
Introduction

The City on the Hill from Below

The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics

Prophetic political critique of the “City on the Hill” is an old and esteemed political philosophy within black America, yet today this project is in crisis. Born within the fugitive public space of black churches and constructed from the multivalent language of biblical scripture, African American quests for freedom, security, and communal autonomy began as insurgent resistance to slavery, terror, and dishonoring dislocation. What began as resistance, however, flowered into a vital and sustained mode of political reflection and politics, as inspired political intellectuals conceived sophisticated social and political analyses that situated the predicament of African Americans within larger and more urgent pathologies of the American polity. They also disseminated ennobling visions of personal and societal transformation that spoke to the hopes of an oppressed people and the conscience and anxieties of white Americans. Prophetic political critique, then, is both a genre of political theory and a mode of political action.

The political imaginary associated with the City on the Hill reflects an older and more durable set of social meanings and practices that conceive and reproduce American political life as the secular instantiation of the sacred. Born aboard a ship that bore colonial settlers from the profane and exhausted space of Old World Europe to lands they planned to consecrate as “New Jerusalem,” this imagined community emerged as a religious quest to found and consolidate a new order of human existence.¹ What began as a religious quest, however, flowered into a nation-state of unprecedented

power, as Puritan settlers bequeathed to their heirs a public memory of their origins as a covenant, articulated their project as a sacred errand, and established a narrative of divine providence as popular historiography. The figure of the City on the Hill captures both the biblical metaphor mobilized by the community of Puritan settlers and their heirs to describe their fateful political project and a symbol of national identity taken up by successive generations of Americans. The multiple discursive practices that come together under this theologico-political symbol connect the meanings of settlement, conquest, revolution, state formation, and national consolidation into an archetypal conception of intergenerational political community and trans-historical national purpose. The City on the Hill is perhaps best understood as a political imaginary that founds and sustains a unique and enduring solidarity within the American polity, an architectonic cultural formation that unites political desire with religious hope. At stake in the crisis of African American prophetic political critique, then, is neither simply the fate of a venerable but declining tradition of black politics nor the dissipation of a once vital mode of theoretical reflection. At stake is the demise of an indigenous New World tradition of rigorous American self-criticism. To be sure, the fundamental theological presuppositions of the political culture of the United States tend to inoculate it from assessing the excesses it systematically produces. However, these presuppositions contain the possibility to destabilize and to help dissolve the forces that produce such excesses.²

This book explicates the character, historical role, and current status of African American prophetic political critique as a capacious and once vital tradition of American political theorizing and political engagement. With a few notable exceptions, this tradition of political theorizing has been largely neglected within the discipline of American political science and the field of political theory, an omission that is puzzling, given the centrality of this tradition to the history of American political thought, African American studies, American political development, and assessments of the current status of post-civil rights black politics and American democracy. There are excellent cultural and intellectual histories of this tradition of politics and a rich and growing literature of incisive theoretical analyses of African American cultural production during all phases of American historical development.³ There is also a smaller but growing and rich literature on African American political theory. Yet only a handful of works substantively address prophetic political critique as a form of political theorizing.⁴ To redress this omission, I explore this vibrant tradition, describe the historical context and intellectual milieu in which it emerged, and situate its central preoccupations in relation to the concerns of canonical and contemporary political theory. By treating

their texts as works of political theory, I demonstrate that some of the principal thinkers of the African American prophetic tradition—David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin—provide critical insights into the most intractable questions of American political life.

Any appreciative retrieval of an underappreciated and imperiled tradition risks nostalgic veneration, especially amid the current atmosphere of rapid social change.⁵ One might be tempted to invoke the past in order to manage or to avoid grappling with the contingency of the present or to construe the present as the detritus of some former golden age. On the other hand, one might be tempted to use the embarrassments of the past primarily to disrupt the sanctioned ignorance of the present. In this case, exposing the ignoble roots of current commitments and practices could make a scapegoat of the past that absolves the present of the responsibility to change. Succumbing to either interpretive temptation can blind thought to the power of history and the value of historical achievement, concealing the continuing presence of the past in contemporary life and obscuring past achievements that might constructively educate the present.⁶ Guarding against the twin pitfalls of nostalgia and irony, I lay the groundwork for a substantive retrieval of a mode of African American political reflection that addresses the unresolved problems of race in America and provides resources for thinking constructively about these problems.

The City on the Hill as Political Education

References to the City on the Hill surface frequently in American political discourse. Republicans and Democrats, candidates and elected officials alike, adopt this biblical reference to suggest that the American polity has a unique destiny caught up with liberty and the right of self-determination. In recent memory, Ronald Reagan is perhaps most closely associated with this political rhetoric, having invoked the “shining City on the Hill” in his bid for the Presidency and, once elected, deploying this image to legitimate his foreign policy: “We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall in Philadelphia.” Democrats too have used this symbol as a touchstone to vindicate their preferred public policies and to criticize their political opponents for failing to realize American ideals. In his keynote address to the 1984 Democratic National Nominating Convention, Governor Mario Cuomo condemned Reagan administration policies that excluded the poor, the working class, and racial minorities from American prosperity. Using terms borrowed from Charles Dickens, Cuomo characterized the increasing

inequality in the United States as a fundamental betrayal of America's sacred mission: "Mr. President, you ought to know that this nation is more a 'Tale of Two Cities' than it is a 'Shining City on a Hill.'"

Both speakers invoked the idea of the City on the Hill because they knew that this idea captures a distinctively American political self-understanding, one that unites a conception of community, a mode of belonging, and a sense of historical destiny. Combining a vision of political possibility, a goal for national aspiration, and a set of standards by which to measure progress, the symbol of the City on the Hill invokes an imaginary of American political community. Hence, the speeches of both men call American citizens to imagine an experience of politics that is beyond partisanship, interest group affiliation, and the particular policy debates of the day. Each reveals to American citizens that the true and proper experience of the political lies in associating with a particular form of political solidarity that accrues from recognizing America's exemplary service to humanity. The controlling vision that inspires these calls involves certain civic competences that citizens can acquire only through the practice of certain excellences identified by John Winthrop. Although seldom explicitly discussed in political science classrooms, these excellences are lodged deep within American political culture, resonating in the lives of those privileged by the American political system as well as in the lives of those marginalized and disenfranchised by it.

Despite the constitutional guarantee of the separation of church and state and the First Amendment prohibition on establishing any official religion, the founding documents of the American republic ground a "civic faith" in the imagery of the City on the Hill. The earliest articulation of this faith was crafted by John Winthrop, who envisioned a compact between the English settlers in this "New World" and their God. Invoking biblical notions of a "chosen people," Winthrop suggested that if these new "Americans" lived in accordance with a strenuous moral ideal, then God would dwell among them and bless them, enabling them to resist all enemies.

At the heart of Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charitee" lies an ideal of community that traces its ancestry to the New Testament. The very first formulation of the City on the Hill is found in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew (5:14). In this passage, Jesus explains to his followers that if they would truly follow him, they must become "like a city set upon a hill." As formulated by Jesus, the City on the Hill is a metaphor for a religious ethic of care. The deeper roots of this metaphor, however, are tied to an implicit invocation of the ancient conception of the "city" as a political community. Anchored in the experiences of the Greek city-states and the Roman republic, the city was far more than a

geographical space. It was the precondition for the good life, providing the physical, moral, and intellectual conditions for human flourishing. Embodying the values cherished by a particular community of people, the city was a form of human association that preserved traditions, institutions, and mores. As Aristotle noted in *The Politics*, the identity of the city was provided by its distinctive constitution, which codified a determinate mode of life.⁷ Thus, as the ancient cities of Athens and Rome demonstrate, the idea of the city encapsulates freedom, the freedom of a self-sufficient community to govern its own affairs, according its members the final authority to determine all matters pertaining to their common life.

John Winthrop's vision of the City on the Hill, like that of its New Testament precursor, linked the institutional conditions for collective self-determination to the fulfillment of a divine mandate. The political independence of the people was tied to the strenuous demands required by the new faith. Living in accordance with the model of Christian charity required a certain selflessness, a willingness to assume responsibility for the well-being of one's neighbors. Knit together in the shared project of freedom, citizens were to expand the horizons of their personal concerns to encompass the needs of others. The duty to provide community members with "the necessities" of existence was to be complemented by a particular demeanor, a "brotherly affection," which enabled all to "delight in each other" as they undertook the arduous challenges of communal self-sufficiency and self-determination. The demands of this virtuous political community would not be easy to fulfill, nor was their achievement a certainty. With what he expected to be the whole world watching this noble experiment, Winthrop emphasized that the settlers had it in their power to succeed or to fail. They could fulfill their destiny as a chosen nation, creating a unique political community set apart from other nations of the world by their performance of exemplary service to humanity, or they could be seduced by "pleasures and profits" and fail in their sacred mission, incurring God's curse and perishing in the process.

The uncertainty of outcomes noted in John Winthrop's challenge to the new settlers was echoed by Alexander Hamilton as he crafted his first editorial designed to persuade his fellow countrymen to ratify the proposed U.S. Constitution:

It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and

force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election on the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.⁸

For Hamilton, as for Winthrop, Americans possessed the unprecedented opportunity to institutionalize a modern republic through deliberate choice. The 1787 Constitution designed a durable and energetic federal government capable of uniting the diverse citizens populating the large geographic expanse of the thirteen original states. It claimed to be able to preserve both the rights of member states and the liberties of individual citizens. By offering the people within the states the opportunity to freely adopt the Constitution, the draft document enshrined the principle of popular sovereignty. Yet because the people might not choose to ratify the document, it also posed a serious challenge to the continuance of the American experiment in self-government. Thus, the ratification campaign represented a decisive historical test of whether republican government was a genuine possibility for modern politics. The process of ratification also raised questions about effective governance: Could a sovereign coercive power sufficient to repel external enemies and regulate citizens be established by the assent of citizens who held a dual status as both rulers and subjects, as equal participants in constitution making and as those equally bound to the laws established by the constitution? For Hamilton, America had been assigned, by whatever forces governing human history, the awesome task of answering the question for all time. America could prove that a good government, contrived by conscious human design, could be legitimated through popular assent.

Hamilton's formulation of the City on the Hill secularized Winthrop's vision. Where Winthrop had insisted that diligent observation and rigorous practice of Christian religious precepts would afford living testimony of God's plan, Hamilton suggested that enlightened self-interest generated by the extreme exigencies of post-revolutionary history would enable Americans to momentarily rise above their narrow selfish interests and bind themselves to a new constitutional order. James Madison, Hamilton's co-author of the *Federalist Papers*, reintroduced the language of divine providence in *Federalist* 37. To explain the unlikely emergence of consensus at the Constitutional Convention among delegates with wildly divergent interests, Madison wrote, "The real wonder is that so many difficulties should have been surmounted, and surmounted with a unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected. It is impossible for any man of candor to reflect on this cir-

cumstance without partaking of astonishment. It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of *that almighty hand* that has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.”⁹ Whether credited to overarching historical forces or to the hand of God, the founders agreed that the United States had a unique and distinctive mission that accorded the nation particular responsibilities on the world stage.

If the founders appealed to the City on the Hill with a sense of profound possibility, more recent politicians have debated whether the United States has fulfilled or betrayed its historic mission. In his 1974 speech “The Shining City on the Hill” aspiring presidential candidate Ronald Reagan resurrected this old political vision to vindicate the American project and reinvigorate U.S. foreign policy initiatives in the aftermath of a decade of dissent. Following more than a decade of intensive social unrest characterized by massive public demonstrations for civil rights and against the Vietnam War, political assassinations of national leaders (John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy), and riots in major American cities, Reagan insisted that America had *fulfilled* the covenant first articulated by Winthrop. Taking issue with wrenching critiques of domestic and foreign policies, Reagan argued that such debilitating self-examination was unwarranted. Indeed, attacking those who dared criticize the United States, Reagan suggested that it was the critics themselves who had lost their way. War protestors had foolishly mistaken America’s defense of freedom abroad for imperial predation. Critics of American capitalism had failed to acknowledge unprecedented productivity, economic growth, and improved standards of living. Critical discourse about America’s “race problem” simply ignored the prodigious accomplishments in race relations over the course of the twentieth century, culminating in the extension of constitutional rights to African Americans. With his characteristic simplicity, Reagan responded to Winthrop’s challenge, “We have not dealt falsely with our God, even if he is temporarily suspended from the classroom.”¹⁰ Casting cold war politics in terms of good and evil, Reagan suggested that Americans had divine right on their side as they engaged a historic mission to destroy the “evil” communist empire. Echoing themes from Winthrop, Hamilton, and Madison, he insisted, “You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed there was some divine plan that placed this continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.” In response to Hamilton’s probing question concerning the destiny of the nation, Reagan confidently asserted, “We are today, the last best hope of man on earth.”

Reagan's rhetorical brilliance consisted, in part, of setting Winthrop's founding prophecy against increasingly trenchant cultural and political critique of the seventies and early eighties, especially critiques leveled by black power advocates, New Left and Third World Marxists such as the Black Panther Party, and leaders of the women's movement. The brilliance of Reagan's rhetoric, however, also goes beyond mere recuperation of the language of the City on the Hill. He effectively wrested this central symbol of the American public imaginary from the long series of critical interrogations undertaken by successive generations of African American prophetic critics. The Reverend Martin Luther King has come to define this tradition within American public memory, in part because he was a transcendent orator with extraordinary compassion and courage and in part because his later writings and speeches criticizing American militarism and empire are rarely discussed in public.¹¹ Yet while King may be the greatest practitioner of prophetic critique—insofar as his extraordinary integrity enabled him to lead by example and his rhetorical virtuosity enabled him to fix the attention of the entire nation and the world—he is but a representative of a larger and more capacious tradition. I trace this tradition in the work of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin. In different ways, each thinker I consider developed comprehensive analyses of the American polity in terms of the normative commitments prescribed by the political imaginary of the City on the Hill. Each articulated unsettling truths about the failings of the American polity, and each devised rhetorical and programmatic strategies for political redress and transformation. The brilliance of Reagan's rhetorical achievement consists, then, of having convinced the American polity that he—rather than African American prophetic critics—spoke the truth about America. Indeed, Reagan convinced Americans that the prophetic political critics were no more than false prophets. To help adjudicate the contest between Reagan and these prophetic political critics concerning the true heir to the rhetoric of the City on the Hill, I turn to John Winthrop himself and examine his works in the context of a longer tradition of political theorizing that Winthrop both engaged and helped to create.

The City on the Hill: A Model of Political Desire

“The eyes of all people are upon us,” John Winthrop preached to fellow émigrés aboard the *Arbella*. As he explained to this first generation of Puritans, their great migration was an “errand into the North American wilderness,” a sacred mission grounded in a covenant with God, undertaken to provide reformation Christianity with a model of ecclesiastical and civil government.¹²

As the seventeenth-century vessel sailed across the Atlantic, Winthrop delivered the sermon that would establish him as the most venerable ancestor of the future republic's pre-constitutional past. In this remarkable sermon, "A Modell of Christian Charitee," Winthrop bequeathed to succeeding generations "The City on the Hill," a richly evocative theologico-political symbol of national purpose, a model of political desire tailor-made for soulcraft as statecraft under conditions of New World modernity. Importantly, Winthrop's sermon embeds a model of political desire within the imagined community he conjures with his invocation of the City on the Hill. Winthrop advances a metaphor of care for the powerless at the heart of a community in which God's residence instantiates the sacred, supplies the arms that secure the community's perpetual military advantage, and grounds the claim of exemplariness. He envisions a polity entitled to claim leadership over the world. "Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us."¹³

"A Modell of Christian Charitee" can best be understood as a model of political desire. Winthrop's sermon deliberately explicates and prescribes an order of love, an order of erotic desire, which must obtain if the Puritan errand is to succeed. Winthrop anticipates and rejects the appeal to sovereign rationality as the architectonic human faculty much celebrated by later liberal political theorists. In his view, rationality is a derivative power whose primary function is to help clarify and defend love, the source of human action. There was ample philosophical precedent for Winthrop's approach. St. Augustine, the Christian philosopher of late antiquity, argued that a polity is none other than "an assembled multitude of rational creatures united in agreement about the objects of their loves."¹⁴ Reason, in this political context, may facilitate agreement among citizens by mediating and bringing their loves into accord, but the fruit of this intercourse of reason and desire (*logos and eros*), according to Augustine, is a higher and more generalized order of love, an order that can best be described as an authoritative and comprehensive regime of desire (*nomos of eros*). Because he believed human sinfulness yoked the most virtuous loves to pride and vanity, however, Augustine concluded that the sovereignty of love in politics doomed the very best polities to corruption.¹⁵ Winthrop appropriated Augustine's account of the formative power of desire, but he believed he had discovered the means to circumvent Augustine's pessimism concerning the fate of political undertakings.

According to Winthrop, justice affords the correct principles for regulating desire, principles that would be furnished by nature. By the law of nature, “man is commanded to love his neighbor as himself,” to “help another in want or distress,” and to “perform this out of the same affection which makes him care for his own good.”¹⁶ Because nature gave these principles to humans in “the state of innocence,” adherence to them is almost impossible for selves who have suffered the permanent disfigurement of human sinfulness. Although Winthrop seems to accede to Augustine’s prevailing pessimism, he shifts the terms of debate to enable an alternative outcome.¹⁷ For Winthrop, the real problem is not that sin precludes the observance of natural law, but rather that natural law is grossly inadequate to the project he and his fellows are undertaking.¹⁸ The Puritan settlers believed themselves to be establishing something altogether unprecedented, an order of community whose freedom from the corruptions of the *saeculum* was vouchsafed by a new covenanted dispensation: “Thus stands the cause between God and us, wee are entered into a Covenant with him for this worke, wee have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to drawe our own Articles.”¹⁹ The ends of this covenant were uniquely tied to religious purposes: “[Our] end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord, the comfort and increase of the body of Christ that ourselves and posterity may be better preserved from the common corruption of this evil world to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.”²⁰ For this extraordinary venture, the “law of grace” rather than the “law of nature” was to be their guide. Thus, natural law’s inadequacy in the face of original sin no longer posed an insuperable obstacle to their success. As a covenanted community—an association of persons “commissioned” directly by God—the Puritans could escape from “the common corruption of the evil world.” Envisioning escape as safe passage cleared by new law rather than fugitive passage sanctioned by old, Winthrop argued that a new form of solidarity was required in the City on the Hill, a solidarity predicated on principles of self-sacrifice rather than virtue. As he explained to his fellow travelers: “Wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluties, for the supply of others’ necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others’ Condictions our owne rejoyce together, labor, and suffer together, alwayes having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke.”²¹

Novelists and political theorists have popularized a depiction of Puritans as rigid, self-righteous, and morally exacting.²² However, Winthrop’s Puri-

tans did not fit this stereotype. The form of association elaborated by Winthrop forged bonds among persons who were not necessarily virtuous but who were capable of self-denial under appropriate circumstances. Community of this kind is different from a community of moral exemplars, although its requirements may be no less taxing. The community of sacrifice, according to Winthrop, presupposed an altogether different order of desire given to the elect “in the state of regeneracy,” that is, the altered condition of the self who has been regenerated by Puritan Christianity.²³ In particular, “the law of grace” revealed to the regenerated a new set of principles concerning the duties of mercy. Mercy prescribed a “measure” for practices of “giving,” “lending,” and “forgiving,” a measure appropriate to “a difference of seasons and occasions.” In other words, Winthrop suggested that the requirements of mercy were different in extraordinary circumstances than they were in ordinary conditions.²⁴ Under normal circumstances, mercy prescribes what individuals must be prepared to give to others in need, how they should value their property, and how they should treat persons who owe them debts. The principles of mercy under these normal circumstances are not terribly different from the principles of justice established by natural law, which require individuals to do good to all and give out of abundance. However, under extraordinary circumstances, such as those permanently built into “an errand into the wilderness,” the requirements of mercy are quite distinctive. Winthrop suggests that the errand mandates a permanent state of exception: “Here we cannot be content with ordinary means or with means we deploy in England.”²⁵ Under circumstances governed by the Lord’s commission, the principles of mercy are exacting. Individuals must be prepared to devote all their energies and efforts to the community, even if the community requires the entirety of their personal force. They must give beyond the exhaustion of abundance to others who have squandered their portions if the errand is at stake. They must be able to release others from promises made, if for whatever reason, they lack the means to fulfill them. In short, community members must sacrifice. The security of the covenant requires each person to give precedence to the needs of fellow travelers over the demands of their own integrity and their own needs.²⁶

The “law of grace,” then, is both an unprecedented emancipation from ordinary morality and an extravagant burden. It frees members of the covenanted community to supplement principles of justice with principles of mercy, but it requires them to enshrine sacrifice as the necessary civic competence for all who wish to inhabit the City on the Hill. To enter and reside in this city, then, everyone must be prepared to sacrifice everything. Winthrop was keenly aware of the arduous demands required by this ethic of sacrifice.

The strategy he devised to address these demands demonstrates his acuity as a political founder and his talents as a poet. Winthrop insisted that where grace or “regeneracy” was genuine, God’s “delight to dwell among us” would not require transcendence of sin; it would require only sinners’ deference to the new set of demands required by their unprecedented experiment in self-government. In a polity where the “law of grace” functioned as a rule of law, sacrifice and covenant fused to institutionalize an exceptional form of mercy as public practice.

Winthrop noted that his task was to “lay open the grounds” of mercy, knowing full well that “draw[ing] men to works of mercy is not [accomplished by] force of argument from goodness or necessity of the work.”²⁷ Appeals to reason would be largely ineffective in habituating people to the duty of sacrifice. “For this might persuade some rational mind to some present act of mercy (as is frequent in experience) but it cannot worke such a habit in a soul as shall make it prompt upon all occasions to produce the same effect but by framing the affections of love in the heart.”²⁸ Invoking the authority of St. Paul, architect and venerated martyr of Christianity, Winthrop insisted that love must be framed in the heart, “for it is this love which makes mercy easy.” To frame love in the heart, Winthrop advocated three interrelated strategies and, in so doing, underscored the constitutive role of rhetoric in covenant politics. First, he described what love is and explained what it is for, revealing love’s existential basis and the rewards that flow from its exercise. Second, he extolled what love has done to create the conditions of possibility for this particular covenanted community. Third, he promised God’s blessings for successful completion of the errand in the wilderness and God’s curses for deviating from it. Winthrop used his considerable oratorical power to articulate the shape and color of “love in the heart,” this all-important desire, and to inflame it through poetic invocation of ancestral heroes whose sacrificial love founded the community. He then appealed to a strict and jealous God as an invisible, yet ever-present special prosecutor poised to ensure community compliance with its covenanted mission.

Arguing that “love is the bond of perfection,” Winthrop accords a particular role to certain aspects of community in “unfolding” the “inward exercise” of love. “Wee must take in our way that maxime of philosophy *Simile simili gaudet* or like will to like.”²⁹ For Winthrop’s conception of love, just as for Aristotle’s conception of justice, the principle of resemblance shapes the parameters for the exercise of virtue in community. In Winthrop’s words, “For as it is things which are carved with disafeccion to each other,

the ground of it is from dissimilitude or arising from the contrary or different nature of the things themselves, soe the ground of love is an apprehension of some resemblance in the things loved to which affects it.”³⁰ The capacity to recognize similarity and difference is essential to the communal practice of love. In relationships with others, an individual can restrain self-interestedness and fulfill the demands of sacrifice as long as the individual apprehends that another is not “the other.” Indeed, Winthrop suggests that the rewards for love for others within a homogeneous community are intense pleasure and secure contentment and that these rewards constitute the true key to the kingdom.³¹ “Soe is it in all the labour of love, among christians, the partie loving, reapes love againe as was shewed before, which soule covetts more than all the wealthe in the world. nothing yeilds more pleasure and content to the soule then when it findes that which it may love fervently for to love and live beloved is the soules paradise, both heare and in heaven.”³² Within Winthrop’s frame, love is a form of identification that enables difficult acts of mercy, and the reward for this identification is a form of pleasure that can be had in no other way.³³ Appealing to those who have encountered the pleasures of such identification as his authorities, Winthrop insists, “Let those with experience say if there is sweetness comparable to mutual love.”

By explicating love as an “unfolding” of philosophical principles regarding matters that are impervious to rational demonstration, Winthrop subordinates philosophy to politics and conflates politics with religion. Philosophical authority is enlisted to support a political imperative that fosters competence in distinguishing beloved compatriots from others, or as Plato had suggested many centuries earlier, friends from enemies. Although philosophy shores up the capacity to distinguish relevant similarities and differences in defining the boundaries of community, it pales in comparison to the decisive support provided by religion. Within Winthrop’s conception of covenanted communal membership, political solidarity is forged by sacrifice. Winthrop construes the meaning of sacrifice as the expression of an exceptional love predicated on resemblance. Uniquely suited to the extraordinary circumstances of settlers in a New World, solidarity in sacrifice for those like oneself promises unprecedented pleasure in the future. In addition to such unparalleled satisfaction, Winthrop consolidates his vision with the threat of divine punishment for communal failure and divine elevation for communal success. Winthrop weaves together the fearsome prospect of God’s abandonment or destruction and the promise that God’s chosen people will enjoy an exalted status among other polities. “If wee shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends wee have propounded, and, dissembling with our

God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intentions, seeking greate things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us; be revenged of such a [sinful] people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a covenant.”³⁴ To avoid this catastrophe and court glory, however, Winthrop enjoins his listeners to the counsel of the prophet Micah: “To doe justly, to love mercy, [and] to walk humbly with our God.”

The City on the Hill envisioned by Winthrop had markedly different consequences for those within the homogeneous community and those identified as sufficiently different to be cast outside its borders. Justice supplemented by mercy and mercy as a political practice of sacrifice legitimated the colonization of the New World and the displacement of indigenous peoples. It also legitimated the importation and exploitation of enslaved Africans. The “souls’ paradise” consolidated by love of those like oneself was simultaneously a living hell for those defined as different. African American prophetic critics documented atrocities within this bifurcated world in ways that European-American political theorists consistently failed to do. However, they took over Winthrop’s politics of sacrifice, convinced of its necessity for their purposes, yet insufficiently attentive to its consequences. Before we turn our attention to the terms of their critique, it is worth surveying the problems presented by colonialism.

New World Modernity and the Parameters of the Political Imaginary

Hannah Arendt described the colonial settlement of the New World as one of the outstanding achievements of Europe. Lacking “a culture and a history of their own,” Arendt explained, the Americas provided empty space for “the founding of new settlements which adopted the legal and political institutions of the mother country.”³⁵ In addition to expelling victims of genocidal violence from history, Arendt’s story failed to engage the politics implicit in the creation of New World modernity.³⁶ Had she engaged the catastrophic upheavals of New World early modernity with the care that animated her engagement with the disintegration of European late modernity, she might have been more circumspect in her claims concerning such “achievements.”³⁷ Colonial settlement of the New World justified its violence against and exploitation of native populations by appeal to a long-standing rationale: Settlement required expropriation, and expropriation required conquest.³⁸ Estranged from “European civilization,” colonial settlers and their heirs wrestled with deep fears of cultural decline and assimilation into

“barbarism,” which contributed to the exercise of violence against various excluded others.³⁹ Settlement of the New World proceeded according to predatory political logic established by the realities of competitive acquisition among imperial states. Expropriation of native populations through violence cleared political space, but it created borders that separated settlers from native inhabitants with prudential warrants for violent aggression. Settlers also had to grapple with the continued arrival of agents of Old World empires, who sought to protect their own acquisitions and extend them into space “cleared” by prior expropriators. As Niccolò Machiavelli had suggested at the genesis of European imperial expansion into the New World, the best way to consolidate power in space claimed by violence is to expand outward. Following Machiavelli’s thinking, New World colonialism encouraged the continuous immigration of “assimilable aliens,” while building durable and powerful governing structures to secure and manage acquired space. As the frontiers of this vast continent receded with the expansion of white settlement across the West, white settlers wrestled with interior frontiers. Territorial expansion and political consolidation ambivalently and imperfectly incorporated increasing numbers of “internal aliens,” peoples whose “difference” precluded assimilation as settler-citizens.

As Winthrop anticipated, a society of restive individuals actively involved in nation-building and dispersed across vast tracts of appropriated space required authority—power that is inspired as well as effective. Inspired power was required to manage fluid and multiple forms of commerce among such individuals and to authorize (in various ways) extreme inequalities and moral excesses resulting from the conquest, subjugation, and displacement of indigenous populations. Inspired power was also needed to mask other exigent economies of violence and violation associated with the expansion and consolidation of a settler society. “Theologico-politics” is one name for such an inspired authority. Conjuring a powerful image of selfhood and community that unites the theological and the political into a single norm of worldly activity, the City on the Hill has functioned as an ingenious form of modern soulcraft and statecraft. Over the past four centuries, this theologico-political discourse has produced citizen-subjects with rich resources and unique abilities to meet the exigencies of New World political modernity. Appropriated for multiple purposes, the City on the Hill has manifested resilience and power that surpass, yet are peculiarly bound up with, the world historic purposes pursued by the small and rather unlikely settlement at Massachusetts Bay.⁴⁰

Contemporary scholarly debates on the question of American theologico-politics have focused on questions of empirical evidence and theoretical

adequacy. Is there a civil religion in America? If so, what are its doctrines, and how might we account for its hegemony in a doctrinally diverse polity?⁴¹ Some scholars who suspect the presence of theologico-politics but doubt that there is sufficient empirical support to prove the existence of an American civil religion posit ideology or civil mythology as an alternative rubric for understanding the dynamics of the bifurcated politics of the City on the Hill. For some writers, “ideology” offers a conceptual category that can account for the hegemony of theologico-politics by locating the reproduction of citizens’ religious understanding of American politics in secular rhetorical practices that appeal to and reinscribe religious ideas and practices.⁴² The notion of ideology captures the continuity between the past and the present and highlights the conservative political role of these practices. Yet it often reduces these complex theologico-political practices to false consciousness and thus masks the multiple dimensions of self-interest that inform them. The notion of ideology also obscures the spiritual resonance of these practices in a polity constituted by varying political interests and diverse forms of religious belief.⁴³

As an alternative to ideology, some scholars have turned to the conception of the “political imaginary.”⁴⁴ As contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor explains, a political imaginary refers to “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, their expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”⁴⁵ An imaginary may be informed by older theories, ideology, civil religion, or various other civic myths, but it is a much looser set of beliefs that is not reducible to these constitutive elements. Held by ordinary persons rather than political or intellectual elites, Taylor suggests that a social imaginary remains causally efficacious within social life, even though it is not tightly structured, elite-driven, or theoretically coherent. More suspicious of the partisan character of “political imaginary” than Taylor, political theorist Sheldon Wolin describes the concept as a potent “fantasy” that serves the immediate political objectives of particular actors or groups of actors. Within Wolin’s frame, a political imaginary is an “organization of resources, ideal as well as material, in which a potential [within a particular conceptualization of resources] becomes a challenge to realize it. What is conceived by the imagination is not mere improvement but a quantum leap that nonetheless preserves elements of the familiar.”⁴⁶ Wolin provides an account of how a political imaginary works and why imperially inclined, corporate-elite-dominated politics favor the proliferation of political imagination. Even

so, he does not address those conditions in which political imagination is inoperative or, if operative, is unable to flourish. Nor does he consider the complex ways in which the “political imagination,” as an individual faculty and as a collective mode of political perception, can become a source of political knowledge.

Legal scholar Paul Kahn has argued that the political imaginary is in fact the true basis of the modern nation-state. In his view, “the basic structures of our self understanding—family, religion, and state—share an overlapping narrative form.”⁴⁷ This overlapping narrative captures accounts of sacrificial violence suffered by the self’s imagined ancestral precursors. What appear to be autonomous discourses about state formation, family history, and religious community—construed by liberalism as separate spheres of association—are seen as parallel inventions of political imagination that situate the conditions of possibility for the modern self in heroic ancestral battles against violence, suffering, and death. As Kahn argues, these narratives incite the modern self to deep and concerted forms of reverent identification with imagined communities of predecessors engaged in grand historical struggles. This reverence fosters the modern self’s willing compliance with determinate ideas of human flourishing—ideas that flow from imagined communities of sacrifice rather than actual ones. Embodied in modern selves, these imagined pasts result in the internalization and the voluntary performance of the very real sovereignty of the modern nation-state.

Kahn’s account of the identifications fostered by these parallel imaginaries of predecessors, saints, and heroes shares marked similarities with the views advanced by Winthrop. Kahn argues that these identifications produce a potent form of political desire, indeed, a form of love. “Love binds us to particular political communities just as it binds us to particular families. We locate ourselves—really, we find ourselves—in communities that have a particular history and territory. That history is not universal history but rather the narrative of the successful overcoming of challenges by a particular community.”⁴⁸ Whether the City on the Hill is conceived as a love-inducing communal identification, a narrative structure that grounds and shapes fundamental conceptions of American selfhood, a loose but causally efficacious set of background conditions, or a thoroughly contingent political construct deployed discretely by specific groups of political actors to secure particular objectives, it has operated powerfully for four centuries to establish the parameters of the American political imaginary. These parameters are thoroughly inflected by race, and the African American prophetic tradition has long examined the effects of such sustained racialization.

Prophetic Political Critique and the Problem of Political Evil

Prophets are a distinguished group of inspired social critics who remind the community of their constitutive covenanted obligations to God and interpret prevailing social contradictions in light of these originary covenanted obligations.⁴⁹ Bearing God's assessment of the justice of their communal practices, prophets warn of impending calamity that will result from the community's continued failure to honor their covenant and place before the community the moment of decision, the moment when the community must choose whether they will honor their commitments or suffer the consequences for their failure to do so.⁵⁰ Prophets illuminate the ways in which communal observances of divine ordinances have ossified into empty ritual and how communal deference to established forms of social order have devolved into institutional practices of self-congratulatory idolatry.⁵¹ Prophets often bear witness to the experiences of the poor, marginalized, and unprotected. They often insist that the proliferation of practices that generate and justify these kinds of vulnerabilities bear directly on compliance with covenanted obligations to God.⁵² When prophets raise the question of the status of the covenant, what is at stake is not simply the quality, form, and distribution of religious piety, but rather the security and integrity of the community established by the covenant. Addressing the national community about its collective fate, prophecy is a profoundly political discourse.⁵³

African American prophetic critics appropriated and revised this ancient tradition of Hebrew prophecy to interpret and transform their New World political predicament. Old Testament narratives of captivity, exile, persecution, and deliverance expressed and validated black people's experiences of isolation, physical vulnerability, and dishonor. They powerfully articulated the experiences of blacks who were hoping, waiting, and preparing for deliverance from slavery and other forms of social denigration. Biblical narratives provided African Americans a larger historical frame within which to situate their own experiences of captivity, exile, and persecution in America.⁵⁴ When read alongside the Christian Gospel, these biblical stories afforded a political theology of individual dignity that opposed white supremacist discourses of black inferiority. They also provided a theory of human depravity that helped to render intelligible the motives and methods of American mastery.⁵⁵ Prophetic language also facilitated a convergence of the ultimate concerns of African Americans and white Americans. Enacting the dreaded proposition that African Americans read from the same texts as white Americans, prophetic political critics asked the national community about the

content and status of America's constitutive obligations. They asked whether American citizens' deference to the celebrated forms and glorious practices of the republic were practices of idolatry. They asked whether, in a Christian community, slavery, segregation, and exploitation could be indicators of anything other than the ways in which the community attends to the poor and powerless it systematically creates and tolerates. Prophetic political critics conceived the problems of slavery, segregation, and other forms of white supremacy as critical national questions that demanded a decision whose continued deferral or wrong-headed outcomes would result in disaster for the polity.⁵⁶

Writing in the prophetic tradition, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin provided African Americans (and their allies) inspiring yet credible visions of societal transformation, grounded in white repentance for the evils perpetrated against blacks. Yet black prophetic political intellectuals also attempted to help African Americans to flourish in a political and cultural context where practices of mercy between whites rendered black pain not only invisible but also integral to settled practices of American "public happiness." Thus, prophetic political critics were forced to grapple seriously and productively with the problem of political evil.⁵⁷ I understand the problem of political evil to be distinct from the problem of moral evil, which has engaged theologians and moral philosophers over the centuries, and different, as well, from the modern theoretical effort, described by Susan Neiman in *Evil Modern Thought*, to reconceive political life in response to the problem of moral evil. In my understanding, the problem of political evil is a subaltern theoretical problematic pursued seriously by only a few political theorists—Augustine, Machiavelli, and Alexis de Tocqueville, among canonical political philosophers, and George Kateb, William Connolly, and Judith Shklar, among contemporary political theorists.⁵⁸ Notwithstanding the insightful interventions of these contemporary scholars, however, the problem of political evil, for the most part, has been studiously avoided by American intellectuals, statesmen, and citizens, past and present.⁵⁹ Against the grain, then, black prophetic political critique developed an incisive, profound, and instructive program of theory and action that was uniquely attuned to American political problems, yet fully engaged with urgent, if subaltern, questions of Western political philosophy.⁶⁰ To appreciate the theoretical profundity of this tradition, then, we need to consider this problem of evil—chief, I would argue, among subaltern questions—in its complex and awesome specificity.

The problem of political evil refers to a range of phenomena associated with a polity's systematic production and concealment of the unwarranted

pain and unjustifiable harm of human beings as the product of its normal operations. The problem of political evil includes an assessment of the institutional operations that produce and sustain harm as well as the consequences of remedial, insurgent, or transformative strategies devised by survivors of political evil to contain, redress, and transcend these harms. George Kateb has conceived of political evil as the unjustifiable harm of undeserving persons caused, endorsed, or knowingly tolerated by states, lower-level political associations, or private citizens who act under the protection of states.⁶¹ Within this frame, “political evil” refers to communal and institutional practices and comprises individual actions (or failures of action) that cannot be reduced to individual deeds. As Kateb notes, political evil is problematic not simply because culprits are collective entities, such as states, associations, and movements, whose sovereignty (or legitimacy with a sovereign state) shelters them from accountability. Rather, the problem is the “susceptibility for political evil” that is built into politics itself. These exigencies of politics foster modes of abstract thinking among political elites that conceal the human costs of the policies that they pursue and promote group identities that secrete images of enemies who can be violated without scruple.⁶² Judith Shklar also wrestled with this question of “susceptibilities” and located them in ordinary vices, the perennial flaws of human character that, however troublesome, detestable, or shunned in social life, map onto the particular needs of different kinds of regimes. Of these vices, cruelty is the worst, in her view, because its direct product is fear, the passion that provides the generative conditions for the proliferation of most of the other vices.⁶³ Shklar concluded, as Kateb would later, that liberalism, the theory of politics that upholds the sanctity of individual rights and the enshrinement of these rights by governments as the principle of their political legitimacy, was not simply the *best* but rather the *only* modern regime sufficiently cognizant of the problem of political evil.⁶⁴

William E. Connolly’s sensitivity to this problem of susceptibility is just as acute, but his intervention takes a very different form. For Connolly, the problem of political evil inheres in various cultural practices, but one of its most acute forms resides within faith, a crypto-Augustinian religious imperative that inhabits insecure ethico-political commitments of all kinds—whether those of overtly religious groups or those with overtly secular aims who simply conceal from themselves their abiding faith in secularism.⁶⁵ According to Connolly, “to be human is to be inhabited by existential faith, hence the tendency to evil in faith is this. The instance in which the faith of others incites you to anathematize it as inferior or evil can usher into being the demand for revenge against them for the internal disturbance they sow,

even if they have not otherwise limited your ability to express your faith.”⁶⁶ Connolly suggests that this imperative is akin to madness because it seeks to extirpate anything that it perceives as a threat to itself.

These provocations occasion a return to St. Augustine, one of the most penetrating theorists of political evil. In contrast to these recent conceptualizations of political evil as a “susceptibility” of the political—a susceptibility that is rooted in ordinary vice and is at once fostered and concealed by faith—Augustine advanced an account of political evil particularly useful for an understanding of the institutionalization of Winthrop-inspired public practices of mercy in the New World. For Augustine, self-sacrifice on the basis of resemblance constituted a criminal solidarity.⁶⁷ Indeed, he suggested that the choice of criminal solidarity was the constitutive act of human community. Grounding his analysis in an interpretation of the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Augustine argued that individuals not only would countenance the crime of others if sufficiently invested in or erotically attached to them; they would also sacrifice their highest good as long as they could sustain their connection to their beloved. Augustine suggests that inordinate desire for recognition by those we desire is so basic to human life that obvious and greater goods will be continually sacrificed in order to maintain this solidarity. In recognizing how criminal solidarity can bind those within a community constituted by resemblance, Augustine demonstrates how Christian religiosity is at once a peculiarly effective form of modern political solidarity and a peculiarly ferocious incarnation of the problem of political evil. Individuals providentially sanctioned as a covenanted community and educated in habits of sacrifice will be especially prone to acts of political evil, even and especially when such acts violate their respective consciences and perhaps even threaten the safety of the covenanted community itself. Augustine illuminates the problem of political evil in a manner that is more comprehensive than the accounts provided by Kateb, Shklar, or Connolly. His account helps to illuminate how the problem of political evil has become embedded into the theological politics of America.

Augustine provides additional conceptual resources for thinking about the problem of political evil. The wily Bishop of Hippo also quietly counseled that the remembrance of communal crime was the best way to manage discord. To remember communal crime is to remind ourselves of sin, our propensities for self-seeking, shortsighted, and inordinately desirous pursuits. “For there is nothing so social by nature as [the human] race no matter how discordant it has become through this fault; and human nature can call upon nothing more appropriate, either to prevent discord from coming into existence, or heal it where it already exists, than remembrance of that

first parent of us all.”⁶⁸ To remember Adam is to remember sacrifice and to remember that the human condition is inaugurated by Adam’s act of preference for corrupt solidarity with Eve over divine communion according to higher principles of justice. Reflection on this biblical crime that fixed the fate of all humanity demonstrates that deep-seated human needs for recognition permanently threaten the human capacity to act on what individuals know to be right and true.

Augustine offers a plausible account of the criminal solidarity that is foundational to Christian communities, an account that provides firm canonical warrant for reading Winthrop’s explication of the exceptional demands of mercy in the New World context as a theologico-political vindication of the problem of political evil. I do not mean to suggest that Winthrop advanced a program of “evil as policy.”⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the consequences of his exceptionalist account of Christian solidarity produced and legitimated political evil. The program of sacrifice inaugurated by his explication of covenant politics facilitated imperatives of compromise, habits of forgiveness, and exigencies of differentiation based on resemblance. These practices enabled a community at odds over issues that they regarded as fundamental questions of good and evil to sustain deep, satisfying, and all-too-often untroubled bonds of solidarity, with devastating consequences for indigenous and enslaved people. An examination of Christian solidarity as a foundational mode of racial solidarity in the New World is the starting point for African American prophetic political reflection on and critique of the City on the Hill.

In the following pages, I tell the story of prophetic critique as a tradition of political theorizing and practice that is especially attuned to the problem of political evil that resides within the theologico-politics of America. In Chapter 1, I analyze the explosive but virtually unexplicated political theory of David Walker, the mysterious political intellectual whose publication of *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* established him as one of the most notorious men of his day. Walker’s provocative text is the first systematic political account of the institution of American slavery and the first explicit attempt to found a new political imaginary to organize and animate black politics. Walker unmasks the Winthropian mercy lurking behind Thomas Jefferson’s apology for slavery and defense of white supremacy. Launching an alternative constitutional project, he issues a call to blacks throughout the Atlantic diaspora to consider the necessity and glory of black sacrifice in attempting, within a “city of enmity,” to build a different kind of City on the Hill.

Chapter 2 analyzes the writings and speeches of Frederick Douglass. As a theorist who was a former slave and bore on his body the manifold scars of slavery, Douglass possessed a keen grasp of the problem of political evil. Yet as an exceptionally graceful and charismatic figure who managed to ascend to a position of leadership within the abolition movement, Douglass focused his extraordinary acumen on envisioning the possibilities within America for multiracial liberal democracy. Douglass appropriated Walker's critique and developed a more sophisticated theory of political evil. I suggest that Douglass launched a campaign against political evil on two fronts at once. On the first front, Douglass sought to reclaim the dignity of Winthropian aspirations incarnated in the American Revolution and founding, exposing the vulnerability of this inheritance to the corruptions unleashed by the political evil of slavery. On the second front, Douglass waged a battle to neutralize the political imaginary conceived and disseminated by Walker. Toward that end, ensconced within a "city of mastery," Douglass devised a narrative of the problem of political evil, which, for reasons of public credibility and personal sanity, led him to publicize the evils of mastery but privatize the experience of slavery. This chapter suggests that the genius of Douglass's prophetic critique may consist of having rendered masters intelligible as enemies of the republic at the cost of banishing the lived atrocity of slavery from history into the relative obscurity of African American memory.

A brilliant and accomplished scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois wrestled with the complex consequences of lived atrocity in his great work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He also examined the advantages and disadvantages of the public imaginary of the City on the Hill as a means to mobilize white citizens around black political needs. Du Bois envisioned critique as a scholarly pursuit taken up by the polity's best minds and accorded a special and protected sphere within society. Chapter 3 analyzes how Du Bois deployed his intimate knowledge of the spiritual aspirations of American cultural and political elites. Acutely aware of their mounting worries about the social leveling associated with mass democratization, Du Bois was able to breach the walls of the "gilded city" and develop a patrician narrative of Winthropian sacrifice that could promote black interests in the twentieth century.

Chapter 4 examines the writings of James Baldwin, the author of six novels, two plays, a screenplay, and a book of poetry, and best remembered for his searing and beautifully written essays. Confronting his sense of exile in the "dishonorable city," Baldwin resuscitated the praxis of prophetic critique, despite his grave reservations about theologico-politics of any kind. Articulating a self-critical prophetic political critique of radical social and

political transformation, Baldwin revised Winthropian politics in a skeptical and self-conscious effort to quell deep and abiding suspicions that Walker's initial project might be justified. Investigating the contours and moral complexity of a black political imaginary, Baldwin illuminated the vulnerability and insufficiency of the American self buoyed by Winthropian mercy. In its place, Baldwin offered a political practice of love as provocation to be undertaken by lovers struggling with and on behalf of a beloved society. Baldwin attempted to create a new New World identity that could sustain more humane and more human politics.

Taken together, Walker, Douglass, Du Bois, and Baldwin delineate a tradition of prophetic critique that offers powerful challenges to the American political imaginary, even as it attempts to preserve some of its more hopeful insights. Nonetheless, examination of the political thought of these four thinkers reveals telling omissions in this mode of political analysis, not the least of which concerns the status of black women's testimony for its purposes. Concerned with reconstituting themselves as founders of a new polity, these thinkers (with the exception, perhaps, of Baldwin) more often than not reproduced the heteronormative, patriarchal norms of society at large. They constructed masculinist models of sacrifice and honor that affirmed for them the duties of citizenship. In the process, they sought to (literally and figuratively) domesticate the violations and vulnerabilities suffered by enslaved women, even rendering those experiences invisible when they did not suit the authors' overarching political purposes. This tendency is one of this tradition's enduring problems.

The Conclusion addresses the contemporary crisis of prophetic critique. I examine the literary critique of the prophetic political tradition advanced by Toni Morrison. Morrison exposes the limitations of gendered constructions of personal vulnerability and citizenship and, in so doing, synthesizes and extends a tradition of black feminist skepticism regarding prophetic political critique. As an avowed legatee of Baldwin, author of nine novels and countless essays, and an African American woman who labored at the crux of the civil rights movement and the women's movement, Morrison exposes the glaring blindness and insuperable limits of this tradition as a contemporary mode of political inquiry, tradition of political action, and form of American self-criticism. I also provide a genealogy of the shifting vocations of black politics associated with the praxis of prophetic critique and assess past articulations in the context of contemporary issues and future prospects. In light of recent declarations of a "post-racial" era in American political life, I analyze the rise to prominence of Barack Obama to explore how this once vital tradition may dissipate into an instrument of black political entrepreneurialism.

In telling the story of African American critical engagement with an American political imaginary forged by the City on the Hill, I also reclaim the work of exemplary American political thinkers. In so doing, I hope to add to the canon of American political theory the critical works of David Walker, a freeborn son of a slave who sought to be a founder; Frederick Douglass, a former slave who became a statesman but longed to be a citizen; W.E.B. Du Bois, a scholar whose quest to become a statesman in an era dominated by aristocrats and demagogues led him to become an exile and a revolutionary; and James Baldwin, an artist turned founder whose failure makes him a candidate for sainthood.