Agonistic Homegoing: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of African American Public Mourning

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*W*hat does the furor over the "politicization" of Coretta Scott King's funeral reveal about contemporary black mourning practices? What does it reveal about black political thought, rhetoric, and practice? Identifying two key modes of mourning and their concomitant conceptions of democracy, this article situates the funeral within a tradition of self-consciously political responses to loss that played a significant role in abolitionism and the struggle for civil rights. Tracing the tradition's origins, and employing the speeches of Frederick Douglass as an exemplar, it considers the approach's democratic value and the consequences of its failure. Arguing that the response to the King funeral indicates that the tradition is in decline, the article locates causes of this decline in significant changes among the black population and in the complex consequences of the tradition's previous successes. It concludes by considering the decline's potentially negative impact, both for African Americans and for the broader political community.*

In February 2006, the alleged politicization of the funeral of civil rights icon Coretta Scott King generated a media furor. Remarks by the Reverend Joseph Lowery and former President Jimmy Carter that were critical of the Bush administration drew particular fire. Despite the presence of the president, former presidents, and numerous members of Congress, it was widely suggested—in a response that cut across ethnic and party lines—that a funeral was neither the time nor the place for politics. The history of the funeral oration seems to confirm the claim. In Plato's *Menexenus*, Socrates satirizes the banality of democratic public mourning by offering his own eulogy marked by anachronism, cliché, and platitude. That his speech was repeated in Antiquity by those who failed to get the joke seems to confirm that he was right about what democracy demands from public mourning: that the Athenians be praised in Athens (Plato 1984, 235d). The relationship between democratic politics and public mourning has, however, long been a close one. Nicole Loraux (1986) argues that the funeral oration invented Athens as much as Athens invented the funeral oration, and Garry Wills (1992), that Abraham Lincoln founded the Second American Republic in the Gettysburg Address. Identifying two key modes of public mourning (tragic and romantic), their corresponding conceptions of democracy (agonism and consensus),

and the ways in which each serves to shape political outcomes, this article situates Mrs. King's funeral within an African American tradition of tragic and self-consciously political responses to loss that was central to the fight against slavery and the struggle for civil rights. While acknowledging that, for most Americans, the furor over the King funeral was little more than a passing media frenzy, it suggests that many African American responses were significant because of what they reveal about the decline of this black mourning tradition, and about changes in contemporary black political rhetoric, thought, and action. This article locates the causes of this decline in socioeconomic, demographic, and theological changes among the black population, and in the complex consequences of the tradition's previous successes. Employing the history of black mourning as an analytical precedent, it considers the effects of the decline on both contemporary black politics and on the wider political community. The article closes by suggesting that the tradition might, nevertheless, still serve as a model for a reconstituted approach to American public mourning.

The article that follows is in five sections. The first offers definitions of key terms and sets out a twofold typology of public mourning as a theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis. Employed as "a productive hermeneutical lens" (Gooding-Williams 2009, 18), the framework neither constitutes the totality of possible mourning practices nor exhausts the set of democratic understandings. The classifications simply function as ideal types for the identification of two key public responses to loss. Arguing that romantic public mourning both generates and reflects a consensus-based understanding of democracy—and tragic public mourning, an agonistic understanding of the same— it identifies the ways in which each approach helps shape political outcomes. The second section identifies a tradition—understood as a core set of ideas or practices with clear historical evidence of influence and shared understandings across time (Bevir 1999; Shelby 2005, 31)—of self-consciously political black responses to loss and locates it within the analytical framework.

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Using Frederick Douglass' Decoration Day speeches and eulogies for Abraham Lincoln as its exemplars, the article's third section then shows how this tradition offers a democratic pedagogy that seeks to generate and reinforce the ambivalent "double consciousness" of black life (Du Bois 2003, 9) in its audience as a means of overcoming the social conditions that produced it: girding African Americans for their struggle and undermining white complacency about issues of race. By identifying the consequences of Douglass' inability to establish this tragic sense in his white audience, and contrasting it with Lincoln's success at Gettysburg, this section further provides an historical precedent for considering the impact of the decline of this mourning tradition and its tragic ethos on the contemporary polity. Establishing the tradition's continuity by identifying its importance to post-Reconstruction resistance and the struggle for civil rights, the fourth section situates Mrs. King's funeral at a generational intersection of conflicting demands for romantic and tragic responses to loss, locating many of the causes of this generational shift in the history of the tradition's previous successes. As befits the complexity of tragedy, the article concludes by considering the potentially negative consequences of these successes and failures, both for African Americans and for the broader democratic polity.

THE ROMANTIC AND THE TRAGIC

In the face of death, romantic public mourning demands little of its audience except a recommitment to the polity's idealized vision of itself. Employed in the sense suggested by Blight (2001, 2002), Foner (2002), and Laderman (1996), the term "romantic" identifies a narrative that draws on, and shares much with, certain understandings of the Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These include a commitment to the role of the imagination, aesthetics, and sentiment, as well as a particular concern with death. It offers the suppression—but not resolution—of conflict through a narrative of higher unity (Schmitt 1986). Although many Romantics focused on the individual rather than the collective, Arthur Lovejoy (1936, 310) notes that for some, individuality referred not only to persons, but also to groups, including races and nations. Moreover, Lovejoy suggests that the Romantic tradition generated a paradoxical tendency toward homogeneity of perspective, "a particularistic uniformitarianism, a tendency to seek to universalize things originally valued because they were not universal," one that occurs "... in the policies of great states and the enthusiasms of their populations" (313). Although the Romantic worldview aestheticizes politics—replacing considerations of outcomes, arguments, values, and processes with concerns about the affective dimensions of narrative—it is not without political effects (Schmitt 1986, 149). Befitting the Romantic commitment to narratives of higher unity, romantic mourning is predicated on, and generative of, an understanding of democracy as consensus. Embodying a *telos*

of reconciliation and agreement that—consciously or unconsciously—eschews politics, democracy as consensus finds expression in not only the Greek obsession with political unity, but also in more recent attempts by John Rawls (1993) and Jürgen Habermas (1992) to identify a position of political consensus beyond liberal neutrality. Arguing that this commitment to consensus serves as an "ideology for the divided city," Loraux (2002a, 30) notes that it can exist in tandem with—and sometimes exacerbate—the sectional conflict that it seeks to suppress. That such an ideology is frequently a rhetorical commitment rather than a political reality does not diminish its capacity to shape political outcomes. Indeed, for its critics, the overriding concern with consensus excludes minority voices in a way that undermines democracy, with the drive toward "normalization" and agreement marking out disagreement as deviant or "other." Thus, not only are minority views often excluded, they are also frequently demonized, with democratic politics becoming marked by shrill antagonisms rather than reasoned debate (Connolly 2005; Mouffe 2005). The object of Socrates' scorn in the *Menexenus*, romantic public mourning is singular in vision, uncritical, purely comforting, and historically ubiquitous: as evident in Pericles' Funeral Oration as it was in the choice of the Gettysburg Address as a eulogy for New York City's September 11 dead (Stow 2007).

Tragic public mourning—understood as *response* not *condition*—is, in contrast, pluralistic, critical, and self-consciously political. It is built on, and generative of, an agonistic understanding of democracy in which conflict and disagreement are recognized as central to democratic politics. In this model, all parties to a disagreement recognize that there is no rational final solution to their conflict, but nevertheless acknowledge the legitimacy of their opponents in the ongoing disagreements constitutive of a democratic polity (Mouffe 2005, 20). The distinction between tragedy as condition and tragedy as response is suggested by James Finlayson (1999). He writes:

> [A] theory of the tragic tells us something about human experience, human actions and the ethical-life of a community in which the actions are played out. The tragic arises from the way in which our institutions, customs, and practices within which we become what we are, shape our actions on the one hand, and take shape through our actions on the other. Hence the question of the tragic enjoys a certain priority over the question of tragedy. The works of theater we call tragedies exist because of the tragic, not vice versa. (494)

Here tragedy as condition is constituted by an understanding of the world as one of suffering, irreconcilable conflicts, paradoxical demands, and frustrated human agency, a world in which what is gained is marked by what is lost (Johnston 2007, 209). Tragedy as response shares the worldview of tragedy as condition and serves, not to overcome that condition (Roche 2005), but rather as a coping strategy for human beings who face it. It is, in the words of Paul Gilroy (2010,

150), "suffering made productive, made useful but not redemptive" (see also Honig 2009, 11).[1]

Central to the understanding of tragedy as response is "the notion of ambivalence . . . the prevalence of duality over unity" (Seaford 1995, 202; see also Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988). On this account, tragedy as response seeks to generate ambivalence in its audience as a productive response to tragedy as condition. It does not, of course, preclude—and may even *presume*—the existence of ambivalence in the text, the performance, or the author (Seaford 1995, 204). Nevertheless, this understanding of tragedy as response belongs to a group of theories concerned with tragedy's impact on its audience (Palmer 1992, 17–52). For the Greeks, tragic theater helped the citizenry negotiate the inevitable and irreconcilable tensions of democratic life. Central to its pedagogical function was the notion of "discrepant awareness": what one character sees and knows, and what another does not; or what the audience knows and the characters do not. Employing this mechanism, tragedy sought to train its democratic audience by demonstrating that any viewpoint is necessarily partial and illustrating the disastrous consequences of blindness—literal or figurative (Zeitlin 1985, 75). It was, however, not only the plays themselves that demanded their audiences reflect critically on all sides of complex issues—in the process embracing and learning to manage such conflict—but also their presentation at the Great Dionysia. Here the Festival's elaborate juxtaposition of celebration and critique performed and cultivated its own ambivalence to the democratic city (Goldhill 2004, 220–32).

Claims about the political importance of ambivalence to democracy are echoed by the recent work of William Connolly (2005) on democratic agonism. Essential to such agonism, he argues, is an *ethos* of "critical responsiveness," a "*form of careful listening and presumptive generosity*" (126) to opponents that generates a "bicameral orientation to political life. . .straddling two or more perspectives to maintain tension between them" (4). It is an ambivalent perspective partly constituted by the recognition of the partiality, incompleteness, and contingency of the agent's own position. Labeling this perspective "tragic," Connolly (1991, 179, 183) suggests that it emerges from reflection on death and the finitude of life (20, 167). Indeed, characterized by many as a ritual of mourning (Loraux 2002b; see also Goldhill 2004, 223–27; Shay 2002), Loraux (2002b, 89) argues that, by reminding citizens that they belonged to a race of mortals, tragic theater also generated the paradoxical "bond of division" necessary for democratic politics, offering both insight into, and solidarity in the face of, tragedy as condition (Loraux 2002a, 93–122; 2002b, 82).

Identifying a tradition of black responses to loss and locating it within the analytical framework requires then, demonstrating that there is a history of black

mourning that is pluralistic and self-consciously political; expressive of an understanding of tragedy as condition; and that serves as a productive, if not necessarily redemptive, response to the circumstances of human existence. The history of black mourning suggests that all three are possible.

"AN AWFUL GLADNESS": TRAGEDY, PLURALISM, AND BLACK EXPERIENCES OF DEATH

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois (2003, 151) extends his discussion of "the Veil" of race to the experience of his child's death.[2] He notes that amid his grief "sat an awful gladness in my heart" arising from the recognition that his son would not have to grow up in a world beset by racial discrimination: "my soul whispers ever to me, saying 'Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free'." Du Bois' experience was far from unique. Former slave John Washington's 1865 eulogy for his son Johnnie expressed similar sentiments (Blight 2007, 259–60; see also Jacobs 1981, 62; Keckley 2005, 12), and the work of Ronald K. Barrett (1998, 89) suggests that African Americans are more "*death accepting*" than whites (Barrett 1995). It is a bicameral perspective captured by the frequent description—much in evidence at the service for Mrs. King—of African American funerals as "homegoings."

Emerging from the slave tradition that death meant a return to the homeland, the term suggests that amidst the sadness of a passing there is a kind of joy about the release from pain and the movement to a better place (Roediger 1981, 177). It is a perspective further suggested by significantly higher suicide rates among African Americans, especially among black males.[3] Both Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., are said to have contemplated killing themselves (Branch 1988, 48–49), and suicide was so prevalent under slavery that some owners took to denying burials to, and mutilating the bodies of, slaves who took their own lives in order to discourage others from doing the same (Cavitch 2007, 212). Indeed, the public suicide of a slave named Romain in Philadelphia in 1803 was widely considered to be a statement against the inhumanity of slavery, and much was made of it in abolitionist tracts (Schantz 2008, 143–44). In this, black experiences of death offered African Americans an ambivalent and bicameral orientation toward life: a double consciousness that was expressed in, and reinforced by, black burials and the rituals of mourning.

Orlando Patterson (1982) argues that the experience of slavery and segregation created a "social death" for

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[1] The context of Gilroy's comment is a discussion of the philosophical implications of Black Atlantic music. There is an obvious connection between this discussion and Du Bois' (2003, 177–88) account of the "Sorrow Songs."

[2] An experience that, Du Bois (2003, 150) notes, failed to save him from white America's scorn, even on the day of his son's burial. For evidence of the continued relevance of Du Bois' experience, see Herbert (2007).

[3] This is no mere historical oddity. Between 1980 and 1992, when suicide rates among white males declined, the rates for African Americans increased dramatically (Holloway 2003, 89–90). Similarly, average death rates in the United States are higher for blacks than for whites, a gap that has increased since 1960 (Satcher et al. 2005).

African Americans. It was one reflected in, and reinforced by, black experiences of physical death. Drawing on a widely held view that heaven too would be segregated, segregation in death extended well beyond the end of slavery and was evidenced by the geographic marginality of black burial grounds, and by the existence of distinct hierarchies of internment (Robertson 2000, 19; Roediger 1981, 179; Tyson 2004, 183). Even when slaves and servants were buried with their masters, it was in a way that indicated their lower status, often at the feet of their owners; indeed, some simply refused the opportunity to be buried in otherwise white burial grounds for fear that they would continue to be terrorized by their masters in death (Krüger-Kahloula 1994, 137–38). In the national cemeteries established to commemorate the Union dead, black Civil War veterans were buried separately from their white counterparts (Faust 2008, 236); and, more recently, the struggles of the families of black veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars to have their loved ones buried in the cemeteries of their choice provided a parallel to the civil rights struggle among the living (Krüger-Kahloula 1994, 130).[4] This double consciousness of death found cultural and political expression in—and reinforcement by—the "blues sensibility" of the Sorrow Songs (Crouch 1995; Davis 1999).

The Sorrow Songs, observes Du Bois (2003, 179), "are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and an unvoiced longing towards a truer world." Although the Sorrow Songs have been a controversial subject for some black intellectuals—Zora Neale Hurston (1995) rejects any view of the songs that associates them with the stigma of death[5]—Max Cavitch (2007, 205) argues such a viewpoint misses the complexity of the genre, that the songs display a hope within a sadness that is reflective of the tragic sense embodied by African American mourning traditions. For some theorists of tragedy, any suggestion of hope is, of course, an anathema (Roche 2005, 62). Certainly, Cornel West's (1989) formulation of the tragic as a kind of insight that emerges from the conditions of black life—what Du Bois (2003, 9) called "second sight"—and an impetus to the action required to overcome them (101–5, 435–39) has been a source of much criticism (Pirro 2004; Simpson 1993). For this reason, any attempt to identify black public mourning as a tragic response seems doomed to failure. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche (1915, 102) suggests, hope and tragedy are not inimical. The resolution of this tension lies in the *nature* of the hope expressed by the Sorrow Songs, and indeed, by the

broader black mourning tradition of which they were a part.

"Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs," writes Du Bois (2003, 186), "there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things." Such hope does not, however, entail an expectation of fulfillment. Eddie Glaude, Jr. (2000, 112), identifies a "hope against hope" captured "by the commonsensical understanding that a radical transformation of American society was implausible." That hope is grounded "in a regulative ideal toward which we aspire but which ultimately defies historical fulfillment" (see also West 1989, 229). As Du Bois (2003, 186) himself asked, "Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?" Reflecting an understanding of tragedy as condition, the songs, and the hope that they expressed, were a response to it. The ambivalence of such hope is, however, largely obscured by popular narratives of U.S. racial history in which its fulfillment is considered a function of the inexorable logic of liberalism, rather than the product of precarious human struggle (Honig 2009, 47). The historical persistence of this misunderstanding is suggested by Frederick Douglass' astonishment at white Northerners who saw the slaves' songs as "evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to make a greater mistake. Slaves sing when they are most unhappy" (Stuckey 1990, 35). In this, the songs were both a lamentation and an expression of resistance—with their political significance suggested by the fear they struck into whites and by the attempts of white authorities to regulate the funerals of which they were a part (Roediger 1981, 168).[6]

By necessity, and often by homeland tradition, slave funerals often took place at night, frequently unnerving slave owners. Georgia plantation resident Francis Kemble (1984, 147) recounts how the "first high wailing notes of a spiritual" emanating from a slave funeral "sent a chill through my nerves." Consequently, they were subject to heavy restriction. In New York alone, nighttime slave funerals were prohibited by laws passed in 1722, 1731, 1748, and 1763, and those that were permitted were tightly regulated: limited to 12 mourners and deprived of all ceremonial trappings (Krüger-Kahloula 1994, 143). Funerals offered slaves an opportunity to experience themselves as a people in a ritualized setting, one that preceded and later promoted the emergence of black Christianity.[7] Indeed, Albert Raboteau's (1978) work stressing the importance of slave agency to abolition and David Roediger's (1981, 168–71) work on the role of funeral rites in generating black solidarity, both suggest the ways in which

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[4] Although the eventual success of these families did not always solve the problem of postmortem segregation. In the South in the early 1970s, some white families removed their relatives' remains from recently integrated cemeteries (Perry 1985).

[5] Hurston was not, however, unaware of the importance of death to African American politics. In a 1945 letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, she suggested the construction of a cemetery for black luminaries, including Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. "You must see," she wrote, "what a rallying spot that would be for all we wish to accomplish and do" (Kammen 2010, 26).

[6] It is a tradition whose continuity is suggested by the importance of the simultaneously mournful and transcendent hymn "We Shall Overcome" and Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" to the civil rights movement (Guralnick 2005).

[7] When the first African Methodist Episcopal Church was established in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1815, its initial meeting was held in a hearse house near the city's black cemetery (Robertson 2000, 146; see also Roediger 1981, 176). This account complicates West's (1999, 425–34, 435–39) suggestion that black Christianity was the source of the African American tragic sense (see also Pirro 2004, 156).

black loss was made productive. Gabriel Prosser's attempted slave revolt and assault on Richmond in 1800, for example, is said to have gained momentum from a meeting held at the funeral of a child (164–65). As such, the delicate economy of slave funeral restrictions, permissions, and transgressions politicized black burials even before the founding of the nation. Under a system in which the humanity of slaves was so much in doubt that those who died during transportation were simply thrown overboard and certain masters had to be reminded to bury their dead slaves, *any* black burial had distinctly political connotations (Krüger-Kahloula 1994, 142; Rediker 2008, 4–5). It was, moreover, a deeply self-conscious politics. Following Denmark Vesey's failed uprising in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822, slaves were prohibited from wearing outward signs of mourning in the week following his execution. Many nevertheless chose to do so and were imprisoned for their pains (Robertson 2000, 98, 104).

Black mourning rituals were thus a tragic response to a tragic condition. Their complex duality found expression in funeral services that often constituted "a posthumous attempt for dignity and esteem denied and limited by the dominant culture" and that frequently clashed sharply in both style and substance with those of white Americans (Barrett 1993, 226).[8] Seeking to make death more than a mere statistic, black funerals became festive celebrations of lives lived rather than simple lamentations of loss, frequently combining with another tradition of African American festivals and counter memorials, themselves often dominated by a concern with mortality (Roach 1996, 60–63, 277–81). Throughout the nineteenth century, African Americans developed an alternative festival calendar that ran parallel to that of the white majority, but which was infused with entirely different significance. January 1, traditionally a day of despair marking another year of suffering for those in captivity, came to be celebrated for the abolition of the foreign slave trade in 1808, and July 5, as a counterpoint to white Independence Day. The mood of these events was, Geneviève Fabre (1994, 72) notes, "*subjunctive*, the *ought* and *should*, prevailed over the *was*. With a feeling of urgency, of great impatience at the renewed delay, African Americans invented a future no one dared to consider and forced its image upon black and white minds and spirits." They were self-consciously political and highly critical of American practices, even as they demonstrated their ambivalence by both participating in and subverting the holidays. The modern Memorial Day grew out of this tradition when former slaves in Charleston, South Carolina, conducted a mock funeral for slavery and organized a parade to provide a proper burial for, and decorate the graves of, Union soldiers who had died

in the city's prison camp. In so doing, they created what David Blight (2002, 187) called "the Independence Day of the second American Revolution" and reinvigorated an older tradition. "Due to Memorial Day," Blight (2001, 72) writes, "the ancient art of funeral orations and sermons gained a new life in America. The Decoration Day speech became an American genre that ministers, politicians, and countless former soldiers tried to master."

The undoubted master of this revival was Frederick Douglass, who offered several such speeches, including a series of eulogies for Abraham Lincoln starting in 1865 and culminating, most famously, in his 1876 speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington DC. The speeches reveal not only the ways in which Douglass inhabited the African American tragic tradition of public mourning—embodying an understanding of tragedy as condition and response—but also the ways in which the tradition offered a distinct political position and a pedagogical opportunity to its audience. If, as Du Bois (2003, 9) suggests, the conditions of black life offered African Americans "second sight"—"an ability to see the world as it is disclosed to a social group different from one's own . . . thus as it is ordinarily not available to be seen" (Gooding-Williams 2009, 78)—then the expression of this dual perspective in the rituals of black mourning might be thought to offer a pedagogical opportunity to its audience, one that extends beyond the issue of race.

LESSONS OF THEIR OWN HISTORY: FREDERICK DOUGLASS, PEDAGOGY, AND PUBLIC MOURNING

Frederick Douglass (1991b, 108) was well aware of the eulogy's pedagogical potential. In his 1866 speech, "The Assassination and Its Lessons," he declared: "The masses are always engaged chiefly in the struggle for existence, and have little time to give to theories. A few can comprehend a rule and the reasons therfor [sic], but many require illustrations before they can be instructed." Douglass was equally aware, however, that he faced a postbellum American polity committed to romantic modes of remembrance and the "Good Death." In white antebellum America, individuals were expected to expire at home, surrounded by their families, preferably after having offered some memorable final words. In this, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson, provided a model for the larger American public (Kahler 2008, 4; Schantz 2008, 23–24). For whites, death was to be welcomed, not as an escape to a better place, but as part of a natural spiritual progression toward the afterlife (Cavitch 2007; Laderman 1996, 130). It was an aestheticized, maudlin, and sentimental understanding of mortality that was fundamentally disrupted by the carnage of the Civil War. For the first time, white America endured violent, sudden death on a grand scale. Far from home, surrounded by strangers, white America had its first encounter with what had hitherto been a predominantly black experience. The unprecedented horror of the war opened a

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[8] The elaborate burial in New Orleans in July 1863 of Captain André Cailloux—the first black officer to die during the Civil War—sought to overcome the indignities heaped on his body by Confederate sharpshooters who prevented its recovery from the battlefield for 41 days. Drawing an enormous crowd of soldiers and civic society members, Cailloux's highly political funeral featured a parade and eulogy calling on others to follow his example in the fight against slavery (Ochs 2000).

fissure in the American understanding of death, creating uncertainty and disorientation in its standard narratives of mortality. "The presence and fear of death," writes Drew Gilpin Faust (2008, xv), "touched Civil War Americans' most fundamental sense of who they were, for in its threat of termination and transformation, death inevitably inspired self-scrutiny and self-definition" (see also Edkins 2003, 5). Stepping into the explanatory void at Gettysburg, Lincoln offered a classically inspired tragic eulogy that made sense of the carnage: the serendipitous intersection of man, moment, and method. In what Garry Wills (1992, 38) called "one of the most daring open-air sleight of hands ever witnessed by the unsuspecting," Lincoln took the opportunity of the fissure opened by mass death to employ a tragic mode of mourning that— by marking what was gained in liberty by what was lost in blood and juxtaposing national celebration with national critique (Stow 2007)—established the Declaration of Independence at the heart of the Constitution, fundamentally changing the nation and her self-understanding. It was, however, a fissure that soon closed.[9]

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the narrative of the "Good Death" was aggressively reasserted. Extraordinary efforts were made to retrieve and inter the bodies of the Northern fallen in national cemeteries where they were lauded as heroes of liberty. The North's racism and complicity in slavery was all but forgotten in sentimentalized celebrations of the dead. In the South, this Northern mourning provoked an equal and opposite reaction. The North's refusal to bury the Confederate dead prompted the formation of Southern ladies memorial associations that sought to raise funds for the internment of their fallen. Deliberately sectional, they offered an equally singular and romanticized account of the Lost Cause (Faust 2008, 247). Both initially exacerbated ongoing tensions. Despite the rhetoric of reunion, the immediate aftermath of the war was often marked by bitterness, vindictiveness, and resentment between the two ostensibly former enemies (Cloyd 2010, 31–55; Kammen 1993, 110, 115). Nevertheless, the ideological commitment to consensus embodied in romantic public mourning eventually served to suppress—if not entirely to erase—the conflict (Cloyd 2010, 79–80; Kammen 1993, 13, 121; 2010, 86, 105). Indeed, with so much detail already jettisoned from their responses to loss—North *and* South—the final triumph of reconciliationism and the transition to a romantic narrative of higher unity predicated on national forgetting was, perhaps, all but inevitable. Just as in antiquity—where forgetting was achieved by literally whitewashing a stone tablet and inscribing on it new laws in the place of the old—Decoration Day and its later incarnation as Memorial Day were metaphorically washed white in a series of postwar commemorations in which the heroism of the war dead on both sides

was celebrated at the expense of any discussion of the origins of the war or its enduring legacies (Blight 2001, 64–97; Rogin 1993). Such mourning, as Douglass was well aware, threatened to undo Lincoln's refounding of the nation and boded ill for blacks. Thus, employing the tragic understanding of African American public mourning, and within only hours of Lincoln's death, Douglass began his fight against historical amnesia in Rochester, New York, on April 15, 1865.

Although this speech, coming so soon after Lincoln's death, was peppered with many of the platitudes more commonly expected of the funeral oration—"A dreadful disaster has befallen the nation"; "I feel it as a personal as well as a national calamity"; and Douglass' most persistent, if least-observed trope, "This is not an occasion for speech-making, but for silence"— it also offered the self-consciously political perspective of the black funeral tradition. "Only the other day," he declared, "it seemed as if the nation were in danger of losing a just appreciation of the awful claims of this rebellion. We were manifesting almost as much gratitude to General Lee for surrendering as to General Grant for compelling him to surrender." "Let us not," Douglass (1991a, 78) stated, "be in too much haste in the work of restoration. Let us not be in a hurry to clasp to our bosom the spirit which gave birth to Booth." Similarly, in 1866, Douglass (1991b, 108) warned the polity against the "desire to conciliate, and that maudlin magnanimity that is now our greatest danger," asking "When will the American people learn rightly the lessons of their own history." On May 30, 1871, on the first national celebration of Decoration Day, Douglass (1999a, 609–10) repeated the refrain, noting that the mourning manifested at such events served to obscure important distinctions between those who had fought for slavery and those who had fought against it. It was a criticism that—as he made clear in an 1878 Decoration Day speech—was aimed not only at demonizing the South, but also criticizing those "Good, wise, and generous men at the North, in power and out of power, for whose good intentions and patriotism we must all have the highest respect, [who] doubt the wisdom of observing this memorial day, and would have us forget and forgive, strew flowers alike and lovingly, on rebel graves" (Douglass 1999b, 632).

A historically precocious thinker who demonstrated a clear understanding of the difference between the sign and the signified, Douglass (1883) recognized that establishing what Lincoln meant and how he was viewed in the postbellum period was central to establishing the public memory of the Civil War. "Dying as he did," Douglass (1991b, 111) declared of Lincoln, "his name becomes a text." Such insight was matched by a call for action. On April 15, 1865, embodying the subjunctive mood of the African American counter memorial (1991a, 78), Douglass declared: "Today, today as never before the American people, although they know they cannot have indemnity for the past— for the countless treasure and the precious blood—yet they resolve today that they will exact ample security for the future." Similarly, Douglass (1999b, 632) later imagined a better future recollection of the Civil War in

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[9] As is suggested by the differences between the stark realism of the photographs of Matthew Brady's 1862 exhibit "The Dead of Antietam" and the romanticization of death in his assistant Alexander Gardner's 1866 *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* (Laderman 1996, 148–51; Schantz 2008, 163–206).

which subsequent generations would "marvel that men to whom it was committed the custody of the Government, sworn to protect and defend the Constitution and the Union of the states, did not crush this rebellion in its egg; that they permitted treason to grow up under their very noses." Indeed, just as Lincoln employed the Declaration of Independence as a standard against which to measure the nation and find it wanting at Gettysburg, Douglass employed Lincoln to judge the living and spur them to action. The president, Douglass (1991b, 111) declared, "would have stood with those who stand foremost and gone with those who go farthest, in the cause of equal and universal suffrage."

Douglass did not, however, simply confine himself to specific criticisms of American policy and explicit calls to action; he also sought to generate an understanding of the tragic condition in his white audience. In this, however, there may appear to be something of a paradox. For although the title of Douglass' 1878 Decoration Day speech—"There Was a Right Side in the Late War"—demonstrates his unequivocal commitment to a definite view of the conflict, tragedy necessarily suggests ambivalence and the contingency of any particular perspective. On this account of Douglass' approach, the latter seems to undermine the former. If the demand for change is but one of several possibilities, it is not clear why an account of the war as a struggle for black freedoms should be embraced over an account of the war as a filial squabble. Resolving this tension reveals much about the genius of Douglass' rhetorical and political strategy, and indeed, about the ways in which he sought to employ a tradition of tragic African American public mourning to disrupt a white consensus that obscured the nation's tortured contradictions on race.

In Douglass' (2006b) "What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?" address, argues George Shulman (2008a), the speaker reconciles the apparent conflict between his commitment to a definite political position and his recognition that any such position requires justification by offering a prophetic form of "democratic authority" that seeks to impel political change by modeling contrary practice. Unlike the prophecy of America's founding sermons, which closed down politics with oracular statements about right and wrong, Douglass' prophecy incited politics by uprooting conventions, "exposing them *as* conventions, hence as practices we have authored and could in principle change" (718). Shulman argues that—by showing that what they took to be natural or god-given categories were human constructions and thus subject to change—Douglass sought to overcome whites' "motivated blindness" about race (720). Expanding Shulman's (2008b, 242) argument beyond race, and employing the language of recent democratic theory, Douglass' method can be characterized as seeking to shift America's democratic self-understanding from consensus to agonism. Douglass' position required not that he recognize the legitimacy of white supremacy as a political doctrine, but simply the legitimacy of those who held that position to *argue* for their viewpoint. His eulogies sought, in effect, to "level the playing field" by demanding that those who

had hitherto considered their position natural, given, and unassailable, defend it against his more compelling arguments. By inviting his white audience to engage him in reasoned argument, moreover, Douglass enmeshed them in a performative contradiction: undermining white supremacist claims by forcing them to recognize him as person worthy of reasoned engagement. Thus, the tragic tradition of African American public mourning offered Douglass a pedagogical tool with which to generate a potential "critical responsiveness" in his white audience, opening them up to the bicameral orientation of black life and forcing them to reconsider their own position. The approach is most evident in Douglass' 1876 eulogy for Lincoln at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Washington, DC, where, by offering critical distinctions about even the "Martyr President" himself—when most were expecting to hear the platitudes of the funeral oration—Douglass brought complexity, ambivalence, and the subjunctive mood into mainstream mourning, challenging the nation to recognize that which its romantic commitment to national unity and consensus served to mask.

In Greek theatre, argues Simon Goldhill (2004, 224), seating arrangements marked out citizens according to their sociopolitical status, representing the city to itself in a manner conducive to democratic reflection. Douglass' 1876 speech before Congress, the Supreme Court, the Chief Justice, the president, and many of the black citizens who had paid for the monument— the polity represented to itself—offered a similar possibility for a meaningful pedagogy of mourning (Savage 2010, 87). Indeed, Lincoln's success at Gettysburg suggested that public mourning could be a moment of transformation: one that radically altered the nature of a public and its modes of deliberation.[10] In 1876, America's centennial year, the negative consequences of romantic public mourning had already begun to manifest themselves. The majority of the former Confederate states were back under white Democratic control; the political and civil rights of blacks were in considerable jeopardy; and African Americans justifiably feared retribution from a white population embittered by the failures of Reconstruction (Blight 2002, 84). As such, Douglass' (2006a, 74) speech called out for some acknowledgment of the circumstances facing those whose monies had been used to erect the "highly interesting object" that was the Freedmen's Monument, itself something of a shrine to the reconciliationism of the postwar years (Savage 1997, 89–128). Nevertheless, the occasion was still a memorial, and Lincoln's transformative words at Gettysburg notwithstanding, few

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[10] Calling Frederick Douglass "Lincoln's alter ego," David Blight (2002, 85; 2001, 15) labels the slave-turned-statesman "the intellectual godfather of the Gettysburg Address." As the work of Goodman (1965), Wills (1992), and others has suggested, however, Lincoln's influences were largely classical. Blight's confusion is, nevertheless, understandable because there are considerable parallels between the tragic mode of Classical mourning employed by Lincoln at Gettysburg (Stow 2007) and the tragic tradition embodied by Douglass in his Decoration Day speeches and eulogies for Lincoln, not least of which is their respective dualisms, ambivalences, and complexity of perspective.

expected the speech to be what James Oakes (2007, 267) called "a scandalous rehearsal of all the criticisms Douglass had hurled at Lincoln during his Presidency." In stark contrast to his 1865 claims that Lincoln was "emphatically the black man's president" (Miller 2008, 307), Douglass (2006a) offered what appeared to be an excoriating critique of the sixteenth president:

> It must be admitted, truth compels me to admit even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the last years of his administration to deny, postpone and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people, to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. (77)

In coming metaphorically to bury Lincoln, not to praise him, Douglass bucked the dominant trend of funeral rhetoric and performed something akin to the productive disorientation of tragic theater. Nevertheless, Oakes (2007, 271–72), among others, suggests that although Douglass began his speech in this critical vein, it did not last. "By the time Douglass reached his conclusion," he observes, "he had long since retreated from the provocative claims with which he had opened his speech." Douglass (2006a, 79) declared ". . . under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood; and by measures approved and vigorously pressed by him, we saw the handwriting of the ages, in the form of prejudice and proscription, was rapidly fading from the face of our whole country." He further noted that Lincoln's rule saw full recognition of Haitian independence, the abolition of the internal slave trade, the enforcement of the ban on the foreign slave trade, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Douglass (79) declared, "Though we waited long, we saw all this and more." Oakes sees the speech as a gradual progression, a rehearsal of Douglass' changing attitudes to Lincoln over the course of his own career. It is an ingenious reading, but one that misses the bicameral orientation of Douglass' approach; an orientation arising from its connection to a tragic tradition of African American public mourning.

"The Freedmen's Memorial speech" observed David Blight (2002, 84), "is too easily dismissed as merely eulogistic or particularly negative." Refusing the temptation to iron out its apparent inconsistencies, the eulogy can be seen as one whose ambivalence demands interpretation from its audience, presenting them with two different perspectives in the hope that they will develop the pluralistic perspective of the speech itself. Indeed, the sophistication of Douglass' speech is demonstrated by his attempt to achieve the perspective of his subject. "Though high in position," declared Douglass (2006a, 81) "the humblest could approach him and feel at home in his presence. Though deep, he was transparent; though strong, he was gentle; though

decided and pronounced in his convictions, he was tolerant towards those who differed from him, and patient under reproaches." Employing the tragically ambivalent double consciousness of the African American funeral tradition, Douglass offered contrasting visions of Lincoln and demanded that his audience reflect on them both.[11] Given his concern about the masses' lack of opportunity for theoretical reflection, Douglass even demonstrated his method. "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground," Douglass (81) declared, "Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent: but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined." Demanding recognition of Lincoln's complexity, Douglass disrupted the simple narratives of reconciliation and consensus offered by both sides—North *and* South— and offered his audiences the opportunity for critical reflection not only on the passing of the deceased, but also on the lives of those who mourned. His aim was "a renovation of the white American public mind," one that would "help to engender new political practices and, ultimately, a radical transformation of the fabric of the political habits constituting the nation" (Gooding-Williams 2009, 204). Most obviously, Douglass sought to engender a mode of critical remembering, one that would return the questions of social and political justice for African Americans to the public sphere where, because of the failures of Reconstruction and the quest for reconciliation, they had been all but erased. Moreover, he sought to do so in a way that would generate an ongoing "ethical insight into the untenability of one-sided positions" (Roche 2005, 57).

Further evidence for the claim that Douglass employed the tragic ambivalence of the black mourning tradition to demand a bicameral orientation from his audience is found in the qualifiers that pepper his speech. At the outset, Douglass (2006a) declares that he and his audience "stand today at the national centre to perform *something like* a national act." He further offers that "Abraham Lincoln was not, in the *fullest sense* of the word either our man or our model"; "He was *preeminently* the white man's President"; and, to the white audience, that "you and yours were the object of his *deepest* affection and *most earnest* solicitude," and that "we are *at best* only his step-children" (74– 77; emphasis added). The effect of these qualifiers is to suggest that there is more going on in the speech than simple praise or blame. Much the same can be said for Douglass' invocation of the double consciousness of being black in a white society. In his eulogy for Lincoln, Douglass drew repeated attention to his insider/outsider status, demanding further recognition

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[11] Although many eulogies for Lincoln were marked by ambivalence, including Emerson's 1865 address and Woodrow Wilson's 1916 dedication of Lincoln's birthplace, Douglass' speech is distinguished by his use of ambivalence as a *method*. Even though Emerson and Wilson expressed their own personal conflicts about the meaning of Lincoln's death, Douglass' speech—although no doubt partly an expression of his own complicated relationship to the slain president— was more systematic in its approach and more oriented toward creating a public through speech.

and reflection from those present. "In view then, of the past, the present, and the future," he observed, "and with liberty, progress, and enlightenment before *us*, I again congratulate *you* upon this auspicious day and hour"; further declaring that: "For the first time in the history of *our* people, and in the history of the *whole* American people, *we* join in this high worship." It was this ambivalent perspective, Douglas suggested, that allowed African Americans "to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position," the perspective, that is, of agonistic democracy (75–78; emphasis added).[12]

Although mourning was but one of many sources and expressions of what West (1999) calls the "tragic sense" of black life, it was one that played a significant role in the expression and cultivation of the others. Nevertheless, for its effect it relied—in part—on an audience trained in, or at least receptive to, a polyphonic tradition (Wills 1990, 195–206). At Gettysburg, Lincoln benefited from a social disorientation that made his audience open to such a method. Frederick Douglass, in contrast, faced a polity consumed by a thirst for national reconciliation. Consequently, in his efforts to bring African American mourning into the American mainstream and to engender a more complex understanding of the war and its legacies, Douglass himself became a representative of tragedy as condition. Beginning with a steady stream of postwar literature, including Jefferson Davis' *Memoirs* (Blight 2001, 211–54), through *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, and Ken Burns' *Civil War*, the myth of the Lost Cause and/or the idea of the conflict as a family squabble took a firm hold of the American imagination (Blight

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[12] Peter C. Myers' (2010) excellent article in this journal on Douglass' Freedmen's Memorial speech was published just as my own article was completing the review process. As such, this article does not engage more directly with Myers' argument. This article obviously shares Myers' view that Douglass' 1876 speech employed ambivalence to pedagogical ends. Nevertheless, the different understanding of hope in African American political thought, rhetoric, and practice offered here—what Myers regards as optimistic and rational is here seen as tragic and frequently performative—generates significantly different conclusions about Douglass' work and its implications for contemporary racial politics. Although Myers (2008, 7, 9, 12, 15, 48; 2010, 218, 219, 221) repeatedly invokes Douglass' "hopefulness," he does not say how he understands the term. The context of his usage strongly suggests, however, that he sees it as a synonym for "optimistic" (Myers 2008, 260), as does Myers' (216, fn. 5) observation that David Blight's work on Douglass and the Civil War "provides an excellent chronicling and analysis of Douglass' optimism." In this, however, Myers seems to be underplaying the complexity both of Blight's argument and of Douglass' thought. In the work cited by Myers, Blight (1989, 6, 11, 23) uses the word "optimism" less often than he uses the word "hope," a term that is, as Blight acknowledges, also compatible with anxiety and pessimism. Indeed, Blight (22, 45) repeatedly refers to the "*duty* of hope" and suggests a frequent tension between Douglass' private beliefs and the demands of his public rhetoric (18). If Douglass is *hopeful* in the African American tragic sense outlined here, rather than simply *optimistic*, then Myers' (2010, 223) attempt to position Douglass as being concerned with "the integrationist mainstream of African American protest thought" requires some qualification—as does Myers' (209) suggestion that Douglass' "theory of racial progress . . . challenges recent, pessimistic readings of American racial history and prospects" (see also Myers 2008, 201).

2002, 211–20; Foner 2002, 189–204; Rogin 1987). For white America, the brief window of opportunity for tragic mourning offered by the carnage of the Civil War had closed. "The poetry of the 'Blue and Gray,'" lamented the African American *Christian Recorder* in July 1890, "is much more acceptable than the song of black and white" (Blight 2001, 300). The consequences of the triumph of romantic public mourning for those who had been "strangely told" by Lincoln that they "were the cause of the war" were disastrous (Douglass 2006a, 78). "[T]his tearful, joyous, and spiritual family reunion," observed Bill Farrell (1993, 170), "could occur as it did only because the North abandoned black Americans in the South. As a result, this population faced disenfranchisement, lynchings and pervasive violence, debt peonage, de jure segregation, lack of education, poverty and malnutrition" (see also Foner 1990). Demonstrating the value of William Connolly's (2005, 7) observation that the "drive to national unity" in consensus-based democracy ". . . too readily fosters marginalization of vulnerable minorities," the romantic and reconciliationist mode of mourning embraced by both North and South helped rob African Americans of many of the gains of Reconstruction and the Thirteenth Amendment (Blackmon 2008). Consequently, the polity was forced to replay its racial conflicts, most obviously in the struggle over civil rights, conflicts in which the tradition of black tragic mourning played a significant role.

By establishing the continuity of this tradition of African American mourning—identifying its importance to the struggle *against* post-Reconstruction violence and *for* civil rights—it is possible see how the response to Mrs. King's funeral is indicative of the decline of this tradition and its tragic ethos. Locating the funeral at a generational intersection, it is, moreover, possible to see the ways in which the successes of this tradition of black tragic mourning have helped bring about its near demise and generated significant changes in African American political thought and practice.

A HOMEGOING FOR MRS. KING: A CIVIL RIGHTS FUNERAL

Amid the racial violence that followed Reconstruction, rituals of mourning became one of the few venues for the expression of African American political protest. Although funerals for lynching victims were frequently political and transgressive of white authority (Brundage 1997, 274), whites—perhaps betraying an increasing ignorance of black mourning traditions—were often content to let African Americans mourn unmolested (Brundage 1993, 46). Alternatively, bodies of lynching victims were left unburied as a protest against racial violence (Rushdy 2001, 262). Embodying both political responses to loss, the 1955 funeral for lynching victim Emmett Till marked the intersection of the struggle against racial violence and the quest for civil rights. The funeral, at which Till's mother famously chose an open casket and eschewed the cosmetic work of the undertaker so that the world might see what

racism had done to her son, was the spark that lit the civil rights fire, bringing the tragic black funeral tradition to bear on yet another iteration of America's racial conflicts (F.C. Harris 2006).

In much the same way that a funeral allowed Gabriel Prosser to organize his assault on Richmond, the impetus for the Selma to Montgomery march arose out of the funeral for slain black activist Jimmie Lee Jackson (Dyson 2008, 21; Remnick 2010, 8–9). Aware that the black funeral tradition was a powerful weapon in the fight for equality, Martin Luther King, Jr., employed it repeatedly, most obviously in his 1963 eulogy for the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Indeed, recognizing the platform that the deaths of four little girls offered him both to gird African Americans for the fight and to reach out to white America by undermining claims about racial differences in suffering, King browbeat the parents of Carole Robertson for refusing to allow her to be buried with her playmates, proving "to the point of callousness that he was anything but squeamish about confronting the human costs of his leadership" (Branch 1988, 892). Among the many deaths that King used to his political advantage was his own. King constantly invoked his mortality for political effect in what Thomas Kane (2004) calls his "automortography," most famously at Mason Temple on the eve of his assassination, but even at his own funeral where his "Drum Major Instinct" sermon was broadcast to the crowd (Dyson 2008, 25; King 1996, 279–86). Although self-conscious, it was not cynical. For the Kings, who spent their wedding night in a funeral home because hotels in Alabama were forbidden from serving blacks, and who often used hearses to travel to and from rallies and church appearances, the connection between mourning and politics was especially tight. Much of Mrs. King's initial moral authority emerged, for example, from her status as Dr. King's widow. Beginning on April 8, 1968, when she marched with the Memphis sanitation workers only days after her husband's death, Mrs. King's presence invoked his absence and the tragic need to go on even in the face of death. It was, therefore, only fitting, perhaps, that her funeral service was very much in the civil rights tradition: part celebration, part jeremiad. That this was not broadly recognized suggests not only the decline of that tradition, but also the complex consequences of its success.

Mrs. King's funeral took place in the 10,000-seat New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, on February 6, 2006. In addition to the president, three of the four living former presidents, and numerous members of Congress, most of the six-hour service was attended by the Governor of Georgia, the Mayor of Atlanta, and veterans of the civil rights movement. Also present were a host of friends, dignitaries, and celebrities—including Maya Angelou, Stevie Wonder, and Malaak Shabazz: the polity represented to itself. It was, however, the eulogies by Joseph Lowery and former President Jimmy Carter that drew the most attention in the days after the funeral. Offering a eulogy in ragged verse, Reverend Lowery (CBS 2006) observed, "How marvelous that presidents and governors come to mourn and praise. But in the morning,'" the audience interrupting him with cheers and applause of anticipation, "will words become deeds that meet needs?" Minutes later, he turned to the lines replayed most often in the subsequent furor:

She extended Martin's message against poverty, racism, and war,
She deplored the terror inflicted by our smart bombs on missions way-a-far.
We know now there were no weapons of mass destruction over there,
But … but Coretta knew and we know there are weapons of misdirection right down here:
Millions without health insurance, poverty abounds.
For war, billions more, but no more for the poor. (CBS 2006)

Coming shortly after Lowery's eulogy, Jimmy's Carter's comments were more restrained but remarkably similar in tone. Drawing out the virtues of the King family, including their peaceful commitment to encouraging democracy, Carter offered an implicit critique of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, and, discussing the surveillance of the King family by the FBI during the civil rights struggle, drew attention to the administration's policy of warrantless wiretaps for those suspected of terrorist activity. Noting that there were "not yet equal opportunities for all Americans," Carter (CBS 2006) challenged the nation to carry on the Kings' work. The public response to the funeral fell into three main categories: two romantic, one tragic.

The first romantic response to Mrs. King's funeral simply aestheticized the event, celebrating the service in the manner of the nineteenth-century Northerners whose misunderstanding of the sorrow songs so vexed Frederick Douglass. Contrasting the King service with that held for the Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone in 2002—an event that provoked a considerable amount of partisan bickering (CNN 2002)—Peggy Noonan (2006) declared, "The King funeral was nothing like this. It was gracious, full of applause and cheers and amens. It was loving even when it was political. It had spirit, not rage. That's part of why it was so beautiful." Similarly, in his eulogy, former President George Herbert Walker Bush (CBS 2006) observed, "I come from a rather conservative Episcopal parish. I've never seen anything like this in my life.… It's absolutely wonderful … the music, itself. It's just spectacular." Bush further praised the Kings for rejecting "race baiting" and observed that he had recently watched the movie *Glory Road*—about an integrationist basketball coach—with high school and college students who "didn't know what discrimination was until they saw this movie." In burying Coretta Scott King, he seemed to suggest, America was burying the memory of its previous divides and, in so doing, demonstrating the closure of race as a political issue in the United States. It was a popular viewpoint summarized by CNN commentator Jeff Greenfield (2006). "[T]he idea of civil rights has now become a consensus," he observed. "There's nobody

arguing that Martin Luther King was on the wrong side of history."

The second, more vociferous, romantic response was summarized Sean Hannity of Fox News Channel (2006). "The President of the United States came to honor this woman," he declared. "It should have been about her life, not . . . using the occasion of her funeral to take a shot politically at the President . . . . I don't think that was the right thing to do in that environment." Similarly, Georgia's *Augusta Chronicle* (2006) labeled Lowery and Carter "[u]tterly, absolutely, unendingly despicable." Although hostility to strong criticism of the racial status quo is a long-standing American trope—as evident in the response to abolitionism as it was in the Jeremiah Wright controversy during the 2008 presidential primaries (Sanneh 2008)—the sheer persistence of the claim that a funeral was no place for politics suggests a genuine concern with propriety. Although it is possible that the concern with form was simply a mask for a concern with content, the similar hostility generated by political critique at the Wellstone memorial, or at that for (Arizona Cardinal football player turned) U.S. Army Ranger Pat Tillman (Fish 2009), suggests that the response to Mrs. King's funeral was part of a broader commitment to romantic public mourning and to the ideology of consensus in the American polity. What made the response to the King funeral so remarkable was, however, that this commitment was broadly shared among many African Americans. For although the media controversy over the King funeral may have meant little to most Americans, the hostility to the "politicization" of the event expressed by numerous black pundits, scholars, and citizens suggests a significant change in the understanding of the tragic mourning tradition among the black citizenry. The comments of Colbert King (MSNBC 2006)—an African American *Washington Post* columnist—echoed those of Fox's Hannity. While attempting to preempt the suggestion that "no white can criticize anything blacks do 'for one of their own,'" Gerald Early (2006) observed that "When Mr. Lowery *[sic]* defended his remarks later by talking about 'speaking truth to power' and how Mrs. King would have approved and how what he said, was, in fact, her position, it sounded like a lot of pious, self-serving flapdoodle from an old civil rights leader." Writing from the doubly evocative location of Stone Mountain, Georgia,[13] *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reader Venetia Poole (2006) spoke for many when she declared of the King memorial, "As an African American, I was somewhat appalled by the fact that some of our 'black leaders' used the funeral as a political platform to scold President Bush concerning the war . . . . I appreciate the fact that speakers had a captive audience with the President, but I disagree with the time and place" (see also Johnson 2006; Selzer 2006;

Washington 2006). Both romantic responses to the funeral nevertheless overlooked the very real conflicts of the civil rights struggle. Conflicts in which, as Lowery and others noted, the tradition of African American tragic mourning had played a central role.

For many, Lowery's eulogy might simply appear to be a form of democratic leftist patriotism.[14] Nevertheless, it is clear that Lowery saw himself as embodying a definite inheritance, repeatedly arguing that those "who are criticizing me don't understand the [tradition] of a black funeral" (H.R. Harris 2006). In a speech at a peace rally in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 1, 2006, Lowery (2006) situated himself firmly within it:

> By what moral authority do they tell us how to conduct a black funeral? How many black funerals has George W. run in his life? . . . for over half a century in the ministry I have buried hundreds of black people and I think I know more about how to conduct a black funeral than . . . Sean Hannity. In the black church, at a funeral, we celebrate the life of the dead, but then we challenge those who are living to pick up the mantle and carry on the work . . . George W. . . . didn't come to celebrate Coretta's life because she made good girl-scout cookies. He came to celebrate her life because she was an advocate for peace and a warrior for justice, and if he didn't expect to hear about peace and justice he should have kept his Whitehouse-Texas self home.

Such heated language—no doubt exacerbated by the tensions between America's ideological commitment to consensus and its very real political conflicts—was not, however, uncommon during the intensely antagonistic atmosphere of the second Bush administration, and that Lowery saw himself as a part of a tradition does not make it so. Nevertheless, to miss the tragic understanding expressed in Lowery's eulogy is, perhaps, to buy into the romantic understanding of racial politics expressed by his critics. It is clear that there has been considerable progress toward racial justice in the United States. However, to see the hope that underpins the black mourning tradition as having been fulfilled is to miss the contingency of those gains and the continuing injustices that Lowery identified in his speech. Likewise, it is to miss the recognition that the gains of the civil rights movement not only came at the cost of those still hampered by racial inequalities, but that these very gains made the alleviation of remaining inequalities all the more unlikely. Acutely aware that Americans do not yet live in a world in which "men judge men by their souls and not by their skins" (Du Bois 2003, 186), Lowery continued to push, not only for racial justice, but also for the possibly even-more-quixotic goal of peace. That Lowery recognized the costs of his approach, and the likelihood of his success, is suggested by his adoption of a dualistic and semi-comic persona.

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[13] The site of the largest monument to the Confederacy in the United States, a bas relief sculpture of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis carved into the mountainside. The site of the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan in November 1915, the mountain was memorably referenced in the closing section of Martin Luther King's speech to the March on Washington in August 1963 (King 1996, 223).

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[14] That it should appear this way is, of course, unsurprising. The language of democratic leftist patriotism is made up of a coalition of values emerging from multiple traditions, including those of African American political activism. Moreover, to make such a claim would be to ignore the possibility of a tragic patriotism.

Before offering his initial salvo against the political luminaries present, a chuckling Lowery turned to the assembly of presidents and first ladies behind him and promised "I'm gonna behave" (CBS 2006). The duality embodied in this theatrical performance—itself echoed in the juxtaposition of his critique with the celebratory aspects of the event—found repeated expression in Lowery's eulogy. He quickly followed up his opening remarks about the disconnection between words and deeds with good-natured zings of Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. Similarly, the most searing—and most frequently replayed—lines of Lowery's speech were immediately prefaced with a joking reference to his own poetry presented as a faux apology to Maya Angelou (CBS 2006). Not immune, furthermore, to romanticized reverie about the heavenly reunion of the Kings—"Together at last! Together at last! Thank God Almighty, together at last!" (CBS 2006)—Lowery nevertheless went out of his way to note that King had her critics. He pointedly referenced her opposition to homophobia, itself a rebuke to Bernice King who had led an anti–gay rights march that had culminated in an address at her father's grave (Clark 2009). In the performance of this ambivalence toward the event, and indeed, to the presence of many of the political notables, Lowery offered—as did Douglass for Lincoln—a counternarrative to the largely hagiographic accounts of King's life that dominated the event and the subsequent commentary. Of course, his purpose was not to denigrate King, but rather to complicate the story of racial reconciliation offered by the dominant narratives of U.S. history. Like his historical forbear, he was seeking to force his audience to recognize the limitations on the progress made toward racial justice. In so doing, he aimed to provide an agonistic antidote to the democratically poisonous ideological commitment to consensus on racial politics that has permitted the cooption of Dr. King's words by opponents of affirmative action (Sundquist 2009, 203–6). That Lowery should become, like Douglass before him, an emblem of tragedy as condition is, perhaps, suggested by the ways in which the successes of the black mourning tradition help explain its contemporary decline.

Although older civil rights activists grumbled that Mrs. King's funeral should have taken place in the Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr. King had preached, the choice of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church was highly significant. "[T]he funeral's location in an arena-sized church," observed Cameron McWhirter (2006) in the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, "set in the heart of affluent section of black suburbia spoke volumes about how much the civil rights movement has transformed the political, economic and social landscape of the United States since the 1960s and the demise of segregation." The African American population has become younger and, in many cases, more affluent in the years since the civil rights struggle. Half of the African American population of the United States is younger than 35, and there are numerous indicators that they are less involved in electoral politics and civic organizations than the previous generation (Smith 2004, 224). The emergence of a black middle class—a product of the increased opportunities generated by the successes of the civil rights movement—has produced significant socioeconomic, political, and theological changes in the African American population. As Allison Calhoun-Brown (2003, 47) notes, the "end to legalized racism has allowed class differences among blacks to gain greater salience," with an increasingly suburbanized black middle class geographically and political separating from a "black underclass decaying in urban areas." A cause and a consequence of this separation has been the declining social and political salience of the black church and the dramatic rise of the "prosperity gospel" (Dyson 2008, 128).

Although there is a "troubling lack of research" on the role of the church in contemporary black politics (Smith 2003, ix), the efforts of the Public Influences of African American Churches project and Frederick Harris (1999) both suggest a decreased political efficacy for an "increasingly un-churched" African American population (Harris-Lacewell 2007). As Aldon Morris (1984, 10) and others point out, the church was the institutional center of the civil rights movement. It offered a democratic pedagogy that was both generated and reinforced by church rituals and traditions (F.C. Harris 1999). Whereas a generation ago, approximately 80% of African Americans attended church, the number is now believed to be as low as 40% (Calhoun-Brown 2003, 48). Among those who do attend church, theological changes have had a significant impact on their political orientation. Foremost among which has been the mainstreaming of the "prosperity gospel," that which embraces personal enrichment and individual rather than social change.[15] This viewpoint—which Harris describes as "a complete reversal from the mission of the black church during slavery, Reconstruction and civil rights" (Hadnot 2004; see also Dyson 2008, 129–30; Hall-Russell 2005)—has reduced political activism in the black church, with those who embrace the prosperity gospel less likely to vote, contact public officials, sign petitions, or attend public demonstrations than those holding more traditional views about the black church and social justice (Harris-Lacewell 2007). Indeed, Preston Smith (2004, 5) argues that the prosperity gospel has had the effect of "valorizing privatism" and "making public action increasingly illegitimate." As a result, the remaining obstacles to social progress are now seen as more attitudinal than structural (Smith 2003, 6–7; see also Smith and Smidt 2003, 73). At Mrs. King's funeral, the African American class schism manifested itself when a finger-wagging former President

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[15] Although growing out of the Protestant ethic identified by Max Weber (1992), which sees the acquisition of wealth as a sign of God's grace, the prosperity gospel deviates from this tradition in two key ways. First, whereas the former sees wealth as a by-product of hard work, the prosperity gospel sees it as an unearned blessing (Rosin 2009). Second, although the Protestant ethic has traditionally eschewed ostentatious displays of wealth and the enjoyment of riches—promoting, as Weber points out, both saving and capital investment—the prosperity gospel promotes the values of consumerism and the idea that God wants his followers to enjoy the success bestowed on them.

Clinton noted—to rapturous applause from *some* of those present—that there were "more rich black folks in this county than any one in America, except Montgomery County, Maryland" and asked, "Atlanta, what's your responsibility for the future of the King Center? What are you going to do to make sure this thing goes on?" (CBS 2006). Although such self-critique—albeit by proxy—suggests that the black tragic tradition of mourning in America is not yet fully exhausted, the social changes reflected in and reinforced by the rise of the prosperity gospel have, nevertheless, served to undermine the conditions under which this tradition emerged and prospered.

As Karla Holloway (2003, 36–37) argues, the emergence of an African American middle class in the early part of the twentieth century was closely connected to the rise of the funeral home. Undertaking was one of the first black businesses to prosper after the Civil War largely because segregation and a lack of interest and expertise among white undertakers in dealing with black skin—frequently bearing the marks of racial violence—all but ensured prosperity for black undertakers. That many funeral homes were owned and operated by ministers permitted the merging of the sacred and the secular in a way that gave impetus to the movement for social and political equality. Throughout that century, however, as incomes rose, middle-class African Americans started to patronize white funeral homes. "For some black folk," noted Holloway, "white funeral homes became a new option and a visible mark of a certain status" (38). To compete, historically black funeral homes increasingly dissociated themselves from their traditional clientele, often by removing pictures of civil rights icons such as Dr. and Mrs. King from their walls. Similarly, white funeral homes made successful outreaches to the black community (Henderson 1997), with many black funeral services becoming less elaborate and more staid in the process (Dunlap 2006).

The changing nature of black funerals, the increasing discomfort of the black church with the theodicy of the emancipationist and civil rights struggles, and the decreasing loyalty of the black population to African American undertakers appear then to have combined to create a largely class and generational divide in black responses to loss. At Mrs. King's funeral, this divide was clear. Those steeped in the tragic tradition of black mourning, such as Joseph Lowery and Bernice King, embraced agonism, celebrating the deceased by both highlighting her achievements and by recognizing the limitations on her success, using the occasion to disrupt the problematic narratives of racial closure and to push for further social and political change. Those with shorter memories, and a different theology, embraced the consensus politics of romantic mourning by rejecting the critique and focusing solely on the advantages they had accrued from the entirely historical—to them at least—struggle for civil rights. As the typology of public mourning offered at the outset suggests, the consequences of this shift away from tragic mourning for the American polity are likely to be largely negative.

A HOMEGOING FOR DEMOCRACY: TRAGIC PUBLIC MOURNING AND AMERICAN POLITICS

The history of public mourning suggests that the stories that we tell about the dead help shape policies and political outcomes (Edkins 2003). At Gettysburg, Lincoln offered a classically inspired jeremiad whose democratic agonism spurred the nation to be better than it was, while the consensus politics of post–Civil War romantic public mourning paved the way for a spurious "national reconciliation" that obscured the causes of the war and promoted white brotherhood over black freedoms. Embracing the tragic led the nation to engage with some of her most pressing political problems; rejecting it led her to suppress them at the expense of her most vulnerable citizens. For African Americans, tragic public mourning played a significant role in establishing a sense of community and resistance central to the struggle for emancipation and civil rights (Roediger 1981, 171). Yet, its absence from the public sphere in postbellum America helped deprive them of their constitutional freedoms. More recently, its continued absence has helped shape American memory of the struggle for civil rights in a manner detrimental to African American political concerns. The spurious national reconciliation over the Civil War has been paralleled by a spurious national unity over civil rights that commemorates it as "a civic celebration that no-one ever opposed" (Tyson 2004, 318). Understanding the complexity of the Kings' legacy is, therefore, central to the continuing struggle for racial justice in the United States. For, as the work of Francesca Polletta (1998) and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) demonstrates, the manner in which we choose to remember Martin Luther King profoundly affects our attitudes toward contemporary racial politics (see also Griffin and Bollen 2009).[16]

That the tradition of black mourning and the tragic ethos that it embodies is now in decline among African Americans suggests that the theological and class schism on display at Mrs. King's funeral will continue to expand to the detriment of those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, precisely those for whom the church and its rituals of mourning have been a traditional source of political strength. It is a development that not only threatens social justice, but also undermines American democracy by expanding inequality—most obviously in access to education and voter information—a problem that is especially acute during periods of economic downturn. Indeed, it is this increasing divide, and the political problems posed

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[16] Indeed, Hall's (2005, 1251) work further suggests the tragic nature of the hope that permeates black politics. Similarly, Polletta (1998) notes that the tension between the politically necessary acknowledgment of black political gains and the more difficult recognition that African American hopes remain unfulfilled is evident in contemporary congressional debate. She identifies the problem of "black legislators rhetorically *struggling* to represent the purpose of memorializing King and the movement, to retell the past in a way that neither deprecates the movement's accomplishments nor claims that its aims have been fulfilled" (483).

by it, that fuel much contemporary African American thought on the possibility of a black community (Gilroy 2010; Glaude 2007; Shelby 2005). As befits the complexity of perspective engendered by the tragic, however, it is also clear that many of the causes of this decline in tragic mourning—most obviously the emergence of a prosperous black middle class—are to be celebrated. Indeed, the emergence of this black middle class suggests that for some at least, tragedy as response has been successful in making productive the suffering of black life: offering an African American political thought and practice that moves beyond the fetishism of struggle (Glaude 2007, 134–35). Nevertheless, even despite the election in 2008 of the nation's first African American president, celebration of a "post-racial" America is both premature and dangerous (Barras 2008). Such talk, redolent of the reconciliationism of the post–Civil War years, bodes ill for disenfranchised African Americans because the ideological commitment to consensus embodied in romantic public mourning further entrenches the power of dominant political groups by distorting democratic politics and discourse. That it does so regardless of the intent of those dominant groups—be it a product of strategic or unintentional blindness—suggests the perniciousness of the triumph of romantic mourning in the public sphere not least because it is clear that the problems posed by the decline of tragic public mourning in America extend well beyond the issue of race.

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy*, John Brenkman (2007, 199) cites the Gettysburg Address as an example of the "wisdom of tragedy" that America requires "if it is to rescue the commitment to freedom from the wreckage of democratic messianism" that has engulfed the nation since September 11, 2001. With a renewed interest among political theorists in tragedy's capacity to reinvigorate democracy by encouraging an awareness of the contingency, costs, and possibilities of political action (Euben 1990; Honig 2009; Johnston 2009), and the classical mode of mourning embodied in the Gettysburg Address now absent from the contemporary polity (Stow 2007), it may be that African American responses to loss still constitute one of the last best hopes for inculcating a tragic perspective, not only in our practices of public mourning, but also in the broader polity. Such a tragic approach might have saved the nation from the consensus-driven and romantic responses to loss whose "United We Stand" mantra demonized those who dared to question the drive towards war. The same consensus continues to attempt to account for the human costs—foreign and domestic—of the current conflicts with romantic narratives of democratic or patriotic sacrifice. That the casualties of these wars have all but disappeared from the public consciousness suggests that the need for a tragic mourning tradition in America is now greater than ever. For even as this article constitutes something of a eulogy for a tradition of tragic and self-consciously political responses to loss, it is a eulogy very much in the same tradition: one that demands that instead of merely lamenting its passing, we pick up the mantle and carry on the work.

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