reparations, Robinson suggests that the spiritual benefit of

recognition and the ability to worship one's ancestors with other Americans will allow blacks to overcome a failure to achieve economic, social, and political parity with whites.

The failure that Robinson asserts is that of the group, rather than that of individuals. Robinson's belief that blacks have failed as a group can be understood in terms of the two types of failure Payne outlines: materialistic and idealistic. Middle class blacks, contemporary members of Du Bois's talented tenth, remain idealistic failures so long as poor blacks are materialistic failures. In order to cope with their own sense of failure, middle class blacks are pushed to live up to the historical and rhetorical mandate of Du Bois, one reiterated in Robinson's call for a group of renaissance blacks to save the race. Robinson's own texts, *The Debt*, and *The Reckoning* can be read as a response to this sense of failure and can therefore be understood as therapeutic in nature. These texts provide blacks with a general explanation for failure and a potential solution to the problem of the color line.

Chapter Six

Failure in the Rhetoric of Transformation

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in his essay “The Talented Tenth” that slavery was “the legalized survival of the unfit and the nullification of the work of natural internal leadership” (*Writings* 843). Du Bois attributed the failure of blacks to slavery and the subversion of the natural order or hierarchy among blacks. In his essay he called on whites to take affirmative actions that would aid the talented tenth in taking their place at the top of the black social hierarchy. Once instilled in their positions these blacks would lift up those beneath them and lead the race upwards from its abject position of servitude. Yet in “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” Du Bois admitted that the only thing his talented tenth succeed in lifting up were themselves. He pined, “In my youth and idealism, I did not realize that selfishness is even more natural than sacrifice” (In *The Future of the Race* 161). Distrustful of the talented tenth Du Bois placed his faith in a tenth of the tenth in the hopes that they might do what his talented few failed to do.

No guiding one-hundredth arose to answer Du Bois’s call. Instead the idea of the talented tenth remained along with the human embodiments it helped create. Still, the shadow of failure loomed large as Carter G. Woodson shined even more light on the talented tenth’s inability to fulfill its rhetorical mandate to save the race. Woodson saw the talented tenth as of little value to the masses of black people.

Not much has changed over the years as modern-day black intellectuals, themselves members of the talented tenth, lament the failure of this group to fulfill its

mandate. Cornel West calls Du Bois the “towering black scholar of the twentieth century” while lamenting that “modern day black intellectuals” fall short of the mark in comparison to their intellectual forefather (*The Future of the Race* 55). In his book *Race Matters* West castigated black political leaders (38) and lamented that “the present-day black middle class is not simply different than its predecessors—it is more deficient and to put it strongly, more decadent” (13). Furthermore, West opined that “the significant secondary efforts of the black Talented Tenth alone in the twenty-first century will be woefully inadequate and thoroughly frustrating . . .” (50). Yet West’s comments may speak more to his own class position than to that of blacks as a whole. As Debra Dickerson wrote in *The End of Blackness*: “It is the well-off Talented Tenth blacks who feel least at home . . . The black community needs to unravel the mystery of why its most successful blacks act like the most dispossessed” (7). I attribute this sense of unease to an understanding that the talented tenth has failed to live up its rhetorical mandate.

This dissertation explored not only the root causes of this sense of failure among successful blacks but also the ways in which some members of the talented tenth seek to cope with failure. A sense of failure exists among the talented tenth, and the turn towards reparations as a potential solution to the problem of the color line underlines this fact. No longer do members of the talented tenth see their efforts as enough to lift the masses. Unlike Du Bois who believed that it was within the power of this group to write a new history for blacks, both Randall Robinson and Derrick Bell, among others, see a history rooted in slavery as too much for blacks to overcome alone. In the post-civil rights era the dreams of yesteryear are fading away, and the stark reality of the day is most

apparent. Understanding the shift within black discourse from that which emphasizes the dream, to that which emphasizes the nightmare is incredibly important.

Yet within the field of communication, both studies of black rhetoric, and studies of failure are disproportionately low. Studies that examine failure within the rhetoric of black Americans are negligible. Perhaps even when we examine black discourse our eyes are so focused on the prize, the fulfillment of the dream that we have failed to notice that many no longer share the same vision. Scholars have catalogued the long journey of African American's to freedom as blacks marched from slavery into the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, little attention is paid to what has happened within black discourse in the post-civil rights era, especially among the black middle class who comprise the talented tenth. If as Ellis Cose wrote in *The Rage of a Privileged Class* that "despite its very evident prosperity, much of America's black middle class is in excruciating pain," (1) then perhaps we as scholars should begin to examine why this is the case, decades after the March on Washington and the passage of much legislation. There are perhaps many explanations to this problem. In this study I illuminated one of them; the failure of the talented tenth to live up to its rhetorical mandate.

The Self-Society Topos and the Rhetoric of Shelby Steele

Whether we examine the past, present, or future of the race problem in America the ways in which we can discuss perceived failures are finite. Our beliefs that failure exists rest on an idealized notion of how things should be, and in American society a dialectic of self-society tends to emerge in discussions of failure. David Payne writes in *Coping with Failure* that:

When the self-society topos is resorted to in rhetoric, an ideal relationship between the two entities is implicitly or explicitly posited. The failure is seen as a result of some violation of the ideal relationship between self and society. The resolution must be a consolation or compensation that invokes or achieves that ideal relationship (60).

Shelby Steele's use of the self-society topos posits just such a relationship. His argument rests on John Locke's notion that we as individuals come together to form a society through our adherence to a social contract. In the United States, our adherence to this social contract is spelled out in the Constitution. It is the Constitution that creates distinctions between not only federal vis-à-vis states rights but also the rights of the federal government vis-à-vis citizens. The rights of citizens were so important to the founding of this nation that the ratification of the Constitution was tied to the promise that a Bill of Rights would also be created. Both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were needed to create balance between society and self. Although individuals came together to create a new society they still saw the need to protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as foundational pillars of our democracy. Yet it is this relationship between self and society that Steele argues has been undermined in the post-civil rights era. In many ways his book is an attempt to restore balance to a system he believes no longer functions properly. The way in which Steele goes about restoring that balance, however, is to demand that first and foremost changes take place within individuals. Much of his emphasis is on the need for blacks to change themselves in the interests of society. Societal changes are called for only to the extent that society interferes with the ability of individuals to make necessary adjustments.

Steele asserts that “a healthy democracy is always at war with race” (*A Dream Deferred* 106). The blind spot in Steele’s argument is that American democracy struggles primarily with the idea of including other races beyond those initially included in the social contract. That social contract is the Constitution, and its protection of the interests of whites in relation to other racial groups is well known. Blacks were written into the Constitution only as chattel and for this reason were not included in the social contract. Although we have made various amendments to the Constitution, the original interpretation of America as a white man’s land still holds true for many today as Derrick Bell’s *And We are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*, and Joe Feagin’s *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations* attest to. Steele’s demand that race be made irrelevant ignores the relevancy of whites as a racial group. I believe that Steele’s focus on other races, and his inability to discuss the Constitution as a document written for the protection of white interests, leads him down a narrow path. Steele calls on blacks to give up their assertions of racial privilege while failing to make the same strident demands on whites. Whites are not asked to change in the same manner that blacks are asked to do. Steele calls on blacks to transcend race because if one looks closely it is the only way around the American dilemma from his perspective. Since the Constitution did not incorporate other racial groups, then the acknowledgement of them seems anathema to its intent. This is true, yet Steele fails to provide a thorough critique of whiteness and the ways in which the interests of whites are written into the very document Steele attempts to defend. Without a thorough critique of the nation’s history and its founding documents, Steele’s attempt to re-instill balance in society could undermine the freedom of those who do not share in white privilege. Derrick Bell’s

Faces at the Bottom of the Well describes in vivid detail the ways in which white privilege could do so in the future. In both past and present, attempts to create a multi-racial democracy arise in opposition to America's history as a white-racial democracy.

America's history as a white-racial democracy evidences a continued resistance to the idea of parity. The failure that Steele believes exists in the post-civil rights era concerns a lack of parity. Both many civil rights leaders and white liberals have argued that discrimination separated whites and blacks into two nations, separate and unequal. Andrew Hacker in *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* carries this argument into the present. Discrimination was a fact of everyday life, codified into law since the institution of the Black Codes and the beginning of the Jim Crow era. The civil rights movement aimed at eliminating discrimination as an aspect of both the American legal system and the American way of life. Yet the removal of legal forms of discrimination, and the political enfranchisement of blacks did not yield economic parity. Blacks still number disproportionately among the nation's poor and often receive inferior educations in less than equal school districts.

In the post-civil rights era the ability of many blacks to exercise a sense of self-hood in society is severely hampered. The lack of parity between blacks and whites raises questions about the successful extension of the social contract to blacks and their incorporation into American society. The harmonious relationship between self and society that exists for many whites cannot be taken as a given among blacks. While a talented tenth among blacks moves towards parity with whites, others fall further behind. The question Steele seeks to answer is, "Why?"

Steele's answer to this question is that the relationship between self and society that exists for whites, the social contract, was never fully extended to blacks. He argues that both a black power imperative and white liberalism coalesced to undermine prospects for black advancement along with societal values that would make advancement possible. The sense of self in relation to society was denied to blacks via preferential programs that either denied the agency of many blacks, or functioned to strip them of their individual agency. Blacks' failure to attain economic parity is tied to their failure to attain equal inclusion into the social contract as whole persons. Steele argues that liberal condescension toward blacks places blacks in an inferior position in which the standards of American society are not applied to them, presumably for their own benefit. Steele believes that this undermines not only the agency of blacks, but also the foundations of American society. Values such as hardwork and individual initiative are compromised in lieu of affirmative action and a push towards group rights. Steele argues that to restore the balance between self and society for all Americans, the social contract, and all its obligations, must finally be extended to blacks in earnest.

Despite his call to extend the social contract to blacks in many ways Steele's work is a defense of America's past. For Steele, racism is a cancer on the American social system. Yet the radiation treatments of social reform killed unhealthy and healthy cells alike. The American social system is not what it was, but neither is it what it should be. Steele believes that the founders intended something better, even if they betrayed their best principles with reference to blacks and other minorities. He argues that Americans have failed to preserve the essence of democracy in an attempt to extend the fruits of democracy to the disenfranchised.

Payne's observation that "A general point to be emphasized wherever in our society the self-society topos is drawn upon, the legitimacy of individualism becomes an issue" (83) sheds light on Steele's rhetoric. Steele's work is a defense of individualism both among blacks, and within American society. The failures he notes in our educational system, and in our economic system, stem primarily from a failure to protect individual rights in our political and social system. For Steele, both the black power imperative and the liberalism of the sixties have undermined the foundations of the American system as group rights are placed ahead of individual rights. Yet in the end, Steele's attempt to bolster the foundations of the American system yields not a new vision of race in America but an old one based on assimilation.

The Past-Future Topos and the Rhetoric of Derrick Bell

Derrick Bell's rhetoric aims to console blacks for failures in the past, present, and future. He sees all of these failures as inevitable and therefore can find no way to achieve compensation for blacks. America he argues, is fundamentally racist and an examination of its history along with its founding documents will prove as much. Both *And We Are Not Saved* as well as *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* depict whites as victimizers and blacks as victims. Blacks are made into history's martyrs and his text serves as a record of their existence analogous to the New Testament's stories of Jesus. Yet blacks are not saviors but in need of saving. In Bell's texts there is endless suffering unmitigated by miracles that are discounted. Every advance in American law and society that would appear to improve the position of blacks is discounted as meaningless and in some way in the service of white racism and privilege. As martyrs, blacks are ultimately crucified in

Bell's works but not resurrected. For blacks there is only hell. No pearly gates await them, no streets paved with gold, only a return trip into bondage in the not-too-distant future as they are sold like chattel to provide riches for the master's house that Bell sees as America.

Bell asserts that blacks lack a means to cope with present injustice. I see his texts as an attempt to provide this means, giving blacks the knowledge of the past Bell sees as necessary. Knowledge of their history would give blacks the power to influence both the present and the future, according to Bell. Yet it is for this reason that in "The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls" (*And We Are Not Saved*) whites banned the reading of Bell's fictional scrolls. Bell implies that whites opposed the scrolls because blacks must be kept ignorant of any aspect of their past that proves too empowering.

Fatalism permeates Bell's works because Bell believes that no matter what blacks do they cannot win. Repeatedly Bell states that the past determines both the present and the future. Bell sees blacks as "objects for barter" (*Faces at the Bottom of the Well* 11), and believes that blacks "will never gain full equality in this country" (12). He seeks to force blacks to "acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance" (12). Yet one wonders what difference this acknowledgement would make if Bell is correct in his assertion that blacks cannot prevail. Acknowledgement of this 'fact' could only provide blacks consolation for failure rather than compensation. If blacks "are closer to than we may realize to those in slavery . . ." (195), and "imprisoned by the history of racial subordination in America . . ." (197), then who is at fault for this state of affairs? Bell's answer is white Americans, and he blames them for failure among blacks.

Bell sees the relationship between whites and blacks as parasitic and argues that whites are resistant to equality with blacks that stretches beyond the letter of the law. In tales such as “The Chronicle of the Black School Children,” “The Chronicle of the Black Reparations Foundation,” and “The Chronicle of the Devine Gift” (*And We Are Not Saved*), Bell posits that whites are motivated by self-interest rather than any desire to help blacks. He sees whites as unwilling to allow substantial numbers of blacks to move up in the social hierarchy. Competition between groups rather than individual merit becomes the defining characteristic of the American system. Bell believes that whites fear “that blacks will unfairly get ahead of them” (*Faces at the Bottom of the Well* 4) and this fear drives resistance to substantial equality within the school system, affirmative action, and even reparations. For this reason Bell seeks to convince blacks that their faith in the American system is misplaced, along with their faith in the goodness of white Americans. It is this faith that sustained the nonviolent protests of the civil rights movement, a movement that Bell ultimately deems a failure judging from the present socioeconomic circumstances of many blacks. Using his fictional character, Erika Wechsler, Bell even goes so far as to assert the possibility of “a black holocaust or some other all-out attack on America’s historic scapegoats” (93). Bell’s final tale of “The Space Traders” ends with blacks “linked by slender chains . . . [leaving] the New World as their forebears had arrived” (194). From Bell’s perspective whites fail to regard blacks as individuals, and it is for this reason that blacks must stick together as a group. Yet the ability of blacks to do so is problematic, according to Bell.

Bell sees the relationship between black men and black women as wrought with failure. Nevertheless, Bell sees the establishment of successful relationships as

fundamental to the survival of blacks as a racial group. In order to cure the ills that plague relationships between black men and women, Bell seeks to restrict the freedom of both groups to choose partners outside of their racial group. In “The Chronicle of the Twenty-Seventh-Year Syndrome,” Bell strikes black women with a plague of biblical proportions, unless they have “ever been married or entertained a bona fide offer of marriage to a black male” (*And We Are Not Saved* 199). In “The Last Black Hero,” Bell forgoes striking his black male character with a plague but rather blames black men for failing to “encourage the forming and maintenance of strong black families” (*Faces at the Bottom of the Well* 80). In both instances Bell’s desire to ‘save the race’ would lead him to curtail the freedom of individuals within the group. He would curb black women’s sexual freedom via a fictional plague, and stem the tide of black male exogamy with shame. Rather than consider that black men and women choose to have relationships with individuals outside of their group because of the difficulties of intra-racial bonding, Bell instead blames those who choose inter-racial or homosexual relationships for the failure to maintain black families. Black men and black women in Bell’s ideal world would be forced to work things out, for better or for worse.

The relationship between black men and black women is often troubled, and so too is the relationship between the talented tenth and the black lower class. At times Bell seeks to skirt this issue such as in his discussion of an ultimate voting rights act. As I noted earlier, Bell fails to make any class distinctions among blacks. Like Robinson, Bell seeks to place all blacks within the same boat, and he blames the perceived failures of the talented tenth on American society. Bell argues that the failure of the talented tenth is predetermined given his belief that racism is a fundamental component of American

society. No matter how successful members of the talented tenth are at steering a course for themselves in the rough waters of American society, they nevertheless feel a sense of failure resulting from an inability to save those who have fallen overboard. Bell writes that “even the most successful of us are haunted by the plight of our less fortunate brethren” (*Faces at the Bottom of the Well* 3). In the end, he concludes that the even those members of the talented tenth who understand how racism operates within American society can do little to counter its effects. Bell speaks of the futility of black agency in the face of what he deems racial oppression, and like Robinson, issues forth a jeremiad that he believes few will heed.

The Spiritual-Material Topos and the Rhetoric of Randall Robinson

Randall Robinson attempts to gain both consolation and compensation for the living descendants of slaves and sharecroppers, descendants who Robinson claims are linked both spiritually and materially to the poverty of their ancestors. Yet in the grand scheme there is no compensation that would equal the horrors of slavery or any holocaust. The memorials and monetary reparations Robinson demands can in the end only provide consolation even when they are meant to be compensation. Robinson appears to understand this on some level when he admits that he seeks for blacks something “that has far more than material value” (*The Debt* 240). He desires to attain from American a form of spiritual compound interest that is in essence spiritual consolation of epic proportions. Robinson blames American society for the spiritual and material impoverishment he observes among blacks, and tells his black readers “You

were caused to endure terrible things. The fault is not yours. There is nothing wrong with you. They did this to you” (242).

Robinson’s words, and even memorials, may console blacks but in the end they cannot provide compensation. Consolation without compensation is unlikely to have the positive effects Robinson suggests unless the opportunity for advancement already exists within American society. Robinson seeks material compensation for blacks yet admits that it may not occur. Nevertheless, he claims that blacks will still benefit from making the demand for compensation because this action will heal their souls. Yet if the knowledge of history that Robinson seeks to give blacks is powerful enough to enable blacks to change their condition, then one must admit that it is within their power to do so already. American society may be faulted for not supplying blacks with this information but one could also fault blacks for not seeking it out on their own. Robinson himself states that he has attained this knowledge. One could just as easily blame blacks such as Robinson for not distributing this knowledge more broadly. Perhaps Robinson recognizes this fact which is why he includes nuggets of the intellectual/spiritual gold he has acquired within his own texts. Yet it is the very notion of debt that is itself problematic whether this debt belongs to American society or to middle class blacks. Debt makes one group or individual beholden to another. It can also make one group or individual responsible for another. The notion of debt has unfortunately stripped away belief in the agency of poorer blacks. This is unfortunate given that individuals must be allowed to have responsibility for their own condition if they are to be the equals of other societal members.

In *The Reckoning* however, Robinson again speaks of “the full damage that America has done to the black world over the last 346 years” (1). Robinson asserts that there is a denial of opportunity for blacks within American society and uses the life of Peewee Kirkland to illustrate his point. Yet Kirkland’s own brother succeeded both educationally and economically in ways that refute Robinson’s claim that opportunity is nonexistent. Nevertheless, Robinson calls on successful blacks to “salvage a living generation of African-American men and women” (3). This is an invocation of the debt Robinson believes successful blacks owe members of the black lower class. Robinson’s use of the word “salvage” implies that lower class blacks are seen as human garbage. At one point in his text Robinson even uses the term “compost” in regard to how American society views most blacks (81). Robinson’s rhetoric places agency within the hands of successful blacks while denying the agency and responsibility of lower class blacks for their own lives. He even goes so far as to assert that his own agency is almost meaningless, “I am a commodity in democracy’s mouthy comic charade. Praise be to mammon, the powerless are allowed to talk” (8). Robinson fails to identify with American society to the extent that he feels alienation. He writes, “I ask myself who I am. I wear another’s clothes. I speak another’s language. I worship another’s god . . .” (25). All of this in Robinson’s eyes points to a failure within American society that has had damaging effects on blacks for generations. Moreover, Robinson questions whether American society ever attended to live up to its boldest principles in regard to blacks. He wonders whether historians will one day “write that America was never an authentic democracy or, worse still, never really tried to be” (49). Robinson blames American

society, specifically white Americans for failure among blacks and questions whether America has the desire to solve the problem of the color line.

Robinson's attempt to imagine life in 2076 leads him to believe that the problem will only worsen. He sees a time in which blacks no longer identify as a racial group but rather as ethnicities that share no common past or present. The majority of people of color are behind bars while a successful few no longer identify with the many (179). For Robinson this is an apocalyptic scenario in which his "renaissance blacks" or what Du Bois earlier termed the "talented tenth" have failed to fulfill their debt to the race.

Robinson urges renaissance blacks to make the demand for reparations in the present in order to show their concern for poor blacks before it is too late. The demand is in essence a symbolic way of taking care of poor blacks. Yet Robinson's juxtaposition of white society's response to white poverty with that of black poverty underlies the fact that the notion of a debt owed to the race may exist more for blacks than for whites. As Robinson observes, "White society has never seriously concerned itself with the eradication of white poverty. Hence it is logical to assume that white society would be even less concerned about the consequences of black poverty" (275). Nevertheless, Robinson argues for reparations. He does so because he believes "What is at stake here is our very future as a people in America" (276).

Robinson's statement points to his belief that without this notion of debt blacks will become individuals without group identification. Yet the future of blacks as individuals is not in jeopardy, rather the rhetorical conception of blacks "as a people". This is why for Robinson his futuristic scenario in which blacks no longer identify as a

racial group is apocalyptic. It represents the ultimate failure of the talented tenth to pay its debt to the race.

It is interesting that for Robinson a time in which people identify as individuals rather than as members of a group is problematic, considering that many civil rights leaders strived to free individuals from the oppression they experienced as members of a stigmatized group. As Greeson suggested, freedom for the individual is interpreted in some quarters as betrayal of the group (*The Dialectics of Betrayal* 18). Yet the problem is not identification with the group but rather that among blacks this identification is given primacy over the individual. It is from this well that a sense of betrayal springs. I believe that blacks must invert the relationship between the group and the individual so that the latter is given primacy over the former. To hold otherwise is to continue the same logic that condemned many blacks, despite their talents, to conditions of servitude in a segregated society that would not recognize them as individuals. To assert my individuality does not mean that I cannot care for the group if I so choose. It only means that I should not feel a sense of failure if choose not to do so. Blacks must be given free will to choose what they will or will not do as individuals. If God grants us this right, then we should not deny it to each other.

Applying the Topoi of Failure to the Study of Race

My study demonstrates the utility of David Payne's dialectical topoi of self-society, past-future, and spiritual-material as a means to understand race discourse. In particular, this study focused on discourse occurring among an important segment of the black population during the post-civil rights era. Understanding the trajectory of

discourse among members of today's talented tenth from the 1980s into the early twenty-first century gives us a greater insight into how influential blacks view the successes and failures of the civil rights movement. Payne's topoi make the public discourse of black rhetors such as Shelby Steele, Derrick Bell, and Randall Robinson more understandable. In this study I used Payne's topoi as a means to critique two works from each of the three authors.

This study also demonstrates the relevance of Payne's themes of consolation and compensation in regard to race discourse within the United States. The struggles for civil rights, social justice and economic equality can be understood as attempts to gain both consolation and compensation for past injustices. Black discourse, and I believe many others, evidence repeated attempts to gain consolation and/or compensation via rhetoric. Unable to wield great military might, slaves and their descendants were forced to take advantage of the one tool they had at their disposal; the power of the spoken word. As this study reveals, discourse among members of the talented tenth often focuses on consolation for past injustices. Perhaps this focus on consolation in the post-civil rights era stems from disillusionment with the idea that compensation is possible in the United States if racism is truly a fundamental pillar of our society. While individuals such as Randall Robinson demand compensation for blacks in the form of reparations, they often hold out little hope that these demands will ever be met. Robinson even left the United States following the publication of *The Reckoning*, having grown despondent with the pace of racial progress in the United States. His subsequent book *Quitting America* explains his reasons for giving up hope that the American experiment will ever turn the many into one in any meaningful sense.

This points to the third benefit of using Payne's framework as a means to understand race discourse, its ability to provide a distinction between idealistic and materialistic failures. As I noted earlier, Payne argued that an individual could be both an idealistic failure and a materialistic failure at that the same time. What I have demonstrated in this study is that combining Payne's ideas about idealistic and materialistic failures with Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth allows us to see that individuals can see themselves as idealistic failures because of the materialistic failure of others. Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth demands that this be so among blacks until the entire group attains greater status within America's social hierarchy. Middle class blacks are held responsible, and accept responsibility for less fortunate blacks if they adhere to Du Bois's rhetorical mandate that members of the talented tenth save the race.

Frustration with the pace of social progress may cause members of the talented tenth to construct arguments in ways that Payne's initial statements on the use of his topoi did not predict. Bell, Steele, and Robinson all emphasize either the presence and/or the possibility of an apocalypse in their works. Although Steele and Robinson use the idea of an apocalypse to argue for social change, both Robinson and Bell also use the idea to argue that attempts to create change in the present will fail to produce beneficial outcomes in the future. Bell's rhetoric is most notable in that in contrast to Payne's observation that consolation can lead to compensation, we find no such rhetorical movement in Bell's work. Rather Bell stops short of compensation entirely. His work provides only consolation for past failure, present circumstances, and future disasters. Bell's deterministic viewpoint makes the past, present, and future into one monumental and omnipresent failure that cannot be undone. For this reason I believe in my future

research it will be necessary to explore the uses of apocalyptic discourse among black rhetors in order to understand the reasons why some rhetorical efforts never make the turn from consolation to compensation.

Addressing the Field of Rhetoric

This study addresses the paucity of rhetorical critiques of black discourse. As Enrique Rigsby noted, our field often fails to pay attention to the rhetoric of blacks on a consistent basis, and when scholars do turn their attention to this direction their work is often behind the times. It is as if many rhetorical critics perceive themselves to be historians more content to study the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass, than the contemporary issues that rhetors such as Randall Robinson bring to our attention. Yes, there are critiques of Louis Farrakhan's rhetoric, but perhaps this is because the subjects of his discourse are already familiar to our ears. As rhetorical critics we have the ability to provide the public with an understanding of contemporary debates in ways that differ from what historians and journalists can and are willing to provide. Moreover, as rhetorical critics we should begin to study literary works that rhetors create and not focus our attention so heavily on speeches. The texts rhetors create can give us greater insight into their thoughts than what we may glean from their speeches. I believe that my study is unique in its attempt to address the works of three contemporary black authors who make important statements in their works about the status of blacks in the post-civil rights era. There are many other rhetors and texts that remain to be studied, and this project lays a foundation for future research.

This study also addresses the paucity of research on therapeutic rhetoric. It continues in the tradition of Kenneth Burke who viewed the texts rhetors produce as “equipment for living”. David Payne took up this idea and created a framework for us to understand therapeutic rhetoric in terms of consolation and compensation. He examined various texts and found that three sets of dialectical topoi: self-society, past-future, and spiritual-material encompassed the finite means in which rhetors can address failure rhetorically. In this study I have taken Payne’s idea and used it as a means to critique the discourse of three black public intellectuals in the post-civil rights era. Payne’s topoi can be used to critique the discourse of blacks in earlier eras as well and perhaps it should be. Understanding the trajectory of black discourse over time may give us greater insight into the nature of the rhetoric we hear today. Furthermore, if we are to understand therapeutic rhetoric, then the discourse of blacks, among other minority groups, provides us with a frontier in which to explore this subject. In the long march from slavery, segregation, civil rights protests, and beyond, blacks have created a great deal of therapeutic rhetoric in order to cope with the failure of rhetoric to persuade white Americans to create a more just society.

This research lays a foundation for new research on the rhetoric of race from a therapeutic perspective. It responds to the discourse of rhetors who question the success of blacks’ previous rhetorical efforts to gain various forms of equality. My study reveals that in the post civil rights era influential blacks are experiencing a lack of faith that we shall overcome racism. This lack of faith challenges what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell sees as the field of rhetoric’s ontological assumption that individuals are rational and capable of being persuaded. One black rhetorical critic, Mark McPhail, expresses doubts about

whether this is the case. Instead he now sees racism as more a psychological problem than a rhetorical one. If this is so, then the subject of race and racism pushes the field of rhetoric to its boundaries. The discourse of those who are marginalized in our society may reveal the limits to which rhetors can aspire. The available means of persuasion that Aristotle spoke of may in some cases not be enough. If this is true, then it is something we as citizens within a democratic society need to know.

A New Frontier for the Field of Rhetoric

My study demonstrates that a rhetoric of failure exists among a segment of the black population often referred to as the talented tenth. It focuses on the work of three black male public intellectuals: Derrick Bell, Shelby Steele, and Randall Robinson. What remains to be done is a similar study focusing on the rhetoric of black women public intellectuals. This research leads me to see the possibility that differential outcomes between genders within a racial group may result in different rhetorical stances. Black women have fared better than black men following the civil rights movement. It remains to be seen whether their discourse focuses on failure at all. If it does, there is still the possibility that the failures black women are concerned with may differ from those of black men. Two out of the three black males whose works I critiqued utilize a theme of consolation in their texts. Yet I believe that one may find a rhetoric of compensation in the rhetoric of black women public intellectuals stemming from black women's more positive outcomes following the civil rights movement in comparison with black men.

I also see a need to explore the rhetoric of other minority groups whether they stem from ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or people with disabilities. Understanding

how various ethnic groups in a multicultural and ever changing society construct rhetorics of consolation and compensation is important. Too often when we speak of race and ethnicity the conversation focuses solely on blacks and whites. Furthermore, it is important to look at therapeutic rhetoric from a gender perspective given the gains of the women's movement, many of which have positively influenced the status of black women who in some ways may benefit from both the civil rights movement and the women's movement. The gay rights movement is ongoing and battles over gay marriage and constitutional amendments to protect the sanctity of marriage point to the need to understand how gays view the success or failure of their attempts to gain equality. People with disabilities continue to struggle to achieve equal treatment as well. Although the possibility of becoming disabled in some way looms for us all, many able-bodied persons are slow to push for changes that would make equal access to something as common as a building possible for fellow citizens. Last, given the various movements named above it becomes important to understand how members of the white majority construct rhetorics of consolation and compensation in response to various societal changes. Since unfortunately groups within society often view their political and economic relations as a zero-sum game, one group's gain is often seen as another's loss. Nevertheless, rather than lessen my faith in America, this project has strengthened it. Although many critics would use the past to discourage us, we should in fact take from it encouragement. The present is better than the past and I do believe that the future will be better as well. We Americans show a resounding ability to overcome our faults, and push forward in the quest to become one nation indivisible. What keeps us together is stronger than what pulls us apart.

Postscript

We have within ourselves the ability to see the old in a new way. Rather than be slaves to ideas of the past we can free ourselves of them and embrace the possibilities of the future. The word we is most important in our vocabularies, as the problems of the past grow in part out of our persistence in seeing the world in terms of us and them. We as Americans have walked many miles together, and although our conversations have not always been amiable we have nevertheless continued to walk together. The problem of race in America has not yet been solved, but we are closer to a solution than many critics would like to admit. Some wounds will heal in time. It took hundreds of years to create the division between us, and we can reasonably expect that it may take as long to create the same level of identification between us. We should not give up hope simply because the dream has not materialized in a few decades. The post-civil rights era is a fitting description for our times as the problems we face have less to do with civil rights and group discrimination than they did before. When discrimination takes place it eventually comes to light, and an attempt to correct the injustice in our social system is made. There is a place in America now for individuals of all colors, and that is a remarkable achievement. Class rather than race is what truly separates individuals both between and within social groups, and educational attainment helps individuals surmount this obstacle as well. This work renewed my faith in the American dream, and in American society. American society was built on hope and faith, and it is these two virtues that we must use to sustain both our country and ourselves.

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