American Skin: Bruce Springsteen, Danielle Allen, and the Politics of Interracial Friendship

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ABSTRACT
Arguing that the political theorist Danielle Allen and the rock musician Bruce Springsteen offer similar analyses of the causes of, and solutions to, America’s racial divide, this article employs Springsteen’s music and his efforts to model his relationship with Clarence Clemons as an example for the broader American polity to consider the plausibility of Allen’s claims about interracial friendship as a source of political reconstitution. Detailing the criticism of the friendship model of racial politics set out by Benjamin DeMott, and the more specific criticism of Allen’s formulation offered by Lawrie Ballfour, it argues that considering Springsteen’s work as a practical embodiment of Allen’s theory suggests not only that Allen fails to surmount such critiques but also that the problems of Springsteen’s relationship with Clemons indicate further ways in which friendship, as a form of citizenship, is an inadequate solution to the political problems of race that Allen identifies.

In his 2011 eulogy for his longtime friend and bandmate, the African American saxophonist Clarence Clemons, Bruce Springsteen paid repeated attention to issues of race, noting that not even Clemons’s success had insulated him

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from racial prejudice. Nevertheless, Springsteen suggested, his and Clemons’s friendship, embodied in and powered by the music they made together, offered the possibility of racial transcendence, not only for themselves and their immediate audience but also for the broader American republic. “Together,” Springsteen declared, invoking their alter egos from his 1975 song “10th Avenue Freeze-Out,” “we told an older, richer story about the possibilities of friendship that transcended those I’d written in my songs and in my music. Clarence carried it in his heart. It was a story where the Scooter and the Big Man not only busted the city in half, but we kicked ass and remade the city, shaping it into the kind of place where our friendship would not be such an anomaly” (Springsteen 2011).

In this Springsteen unknowingly, perhaps, echoed a view of friendship and racial politics outlined by Danielle Allen in her 2004 book *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. In it, Allen calls for a reconstitution of the American polity through rituals and practices aimed at cultivating interracial friendship as a form of citizenship. It is not the only similarity between their work. Both regard what Allen calls “congealed distrust” as the predominant source of racial tension in the United States—precisely that which, they believe, a citizenship modeled on friendship might overcome or alleviate—and both place considerable faith in the power of cultural forms to alleviate it (Allen 2004, xiii). Largely absent from Allen’s account is, however, any suggestion about what such practices and rituals might look like when removed from the world of academic theory. In this, given the shared understanding of the causes of racial strife that animates Allen’s book and Springsteen’s music, and their shared commitment to friendship as a solution to it, Springsteen’s modeling of his relationship with Clemons as an example for his audience might provide a theoretically rich opportunity for considering the promise, and the problems, of Allen’s account of friendship as a basis for racial politics in the United States.

The claim is not that Springsteen’s relationship with Clemons can serve as a case study of interracial friendship. It is rather that as a deeply self-reflective artist who, through his work, seeks to think critically about himself, the nation, and his ongoing relationship with his audience, Springsteen explores the problem of American racism in ways that parallel Allen’s approach. Like Allen, Springsteen is keenly aware of, and invested in, the potential power of the image, and like Allen, he believes in music as a metaphor for, and a path toward, racism in America.

1. Allen concludes her book with a letter to the Faculty Senate at the University of Chicago—where she was then employed—outlining modes of engagement that the university might adopt with the poorer, African American community by which it is surrounded. Setting aside the question of their likely efficacy, doubts about the replicability of these proposals outside of the specific context Allen discusses suggest that the issue of what such practices and rituals might look like in the broader American context remains a thorny one for her theory (Allen 2004, 175–85).
more productive racial politics. As such, the limitations and problems inherent in his artistic attempts to engage with the issue have the potential to cast considerable critical light on Allen’s more abstract academic formulations.

Setting out Allen’s argument about interracial friendship, this article will identify the considerable similarities between her views about race, politics, and friendship and those underpinning, and expressed in, Springsteen’s music. Then, detailing two key critiques of the friendship model of racial politics—offered by Benjamin DeMott and Lawrie Balfour—it will suggest not only that Allen’s argument fails to address or fully engage with a number of the concerns that they raise, but also that both Springsteen’s work and his audience’s response to it point to further problems with her claims. Not least among these, it will be argued, is her overreliance on the promiscuous power of the image and her failure to recognize how the potential for blindness in even the most intimate of friendships may undermine her arguments about political possibilities of interracial friendships between citizens. Although the argument presented here is highly critical of attempts by Allen and Springsteen to employ friendship as a model for American racial politics, it is offered in a spirit of constructive engagement. While recognizing that there is much that is noble in Springsteen’s efforts and Allen’s theory, it suggests, nevertheless, that even as claims about friendship as a basis for racial politics are, once again, in vogue, the obstacles to its enactment as a basis for productive interracial engagement may remain insurmountable.

TALK TO ME

Danielle Allen’s attempt to rehabilitate friendship as a model for American racial politics is predicated on the claim that “an honest look at the political situation in the United States leads to . . . a recognition that among our core political problems is not racism but interracial distrust” (Allen 2004, xiv). She suggests, moreover, that “within democracies, such congealed distrust indicates political failure. At its best, democracy is full of contention and fluid disagreement but free of settled patterns of mutual disdain. Democracy depends on trustful talk among strangers and, properly conducted, should dissolve any divisions that block it” (xiii). Citing the importance of Robert Putnam’s work on the cultivation of social capital, Allen suggests that such trust is absent when “citizens no longer feel it sensible, or secure enough, to place their fates in the hands of democratic strangers” (xvi), a problem made all the more pressing because “we are always awash in each other’s lives.” “Some live behind one veil,” she writes, “and others behind another, but the air that we all breathe

2. As such, her argument, while focused on race, has implications for other possible cleavages in the polity such as class and gender.
carries the same gasses and pollens through those veils” (xxii). Presenting her argument as “a modest contribution to liberal political theory,” Allen argues “not for institutions that can dissolve distrust but for forms of citizenship that, when coupled with liberal institutions, can do so” (xx). In keeping with a compelling theoretical claim that is at the heart of much of her work—that “new ideas can introduce changes to fundamental conceptions of reality, value, and possibility, linguistic change can itself contain the seeds of structural change” (Allen 2010, 145)—Allen suggests that citizenship understood as a form of friendship might serve as a corrective to the problems of congealed distrust that she identifies.

Possibly as a response to Benjamin DeMott’s critique of earlier attempts to model interracial friendship as a solution to America’s most pernicious political problem, a critique that she briefly acknowledges in her work, Allen is quick to note that hers “is not an argument that we should all be friends—in the spirit, say, of Hollywood’s popular interracial buddy movies” (a genre of which DeMott is particularly dismissive), “nor is it an argument that each of us should seek some human communality that binds us even to strangers.” Friendship, she suggests, is not an emotion, but a practice: “a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration.” For friendship, she notes, “is not easy, nor is democracy. Friendship begins with the recognition that friends have a shared life—not a ‘common’ nor an identical life—only one with common events, climates, built-environments, fixations of the imagination, and social structures” (Allen 2004, xxi–xxii). Allen suggests, nevertheless, that underpinning this shared life should be a recognition of the heterogeneity of the polity. Indeed, she is keen to distinguish her claims from those of Jürgen Habermas, who, according to Allen, is overly committed to notions of unity and consensus. For Allen, the social cohesion she seeks through friendship as a practice of citizenship is one of “wholeness” rather than “oneness” or unity: friendships can often be unlikely, occurring between individuals of diverse backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences. Allen also rejects the notion that such a model would require giving up on the bedrock liberal idea that citizens are motivated by their own self-interest. She offers a reading of Aristotle that suggests that political friendships are those in which self-interest is understood more broadly, with the self-interest of friends, both intimate and political, often overlapping without necessarily merging into one (126). Indeed, she argues that friendship as a form of citizenship offers an Aristotelian mean between domination and acquiescence, one that, while limiting agency, preserves both autonomy and consent (121, 132). Lest her argument be seen as Pollyannaish, Allen further suggests, nevertheless, that her citizen-friends need to know why they are distrusted. The politics of friendship “requires of citizens a capacity to attend to the dark side of the democratic soul” (xxii). Central to this understanding, Allen argues, is a shared historical consciousness.
As the title of her book suggests, Allen sees the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* as a watershed in American racial politics. She is, nevertheless, keen to make clear that both the decision and the civil rights struggle that it fueled defined a period of considerable upheaval that Allen compares to the Civil War. Such a characterization, she notes, “will probably seem like an exaggeration, given how the history of the civil rights movement is typically told. The outcome of these events allows us to peddle a softer version of the tale than the origin of these events points to. At the very least, in the period of the civil rights movement, large groups of citizens had decided no longer to obey a fair portion of the laws of their states” (Allen 2004, xviii). As evidence of the violence of the immediate aftermath of *Brown*, Allen pays repeated attention to the famous photograph of Hazel Bryan, a young white woman, hurling hateful invective at Elizabeth Eckford, a young black woman attempting to enter Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas on September 4, 1957. For Allen, this picture is not only indicative of the violence of the civil rights struggle, and, indeed, of the demands that such reconstitutions of the polity place on its citizens, but also one of the ways in which that reconstitution might be achieved.

The media’s widespread dissemination of the Eckford–Bryan photograph, Allen argues, “forced a psychic transformation of the citizenry” (2004, 3). It elicited “throughout the citizenry an epiphanic awareness of the inner workings of public life and made those mechanics the subject of debate,” evidence for her claim, she suggests, that “habits of citizenship begin with how citizens imagine their political world” (4). Indeed, this public debate was precisely the sort of “talking to strangers” central to Allen’s project. For Allen, moreover, the power of the image is not just confined to generating an awareness of the profound social inequalities underpinning American life; it can also offer—at the very minimum—a suggestion about what her desired practices of citizenship and friendship might look like in practice. “Trust building,” Allen writes, “requires that citizens turn their attention toward one another.” She offers, by way of example, an image from the work of the African American photographer Teenie Harris. In it, five African Americans—three men and two women—are gathered around a piano in 1946. As a seated woman plays the piano, a shorter man stands with his hands on her shoulders while two taller men stand behind him. One of these men rests his arm on the other man’s shoulder. At the far right of the picture, a younger woman leans in and smiles as the man to her right pulls his left arm tightly around her. “Each musician’s body,” Allen observes, “is subtly attuned to the presence of others, as all of them preparing to sing, listen for the piano and cast the whole of their attention toward something invis-

3. Likewise, Bonnie Honig writes, “Those victorious political actors created post hoc the clarity we now credit with having spurred them on to victory ex ante” (2009, 47).
ible: the song. In politics the something invisible we look and listen for is the re-
public, or the res publica, which means ‘the public thing.’” For Allen, this mu-
sical engagement is both a metaphor for and an example of the political whole-
ess that she seeks through practices of citizenship. “Each,” she says of those
around the piano, “will have a sense of how his or her voice is supported by
and supports the others. So too is the activity of attending to the ‘public thing’
a matter of attentiveness to fellow players,” precisely that which, she suggests,
citizenship understood as friendship seeks to generate (87–88).

In this, then, Danielle Allen offers a reworking of an older set of claims about
the political possibilities of friendship. Building on her claim that Americans of
all races find themselves enmeshed in a shared world of congealed distrust, she
seeks to outline political practices that might overcome it in ways that would
allow the polity to move forward as an ongoing democratic project. Such
friendships, she suggests, might free the polity from a constant need to replay
its racial dramas.⁴ Employing the image as tool and music as metaphor, Allen
seeks to make her theory practice, cultivating in her readers the very skills they
need for citizenship. In this, she shares a great deal with Bruce Springsteen, an
artist who is similarly committed to the transformative power of music and the
image, and whose work emerges—like that of Allen—from a concern with both
the political community of which he is a citizen and an ongoing relationship
with his audience. Although race has not traditionally been at the heart of
Springsteen’s musical concerns, he, like Allen, nevertheless sees friendship as
a potential solution to America’s most pressing problem. As such, Springsteen’s
work, and the example that his relationship with Clarence Clemons offered
to his audience, might prove to be a fecund source of insight into the political
promise and the problems of Allen’s claims about interracial friendship.

LET’S BE FRIENDS (SKIN TO SKIN)

Bruce Springsteen, it was frequently observed during the Clarence Clemons–
era E Street Band, had more black people on stage than in his audience. Al-
though somewhat hyperbolic, the quip may seem more plausible given that
the first post-Clemons incarnation of the band featured a black saxophonist,
three African American backing singers, a black percussionist, and Tom Mo-
rello, formerly of Rage Against the Machine, as an adjunct guitarist.⁵ Sprin-

⁴ Or, as Linda Williams (2002) suggests, melodramas. For another compelling take on
melodrama in American life and politics, see Anker (2014).
⁵ Clemons died from complications from a stroke on June 18, 2011. For Springsteen’s
2012–13 tour in support of his Wrecking Ball album and his 2014 tour behind his High
Hopes record (which contained a new studio version of the song “American Skin (41 Shots)”),
the new band members were the saxophonist Jake Clemons (nephew of Clarence); the singers
steen’s apparent lack of appeal to black audiences may, in part at least, be a product of the way in which race has always been at the periphery of his work. For an artist who sees his role as judging the distance between the American dream and American reality, that the disparity that he identifies is more often focused on issues of class than those of race means that the appeal of his work to those for whom race is a more salient source of inequality may be limited. The paradox here is that Springsteen has made much of his debt to black music.

In 1971, the Student Prince—the Jersey Shore club where Springsteen would later meet Clemons—billed him as “That Sensational Soul Man Bruce Springsteen” (Marsh 2006, 51). His 2012 tour in support of his Wrecking Ball album began with a show at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem, where, in addition to performing songs by Smokey Robinson, Wilson Pickett, and Sam and Dave, Springsteen paid tribute to “Motown. Atlantic. Stax . . . labels whose very name held power and mystery for us when we were young” (McKinley 2012). As such, Springsteen might be thought to belong to that long list of white artists who have appropriated black music for commercial gain. Indeed, when the narrator of his song “Incident on 57th Street” declares, “let the black boys in to light the soul flame,” he or she might be thought to have captured the marginal role of African Americans in Springsteen’s work. And yet, it is also clear that Springsteen’s personal and professional relationship with

Curtis King, Cindy Mizelle, and Michelle Moore; and the percussionist Everett Bradley. Morello’s exact status as a band member is unclear.

6. This is not to suggest, of course, that nonwhites can only appreciate music, art, or literature that deals with issues of ethnicity or race. Rather, given that Springsteen is an artist whose appeal lies, in part, in the ways in which his music offers his fans insight into their own lives, the marginality of race in his work may explain, in part, why the kind of devoted fans who make up his fan base are predominantly white. Here Dave Marsh (2011) is insightful: “Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons did not find a blacker audience because . . . the anomaly of their enactment of the dilemma and its consequences, if not solutions, did not need to be impressed upon the black community.”

7. It is also possible that Springsteen’s lack of appeal to black audiences is aesthetic. Noting the divergence of white and black rock music in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marsh claimed that “the black audience focused heavily on elements that are least interesting in Springsteen’s music: namely the bottom and the beat” (Cavicchi 1998, 148). Interestingly, however, the E Street Band is cited—along with Wynton Marsalis—by a black character in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child as being one of the few groups to embody an otherwise dying black aesthetic of brass instrumentation in popular music (Morrison 2015, 126).

8. While there is no denying this phenomenon, recent scholarship has complicated these claims. See, e.g., Mazor (2009) and Hughes (2015).

9. Bruce Springsteen, “Incident on 57th Street.” © 1973, Bruce Springsteen (ASCAP). All rights reserved. The request is made to a character called Puerto Rican Jane. Springsteen’s relationship to and depiction of Latinos might well be the subject of another essay. Also on the periphery of his work, it took a more central role in his 1995 album The Ghost of Tom Joad.
Clemons was central to his self-understanding, at least in terms of his role as a performing artist: Clemons was offered up as a friend and musical partner, one whose shared bond with Springsteen offered hope for America’s racial divide. Echoing Allen’s view about American democracy as an ongoing project, Springsteen’s eulogy for Clemons suggested that not even death could undo the positive impact of their friendship. “I’m no mystic,” he observed, “but the undertow, the mystery and power of Clarence and my friendship leads me to believe we must have stood together in other, older times, along other rivers, in other cities, in other fields, doing our modest version of god’s work . . . work that’s still unfinished” (Springsteen 2011). Indeed, the song “American Skin (41 Shots),” which premiered during Springsteen’s 1999–2000 reunion tour with the E Street Band and might be considered the clearest statement about race in his musical canon, suggests that Springsteen shares with Allen not only an understanding of the solution to America’s racial problems but also an understanding of its causes. “American Skin,” it might be argued, is about precisely the world of congealed distrust that Allen identifies.

In June 2000, Robert Lucente, president of the New York State Chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, asserted that Bruce Springsteen had “turned into some kind of fucking dirt bag.” Warming to his theme, Lucente continued, “He has all these good songs and everything, American flag songs and all that stuff, and now he’s a floating fag. You can quote me on that” (NME 2000). Lucente was joined in his condemnation of Springsteen by George Mole, an NYPD lieutenant who asserted in a New York Times editorial that the singer—traditionally associated with working-class themes—had turned “his back on the working men and women who wear the shield” (Mole 2000). It was an astonishing turnaround for the singer, who once boasted of “a healthy fan base in law enforcement,” and who had suggested that “a lot of rock-n-roll music was concerned with the outlaw. But I liked the idea of ‘High Noon’ and the ambivalent sheriff” (Strauss 1995).

The cause of the police discontent was Springsteen’s—then unreleased—song “American Skin (41 Shots),” ostensibly about the shooting of an unarmed West African street vendor, Amadou Diallo, by four New York City police officers in February 1999.

The song itself was not officially released until 2001 on the album Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band: Live in New York City. There the performance begins with the refrain “41 shots” repeated nine times, first by individual band members, then by Springsteen in unison with the other voices, and

10. Springsteen, it might be noted, once also headlined a benefit concert for the wife and family of a slain local police officer in his home state of New Jersey. For evidence of Springsteen and the ambivalence of law enforcement, see, e.g., his songs “Highway Patrolman” (1982) and “The Line” (1995).
finally by Springsteen himself. That Clarence Clemons, then the only African American in the band, is the first voice in the sequence, followed by Nils Lofgren, Steve Van Zandt, Patti Scialfa, and finally Springsteen, suggests, perhaps, an idealized history of racial struggle in the United States not dissimilar to that outlined by Allen. It is one in which blacks begin political action alone before they are joined by whites, who—recognizing their shared interests, properly understood—then combine into a greater political collective whose action reaches across divides of race and gender to cultivate a polity predicated on wholeness. Certainly Allen’s account of the—albeit racially homogeneous—Teenie Harris photograph of five black Americans gathered around the piano suggests the ways in which musical performance can serve as a metaphor for, and even an enactment of, the political friendships that she seeks. Further suggesting the affinity between Springsteen and Allen, “American Skin” pays particular attention to Allen’s “dark side of the democratic soul.”

The clearest statement of Springsteen’s understanding of the dangers of being a visible minority in the United States is offered in the song’s second verse. It declares,

Lena gets her son ready for school  
She says “on these streets, Charles  
You’ve got to understand the rules.  
If an officer stops you  
Promise you’ll always be polite,  
That you’ll never ever run away  
Promise Mama you’ll keep your hands in sight.”

It is telling that while we are never told that Lena and Charles are black—or, at least nonwhite—the history of state-sanctioned American racial violence and harassment is such that the listener automatically assumes this to be the case, a claim that is, perhaps, true even for those, such as Lucente and Mole, who took offense at the song and would, no doubt, deny the existence of the very condition they have automatically understood. This dark side is, as Springsteen repeatedly makes clear in lines that appear three times in the song, not just threatened, but actual:

11. This and all subsequent references refer to “American Skin (41 Shots).” © 2000, Bruce Springsteen (ASCAP). All rights reserved.
12. It is a device that Springsteen may have borrowed from Bob Dylan, whose 1964 song “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” addressing the senseless murder of an African American maid, Hattie Carroll, by a white tobacco farmer, William Zantzinger, achieves the same effect without ever mentioning the victim’s race.
It ain’t no secret
It ain’t no secret
No secret my friend,
You can get killed just for living in
Your American skin.

That many white listeners found these lines, and the song of which it is a part, so objectionable might be considered evidence of the congealed distrust that Allen sees at the heart of America’s racial politics. For this audience, at least, the skin that Springsteen identifies is anything but white, a further indication, no doubt, of the supposed bias that led Lucente to question Springsteen’s heterosexuality (while praising his buoyancy). Such an understanding is, however, predicated on ignoring the first two lines of the chorus and, indeed, the entirety of the first verse. There the narrator—in a song that has only two full stanzas—declares,

41 shots . . . cut through the night
You’re kneeling over his body in the vestibule
Praying for his life.

The most likely protagonist here is a cop, possibly one of the officers who fired some portion of the 41 shots. While it is always possible that the officer is praying for the target’s life because he or she fears legal or disciplinary reprisals, the audience is, perhaps, meant to believe that the officer is concerned for the well-being of the victim. Indeed, the song immediately switches to providing the broader context for the officers’ actions: the victim’s behavior and the inherent uncertainty faced by cops in their encounters with potential assailants.

Is it a gun, is it a knife
Is it a wallet, this is your life.

In the incident from which Springsteen drew many of the song’s details, Diallo held out a wallet to the police. In the dark, the four—later exonerated—officers charged with the shooting observed that they simply could not tell what it was (Fritsch 2000). Here, then, Springsteen places the officers’ actions in context, mitigating if not outright exonerating them by suggesting that they too might be killed for living in their American skin, a skin that is now also white.\(^{13}\) As such, the cops’ uncertainty and, indeed, the uncertainty of the vic-

\(^{13}\) It might be argued that it is the officers’ uniforms and not their skin that make them targets. Nevertheless, that Springsteen only employs the term “skin” suggests otherwise. In-
tim may be products of precisely the congealed distrust—itself a product of the
prior history of such interactions—identified by Allen. The only moment in the
song where Springsteen suggests that something more might be at work than
the officers’ fears about their own mortality comes when the narrator asks,

Is it a gun, is it a knife
Is it in your heart, is it in your eyes?

Here, at least, Springsteen suggests that the fear might rest on preexisting preju-
dice. Nevertheless, that the cop is seen to ask him- or herself that question might
make his or her actions less blameworthy: that the cop asked such questions
before shooting would seem to redound to his or her credit, especially in the con-
text of fear, potential violence, uncertainty, and distrust that Springsteen de-
scribes. Unexpectedly, Springsteen—who is, because of his race and socioeco-
nomic status, much less likely to be a victim of it than Allen—pays more
attention to this violence than the theorist. While Allen rejects the “same boat”
metaphor beloved of some of those committed to social unity, she does not go
as far as Springsteen, who depicts a world in which “we’re baptized in these wa-
ters and in each other’s blood.” Nevertheless, for Springsteen, like Allen, even
this world of violence seems to be one of distrust, not bad intent. Indeed, as
far as Springsteen depicts racial violence in his work, it appears to be somewhat
agentless, emerging from a violence in American society whose origins remain
largely unexplored.

“American Skin” offers two stories, one white, one not, suggesting a world
in which this apparently agentless violence affects both groups equally. It is an
understanding that appears to underpin much of what Springsteen has to say
about race elsewhere in his work. In one of his many lamentations of Ronald
Reagan’s America, 1984’s “My Hometown,” the narrator—whom we assume
to be white, not least because he has a social mobility in the face of economic
decline that is often unavailable to African Americans—declares,

It was ’65, tensions were running high at my high school
There was a lot of fights between the black and white
There was nothing you could do
Two cars at a light on a Saturday night in the backseat there was a gun
Words were passed in a shotgun blast
Troubled times had come to my hometown.14

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14. “My Hometown.” © 1984, Bruce Springsteen (ASCAP). All rights reserved.
The causes of this racial violence remain unexplored. The fights were between blacks and whites. There is no indication of who was subject to the violence of the shotgun blast, or who perpetrated it; both are culpable, both are victims. It is a view that is conducive to a certain kind of interracial friendship: one in which both blacks and whites can simultaneously take and deny responsibility, accepting that both were at fault. Tellingly, the narrator of the similarly unexplored violence in “American Skin” addresses the listener as “my friend” on three separate occasions.

While artists cannot necessarily be held responsible for the responses of their audiences, the agentless account of violence that permeates Springsteen’s work on race offers very little resistance to the preconceptions of his listeners. Indeed, that an unreleased Springsteen song, “The Klansman,” recorded around 1982, drew praise on a white supremacist discussion board and provoked a debate about whether or not Springsteen’s father was a White Knight further suggests how the apparently blameless racial violence in Springsteen’s work might simply reaffirm the expectations of his audience (Stormfront 2005). Likewise, the offense taken by those hypersensitive to criticism of the police to a song that all but exonerates law enforcement in the killing of an unarmed man suggests the ways in which Springsteen fails to “transfigure the commonplace” (Danto 1983). Of course, simple condemnation rarely makes for good art—though Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” and Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddamn” might be exceptions to this rule—but it is a shortcoming of Springsteen’s writing that he seldom challenges his audience’s preexisting convictions about American racial politics. Indeed, it may be that this is the cost of maintaining his relationship with the white citizens who make up the majority of his audience. A less cynical possibility is, however, suggested by Springsteen’s friend and in-house biographer, Dave Marsh.16

Although Marsh should not be seen as a Springsteen mouthpiece—the artist is more than capable of speaking for himself—his account of the conclusion of Huckleberry Finn, raised in the context of describing, without irony, how

15. One possible strategy might be irony, though, as Springsteen has noted, he seldom employs this tool. Nevertheless, both Jay Z’s “99 Problems” and Randy Newman’s “Rednecks” might be considered examples of the way in which an artist might challenge his audience’s preconceptions about racial issues in a way that Springsteen does not. A July 20, 2001, performance of “American Skin (41 Shots)” by the African American artists Living Color is potentially far more challenging to the audience’s worldview, despite the lead singer introducing the song by denying political intent. The combination of the singer’s emotional breakdown at the end of the song and the angry defiance of some of the other musicians may capture a complexity missing from Springsteen’s own performances. See https://www .youtube.com/watch?v=MiC68406c3M.

16. Marsh is married to Barbara Carr, a longtime member of Springsteen’s management team.
Springsteen and Clemons were like Huck and “Nigger Jim,” suggests the problematic perspective offered by the understanding of American racial politics underpinning Springsteen’s work. “You cannot free one slave,” declares Marsh, “and since the slave owner is in the same prison as the slave, just like any other jailer, you can’t free two either. It’s all of us or none of us” (Marsh 2011). The view that society must be freed from racism is obviously an admirable one; the notion that slave and slave owner—and thus black and white—are in the same prison is less so. Among other things, it suggests a naïveté about both figurative and literal racial incarceration (see, e.g., Alexander 2012). What is even more surprising is that Allen would appear to share Marsh’s view. Although offered in a slightly different context, her apparent—though possibly performative—insensitivity to such differentials in power and moral culpability is suggested by her claim that “as democratic citizens, we are all Negroes” (Allen 2004, 116).18 For although Allen does acknowledge a number of significant sources of interracial tension and ongoing racial inequities in the American polity—including, but not limited to, the differential impacts of certain kinds of laws (19–20)—her racial worldview appears remarkably sanguine.

“When the United States was reconstituted between 1954 and 1964,” writes Allen, “its redirection toward integration began the long, slow end of its durable minority group.” Indeed, she continues, we “are not experiencing the end of the social bonds, but only, at last, the small first death tremors of the ideas of ‘the majority group’ and ‘the permanent minority’” (Allen 2004, 163). For all of her expressed concern about social distrust and racial inequity, Allen appears wedded to a somewhat optimistic political teleology in which that which has been gained cannot be lost: she declares, for example, that following the publication of the Eckford–Bryan photograph, “there could be no turning back” (8). Her apparent naïveté—which, once again, raises the question of the possibly performative nature of her argument, as does her belief in the

17. As Andrew Levy (2015, 183) reminds us, Twain himself never employed this nomenclature.

18. In the conclusion to his 1963 essay “We Can Change Our Country,” James Baldwin might be thought to embody something of a performative “we” that offers an olive branch to the white reader he has hitherto attacked. “We have,” he writes, “already paid a tremendous price for what we’ve done to the Negro people” (Baldwin 2010, 64). By making what had previously been a black “we” a multiracial one, Baldwin permits those whom he had attacked in the essay to join him in fighting for the outcome—the changed country—that he seeks. Baldwin was, of course, far from naïve about such alliances and their possibility of being romanticized into a friendship. Indeed, his account—published the following year—of viewing the conclusion of The Defiant Ones, starring Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier as two prisoners chained together and on the run, with white and black audiences might itself pose a challenge to Allen’s overly optimistic account of the political possibilities of interracial friendship (Baldwin 2010, 77–78).
power and importance of rhetoric to political change—about America’s racial politics is further suggested by her depiction of the United States as something of a “city on the hill” for other nations dealing with racial and ethnic divides (xx); by her claim that America is a world “with common events, climates, built-environments, fixations of the imagination, and social structures,” despite its deeply, and deliberately, segregated social and economic spaces (xxi–xxii); and by her assertion that even though whites and blacks live behind different veils (and here, it might be noted, Allen is willing to extend Du Bois’s language to whites in a way that underlines her claim that we are “all negroes” in democracy), we breathe the same air, a claim that is, as recent environmental studies indicate, palpably untrue. Indeed, in the wake of the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, John Crawford, and Walter Scott, among others, and the American public’s deeply divided response to them, Allen’s claim that “by and large, citizens of the United States analyze political problems on roughly the same conceptual turf” (53) may be even more preposterous than when it was first published. In this, Allen seems to be guilty of precisely the sort of blindness to racial issues identified by Benjamin DeMott and Lawrie Balfour.

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

Writing in 1995, in a book that Allen twice acknowledges but with whose critiques she does not engage directly, Benjamin DeMott identified what he called a “friendship orthodoxy” in American racial politics (1995, 5). Espoused by politicians, including Bill Clinton, and cultural theorists such as Studs Terkel, and captured most succinctly by Rodney King, a victim of police violence who famously asked “Can we all get along?” this orthodoxy held “that racism has to do with private attitudes and emotions—with personal narrowness and meanness—not with differences in rates of black and white joblessness and poverty, or in black and white income levels, or in levels of financing of predominantly black and white schools” (22). This viewpoint, DeMott observed, permeated all levels of popular culture, showing up in buddy comedies, from *White Men Can’t Jump* to *Lethal Weapon*, and in typically sentimental American racial narratives, from *Driving Miss Daisy* to *Forrest Gump*. While DeMott noted that friendship can indeed be a social good, he argued that, as far as race is concerned, this orthodoxy constitutes “an intellectual step backwards” (55).
It offers, he argued, a decontextualized, dehistoricized understanding of race in America, one that obscures its structural causes, not least because its viewpoint is embraced by both majority and minority groups. Also turning to music, DeMott noted that Ice Cube, N.W.A., and Public Enemy, among others, frequently articulated a worldview that “the true reason for black suffering lies in the cold unfeelingness of the white heart” (77). In this, he argued, the friendship orthodoxy cultivates the very interracial distrust that Allen believes it will alleviate. He suggested, moreover, that this orthodoxy acted as a cover for the public expression of the problematic racial views of the sort expressed by Richard J. Hernstein and Charles Murray in their bestselling book *The Bell Curve*. Their “science,” he noted, “obliged them to broadcast . . . [with] the words ‘unfortunately’ and ‘disappointingly’” their “discoveries,” “and the notes of condolence and frustration that they struck reaffirmed white sympathy and concern” (81–82). As such, DeMott argued, friendship was not a resource for the cultivation of a productive racial politics; rather, it was a hindrance to the same—a view shared by Lawrie Balfour.

In her essay on Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, Balfour directly engages with Allen’s claims about interracial friendship, making explicit the response to DeMott that is only implicit in *Talking to Strangers*. Balfour notes the ways in which Allen moves beyond the “shared humanity” claim that structures the “friendship orthodoxy” by pointing to wholeness and heterogeneity of the citizenry (2013, 269–71). Likewise, Balfour argues, Allen rejects DeMott’s suggestion that a commitment to interracial friendship as a resource for American racial politics merely requires the cultivation of emotional attachments, pointing to Allen’s concerns about the practices of citizenship. Finally, Balfour suggests, DeMott’s claims about the absence of history from friendship narratives are addressed by Allen in her account of the post-Brown civil rights movement. Nevertheless, Balfour does not spend much time evaluating Allen’s response to DeMott, turning quickly to her real concern: identifying the problems that a certain type of blindness poses to Allen’s theory. It is an argument that she explicates through her reading of Herman Melville.

“One of the most disquieting elements of Melville’s story,” writes Balfour, “is its insight into the ways in which a brutal, racially hierarchical order was maintained through the performance of friendship” (2013, 261). Indeed, she describes “the elaborate pantomime” between Cereno and his servant Babo, whom, she notes, Melville describes as “less a servant than a devoted companion.” “Although the story is replete with happy images of interracial friendship,” Balfour continues, “it does not countenance anything approximating the equality of Queequeg and Ishmael,” noting “the everyday performances of familial relations that were part and parcel of the order of slavery” (266). For Balfour, the story suggests the ways in which the performance of friendship might obscure
tensions in the actual relationship, especially with regard to the more power-
ful party’s possible blindness. That Cereno should be shocked by Babo’s at-
ttempted assault on him, and devastated by the latter’s execution, further sug-
gests the ways in which the sentimentalization of such relationships might hide their inequities of trust: just as Cereno is blind to the distrust he should feel for Babo, Babo must hide his distrust of his master. In each instance, the performance of that friendship fails to bridge the racial divide while simultaneously feeding the distrust that Allen believes it will alleviate. Indeed, Balfour further suggests that it serves to cultivate a complacent self-satisfaction among “friends of the Negro,” who, she writes, “expect acknowledgment for their forward thinking on matters of race” (274).

DeMott and Balfour, then, pose considerable challenges to Allen’s claims about the political efficacy of interracial friendships. Taking Springsteen’s attempts to model his relationship with Clemons as an attempt to enact something like Allen’s approach in the American mainstream, it would appear that when transported from the realm of theory to practice, such critiques are even more telling.

YOU’RE A FRIEND OF MINE

Although Springsteen has, at times, shown himself to be acutely aware of the many and subtle ways in which racism permeates the American polity—for example, when explaining his decision to write a song for Donna Summer, he observed, “She could really sing and I disliked the veiled racism of the anti-disco movement” (Springsteen 2003, 167)—his understanding of his relationship with Clemons suggests the limitations of even the closest friendships as a model for racial politics. In the introduction to his friend’s memoir, Springsteen invoked the relationship he would later identify as a source of racial healing at Clemons’s memorial. “When you look at just the cover of Born to Run,” he wrote, “you see a charming photo, a good album cover, but when you open it up and see Clarence and me in the photo together, the album begins to work its magic. Who are these guys? Where did they come from? What is the joke they are sharing? A friendship and a narrative steeped in the complicated his-
tory of America begin to form and there is music already in the air” (Clemons and Reo 2009, ii). Clemons’s account of the cover was somewhat more ambiv-
alent. In the same memoir, he recounted his response to a friend who observed, “I loved you guys on the Born to Run cover. . . . Everybody did. This black guy and this white guy playing together.” “I’m not on the front of the cover,” Clemons replied, “I’m on the back. I’m talking about the album as it came out. You’ve got to turn it over to see me. That’s how they printed it” (225). That even close friends of different races might have such a different under-
standing of as iconic an image as the cover of Born to Run suggests that Allen’s reliance on the power of the image and the political impact she ascribes to it are both misplaced. Indeed, her claim that the Eckford–Bryan photograph had an epiphanic impact on the polity looks to be—at best—overstated.\textsuperscript{21} Certainly, Allen provides no evidence to support her claim. Furthermore, it would seem to rest on the equally dubious assertion at the heart of her theory: that whites and blacks operate on the same conceptual turf. Given the disparity in understanding of an image between actual friends—between Springsteen and Clemons about the cover of Born to Run—the suggestion that political friends would share the same viewpoint seems to be decidedly misplaced. Likewise, the Teenie Harris picture Allen employs to illustrate the importance of the res publica to citizenship fails to do the work that she requires of it. While all five of those pictured are smiling, only one actually appears to be singing, and of the five, one sports a heavily bandaged eye that might itself hint at the dark side of the democratic soul in a way that she does not acknowledge. As such, Allen’s reading of the photograph, though supportive of her position, appears incomplete—evidence of the way in which many of her claims may be overstated and undersupported.

Balfour’s concerns about the blindness that friendship makes possible are further evidenced by Springsteen’s relationship with Clemons. It could be argued, for example, that Springsteen’s nickname, “The Boss,” redolent of a world of Jim Crow and slavery, is indicative of a hierarchy—Clemons was a hired hand, fired along with the rest of the band in 1989—obscured by the friendship narrative. Certainly, Allen’s observation that “equity is at friendship’s core” might seem to call into question the value of the relationship to the American polity that Springsteen believed that he modeled with Clemons (Allen 2004, 129). Likewise, Springsteen’s occasional blindness to the hierarchy he inadvertently reinforced suggests that Balfour’s concerns are entirely justified: that such blindness is evident in actual friendships does not bode well for political ones. In 1988, for example, Springsteen and Clemons appeared together at an SOS Racisme antiracism concert in Paris. Greeting the crowd in French, Springsteen, dressed in black, declared that “racism is a poison at the heart of American society,” before he and Clemons, dressed in white, performed a rousing version of the song “The Promised Land.” It ended with the two men harmonizing on the final chorus in the manner suggested by Allen in her account of the Teenie Harris photograph. Following a similar performance of the racially problematic “My Hometown,” Clemons then left the stage and Springsteen performed two additional songs. While Springsteen might not be expected to allot

\textsuperscript{21} For a discussion of the problems inherent in the claim that audiences might exhibit universal responses to cultural artifacts, see Stow (2007).
equal time to his friend and bandmate in all of their appearances, this ironic
division of labor at a concert meant to encourage racial equality seems to have
been lost on Clemons’s boss, suggesting precisely the sort of blindness identi-
fied by Balfour. Even more telling was Springsteen’s stunningly symbolic 1985
refusal to record the song “You’re a Friend of Mine” as a duet with Clemons be-
because he considered the song beneath him (Rolling Stone 2011). In such cir-
cumstances, the sacrifices that Allen believes are required for friendship often
seem to be borne only by the less powerful party, even as the blindness that Bal-
four identifies serves to obscure the ongoing inequality of acquiescence and
domination. Much the same might be said about the obfuscatory romanticiza-
tion and sentimentalization that, DeMott argues, friendship as a political model
courages among the citizenry.

Introducing the band in concert, Springsteen frequently invokes many mo-
moments in the real and mythic history of the group. Nicknames—“Miami”
Steve Van Zandt, “Professor” Roy Bittan, “Phantom” Dan Federici, and
“Mighty” Max Weinberg—both capture and mythologize the personalities
and musical styles of the individual members of the band. Prior to his death,
the last introduction was always reserved for Clemons, who was accorded mul-
tiple monikers—“C,” “the Master of Disaster,” “the Big Kahuna,” “the Duke
of Paducah,” and “the man with a PhD in saxual healing,” among others—but
most famously, of course, “the Big Man,” the name that provided the title to his
memoir. Such romanticization in public performance was not, however, with-
out impact on the private. In his eulogy for Clemons, Springsteen recounted
how his youngest son loved to spend time with the “Big Man” on tour: “As
a young child my son Sam became enchanted with the Big Man . . . no surprise.
To a child Clarence was a towering fairytale figure, out of some very exotic sto-
rybook. He was a dreadlocked giant, with great hands and a deep mellifluous
voice sugared with kindness and regard. And . . . to Sammy, who was just a little
white boy, he was deeply and mysteriously black. In Sammy’s eyes, ‘C’ must
have appeared as all of the African continent, shot through with American cool,
rolled into one welcoming and loving figure” (Springsteen 2011). It is a touching
description of a genuine relationship, but in many ways the younger Sam
Springsteen might serve as a proxy for the relationship that his father cultivated
between Clemons and himself, and between his and their audience. The nature
of the relationship that the older Springsteen performed with Clemons—what
Balfour might call their “pantomime of friendship”—is suggested by his obser-
vation, “Of course, also enchanted was Sam’s dad, from the first time I saw my
pal striding out of the shadows of a half empty bar in Asbury Park, a path open-
ing up before him; here comes my brother, here comes my sax man, my inspi-

22. Clemons eventually recorded the song with Jackson Browne.
ration, my partner, my lifelong friend. Standing next to Clarence was like standing next to the baddest ass on the planet. You were proud, you were strong, you were excited and laughing with what might happen, with what together, you might be able to do” (Springsteen 2011). In both this accounting and the one that Springsteen repeatedly offered on stage, Clemons was precisely the fairytale giant, imbued with kindness and American cool, that Sam Springsteen understood him to be. Nevertheless, as Springsteen made clear in his eulogy, this Clemons was something quite different from the more complicated man that Springsteen and Clemons’s friends and family knew more intimately. This was not the relationship that Springsteen’s audience saw; for them, perhaps, Clarence was the cool, unthreatening black friend they had always wanted but never had. Indeed, such an understanding may have also encouraged the politically regressive “friend of the negro” trope among Springsteen’s fan base, permitting them to take offense at “American Skin” because their “friendship” with Clemons had already established their antiracist bona fides. Springsteen’s biographer Dave Marsh acknowledges the difference between public and private friendship, but he misses the broader point.

In his performance of friendship, Marsh suggests, Springsteen risked Clemons “being treated as the safe, harmless, ‘why can’t they all be like this’ black man.” By way of refutation, Marsh invoked his personal relationship with the “Big Man.” “I loved Clarence,” he wrote, “he paid me any number of small kindnesses over the years, mainly just always being glad to see me, but the idea that he was harmless is an absurdity, an insult and a symptom” (Marsh 2011). Marsh’s Clemons was not, however, the Clemons of the performed friendship Marsh also champions as a path to racial equality.23 One wonders, for example, whether the post-1984, largely suburban white audience that came out for Springsteen’s shows and cheered the mythical Clemons would have been as comfortable with the real Clemons (or another similarly large black man for whom Springsteen had not vouched) moving into their neighborhoods—especially with the knowledge that he had been married five times, had four children with different women (three of them white), had been pursued for child support payments, and had been arrested for, and charged with, domestic violence (Los Angeles Times 1997). Without Springsteen’s imprimatur, Clemons may have been seen less as a potential friend and more as an expression of black pathology, further evidence, perhaps, of the problematic nature of Allen’s claim that Americans share the same “conceptual turf.”

23. “They were these two guys who imagined that if they acted free, then other people would understand better that it was possible to be free. How close they came is harder to see than how far the rest of us are from that goal. But there are hearts and minds a few steps closer to liberation out there because of them, people who had fun until it stopped being just fun and grew inside them” (Marsh 2011).
This is not, of course, to attack Clemons. Springsteen’s eulogy told a story of a widely loved man whose actions brought both great joy and pain to those he knew, a story that might be told about any one of us. It is, however, to suggest that what white suburbanites might be willing to overlook in people who look like themselves in order to be friends and neighbors is far less demanding than that which an interracial friendship would require. The complicated, off-stage Clemons that Springsteen knew, the one with whom he seemed to have a genuine and close friendship, was not the Clemons—nor, of course, was it the Springsteen—24—that their audiences saw. The on-stage Clemons was very much a performance of blackness. It would be insulting to Clemons to suggest that he was consciously engaged in any kind of minstrel act, but aspects of his portrayal and performance might have served a function similar to that of blackface: most obviously by neutering a potentially threatening blackness that he might otherwise have embodied (Rogin 1998). Indeed, Springsteen’s use of the language of enchantment, mystery, and fairytale in his description of Clemons suggests that the “magic Negro” trope of the problematic Hollywood films identified by DeMott is so firmly embedded in the culture that even those who would seek to escape it find themselves enmeshed—a further challenge to the claim that friendship will overcome the congealed distrust and misperception that Allen identifies.

CONCLUSION: ALWAYS A FRIEND

In a 2012 New Yorker article, David Remnick observed, “One night, I asked Springsteen what he hoped his political songs would do for people who come to concerts for a good time. He shook his head and said, ‘They function at the very edges of politics at best, though they try to administer to its center. You have to be satisfied with that’” (Remnick 2012). Likewise, Danielle Allen suggests that her work is a “modest contribution” to liberal theory. Both are motivated by an admirable desire to address America’s most pernicious racial divide. Both seek to do so in a thoughtful way. Both offer an example of the potential power of the image in American politics. Their shared understanding of America as an ongoing democratic project committed to an ongoing reconstitution of the polity around an expanded understanding of racial equality offers, moreover, a provocative challenge to the complacency of the nation’s dominant “race blind” or “post-racial” narratives. For this, and for much else, they are to be congratulated. Nevertheless, their chosen method of addressing America’s

24. Springsteen acknowledged this while performing one of two benefit shows for the Christic Institute in November 1990. In response to an audience member who shouted, “We love you Bruce,” Springsteen replied, “But you don’t really know me.”
complicated racial history and politics appears to be decidedly regressive in its impact. Certainly, neither Allen, on a theoretical level, nor Springsteen, on a practical one, seems able to surmount the telling criticisms of the “friendship orthodoxy” offered by Benjamin DeMott and Lawrie Balfour. The ongoing significance of this failure is suggested by the continued popularity of the friendship narrative in American politics.

On March 18, 2008, then-senator Barack Obama, facing a furor over the controversial remarks of his pastor Jeremiah Wright, offered one of the most widely lauded—and undoubtedly one of the more impressive—speeches on race by a mainstream American politician in recent history. Having offered a nuanced—though sometimes problematic—history of American racial politics, Obama concluded with the story of Ashley Baia, a 23-year-old white woman whose childhood had been marked by poverty precipitated by the cost of treating her mother’s cancer. During an organizing meeting, Obama recounted, having told her story, Ashley went around the room and asked others why they had come. “Finally,” notes Obama, “they come to this elderly black man who’s been sitting there quietly the whole time.” Having noted that the (nameless) man does not identify a specific issue, nor assert his support for the senator’s campaign, Obama built to the reveal. “He simply says to everyone in the room, I am here because of Ashley.” Repeating the line “I am here because of Ashley,” Obama noted the limitations on the possibilities of such a relationship. “By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough,” he observed. “It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger” (Obama 2008, 231–32). The popular reception of the speech across the political spectrum suggested the continued influence of the racial friendship narrative in American politics, even as the well-intentioned failures of Danielle Allen and Bruce Springsteen belie his conclusion.

25. In his book Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race, Thomas Sugrue notes that Obama problematically suggested equivalence between black suffering and white anger. He writes, “To emphasize his sympathy with blue-collar whites, [Obama] lists white racial grievances, invoking arguments popularized by journalists and pundits during the mid- and late 1980s that civil rights is a zero-sum game that exacts high costs from whites. Those who resent busing (an issue that has been off the table for the last several decades in most parts of the country), and who chafe at affirmative action in higher education and in the workplace, are, in Obama’s telling, as justified in their outrage as are those blacks who continue to experience discrimination, even though there is little evidence that whites have been harmed by affirmative action or other compensatory programs.” “At a moment,” Sugrue concludes, “when many ordinary citizens . . . argue that white racism and black racism coexist as fundamental moral equivalents, Obama offers his own concurring opinion” (2010, 121). In this, Obama appeared to share the racial worldview of both Springsteen and Allen. See also Kloppenberg (2010).
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